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Levi's Place: A Building Biography

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Introduction

Where do new buildings come from? What social and historic forces lie behind their final appearances, siting, layout, and uses? Can case studies based on such questions teach practitioners of place-making useful lessons? The creation of Levi Strauss' new headquarters complex—"Levi's Plaza"—has provided the occasion to examine these questions.

Describing the creation of Levi's Plaza is tantamount to recapitulating the history and culture of the corporation itself, an environmental biography of sorts. This is, no doubt, true of all organizations expressed in built form, but the case of Levi Strauss—the world's largest apparel maker—merits special attention because of the distinctive way the new Plaza was conceived and shaped. As we will show, the complex is singularly expressive of Levi's evolution and relationship to the city of San Francisco. It has enjoyed extensive media attention celebrating the distinctive plan and array of the buildings, plaza, and park, and has been described as "sensitive to its surroundings," "a gift to the city," and an unusually pleasant work environment inside and out.¹ The numerous articles that applaud the buildings and work atmosphere overlook the extraordinary process by which the place came into existence.

This article describes how a series of headquarters relocations uncovered and clarified the company's environmental needs and crystallized a corporate image. The analysis began in 1976 when a research team was asked to help interpret a vague, persistent, and general dissatisfaction among employees with the then new headquarters location in San Francisco's Embarcadero Center, a flourishing office and retail development in the heart of the city's financial district.²

In 1978, after the decision had been made to leave Embarcadero Center and to construct Levi's Plaza, another team of faculty and architecture graduate students in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, conducted observations, interviews, and surveys, and helped manage a participation process through which employees explored their images of the new headquarters complex.³ Finally, in 1982 a third research team was permitted to conduct an impressionistic postoccupancy evaluation.⁴ As members of this most recent team, the authors are in a unique position to discuss the origin, conception, and use of the Plaza.

Levi Strauss: Origins and Growth

Levi Strauss, a Jewish immigrant from Bavaria, came to this country as a

follower of the gold rush and purveyor of dry goods. He transformed his unsold tent and covered-wagon canvas into durable "waist-high overalls" that responded to expressed needs of the 49ers. Eventually he stopped using the indigo-dyed canvas and began importing a strong French fabric, *serge de Nimes*, a name that was later shortened to the colloquialism that we know today as "denim." Copper rivets reinforced the strain points, a feature that still punctuates the popular "501" denim jeans. The Levi Strauss work pants were so successful that Levi Strauss & Company became not only an important San Francisco establishment but a part of Americana; in fact, several old pairs are now included in the Smithsonian Collection.

Levi Strauss' prosperous, albeit modest, business was located in a brick warehouse on the San Francisco waterfront. Later, four nephews inherited the company from the distinguished San Franciscan. The company managed well as a family-owned enterprise in which promotion was largely internal and personal contact was relaxed and extensive. Stable and private through the years, the company grew slowly, functioning exclusively as wholesaler of one product in 35 sizes until the end of World War II, when it moved into retail trade and diversified its line.

Farmers, cowboys, and blue-collar workers made up its expanding market until successive events exploded on the American cultural scene. Popular films, especially those of Marlon Brando and James Dean, crystallized the popularity of Levis among young people. The antifashion "beats" and, later, the youth of "Aquarian Age" counterculture elevated denim, in general, and "Levis," in particular, to the level of social statement. Denim was no longer merely the garb of workers; it had become the uniform of international youth culture, transcending even social class and political differences.

Levi's sales rocketed from \$8 million in 1946 to \$1.2 billion in 1976. Consciously catching the wave of the baby boom, the company enjoyed a 24 percent annual growth in sales every year between 1968 and 1978. In 1981, 10 years after going public, Levi's recorded \$2.85 billion in sales. Developing a new product line with "a skosh more room" allowed them to continue riding the crest of the maturing, postwar baby wave.

Levi's Moves into Fashion: Embarcadero Center

Success produced growth, differentiation, and competitors. Levi's original building at 98 Battery Street was small and informal: in the early days its entire



1 98 Battery Street.
 (Photograph by Tom King,
 courtesy of Howard
 Friedman, FAIA.)

inventory was comfortably warehoused on the fifth floor. In 1974 Levi's moved its cozy and cluttered 98 Battery Street offices to a 34-story tower in John Portman's and David Rockefeller's new downtown development: Embarcadero Center. The second of four buildings in the complex was named the "Levi Strauss Building," although Levi's occupied less than half its space.

Levi Strauss was no longer the manufacturer of a single product. As its products were diversified to find new niches in an increasingly competitive market, Levi's found it necessary to reorganize along divisional lines, each division functioning as a relatively autonomous unit. A critical event in 1973 exemplified the company's need for efficient and streamlined organization. European sales had grown so rapidly that the officers of the international division lost control of production schedules and inventory management. That year the company experienced only the second profit loss in its history, a 53 percent decline, which was attributable almost entirely to European losses in a recession environment.

In 1976 the international division had fully recovered under new management. It accounted for one-third of all Levi's sales and was second only to the jeanswear

division in size and productivity. Because of the division's importance, its fourteenth-floor offices, designed by Howard Friedman, were dramatically different from all floors save the twenty-eighth-floor executive suite. For the benefit of Levi's executives visiting from countries around the world, the elevator lobby announced "international" with a forest of flags, bright colors, and other adornments. Friedman, a member of the family and consulting architect on every Levi's building project for 35 years, had developed a clever circulation plan with scattered and enclosed offices, open, small-scale receptionist areas, and distinctive waiting areas.

The international division is important to our discussion because its special treatment was noticed with resentment by those on other floors and became one of several lightning rods of employee dissatisfaction. The issues were complex in nature and interactive in their origins. The policy of top management on the disposition of space was enlightened: only the very top managers within divisions or other units were given enclosed corner offices with the obligatory "view." A large percentage of all window surface and natural light was given to lower-level employees; middle management was housed in glass-walled offices without doors that ringed the inner

core of the building. These faced interconnected cubicles of high-quality wood that was lined with so-called “Levi’s Grey” cloth. Throughout the white-walled Levi’s floors, everything sat on a thick “Levi’s Grey” carpet.

To top management the appointments represented continuity with the modest, frugal yet quality materials symbolic of the company’s origins. The openness and relative spatial equality of the floors was meant to recapture some of the life at 98 Battery Street where employees had had easy access across hierarchical lines. There everyone had had the opportunity routinely to meet and to say a friendly “good morning” to Chief Executives Walter and Peter Haas. Here, at Embarcadero Center II, Walter and Peter took the elevators that served the tower’s upper floors, while the bulk of their employees rode the elevators for the lower floors. Both banks of elevators were filled with strangers. Few Levi’s employees ever saw—in the otherwise elegant executive suite—the astonishingly small and simple adjacent offices to which Walter and Peter retreated.

“Old-timers”—long-term employees from 98 Battery Street—understood, without instruction, the subtle meaning of “Levi’s Grey.” They disliked, however, the division by elevator and by

corridor from their friends. Neither the “class” location in the financial district nor the quality work stations could compensate for their loss of interpersonal “perks” and a sense of belonging. They also bridled at the replacement of the customary “Christmas bonus”—a company-wide gesture of goodwill by the family—with incentive bonuses devoted to the most productive divisional managers.

Newcomers found “Levi’s Grey” and universal white simply drab. They could identify neither with the “unpretentiousness” of the physical environment nor with the corporate motto: “Levi’s is People,” muttering instead, “Levi’s is 40,000 people,” “Levi’s is Profit,” “Levi’s is a job.” Newcomers in management resented the frugality of their expense accounts. For them, the glass-walled offices and simple, serviceable showrooms were not appropriate settings for conducting business in the increasingly competitive world of fashion.

Environmental openness added to these problems in other ways. Everyone was “looking for a closeable door” away from the “fishbowl” offices through which competing button-and-thread salespeople could read the faces of their competitors. Adjacent occupants heard things they “shouldn’t hear” through the doorless glass-walled offices.

Passersby mistook visibility for availability, forcing office occupants to invent personal devices signalling “busy.” Sometimes tearful employee-evaluation sessions were on view for all. It was impossible to catch five minutes of contemplative rest in the midst of a tough problem or a hectic day.

Salvaging Corporate Culture

Walter Haas, Jr., Levi’s president from 1958–1970, now chairman of the executive committee, frequently lamented the loss of morale in the company and the lost “sense of family,” formerly an unstated Levi Strauss trademark. This sense of family had been lost before. In fact, the move from 98 Battery Street had largely been prompted by the corporate growth that had pushed the expanding employee population into several outlying buildings. Within a year of its move to Embarcadero Center, however, Levi’s again found itself forced to locate some functions outside the building. Their lease made provisions for expansion, but, ironically, did not guarantee expansion *within* Embarcadero II—the “Levi Strauss Building.” The “family” was dispersed again.

This time, however, the meaning of “family” was more equivocal. It could mean many things or few in the new Levi’s. There was, of

course, the historic extended family. There were the displaced denizens of 98 Battery Street, schooled in the Levi’s life nurtured in the old building. There was management’s overarching paternal desire, which most newcomers sensed, to maintain everyone together in a single, caring environment. But for an increasing number of new employees the push to bring the “family” together seemed irrelevant and hypocritical. Management was keenly aware of this; underneath the impetus to move again lay a relatively urgent need to salvage the old and to incorporate the new.

Home: A Fitting Form

Loathing his “ivory tower,” Walter Haas began as early as 1974 to envision the creation of a definitive headquarters facility. The recent move to Embarcadero Center II and a commitment to employee consultation inhibited any precipitate action on these fantasies. When corporate instincts and the studies commissioned by Friedman in 1976 confirmed a general unhappiness in the building, the decision was made to build the Plaza. Gerson Bakar, a developer and a friend of Haas, had proposed an attractive arrangement wherein he would buy out Levi’s long-term Embarcadero lease, give the corporation complete design control, and build Levi Strauss a “Shangri-La.”

Levi's took this unprecedented opportunity to carry out in Levi's Plaza the ultimate form of image-making and gift-giving, a practice central to Levi's corporate ideology. To project an image of a special and caring company, when it constructed a new facility. Levi's had consistently avoided attaching itself to industrial parks or to other factory concentrations. It also attached to each new facility some major, public-oriented amenity. For example, a factory in Mexico was surrounded by a community garden available to employees and to the nearby community. A facility in the southern United States was located near a stream that the company rerouted, cleaned, and turned into a fishing and recreation area. This history of corporate-building practice provided a guide for the competitive proposals Bakar solicited from architects Arthur Gensler & Associates and Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum.

The task of developing a new headquarters complex involved the company's top executives, members of the family, and all levels of employees. Robert Haas, Walter's son, managed the corporation's design interests when, after a 1977 presentation to top executives, Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum was chosen to design the buildings, Gensler the interiors and Lawrence Halprin the park and

plaza. Howard Friedman's responsibility was to mediate and to interpret corporate policy on facility development to the architects.

The prospect of creating a final "home" required the distillation of the company's 120-year-old self-definition. Levi's wanted a setting that would include the essential qualities of "Levi-ness." The resulting brick-and-glass metaphor was to be the physical manifestation of the same sense of quality that was stitched into their comfortable and well-worn "501" jeans.

Robert Haas prepared a set of principles with which Friedman was to guide the architects:

"We are an understated Company . . . as a consequence, monumental architecture is not our style. . . ."

"We are an exceptionally distinctive Company." The Plaza too should be distinctive. The concept of a low-rise urban office complex is unusual.

"Quality Never Goes Out of Style." The project's design and materials should reflect the company's high-quality standards. "This implies sensitivity to detailing and high standards of workmanship, not extravagance or gaudiness."

"Levi's is a San Francisco Company. While our growth has spread our

products and operations around the world our roots are deeply planted in the City. For Levi's, then, an 'International Style' design would not work. We want the project to be a 'good neighbor'—to fit comfortably in its environment and be a positive feature of the revitalized Northern Waterfront."

"Above all else Levi's is people-oriented. To be successful the project must provide a superior working environment. The work environment and public spaces must be relaxed, not formal, and should facilitate communication and a sense of community."

Haunting these principles was a set of unstated facts that confounded them. While the company had a natural loathing for bigness, it was, in fact, a massive and growing multinational corporation. (A Gensler architect was later to say, "Levi's does not know how to be big.") Levi's was also now a public company, with only six years of public experience after more than one hundred years of quiet, private, family ownership. "Understated," then, could not mean the hidden life of San Francisco's privately held Bechtel Corporation, whose low-key headquarters housed the nation's largest construction and engineering company; nor could it mean the brazen landmark quality of the publicly held Transamerica Corporation's headquarters in San

Francisco, often referred to by locals and tourists as "the Pyramid." How, then, was Levi's to represent itself anew, architecturally?

Design Sources and Outcomes

As we will show, the completed Plaza is a physical rendition of several countervailing forces in and outside the company. The complex reflects the encounter between the unique history of a corporate culture, a distinctive city, and certain practical realities. In what follows, we will describe the effects of these encounters on design intentions and outcomes at Levi's Plaza.

Patrician Mitzvah: The High Road of Lowrise

Jewish families appeared early among the late-forming elite of this late-forming city. Names like Strauss, Sutro, Zellerbach, and Fleishacker excited a deference similar to those of Huntington, Hopkins, Crocker and Stanford. Among these social and economic elites, *noblesse oblige* induced public gifts counterbalancing economic exploitation. Economically prominent, this family obligation was, in Levi's case, punctuated by the special requirement of their religion to include some blessing or social good to their work: a "mitzvah."

This obligation was consistent with their philanthropic and personnel policies and, as previously mentioned, their

siting practices for outlying facilities. The plans and guidelines for the Plaza were, then, a mixture of business and belief.

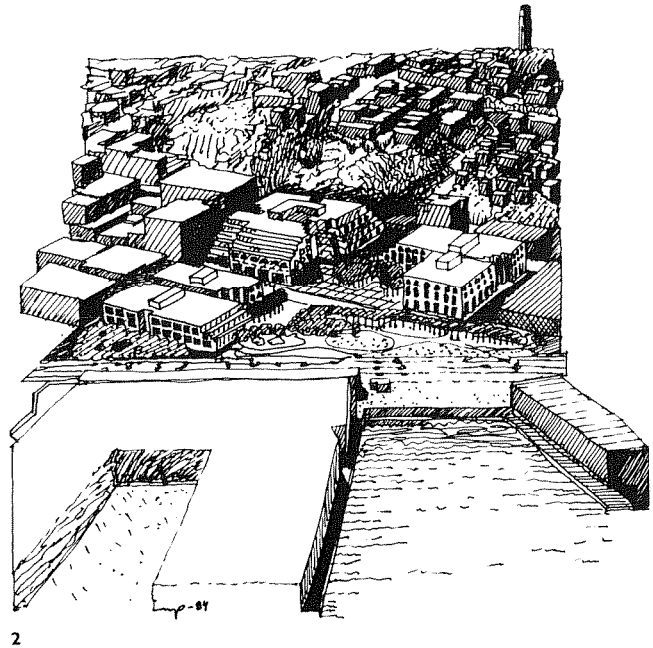
Thus, in following Gerson Bakar's cleverly negotiated lead to the northern waterfront, Levi's did not aim for the high profile of big capital, but for the low quiet of preservationist community. "Lowrise" was Levi's massive move away from the much criticized "Manhattanization" of San Francisco. The corporation was responsive to 20 years of active opposition on the part of certain history-conscious city elites to the rapid increase in tall office structures that had radically altered the skyline. This "San Francisco Company" called for buildings of historic brick, preservationist values, and a contribution to human-scale city growth. "People-oriented" meant not only sensitive employee practices, but also sensitivity to the people of the city at large. "Quality" meant the tourist city's struggle to avoid meritricious quaintness.

Levi's Plaza is situated just north of the financial district in a dockside community of old brick buildings and renovated warehouses. Fully occupying two square blocks beneath Telegraph Hill, the Plaza steps back from the hill and is sited to draw attention to Coit Tower, one of San Francisco's foremost landmarks. The tallest building is seven stories tall; the rest are three. Separated

by a fairly busy street, the Plaza seems more like two complexes: on the Telegraph Hill side are the seven-story Levi Strauss Building with its grand glass atrium, and the Stern Building, which is connected to a rehabilitated, old-brick, Italian Swiss Colony Building. These buildings are organized around a hard plaza and fountain and look across Battery Street to the Koshland and Haas buildings, which were located at the extreme south end of the site to allow for a large grassy park and stream. All five brick buildings include amenities such as outdoor balconies and generous window space. The design plays on historically significant features such as brass rivets, which appear as decorative elements on doors and windows.

The Plaza was an immediate success with the media and the public in San Francisco and nationwide. There could have been no better affirmation of the company's intentions (and public image) than the brief panegyric by Herb Caen. Caen, an immensely popular local columnist, routinely writes directly to the company's most important San Francisco audience:

"St. Patrick's Day sightem [sic]: Wally Haas, Jr., boss of Levi Strauss, in green jacket and green tie, pushing a tray of corned beef and cabbage in the company cafeteria, just like the help. By the way, if you



2 Levi Strauss Plaza.
Drawing by Lars Lerup.



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haven't strolled through the new Levi 'campus' below the East crest of Telegraph Hill, browse around. A showplace, another gift to the city from this splendid family. No wonder the people who work there fondly call it 'Levi U.'"⁵

Soon after, *Fortune* magazine ran an unusual feature story on the corporation highlighting its financial status with a story on the Plaza's design. Positive appearances in the major architecture magazines were capped off by *Time* magazine's identification of the Plaza as its "Building of the Year."⁶

The internal audience of employees was also graced by the Plaza's break upon the mediascape. Even during the first studies at Embarcadero Center II, employee identity with the social glow of the product "Levi's" elicited comments such as: "At a party, I say I work at Levi's and people smile." The postoccupancy evaluation showed increased employee pride in their association with Levi's at the new Plaza complex; the majority seemed especially pleased by the new attention paid by the media to their employer and to their workplace.

Park and Plaza: Invitation, Inversion, and Stratification

Like the floor plans and the decor, the Plaza buildings had been subject to great scrutiny. After critical

review by division managers (and later by employee representative groups), the powerful Telegraph Hill Dwellers Association, the San Francisco Planning Commission, and local architecture critics played major roles in progressively twisting, bending, and re-forming the design into its present shape and siting.

These buildings take up only 40 percent of the site; the park and plaza, conceived and executed single-handedly by Lawrence Halprin, fill the rest of the site. Halprin was an appropriate choice: he knew the extended family, had done major private work for its members, and understood the scope of their intentions. Also, like corporate architects Gensler and Helmut, Obata & Kassabaum, his "signature" on the Plaza garment would be seen as a "quality" label, a sign that the family's intents were to be taken seriously.

The park proved to be a major symbol of Levi's goodwill toward the city of San Francisco. When the lowest bids on Halprin's design came in \$5 million over the original \$1 million budget paid for by Bakar, the Levi's family took the necessary money from personal, not company, funds. The family also maintains the park in perpetuity.

An interview with Halprin uncovered some concrete

social themes in his design intent. His translation of the family's desires produced two contrasting areas separated by Battery Street: a "hard plaza" and a "soft park." The "hard plaza" was designed to recall the best elements of old European plazas. Its purpose, in Halprin's words, was to "turn the organization inside out, the same way you would a coat, to see how it's made." Traffic to and from the various buildings would function to show all Levi's people from all levels who they were collectively. The organization would, thus, be inverted and revealed. This idea was Halprin's direct response to what Levi's wanted to escape at Embarcadero Center II: the utter lack of company identity. While the postoccupancy evaluation was too limited in scope to fully document the outcome of his intentions, observations clearly showed extensive use of the plaza by formally dressed executive types, catching brief snatches of conversation in the general flow of the varied traffic. Levi's liberal dress code, mandated by its products, provided a neat, unobtrusive measure, since managers still lean toward "financial district" attire. The counterpoint "soft park" across the street consists of a stream, winding paths trimmed by seasonal plantings, and a long grassy area with landscaped berms that shelters users from the sounds of traffic.

3 San Francisco's Telegraph Hill

forms the backdrop for Levi's Plaza, the new headquarters of Levi Strauss & Company and an open-space alternative to metropolitan high-rises. With heights ranging from seven stories downward, the new buildings reflect the cascading of the hill and its residential structures. The Plaza's red-brick exteriors are compatible with neighboring turn-of-the-century warehouses, including a renovated pre-earthquake landmark that now houses Levi Strauss offices. The north waterfront development includes a 3.2-acre public park complete with fountains and a stream. (Photograph by Peter Aaron, Esto, courtesy of Howard Friedman, FAIA.)

4 Main (Levi Strauss) building, atrium, and plaza.

(Photograph by Janet Parrish.)



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5 The Embarcadero Center

II looms (left) behind the campuslike grounds of Levi's Plaza.

(Photograph by Janet Parrish.)

6 Plaza and rehabilitated, pre-earthquake, Italian Swiss Colony building.

(Photograph by Janet Parrish.)

A second of Halprin's intentions and hypothesized outcomes—which he held with great conviction—was that the location would stratify outdoor use by employees: lower-level employees would be more likely to use the soft park's grassy knolls and seating than upper-level employees. We could find no strong evidence that Halprin's predictions were borne out, however.

Finally, the park, a “transplanted piece of the Sierras” where Levi Strauss first sold his canvas pants, was to invite the public in to share it with employees. This works better than Levi's people realize. At lunchtime fewer than one-half of the park's occupants are associated with Levi's. Most outsiders are not aware that the park is Levi's property—in part because of its public scale and the use of minimal, subdued signs by the company. Interestingly, Levi's people generally estimate that nearly all of the park's occupants are associated with the company. Also,



6

the park quickly became a tourist attraction on the route to and from Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39.

One group of visitors dislikes the park, though they use it extensively. They are the local design professionals who had colonized the low-rent buildings with offices and studios. “Gentrification” is the complaint, this referring both to increased rents and to various “hokey” treatments in the design. A major example was the rehabilitation of Mildred Pierce's, a cozy hamburger café that had long been a slumming favorite for the informal professional crowd, a place where they could mingle with sailors and dockworkers on a sawdust-covered floor. The simple box that housed Mildred Pierce's was as much a popular sign as any logo-shaped food franchise. Its new skin and plant-filled atrium (actually ordered by Bakar, not Halprin) outraged many of the old patrons and exacerbated the criticisms of gentrification. And, in fact,

their complaints may be justified: Mildred Pierce's has been replaced by a new restaurant, Battery Point. The old sawdust and chaos has given way to tables graced with linen napkins and freshly cut flowers.

An interesting sidelight relating the social and the physical in this design is that Halprin's large, accessible, unsupervised fountains clearly constitute an “attractive nuisance” in the legal sense. The year-round, 24-hour security force paid for by the developer is essentially a design supplement that freed Halprin's design hand even further and allows Levi's to maintain a public stance of openness. Robert Haas envisions a time when street vendors and musicians will mingle with the employees and the public will be interlarded among Levi's people at their celebratory plaza affairs. All of these possibilities rely on human supervision, which is, in fact, an intimate feature of the design, giving it the formal freedom it could not otherwise have.



7

The Atrium

The atrium of the Levi Strauss Building is the hub of all intentions and outcomes in the Plaza's creation. What had been missing since 98 Battery Street was a visible corporate commons: a place through which the entire community flowed—where one could, with certainty, know one was “at Levi’s.” The Plaza and park are symbolic hubs; the atrium is the transparent tool that separates the Levi’s community from the outside world while retaining a visual connection. This separation acts to reinforce employee cohesion and, at the same time, the sense of general accessibility. The main building filters out those who do not work there; those who move beyond the lobby are associated with Levi’s. People accomplish the actual filtering, since it was important to the company not to convey a sense of public exclusion through the design itself. An information officer sits at a circular chrome desk in the center of the atrium to monitor comings and goings. Thus,

a sense of easy mobility and clear control are maintained simultaneously.

The atrium’s conspicuous chrome elevator, one which brings top management up from the garage, is a surprise; its chrome encasement seems inconsistent with the overall warmth of the complex. It is at this point that one remembers that Levi Strauss & Company, the world’s largest apparel-maker, is in fact, a multinational corporation. And, like any other corporation, hierarchy is a reality. Although Levi’s has a detailed personnel grading system, and top executives occupy the plush offices located on the top floor in the highest building, it *somehow* manages to obscure this hierarchy in an understated manner, one which can be demonstrated more clearly by looking at the interiors.

Interiors

“Levi’s Grey” is gone. Gensler’s negotiated interpretation of employee and corporate preferences comes very close to what was requested in sessions with

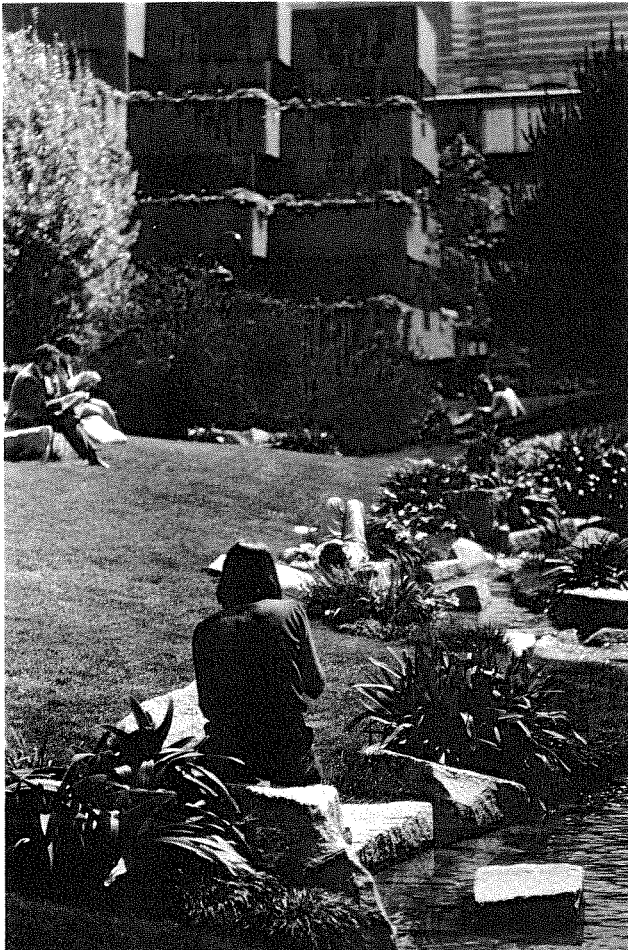
employee representative groups. During the 1978 preprogramming studies, a number of recommendations were made that stemmed from the international division’s issues: it was recommended that since each division was an independent unit of the organization, each should have different design personalities, linked by a common circulation system and swelling into the eating areas, garden spots, and strolling places. In addition, the divisions and major operating units should be located tangentially on this loop-style arrangement. Single-axis, double-loaded systems were discouraged. The resulting circulation scheme by Gensler accommodated these suggestions with open offices laid out almost like mazes, color coded in earthy pastels, and institutional in a soft way. The universality of the color scheme, however, blurred the divisional distinctions proposed for the circulation layout.

Interestingly, personality and distinctiveness are reflected in the response to a second

7 Park and waterfront.
(Photograph by Janet Parrish.)



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recommendation. The preprogramming studies revealed that for professional staff, job satisfaction and personal space were most closely connected to a feeling of job competence and getting somewhere within the company. Space was associated with its value as a symbolic badge and notarization of position, not just as a functional area for completing one's work. For lower-level staff, job satisfaction seemed less connected to work as a rewarding experience in itself than with the convivial aspects of the job: in particular, relationships with fellow workers and the boss. Therefore, the program's suggestion was to design a qualitatively different type of space for the second group: friendlier areas given to more social intercourse, more lounges, rest areas, and lunchrooms.

Miniplazas

In a major gesture, lobbied for heavily by Howard Friedman, "miniplazas" were created. These tastefully furnished lounges sit at corridor intersections. They

were intended to be places where employees of all levels could bump into each other while going about their everyday business—positive, informal settings where people could mix business with friendly conversation. Each miniplaza has a coffee machine, refrigerator, tables, and bulletin boards; a copier and conference room(s) are only steps away. Each division or work unit has its own distinctive, uniquely furnished miniplaza. Chairs and tables are provided for indoor lunches and coffee breaks, an option to the complex's restaurant, cafeterias, and parks.

The miniplazas do not work as they were intended: people know where they are on the floor but they will not always stop and relax.

One reason why the miniplazas do not work as they were intended is that they are an unfamiliar environmental tool in the work setting. Employees do not, in their experience as workers, know how to use them. Second, Levi's Plaza



10

was completed and occupied at the start of a devastating economic recession. In its third major contraction, cuts in staff and pay produced anxiety among employees. So, despite top management's vigorous offering of this gift, lower-level employees realistically understood that their more immediate managers, tense about productivity, were watching. Many who do use the miniplazas often retreat to those on a different division or floor so as not to be seen "malingering."

Friedman, who even insured the miniplazas against the imperialism of office expansion by excluding wiring and power sources required to make that possible, was especially

disappointed by this outcome. Recent observations reveal a gradual increase in the number of employees using the miniplazas.

Offices and Work Stations

Aside from the chrome elevator in the atrium and the seventh-floor executive suite of the Levi Strauss Building, status signs are underplayed throughout the four major buildings. The design sticks to the corporate "50 percent rule": no more than 50 percent of the interior periphery is devoted to individual offices. One result of this has been a feeling of demotion for some executives who had more sumptuous offices at Embarcadero Center II.



11

Because of this spatial "democracy," many in the new complex were moved into enclosed interior offices. Of course, those nonmanagerial employees who benefited from the rule are delighted.

Cafeteria

A great deal of "community" is created and sustained around the ritual of meals. Lunch at work is certainly a national pastime. Lunchtime at Embarcadero II had no pleasant or central location. The company cafeteria was unpopular and lost customers to the rich variety of shops and restaurants scattered throughout the financial district and within easy reach of Levi's employees. As part of Levi's

8 Two views of the park at noon.

(Photographs by Janet Parrish.)

10 Atrium of main building maintains a visual connection between Levi's employees at work and in transit while separating Levi's from casual outsiders.

(Photographs by Janet Parrish.)



12

12 Scene portrays Levi's ideal use of "mini-plazas."
(Photograph by David K. Madison, courtesy of Howard Friedman, FAIA.)

13 The 36 distinctively appointed "mini-plazas"—a gift to the employees—are an unfamiliar environmental tool that employees are slowly learning to use. In current tight economic times, some employees retreat to "mini-plazas" away from their units to avoid the appearance of malingering.
(Photographs 13 and 14 by Tonia Chao, photograph 15 by Janet Parrish.)

16 The "50 percent rule" produced many work stations and common areas with access to operable windows, sliding doors, and terraces. In fact, somewhat less than 50 percent of the plaza outer-window area is taken up by private offices.
(Photograph 16 by David K. Madison, courtesy of Howard Friedman, FAIA; photograph 17 by Janet Parrish.)

18 The Plaza complex includes two cafeterias. The "Plaza Café" (above) is limited to Levi's employees.
(Photograph by Janet Parrish.)



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efforts to retrieve a sense of community, two cafeterias were included in the complex: an elegant restaurant in the Levi Strauss Building and a more informal cafeteria in the Koshland Building with a panoramic view of the park and fountain. Both work well and are places the Haas can frequent, confident that they are with Levi's people.

Conclusion

Levi's Plaza is a "place" in comprehensive terms. Its location, form, scale, and layout are summaries of what the company intended in crystallizing its corporate identity and supporting its architectural image. There were conflicts between the company and the architects, but, in fleshing out and physically manifesting corporate policy, Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, Gensler, and Halprin clearly benefited from the strong and distinctive set of implied and explicit guidelines that emerged from a long corporate history and culture.

Inwardly, this "culture" involved a tradition of familial caring for employees and—at least ostensibly—a diminishment of the everyday importance of hierarchy. Outwardly, there was the identification with the city of its origins and the desire to give back to the city some of the environmental qualities lost in the burst of high-rise development.

Despite the honest, positive tone of our discussion, Levi's is, of course, not a democracy. Hierarchy in the new-scale organization is more a fact than ever. Nor is Levi's a "family," despite efforts to retrieve some of that feeling. Certainly the "gift to the city" was not innocent of advantages that could be extracted from the city's review process. But the Plaza is a success as a work-place, as a city-place, and as an environmental symbol. At this writing, for example, San Francisco's mayor, Diane Feinstein, has forced a major developer to rethink its proposed design insisting that she wants "... a less ambitious project modeled



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on the college campuslike design of the new Levi Strauss offices.”⁷

The Plaza was intended as a definitive home and it works that way. It was intended as a contribution to the kind of place a significant and influential segment of the San Francisco community wants the city to be, and it is. It also manages to be summary of the company’s historic experiences—rooting the place in time. More significantly, the Plaza is a resolution of Levi’s experience with growth.⁸ As an environmental tool, it helps resolve the contradictions between bigness, on the one hand, and a sense of community and distinctive corporate culture, on the other.

This is a dramatic case of social origins in building. Those of us who have been critical of the abstract and/or formal descriptions of buildings that frequent the literature need to search more extensively for those

extraaesthetic and extramaterial forces that explain the shapes and uses of places in our built environment. It is inevitable that the familiarity of design professionals with building biographies such as this can function as a guide to their questions, and can offer advice, eyes, and hands when working on similar problems.

NOTES

- 1 *A.I.A. Journal*, May 1982, pp. 153–160. *San Francisco Business*, March 1983, pp. 13–15; and “The Odyssey of Levi Strauss,” *Fortune*, March 22, 1983.
- 2 Russ Ellis and Gary Lehner.
- 3 Russ Ellis, Dana Cuff, Sam Dyer, Marianna Adler, Toby Levy, and Fried Wittman.
- 4 This was conducted by a graduate methods seminar on postoccupancy evaluation. Levi’s management insisted that our approach be as unobtrusive as possible. No interview schedules or survey instruments were permitted. Thus, we relied on observation and unstructured interviews.

- 5 *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 19, 1982.
- 6 *Fortune*, op. cit.; *Time*, January 3, 1983, pp. 265–266. See also “Revolution in the Workplace,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 16, 1984.
- 7 “Southern Pacific Will Start Over on the Design for Mission Bay,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 23, 1984.
- 8 Ironically, it is very likely that Levi’s will again have strangers in its buildings. The fading popularity of the “501” jeans has recently necessitated the closure of 11 plants in the United States, Canada, and France. Headquarters employees will also be laid off. This major new contraction will almost certainly require the leasing of underused space to other companies. The closeness of Levi’s relationship to developer Gerson Bakar will most likely result in Levi’s exercising some influence over the choice of new lessees. See “Big New Levi Cutback to Close San Jose Plant,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 20, 1984; “Levi Closing 11 Plants, Idling 2,500,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 19, 1984.