



EZRA STOLLER/ESTO

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's 140 Broadway, completed in 1967, with Isamu Noguchi's *Red Cube*.

sponsor a monthly series of public-space design symposia, where new talents would have a chance to showcase their visions and learn more about RFQ procedures.

City Hall and the Parks Department can improve the RFQ process, but they obviously can't legislate better design. For this reason, I have a few items of cautionary advisement to offer. First, there should be enough memorable features in a park or plaza to encourage people to travel out of their way to see the space and, after leaving, tell their friends about it. Second, public space is successful to the degree that people look attractive to each other and are encouraged to interact in new ways. Designers should be sensitized to "prosthetic engagement," where body movement and pedestrian interaction become as much a part of the raw material of design as paving, steel, and vegetation. Third, parks, plazas, and gardens should involve all of the senses in equal measure. And fourth, the design of public space today includes an awareness of "integrated systems." This suggests a design philosophy based on understanding the parallels between the components of electronic communications and their symbiotic equivalents in nature.

If Mayor Bloomberg expects his plea for new ideas to reach high fertility, his passion for change must reflect a more psychologically engaging and aesthetically innovative brand of street and park life for New York City. There must also be support for a truly civic-minded "mandate for change." Today, this means green and sustainable. By Manhattan standards, being green is a rather restrained and puritanical notion—the antithesis of Big Apple optimism. If the green movement ever expects to conquer New York, it must reverse its scold tactics and provide the same kind of inspiring catalyst for change that the industrial revolution offered our flamboyantly receptive island over a hundred years ago. This means shaping and selling a persuasive new "philosophy of the environment." Come on Mayor Bloomberg, let's go for it!

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BEYOND PLOP-ART PARKS

When I first received Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe's 2007 greeting announcing PlaNYC, I felt a great wave of exhilaration—probably the same one experienced by all architects, landscape architects, and planners who have fantasized about a nascent era of great design sponsored by visionary leadership in City Hall. Office interiors were spruced up, websites revised, and principals' sartorial splendor amplified in anticipation of knocks at the door from beneficent developers and eco-conscious politicians who would beseech us to create the New York City of tomorrow.

As my fantasy faded to something resembling reality, I tried to grasp the magnitude of the gauntlet thrown down by the mayor. With selfish concern for my own studio's chances of participation in this metropolitan dream, I also wondered whether there would ever be a significant opening up of the job market for small design firms—or would all the request for qualifications (RFQ) documents arrive with their onerous requirements for mega-building experience, multi-million-dollar liability protection, hundreds of consultants under

one roof, and the thinly veiled implication that success depended on the invitee's ability to invest in competitive bidding (with free design services tossed in to sweeten the deal)?

By the time Adrian's call for designer involvement in an expanded parks program arrived, my enthusiasm for PlaNYC had been diminished by memories of futile efforts to break into New York's public space job market. Since my firm, SITE, is an architectural practice that focuses on parks and plazas (but mostly works abroad, where there is less resistance to innovative solutions and green principles), I could see the handwriting on the wall: The future would be sponsored, controlled, designed, and built by the same cast of characters that has dominated the city's architecture and planning markets for the past 30 years.

Clearly, the tasks outlined in PlaNYC—repairing infrastructure, constructing affordable housing, reducing traffic, improving mass transit, and saving energy—are top priorities. But by focusing on these imperatives, an investment in imaginative ideas for the social, psychological, and aesthetic resolution of parks,

streets, and gardens should not be assigned to the back burners. (Just look at Detroit and Cleveland!) The usual tactic of favoring operational efficiency and restorative technology, at the expense of social interaction and access to nature, has demonstrated how such legislative abandonment can destroy the very "quality of life" that a massive investment in infrastructure is meant to preserve.

My fear that New York's grand park plans may become another blueprint for business as usual was confirmed by news accounts early in the game. When the mayor's original challenge was issued in December 2007, it proposed to open 90 percent of the city's waterways for recreation by limiting water pollution and preserving our natural areas. But earlier that year, the Regional Plan Association was already complaining that the city had planned for more park expansions than it could afford. This suggests that public space may become PlaNYC's first casualty, and I suspect that similar economic and political inertia will thwart the mayor's water, transportation, energy, and air improvement agendas.

Still, in the hope that such initiatives may succeed, I want to emphasize a few issues that have enormous impact on the way our city's parks and gardens have been shaped until now, and on how they will be designed in the future. It is no secret that most public spaces constructed in New York over the past two decades have been based on Modernist traditions. The ingredients invariably include a massive slab of concrete, donut fountains, "plop-art" sculptures, and a scattering of park benches. The reasons for this formulaic consistency can be found in the politics of architectural employment and the entrenchment of a Robert Moses-era planning legacy.

Clearly, we can do better. But for a flexible climate of creativity to succeed, city agencies must first provide a less labyrinthine and preferential RFQ process. It should certainly encourage smaller architecture and landscape offices to compete for city commissions by placing more value on the applicant's track record of creativity. Since the criteria for what constitutes "creativity" can vary according to taste and time, the Parks Department might do well to