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Privatisation of Public Open Space: The Los Angeles Experience

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ANASTASIA LOUKAITOU-SIDERIS

# Privatisation of public open space

## *The Los Angeles experience*

Urban plazas have proliferated in American downtowns during the last decade. This paper examines the private production of open space as a form of privatisation of a public amenity. Using three case studies of plazas built by private capital in downtown Los Angeles, the study examines their development process, design and physical layout, management, control and social uses. It is found that the spaces display characteristics drastically different from those of traditional public places. Certain design cues in combination with stringent control practices are used in these settings to promote the purposes and goals of private enterprise. Characteristics such as introversion, enclosure, protection, escapism, commercialism, social filtering and exclusivity are seen as resulting in environments that are congruent with the private interests but not always beneficial to the general public.

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Privatisation has become a popular mode of supply for many previously public services in the last decade for a number of socio-political and fiscal reasons.<sup>1</sup> Government initiatives designed to increase the private sector's role signified the introduction and extension of market principles in public service production and provision. Studies have documented the outcomes of privatisation for a wide range of services (rubbish collection, health, fire and police protection, transportation). Not much attention, however, has been given so far to a phenomenon that is evident throughout most American downtowns: the privatisation of public space.

Urban plazas built using private capital have today become a common means of supplying open space in downtown areas of American cities. This paper is based on the premise that the creation of public open space as part of a privately owned office, retail or mixed-use development is a form of privatisation of public amenities. Urban plazas are, on paper, open for use by the general public. They are presumed by planners and city officials to be public spaces. However, this study will show that urban plazas are not equally accessible and cannot be used by all population segments in the same manner and with the same freedom as traditional public open spaces.

Some definitions are in order. Many years ago Kevin Lynch had argued that open spaces are 'all those regions in the environment which are open to the freely

chosen and spontaneous action of people'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Amos Rapoport explained that 'one can see open space as such, if it allows people to act freely . . . Open space might then be seen as providing freedom to enter and move through lack of restriction and obstruction—whether physical or through rules of "ownership" or "occupancy", not being too determined, being responsive and not overdesigned, and allowing people to act freely in it.'<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will present evidence that the new downtown open spaces are not truly public settings if measured according to the previous definitions. I will seek to show that the private production of public space has affected the socio-physical characteristics, purpose and uses of these new open spaces. Drawing from empirical research in the form of three case studies of plazas built by private capital in Los Angeles, this study will assess the effects of privatisation at four different levels: 1) provision and production; 2) design and physical representation; 3) management and control; and 4) consumption and use of public open space.

### *Privatisation of public open space: the phenomenon*

Open space privatisation is only a small, but indicative manifestation of the general trend for passing over traditional public services to the private sector, that prevailed in the 1980s. Many central city spaces intended as public environments are brought into being through incentive formulae, linkage fees, and development agreements between the public sector and private developers.

The privatisation of public space, the passing over of its production, management and control to the private sector, is a relatively recent form of private involvement in public open space provision.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, public open spaces would be publicly acquired, created, owned, controlled and managed. They would be accessible to the public and available for individual or communal activities.<sup>5</sup> Even though the private sector has in the past played a role in shaping the public realm (for example, early city and regional plans sponsored by business organisations, or philanthropic grants of private lands for public parks), it was mostly the public sector that was considered the responsible and main actor for the planning, design and management of open spaces. In recent decades, however, the onus of providing public open space has been increasingly shifted to the private sector. Urban plazas built with private money, usually in downtown areas, have become the modern American version of public space.

Public space privatisation can be attributed to three interrelated factors:<sup>6</sup>

1. The desire of the public sector to utilise private resources and find an alternative that could relieve its economic burdens and increasing financial retrenchments. Skyrocketing land values and construction costs, tax cuts and declining municipal revenues have resulted in the reluctance and inability of the public sector to maintain existing public spaces or create additional ones at a rate consistent with the growth and expansion of the urban population. In state after state proposals advocating sharp increases in state taxes and fiscal expenditures emerged victoriously from ballots. Thirty-seven states cut taxes or imposed spending limits in 1979. In California, it was estimated that the passing

of Proposition 13 resulted in a reduction of local government revenues amounting to 22 per cent of their total budgeted expenditures.<sup>7</sup> Public parks and open spaces were particularly badly hit since per capita spending shrank by 16.9 per cent between 1979 and 1984. Statewide, about 41 per cent of park districts have either eliminated facilities or reduced hours since 1977–1978. Large cities have been hit more severely. The city of Los Angeles closed twenty-four recreation centres in 1981. Funds for the remaining 154 centres have been reduced.<sup>8</sup> So in the 1980s municipalities had to invent new strategies to cope with the changed economic and political situation. Most of these strategies pointed towards one direction: privatisation.

2. The responsiveness of the private sector to development incentives and its willingness to participate in 'public–private partnerships' and incorporate public spaces within private development projects. The early New York precedent of incentive zoning<sup>9</sup> was copied widely by other cities throughout the country in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Developers responded to the opportunities of incentive zoning, ensuring increased floor area ratios of valuable commercial space in exchange for the provision of some public amenities. Developers also grasped the fact that the enrichment of their projects with public space could be profitable if the space was in close connection with commercial facilities and private services.
3. The existence of a market demand from certain sectors of the population for the facilities and services that the privately built open spaces have to offer. The 'urban pathology' of traditional public spaces, the perception, and often reality, that public squares and parks represent the locus of urban problems, and the desire of office workers, tourists, and conventioners to be separated from threatening groups (the 'undesirables' as Whyte calls them<sup>11</sup>) opened a market for spaces that are produced, maintained and controlled by the private sector.

In addition to the previously stated reasons, the proliferation of urban plazas is also intricately related to the regeneration of many American downtowns. For the past thirty years many downtown areas have continued to rebuild steadily despite continuing decentralisation and expansion in their metropolitan fringes. This massive and steady rebuilding of downtowns has not only changed their skyline, but has also amounted to major restructuring of their spatial organisation. A major aspect of this restructuring is the creation of open spaces by the private sector—plazas, paseos, gallerias and the like.

### *Privatisation of public open space in Los Angeles*

The privatisation pattern is particularly evident in Los Angeles, where in the downtown area in the last two decades a considerable number of new developments have dedicated part of their sites as landscaped plazas available for public use. Parenthetically I will give some background regarding development in downtown Los Angeles. This is an interesting account of trends and forces that shape contemporary development processes in many American cities, and which

can be clearly seen in Los Angeles. Los Angeles has been characterised as the 'post-modern city',<sup>12</sup> the exemplary product of a post-industrial society. In some sense the city resembles a window to the emerging urbanism of American cities in the waning years of the twentieth century. Through this we can see processes and patterns that are also happening, or are likely to happen, in many other cities: real-estate speculation, public-private negotiation, international capital investment.

The part of downtown Los Angeles with the densest new construction is the Central Business District (CBD) (see Fig. 14), which occupies approximately the geographic centre of the sprawling metropolis. In the last three decades a major building boom, financed to a great extent by private capital, has transformed the CBD into a prime financial and corporate node of the Pacific Rim economy.<sup>13</sup> The downtown rebuilding, beginning with the Bunker Hill urban renewal project in the 1960s, has systematically segregated the contemporary CBD from the historic downtown to the east.

This accelerating pace of growth and development has gone hand-in-hand with in-migration that has brought waves of homeless or very low income tenants, as well as undocumented workers, Asians, Mexicans, and other Central Americans. Thus, the social context of downtown Los Angeles is a mosaic of people with very different cultural, racial, occupational and economic backgrounds. The sharp division between wealth and poverty in Los Angeles is clearly reflected in the urban form. The city has two downtowns, one next to the other: the rich, flashy, corporate downtown of today and the poor, derelict, abandoned downtown of yesterday.

Starting in the 1960s the focus of public expenditure in Los Angeles shifted toward major urban renewal programmes aimed at the revitalisation of the CBD. The Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) was created to be the primary public organisation responsible for all redevelopment projects within the downtown district. The relationship between the CRA and private developers is critical in terms of the provision and allocation of public open space. As part of its efforts to restructure the downtown area, the CRA initially pursued an incentive zoning programme. This strategy allowed the Agency to encourage private developers to provide various public amenities within the project site in exchange for enhanced development rights beyond the constraints of zoning ordinances.<sup>14</sup> Specifics of such public benefit improvements, negotiated between the developers and the Agency staff, were incorporated in development agreements. As a result of this process the supply of public open space under private jurisdiction and control has significantly increased in recent years. The same cannot be said for the production of traditional public spaces. Development or remodelling of such spaces has remained on planners' boards for years.<sup>15</sup>

### *The case studies*

In order to assess the effects of privatisation on the physical layout and social uses of space, three plazas were selected for study—Security Pacific, Noguchi and Citicorp—all of which were created through a public-private negotiation and

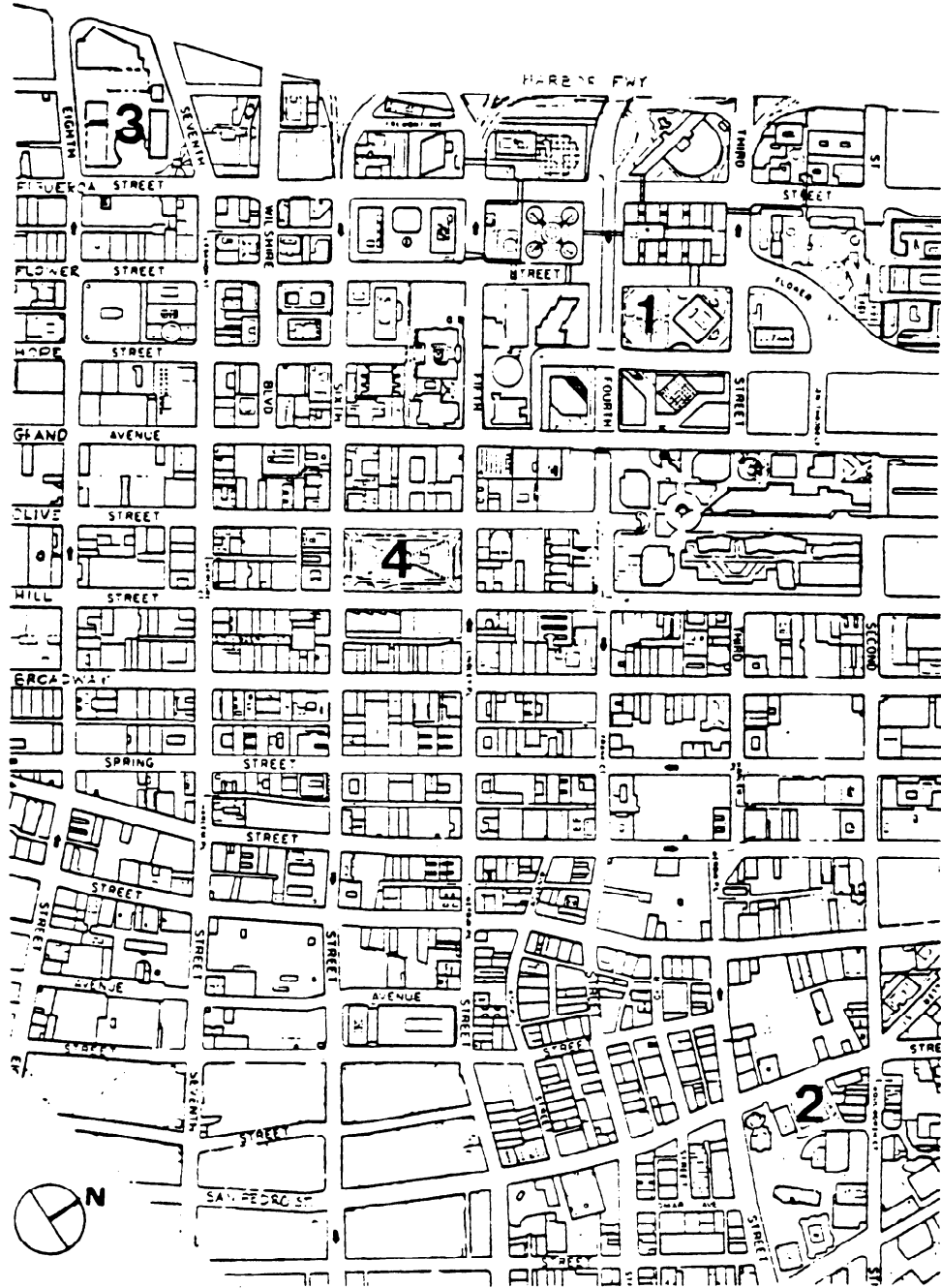
agreement process. A number of different methods and a variety of sources of evidence were utilised as part of the case study process. Relevant data were obtained through: a) interviews with the key actors (developers, architects, CRA officials) involved in the development process (see Appendix 1); b) examination of archival materials and development agreement documents; c) user surveys following a standard questionnaire (see Appendix 2); and d) structured observations at specific time intervals on weekdays and weekends (see Appendix 3).

The three plazas were selected as representative examples of the different types of public space that is built by private capital in Los Angeles. Each plaza occupies a prominent location within distinctive areas of downtown (Fig. 1), which also represent different redevelopment areas. Security Pacific Plaza is located in the Bunker Hill area (the premier corporate district of the downtown area), Citicorp Plaza is within the financial core (the commercial–retail heart of downtown), and Noguchi Plaza is at the centre of Little Tokyo (the booming and prosperous Japanese community of Los Angeles). Also, each space is attached to a different primary use. Citicorp is an urban mall associated with retail/shopping uses. Security Pacific is a typical example of a corporate plaza. Finally, Noguchi Plaza is associated with cultural uses (being in close connection with the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center and the Japanese Theater).

Each plaza conveys a different physical image: Security Pacific resembles a formal garden in repose that awkwardly finds itself in the midst of urban activities (Figs. 2–4). As a garden it seeks isolation from its surroundings. Its spatial configuration, reminiscent of classical landscape design, emphasises axial symmetry, correct proportions, and pleasing relationships between the different parts. The careful arrangement of plant materials, the uniformity of trees and planters, and the axial organisation of the water channels seek to signify orderliness and harmony, attributes in sharp contrast with the disordered and chaotic environment of the surrounding city.

Noguchi Plaza can be compared with a ceremonial court, ready to serve as the stage for scheduled events, festive operations and celebrations (Figs. 5–7). It is, however, a semi-private court, turning away from the world to reveal its contents only to the 'initiated' visitors. The plaza is landscaped as a theatre. When not used for pre-planned events, the space is not designed to serve as the background for spontaneous human activity. The plaza is not encouraging the users' dominance over its space, but rather their passive attendance. It is a work of art with well formulated canons and rules, a spectacle that unfolds itself in front of an audience.

Citicorp Plaza was characterised by its designer Jon Jerde as a grotto, an artificial hole in the ground that 'swirls' people away from the activity of the street (Figs. 8–10). The plaza also resembles a sanitised bazaar. It aspires to create a lively, festive, commercial environment, but the desired diversity seems at times pre-planned and artificial. Citicorp Plaza screens out most of the attributes that make a bazaar successful—a variety of people and merchandise, intense, spontaneous activity, elements of spectacle and surprise. Design here is clearly motivated to construct a place appealing to upmarket consumers.



- 1. SECURITY PACIFIC PLAZA**
- 2. NOGUCHI PLAZA**
- 3. CITYCORP PLAZA**
- 4. PERSHING SQUARE**

Fig. 1 Downtown Los Angeles site map

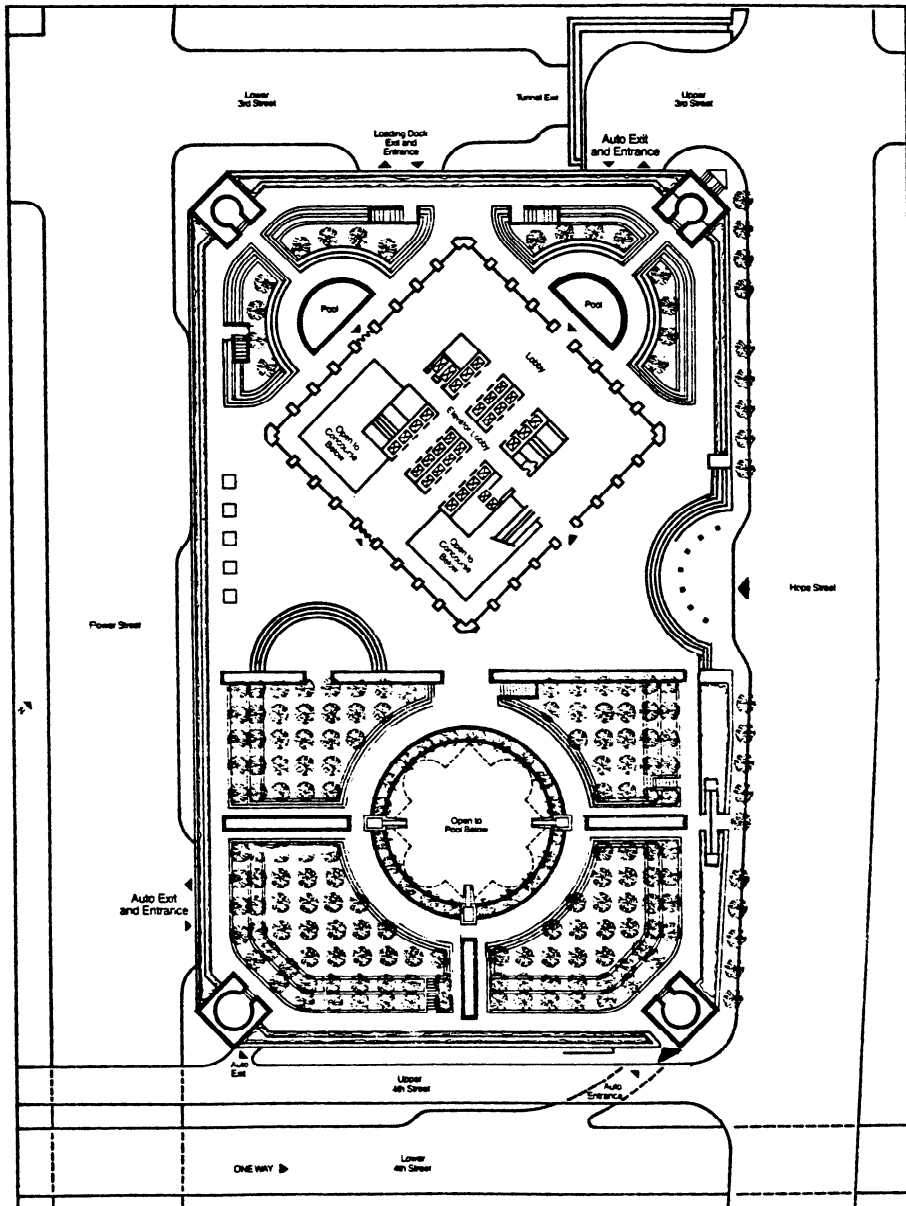


Fig. 2 Security Pacific Plaza site plan

### *The findings*

#### PROVISION AND PRODUCTION OF SPACE

All three plazas are on paper open and accessible to the public. Their production is prescribed by the Disposition and Development Agreements. Responsibility for public space provision is supposedly shared by both the public and private sectors.



Fig. 3 Security Pacific Plaza



Fig. 4 Security Pacific Plaza

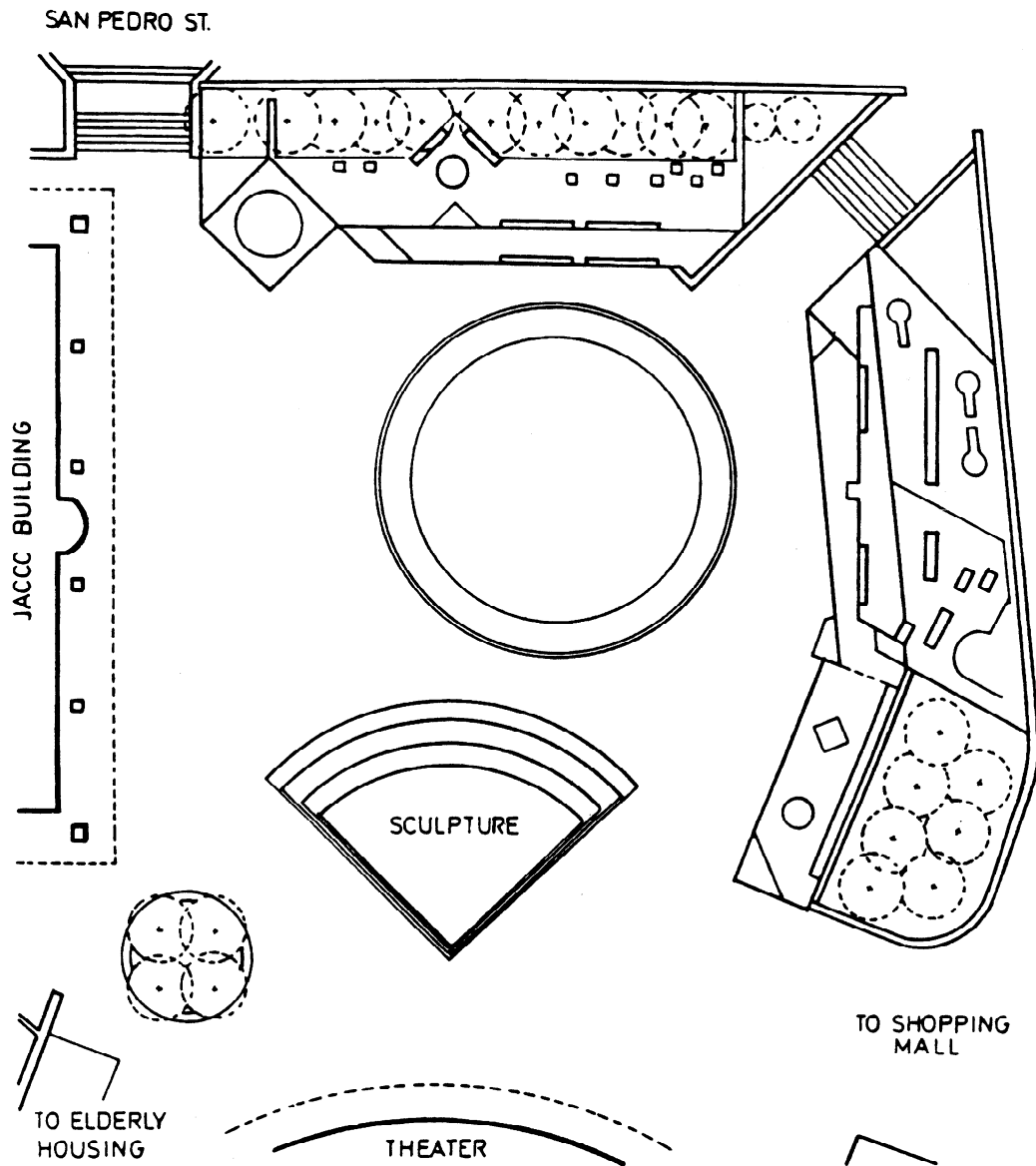


Fig. 5 Noguchi Plaza site plan

In fact, some people have hailed privatisation as an efficient process where the public and private sectors are equal collaborators and partners.<sup>16</sup> The empirical research shows that this is not exactly the case.

On the surface it would seem that the CRA carries a lot of power and clout to be able to play the principal role in the negotiation process. After all, the Agency is quite autonomous financially; it has design right approval, and it has the power to



Fig. 6 Noguchi Plaza



Fig. 7 Noguchi Plaza

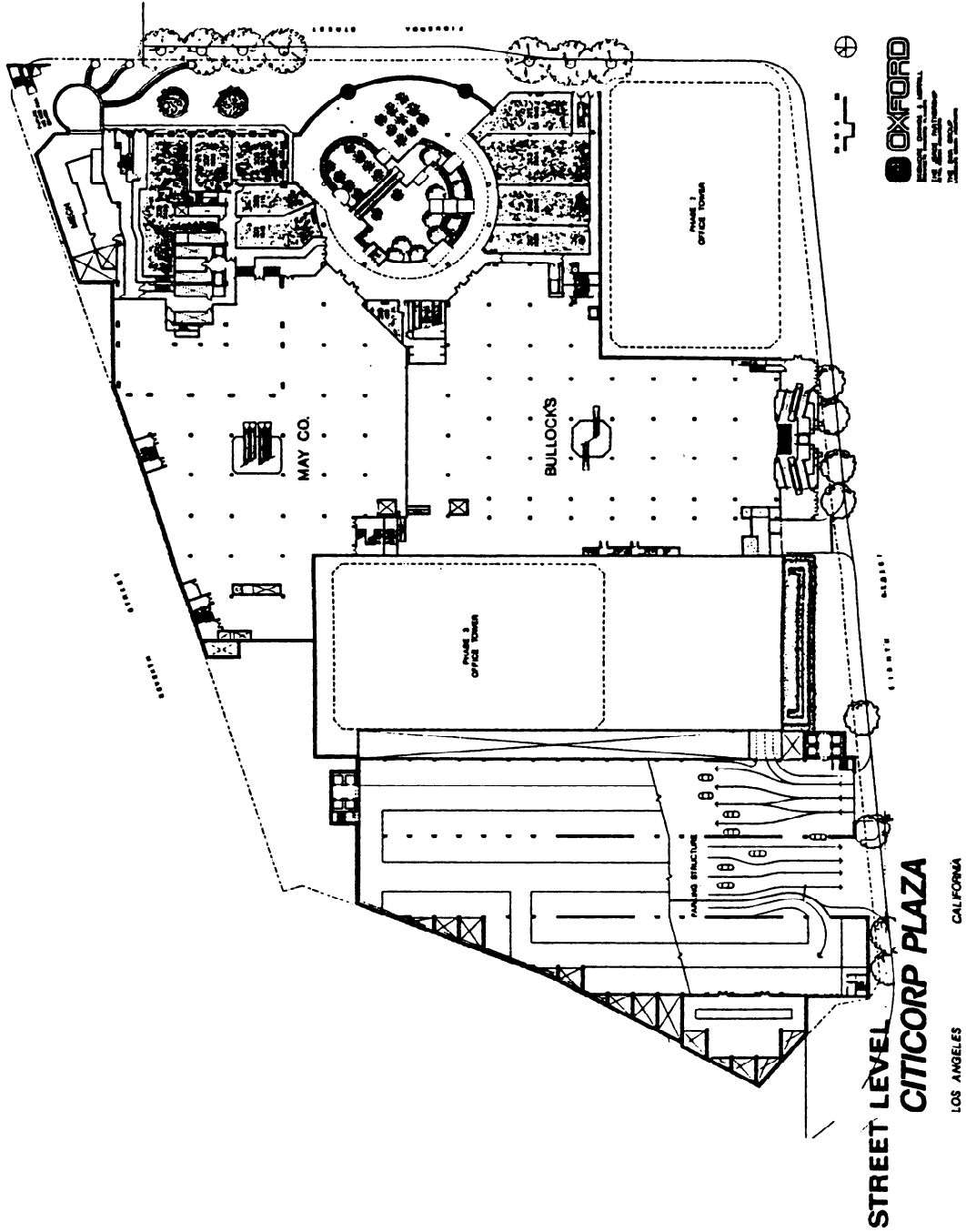


Fig. 8 Citicorp Plaza site plan



Fig. 9 Citicorp Plaza

give density variations and enhanced development privileges. However, a closer look at the Agency's political and administrative structure in conjunction with insights from interviews, revealed that the balance of power often tilted toward the private sector. Developers usually had the upper hand and set their terms in the negotiation process: 'When you deal with the big developers they have a lot of power. There are political ramifications. They have the power, they have the money and they will use it. There is always a certain amount of pressure. When there are battles they can go over your head and that is their option too' (CRA planner).

The CRA is politically dependent upon the City Council. All agreements have to be approved by the Agency's board (appointed by the Mayor) and by the City Council. Developers can and have exercised political pressure in the past to achieve their intentions. 'Our job is to make development happen, not to chase the developers away. Developers are investing millions of dollars on a project. They can say "if you make us build this there is no way we can continue", or "public open space may look nice, but it has inherent security problems". We invest a considerable amount of time during the pre-agreement and selection process.<sup>17</sup> We do not want to see afterwards everything falling apart. It is reasonable to think that we should get to agree' (CRA planner).

The CRA is a redevelopment agency. Its purpose is to promote development, not hinder it. There is always the threat by developers that, if pressed too hard, they will take their money and leave. A major goal of the CRA is economic growth, to



Fig. 10 Citicorp Plaza

generate revenues and increase its tax base. Developers know how to take advantage of this fact: 'CRA gets additional property taxes assessed for those densities above what a developer can do by right. So it has an incentive to cooperate with us' (developer, Prudential Development Company).

During the negotiation process, the CRA often relies on its ability to offer developers density variations. A developer always wants to trade something for the right to build additional floor space, but in terms of public open space, the study of the agreement documents for the three plazas revealed that it played a tenuous role in the negotiation/development process. Public space provision has become a low priority in the objectives held by city officials. According to the planners interviewed, the cost of assembling land and turning it to a non-economic use is prohibitive. Public open space is considered an unproductive allocation of land and is devalued as an amenity. The public sector is content to trade off negative externalities and transfer responsibility for public open space provision and maintenance to the private sector. Development frameworks and guidelines are loose and flexibly written so as not to discourage or constrain private initiatives. But this lack of an overall urban design framework for the downtown area and the planners' inability to impose strong design and development guidelines represents a loss for the city, which misses the opportunity to strengthen its urban form and pedestrian activity.<sup>18</sup> As can be seen in Figure 11, most urban plazas in downtown are located outside the designated pedestrian zone.

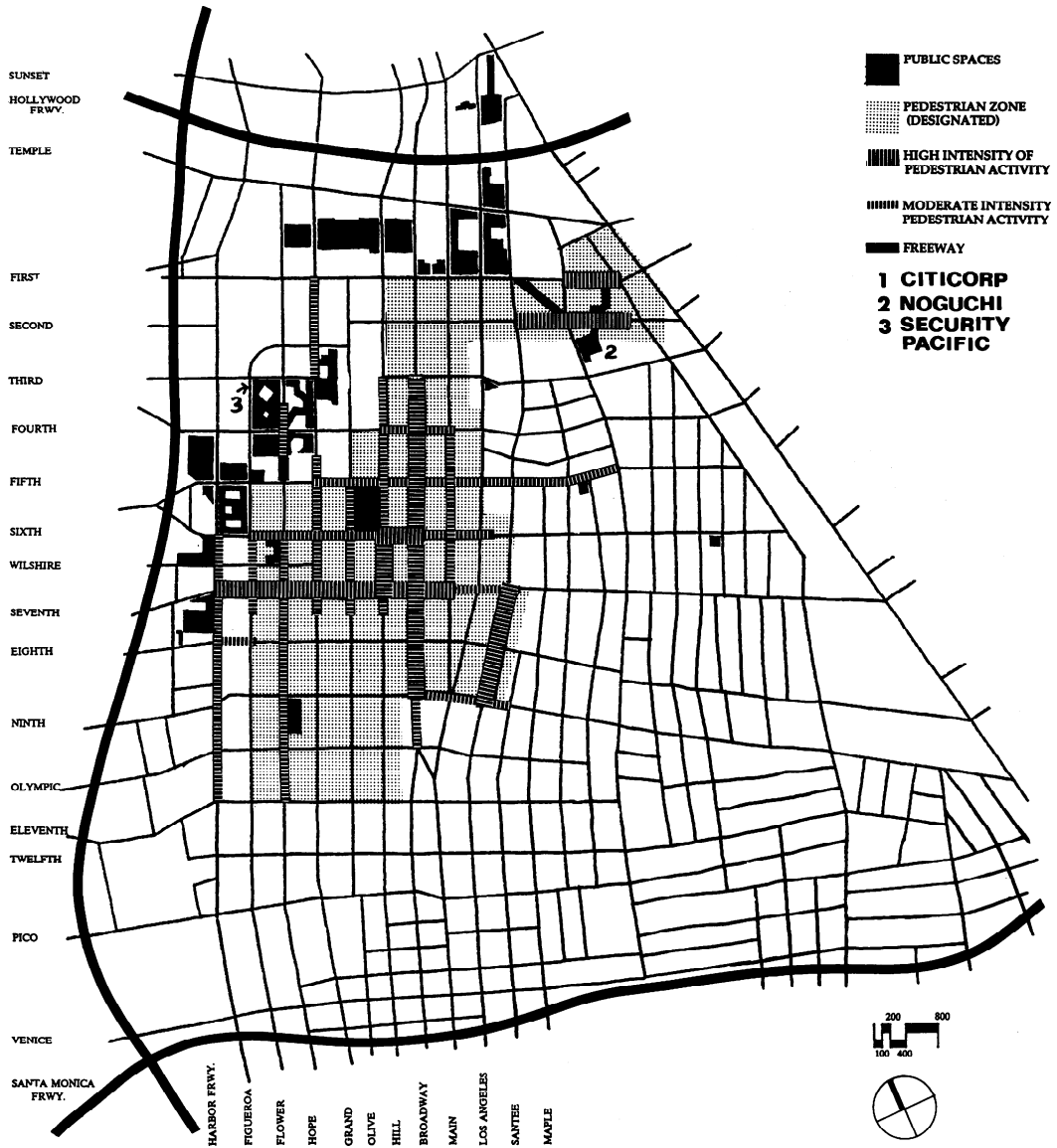


Fig. 11 Location of urban plazas in downtown Los Angeles

#### DESIGN AND PHYSICAL REPRESENTATION

A great deal of creative talent is devoted to making urban plazas attractive and distinctive. The three plazas studied project distinct physical images. At the same time, however, they display some common qualities and characteristics.

Introversion was found to be a common attribute of all three spaces. Not much of their exterior gives a clue to the space within. Design means are used to achieve an

inward-orientation of the spaces that are supposedly open to the public. These include: high enclosing walls, blank façades, distancing from the street, de-emphasis of street-level accesses, and major entrances through parking structures. This enclosure facilitates control of access and use of space and effective application of security measures. Also, the negation of the outside environment succeeds in fragmenting and disconnecting the space from the surrounding city fabric.

Design objectives for all three plazas reflect a desire for escapism and relief from the city. Architects and developers interviewed referred to their spaces as 'oases', pieces characteristically different from the rest of the urban fabric. The intention of design is to create a sharp contrast between the grey exterior space and the bright interior courts and atria. My interpretation of the discussions held with the architects of these plazas is that they all aspired to resurrect an idealised, even nostalgic image of the public realm, which in reality is never so clean, disciplined, safe, or stratified. One cannot help but remember an early article by Dyckman who argued that American planners and designers nostalgically look back for inspiration to the 'European motherland'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in their discussions many plaza designers referred to the classical plazas, squares and open spaces of medieval and baroque European cities as sources of inspiration. However, the validity and appropriateness of these romantic prototypes for the American city centre of the 1990s should be carefully examined.

Another common characteristic of all three plazas is the rigidity of their design, which demands adaptation of user behaviour to the requirements of the setting and encourages the visitors' passivity. Nothing is left to chance, or can be easily changed. In all three spaces design emphasises orderliness but not spontaneity. None of these spaces provides the appropriate setting for children to run freely, couples to lie on the grass, big groups to congregate.

In order to serve the purposes of the developer, design most often aspires to create settings for an exclusive class of user. Chic architecture, stylish, highly ornamental and elegant materials intend to attract, impress and at the same time promote the feeling of affluence. The design of corporate plazas, like Security Pacific, usually borrows heavily from the modernist doctrines—clear-cut layout, hardscapes, fixed benches, colours drawn from a limited palette of greys, browns and pale greens. Some kind of abstract ornamentation, a sculptural or water element is often a limited attempt to break away from the standardisation and universality of the modernist design scheme. Shopping plazas like Citicorp are often dressed with a post-modern costume. The stylishness, superficiality, impression of affluence that post-modernism sometimes seeks to achieve blends well with the purposes of commercial enterprises. Shopping plaza post-modernism uses a pastiche of colours and design elements borrowed from various styles. Design treats space as a commodity to be consumed. In both cases the visual language of design is utilised to promote cues consistent with the goals of private enterprise. The design characteristics commonly present in the plazas—introversion, fragmentation, escapism, orderliness and design rigidity—are in congruence with the objectives of control, protection, social filtering, image generation, and manipulation of user behaviour.

### MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Private management is quick to assert its authority, often converting the plaza space into a limited-access territory. Control is the operating principle. 'Hard' control targets the elimination of certain undesirable elements through the employment of private security officers and the use of regulations that prohibit certain things from happening, or allow them only after the issue of permits, or through programming, scheduling and leasing. 'Soft' control focuses on symbolic restrictions through the lack of facilities that could appeal to certain people or encourage functions deemed undesirable (public rest-rooms, food vendors, sand boxes), and through the utilisation of previously mentioned design cues that seek to achieve a subtle closure and screening of the undesired elements. These control strategies are successful in eliminating 'undesirable elements' from the plazas' grounds. Homeless people and other denizens who wander freely in the surrounding streets and often sleep in Pershing Square, a downtown public space, were absent in all three plazas studied.

It is interesting to note that as it became clear from personal interviews with developers, managers and security officers from many downtown plazas, the undesirable population includes not only criminal elements, or dangerous individuals, but also harmless bag-ladies, the homeless, street vendors, musicians and public performers, noisy teenagers and children, and in general everyone who does not conform with the management's standards of appropriateness, or whose presence might damage the image of a clean, proper, and safe environment. Control of use is also practised. Noisy activities, drinking of alcoholic beverages, sleeping on the benches or grass, and picnicking are in general prohibited. Big public events, demonstrations, political gatherings, picketing and protests are not allowed in Citicorp Plaza and need a special permit in Security Pacific Plaza. Sometimes appearance or clothing is the sole basis for exclusion of potential users.<sup>20</sup>

The private owners of public settings in general have three good reasons to exercise rigid control practices: maintenance, liability and marketability. Maintenance costs burden the private owners exclusively, so they have an incentive to ban activities and people perceived as potential threats. Owners are also liable for all facilities and spaces within their property lines. The liability crisis of the 1980s, accompanied by skyrocketing insurance costs, make owners very sensitive to any perceived risk. Finally, plazas represent for the private sector a marketable commodity. Surveys of plaza users showed that users aspire to safe, protected, orderly settings (see Appendix 2). It is quite rational, therefore, for owners to seek to eliminate any distraction that can spoil the image of a 'perfect' environment.

### CONSUMPTION AND USE

A common attribute of all three plazas is the homogeneity of their social context. All spaces represent highly segregated settings, appealing only to a specific clientele. Security Pacific Plaza was built to serve the Bunker Hill business community. Citicorp Plaza has carefully tailored its services to suit predominantly yuppie tastes, and Noguchi Plaza appeals mainly to a limited segment of one ethnic community.

This fact is quite consistent with the 'target group' concept pursued by developers. Urban plazas are designed to fulfil the needs and values of only that section of the public which is most likely to consume the private services offered. The surveys showed that the users of the plazas studied appreciate their exclusionary environment. Forty per cent of the users in Security Pacific and forty-five per cent of those in Noguchi Plaza responded that the most appealing characteristic of the plaza space is its solitude. Safety, order and the banning of 'undesirables' ranked as positive attributes among users. It is clear that people do not come to these plazas for a sense of togetherness, communality, or to mix with people from different social strata—attributes associated with some public open spaces of the past.<sup>21</sup> Observations confirmed an individual and private use of space.

These sentiments are recognised by the private sector, which markets 'pseudo-public' settings to cover the needs of its clientele. Plazas are characterised as more successful if they bring certain sections of the public in, but also keep other sections of the public out. Since plazas are designed for office employees, it comes as no surprise that the cross-section of the population that uses them is quite skewed, with more professional, well educated, white-collar adults, and fewer blue-collar workers, fewer minorities (with the exception of Noguchi), children and the elderly. As the surveys showed, most plaza users work in the adjacent office buildings. They typically cover a walking distance of up to two blocks to come to the plaza. Most users are well educated (beyond high school) and employed mostly in clerical, secretarial or managerial professions (see Appendix 2).

All downtown plazas—and the three cases studied represent no exception—display a very temporal use. The peak time for all on weekdays coincides with employees' lunch hours. It should be noted that the food court at Citicorp Plaza, with a variety of restaurants to choose from, is quite popular among downtown office workers. More than two hundred people can be found lunching on its grounds on any given weekday (see Fig. 12). As Whyte has argued in his well known study of New York plazas,<sup>22</sup> food is a major attractor of people in open spaces. The rest of the time, however, and on weekends plazas are very much underutilised (Figs. 12 and 13). This refers to participatory use. There is no doubt that plazas offer visual and mental relief and satisfaction to many office workers, who sitting in their office cubicles are able to gaze at them through their windows.

Catering to a different 'clientele', the limited open space in downtown which is under public control enjoys much higher levels of participatory use. In Pershing Square, a downtown public open space, my observations showed a much more intensive utilisation of space. Similarly, there is a daily cramming of people in Skidrow Park, a tiny park in the Skidrow area of downtown. An activity count showed eight different types of activities in the plazas under study (eating, sitting, walking, meeting friends, reading, working, taking pictures, feeding pigeons). A similar count found a much greater variety of activities (more than twenty-five different ones) in the other two public spaces (Pershing Square and Skidrow Park). The users in these two spaces are the downtown denizens and homeless, bag-ladies, some drug dealers, but also Hispanic families with children, and African-American teenagers. Absent are the office workers, the business executives, the secretaries and the

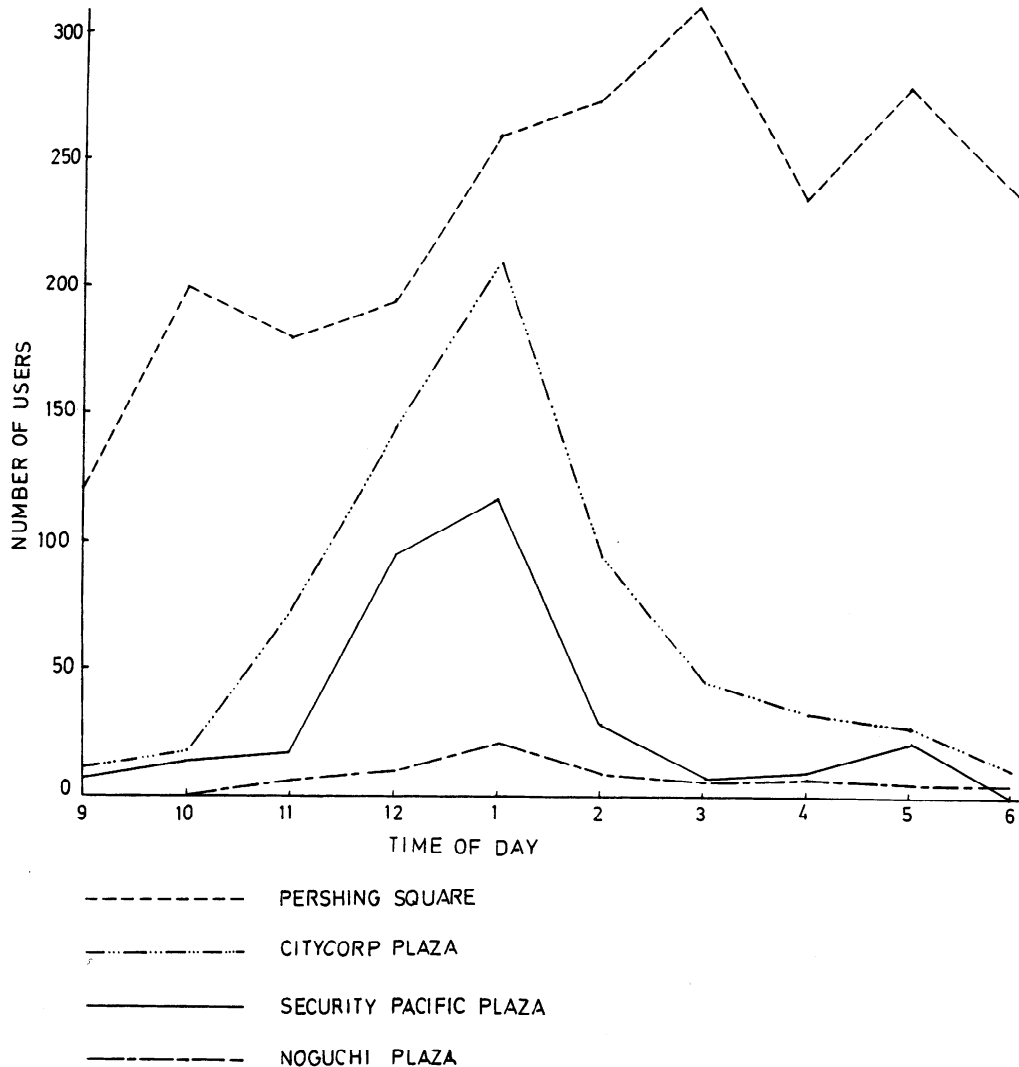


Fig. 12 Use patterns on a weekday (weather: sunny, temperature 75° F)

and the professional staff, who feel 'out of place' here and are more comfortable and protected in the corporate plazas.<sup>23</sup> Public open spaces were once perceived as being capable of bringing together people from different social strata. Today, both corporate plazas and traditional public spaces are often as segregated as any other part of the American urban form.

### *The meaning of privatisation*

Downtown open spaces, like these under discussion, can be found today in almost every North American city. They are part of a city's redevelopment efforts, which

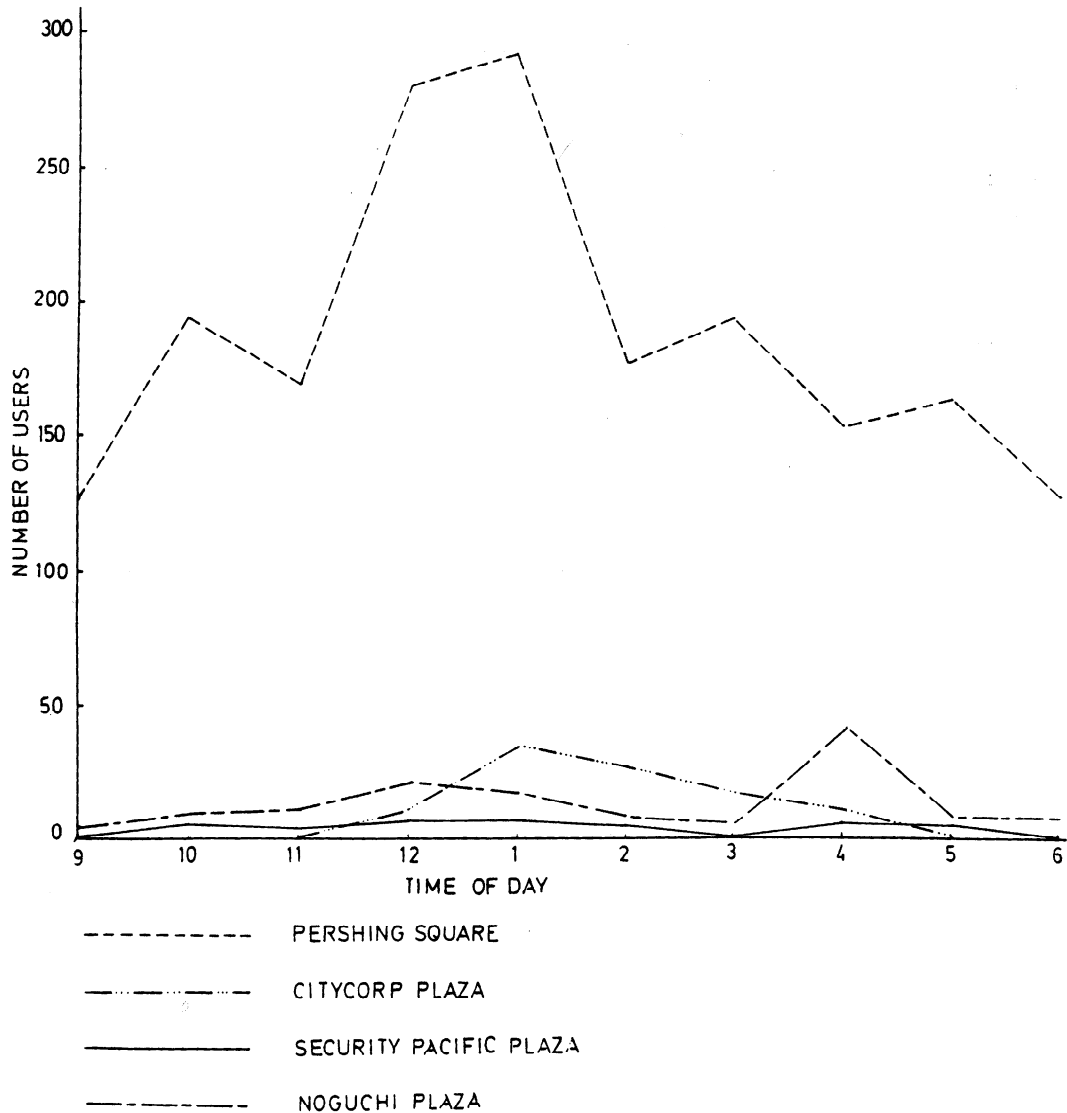


Fig. 13 Use patterns on a Sunday (weather: sunny, temperature 77° F)

more often than not are based on a corporate centre's strategy.<sup>24</sup> Investment priorities are transforming the ageing core into the modern corporate image, with emphasis upon commercialisation rather than reindustrialisation, and orientation toward financial/administrative services and luxury consumption. Genuine public spaces, whether parks, squares, playgrounds or recreational facilities, have been consistently devalued as amenities and redefined as planning problems to be eliminated or privatised.<sup>25</sup>

Corporate plazas are loved by developers and redevelopment agencies alike. They are perceived as enhancing the corporate milieu, the glitter and image of

downtown as 'world centre'. A great deal of design talent and effort, as well as money, goes into the development and packaging of these spaces, which as set pieces often represent attractive environments for their users. It should also be said that plazas offer comfort and secure 'refuge' to a legitimate group of downtown users—the advanced services professionals and white-collar office workers. However, based on the findings of this study, I wish to raise a number of issues and concerns regarding the privatisation of downtown open space.

The acclaimed public-private partnership between the city's Community Redevelopment Agency and the private developers has effectively meant corporate domination of public policy and a form of dependency of the public on the private sector. My interviews with developers and planners showed that the two sectors are not equal collaborators in the development process. In Los Angeles the role of the public sector in the determination of open space provision and functions is minimal. Dependency relations are unequal. The case studies showed that the private sector is usually in a better position to determine the outcome and set the terms of the negotiation/deal-making process. This finding is quite consistent with the theory of urban economic dependency of cities in the era of post-industrial capitalism.<sup>26</sup> The bargaining relationship between cities and large corporations that have come to dominate urban economies has tilted in favour of the latter. Cities are impelled to compete with one another in response to the investment decisions of large corporations.

Thus, private developers have become the city builders and private interests determine what gets built where. Virtually no strategic planning has been carried out by the public sector regarding what sorts of open space priorities should be set, how much open space is needed in downtown, where it should be allocated, and which different models of open space can better serve the needs of different user groups. As a result, the need for plurality and diversity in the provision of public open space was not served well by the privatisation pattern. The divide between west and east, new and old, rich and poor in downtown Los Angeles has widened by the allocation of all new open space in the form of corporate plazas in the west stretch of the 'new downtown' (see Fig. 14).

Urban plazas are appreciated as amenities by the downtown white-collar office workers. But in Los Angeles many other user groups live, work and shop in downtown. In the Eastside Industrial District (which includes the apparel and flower industries) thousands of immigrant workers are packed in sweatshops. In the Central City East (which contains the Skidrow district) the homeless are struggling to find a resting spot in the missions, single-occupancy hotels, or (most of them) on the streets. In the Historic Core a vibrant Latino community fills the retail shops and theatres of the Broadway corridor. All these distinct areas of Los Angeles downtown are lacking open space amenities (see Fig. 14).

Bonuses to developers can be seen as negative externalities, the costs of which (for example, increased traffic congestion) are borne by the public. One could also question the wisdom of giving such bonuses and density variances for an amenity that most probably would have been provided by the private sector even without the incentive, as all developers indicated they perceive plazas as directly beneficial to their building, enhancing its image and desirability by tenants.

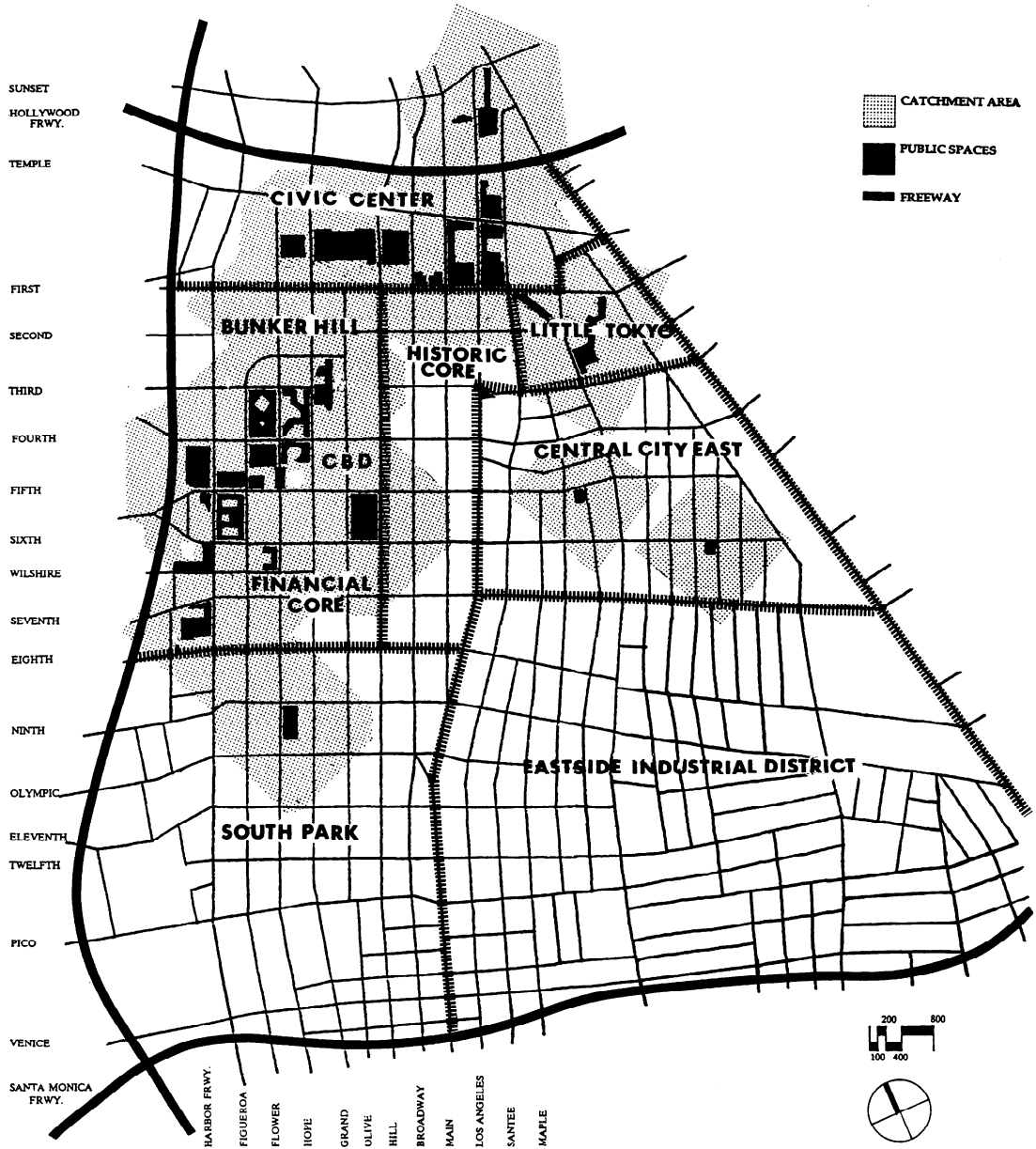


Fig. 14 Open space allocation in the 'new downtown' of Los Angeles

Finally, the lack of strategic planning and the dominance of the private over the public sector in the creation of open space have resulted in some lost urban design opportunities for downtown. The inward orientation and fragmentation of most plazas is in strong conflict with urbanistic objectives for coherence, effective linking of districts, and pedestrian connections. Plazas effectively turn their back on to one

another, closing the city outside. In downtown Los Angeles this tactic has produced a non-cohesive arrangement of public open spaces and a fragmentation of the public environment. The modernist scheme, where the tower dominates and suppresses an open plaza, is gradually being replaced by the post-modernist approach of the sheltered plaza. There is a general agreement that, like post-modern architecture, post-modern urban design also tends to be context independent.<sup>27</sup> Much of the urban design of downtown Los Angeles—especially the fragmented, self-contained plazas—attests to this post-modernity. The principal concern about this corporate, post-modern urban design is not one of style, but one of connections and continuity both in space and time.

### *Epilogue*

Public open space privatisation is a phenomenon that can be observed in many American downtowns. The 1980s evidenced the apotheosis of private enterprise. At the same time the balance of power in cities has changed.<sup>28</sup> The private sector now has a far greater role and influence in shaping the form of the city. Los Angeles' experience is by no means unique. The privatisation phenomenon seems to be accentuated, however, in Los Angeles because the city's public officials and planners in their thrust for downtown growth and development have left every major responsibility for public open space production and provision to the private sector. In the name of flexibility a case-to-case approach has been pursued. This total absence of regulation in the form of policy and design frameworks and management guidelines has made the privatisation effects very evident in the city. In general, it can be argued that local variations and attributes such as the political climate and power structure, the planning style, the state of the local economy and the pro- or anti-growth sentiments of the citizenry, can moderate or accentuate the effects of privatisation. It is my premise, however, that some of the attributes described in this article are inherent in the privatisation phenomenon. The Los Angeles experience seems to indicate that privatisation is not simply a change in the delivery system of a public amenity; it is a process in which the meaning and purposes of public open space are redefined and reshaped in the context of changing socio-economic and political relationships. It is a symptom of powerful social trends with ramifications in the production, consumption use and physical representation of public open space.

#### APPENDIX I:

##### FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. **Interview outline for developers, CRA officials, planners and project managers**
  - a. *Goals and intentions*
    - \* What were the prominent goals and intentions of the CRA regarding the development of the site?
    - \* Did you have any intentions that were not realised?
    - \* What types of users did the development target? Who suggested them?

b. *Process of development*

- \* How did the open space evolve? What was the process of negotiation? To what extent does the CRA participate in determining the layout and uses of the open space?
- \* Could you explain the role and responsibilities of the CRA, the developer, the architect?
- \* Were there conflicting interests between the CRA and developers? If yes, how was the outcome decided?
- \* The part of the development agreements that describes the scope of development is quite open-ended and flexible. Was this the intent of the CRA? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having more specific design criteria?
- \* Other than the development agreements, what ways does the CRA have to direct or guide the development process?
- \* Did you encounter any problems with the process?

c. *Operation*

- \* Who owns, manages, and controls the plaza?
- \* Can the plaza be characterised as public? Is it open and accessible to all?
- \* Can the plaza be used for major public events? Is there any coordinated or planned programming for such events?

d. *Evaluation*

- \* Is the plaza (as it has been realised) consistent with the initial goals and the scope of development? Are all the activities intended actually happening?
- \* Would you say that some downtown plazas are functioning better than others, and why?
- \* Some of the plazas are quite isolated from their immediate surroundings. What is responsible for that?
- \* What do you think the strongest element of the plaza is?
- \* What would you change if you could?

**2. Interview outline for architects**a. *Goals and intentions*

- \* What were the prominent design goals and intentions for this space? Were they clear from the very beginning?
- \* Who was responsible for the development of these goals (yourself, the developer, the CRA)?
- \* Did you have some intentions that were not realised?
- \* What types of users did your design target? Who suggested them?
- \* What uses and activities did your design want to a) encourage b) discourage? Who determined them?
- \* Were you targeting for a plaza environment which is a continuation of the street, or an environment that is more secluded and inward-oriented?

b. *Process of development*

- \* Could you explain your role and responsibilities throughout the development process, as well as that of the developer and the CRA?
- \* What primary constraints did you face while designing the plaza?
- \* Were there any problems or conflicts of interest throughout the process?
- \* What was your primary contribution?
- \* What has inspired your design of the plaza space? Were there any prototypes or models of other open spaces that you drew from?

c. *Evaluation*

- \* Were your design intentions realised? Does the plaza function as you had expected?
- \* What are the strongest elements of the plaza's design?
- \* Is there anything that you would change if you were to design this space again?

**APPENDIX 2:  
USER SURVEYS**

	Security Pacific	Noguchi	Citicorp
1. Why are you downtown today?			
Work	87.5%	52.5%	79.0%
Sightseeing	7.5%	12.5%	7.0%
Shopping	0.0%	17.5%	14.0%
Living here	0.0%	17.5%	0.0%
Other	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2. How did you get to downtown?			
Drive	75.0%	60.0%	55.0%
Transit	17.5%	20.0%	27.5%
Carpool/vanpool	7.5%	7.5%	14.0%
Walk	0.0%	12.5%	3.5%
3. How often do you use this plaza?			
Less than once a week	10.0%	20.0%	3.5%
1–2 times per week	35.0%	42.5%	76.0%
3–5 times per week	50.0%	25.0%	17.0%
More than 5 times per week	5.0%	12.5%	3.5%
4. How many blocks do you have to walk to come to the plaza?			
1–2 blocks	70.0%	69.5%	58.5%
2+–3 blocks	22.5%	20.0%	27.5%
3+–4 blocks	7.5%	3.5%	7.0%
Other	0.0%	7.0%	7.0%
5. What do you do when you visit the plaza?			
Eat	42.5%	22.5%	47.0%
Sit/relax	32.5%	40.0%	11.0%
Meet with friends	5.0%	10.0%	9.0%
Shop	0.0%	0.0%	31.0%
Read	5.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Other (walk, work, taking pictures, smoke)	15.0%	17.5%	2.0%
6. How much time do you usually spend in the plaza?			
Less than 5 min	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
5–15 min	2.5%	32.5%	7.0%
16–30 min	15.0%	22.5%	51.5%
31–60 min	75.0%	32.5%	38.0%
over 60 min	7.5%	2.5%	3.5%
7. What attracts you to this plaza?			
Solitude	40.0%	45.0%	11.0%
Design/landscaping	42.5%	37.5%	11.0%
Food	0.0%	0.0%	27.5%
Shopping	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%
People	10.0%	7.5%	9.0%
Special events/entertainment	0.0%	5.0%	16.5%
Other	7.5%	5.0%	0.0%

PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

163

	Security Pacific	Noguchi	Citicorp
8. Do you have a favourite spot in the plaza?			
Yes	30.0%	35.0%	24.0%
No	70.0%	65.0%	76.0%
9. What do you like the most about this plaza?			
Design/landscaping	45.0%	25.0%	8.5%
Outdoors/open-air	17.5%	5.0%	6.5%
Quiet	15.0%	42.5%	2.5%
Food	0.0%	0.0%	32.0%
Shops	0.0%	0.0%	26.0%
Cleanliness	17.5%	15.0%	13.0%
Convenient location	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%
Other	0.0%	7.5%	6.5%
10. What do you like the least about this plaza?			
Non-operating waterfall	30.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Uncomfortable seating	22.5%	0.0%	7.0%
Lack of greenery	0.0%	17.5%	7.0%
Lack of food	7.0%	7.0%	0.0%
Type of food	0.0%	0.0%	17.0%
Other people	5.0%	17.5%	7.5%
Lack of entertainment	5.0%	5.0%	3.5%
Garbage after lunch	5.0%	5.0%	7.5%
Design	0.0%	0.0%	14.0%
No answer	25.5%	48.0%	36.5%
11. Are there any people prevented from using this plaza?			
Yes	37.0%	25.0%	34.5%
No	14.0%	23.0%	14.0%
Don't know	49.0%	52.0%	51.5%
12. Are there rules of use in this plaza?			
Yes	25.0%	27.5%	27.5%
No	17.5%	12.5%	3.0%
Don't know	57.5%	60.0%	69.0%
13. Do you feel comfortable here?			
Yes	100.0%	95.0%	100.0%
No	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%
14. Do you feel safe here?			
Yes	95.0%	95.0%	93.0%
No	5.0%	5.0%	7.0%
15. Where do you work?			
Downtown Los Angeles	95.0%	55.0%	96.5%
Los Angeles metro area	2.5%	15.0%	3.5%
Other state	2.5%	10.0%	0.0%
Not working (retired, unemployed, student)	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%
16. Where do you live?			
Downtown Los Angeles	5.0%	20.0%	0.0%
City of Los Angeles	22.5%	10.0%	20.5%
Other community in Los Angeles metro	70.0%	60.0%	79.5%
Other state	2.5%	10.0%	0.0%

	Security Pacific	Noguchi	Citicorp
17. What is your age?			
Less than 18	2.5%	5.0%	7.0%
18–29	47.5%	20.0%	62.0%
30–39	35.0%	35.0%	21.0%
40–49	12.5%	15.0%	7.0%
50–59	2.5%	15.0%	3.0%
60+	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
18. What is your gender?			
Female	55.0%	42.5%	58.0%
Male	45.0%	57.5%	42.0%
19. What is your race?			
Caucasian	60.0%	40.0%	52.0%
Hispanic	22.5%	0.0%	34.5%
African-American	7.5%	12.5%	10.0%
Asian	10.0%	47.5%	3.5%
20. What is your occupation?			
Secretarial/clerical	20.0%	15.0%	30.0%
Managerial/professional	57.5%	40.0%	45.0%
Other business	10.0%	15.0%	18.0%
Student	10.0%	15.0%	3.5%
Crafts/labour/farm work	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%
Unemployed	2.5%	2.5%	0.0%
Retired	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%
21. What is the highest grade of education you have completed?			
Less than high school	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
High school	10.0%	17.5%	27.5%
Some college	37.5%	20.0%	24.0%
Completed college	40.0%	40.0%	27.5%
Graduate studies	12.5%	12.5%	3.5%

**APPENDIX 3:  
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**

**PEOPLE/ACTIVITY COUNTS FOR DOWNTOWN PLAZAS**

Name of Plaza:

Date :

Time :

ACTIVITIES		T	%
Standing			
Walking			
Sitting			
Eating			
Chatting			
Reading			
Sleeping			
Smoking			
Other			
<b>GENDER</b>			
Male			
Female			
Total			
<b>DRESS</b>			
Formal			
N-Formal			
'Sloppy'			
<b>GROUPS</b>			
G-2			
G-3			
G-4			
G-5			

- 1 For more information on the topic, see: Asher, K., *The Politics of Privatization*, London, Macmillan Education, 1987; Brooks, H., Liebman, L. and Schelling, C. S. (eds.), *Public Private Partnership: New Opportunities for Meeting Social Needs*, Cambridge, MA, Ballinger, 1984; Le Grand, L. and Robinson, R. (eds.), *Privatization and the Welfare State*, London, George Allan and Unwin, 1984; Swann, D., *The Retreat of the State*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.
- 2 Banerjee, T. and Southworth, M. (eds.), *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1990.
- 3 Rapoport, A., *Human Aspects of Urban Form*, Oxford, Pergamon, 1977.
- 4 As an exception to this statement, we should note that Rockefeller Plaza in New York, built in the 1930s, is an urban plaza designed, built and managed by the private sector.
- 5 Scruton, R., 'Public Space and the Classical Vernacular', *The Public Interest*, 74, Winter 1984, pp. 5–16.
- 6 Loukaitou-Sideris, A., 'Designing the Inaccessible Plaza' in Angelil, M. (ed.), *On Architecture, the City, and Technology*, Stoneham, MA, Butterworth Architecture, 1990.
- 7 Yorlkin, N., 'Taking Back the Parks', *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 28 May 1989, pp. 6–16.
- 8 Schwardon, T. and Richter, P., *California and the American Tax Revolt*, Berkeley, CA, The University of California Press, 1984.
- 9 For an extensive discussion, see Barnett, J., *Urban Design as Public Policy*, New York, Architecture Records Book, 1974.
- 10 New York City was the first to initiate incentive zoning in order to encourage private developers to provide urban plazas within their project site. Each square foot of plaza area was credited with ten square feet of office space. Between 1961 and 1973 every developer who put up an office building in New York took advantage of the plaza bonus. Most of these plazas were badly designed, poorly lit, with limited seating, and very much under-utilised. For more information on the subject, see Whyte, W. H., *City: Rediscovering the Center*, New York, Doubleday, 1988.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 See Dear, M., 'Postmodernism and Planning', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 4, 1986, pp. 367–84; also Soja, E., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, New York, Verso, 1989.
- 13 Soja, E., Morales, R. and Wolf, G., 'Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles', *Economic Geography*, 59, April 1983, pp. 195–230.
- 14 Since the settlement of a law suit filed by the Los Angeles Conservancy against the CRA in 1986, no density variations are now permitted for any development over 50 000 square feet. The major mechanism for density increases is now the transfer of development rights.
- 15 Some of the projects still at the planning stage include the Grand-Hope Park (formerly Olympic Park), the Hope Street Promenade, and the Pershing Square remodelling.
- 16 See Poole, R. W., *Cutting Back on City Hall*, New York, Universe, 1980; Bennett, J. T. and Johnson, M. H., *Better Government at Half the Price*, Ottawa, IL, Carolina House, 1981; and Savas, E. S., *Privatizing the Public Sector*, New Jersey, Chatham House, 1982.
- 17 The CRA selects a developer only if it owns the land for the project.
- 18 Now an effort is under way, more than twenty years after the entire downtown district was declared a redevelopment area, to develop a 'strategic plan'. But this is an oddly fragmented process shared by the Planning Department, the Strategic Planning Task Force, and a privately initiated plan known as the Central City West Project.
- 19 Dyckman, J., 'The Changing Uses of the City' in Rodwin, L. (ed.), *The Future Metropolis*, New York, George Braziller, 1961.
- 20 As explained to me by a security officer in Citicorp Plaza, people who are shabbily dressed and resemble the homeless are escorted to the exit.
- 21 One of the social roles of the park according to Frederick Law Olmsted was to enable contact between the upper and lower classes (see Todd, J. E., *Frederick Law Olmsted*, Boston, Twayne, 1982).
- 22 Whyte, W. H., *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC, The Conservation Foundation, 1980.
- 23 It is interesting to note that during a recent expansion of the Biltmore Hotel, a historic hotel fronting Pershing Square, which caters for upmarket tourists and conventioners, the main hotel entrance was shifted to Fifth Street, so that hotel patrons would not have direct exposure to the square.
- 24 See Frieden, B. and Sagalyn, L., *Downtown, Inc.*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1990.

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