

A PUBLIC SPACE

DALEY PLAZA

Notes on A Public Space: Daley Plaza

Dan S. Wang 2006

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What is it about Daley Plaza? Whatever charm the well-policed territory once had is certainly dated now, and its hard modernist geometry and monumental Picasso are very much passé, if still triumphantly extant. But ordinary passersby do not seem to mind spending a few idle moments there. That this should be so is somewhat surprising, because on the surface Daley Plaza looks to be as barren as its nearby cousin, Federal Plaza. Like Daley Plaza, Federal Plaza possesses its own Miesian rectangles, heroic art work (a Calder stabile), and, as any protestor of federal government policy from recent years can tell you, a security detail second to none. When I am there, though, unlike in Daley Plaza, my emotions go dead. Thankfully, the primary formal elements featured in both plazas' design and administration are not what supply their essence.

Until 1976 the building we now call the Richard J. Daley Center was known as the Civic Center, and its plaza the Civic Center Plaza. The building and its plaza were rededicated following the death of the old man that year, within a week's time. The politics of memorialization, crudely evident in the renaming, inadvertently endowed Daley Plaza with a living soul: the space, due to the disputed memory of its namesake if nothing else, remains contested. Unlike the Harold Washington Library, the dedication of which terminally deified the former mayor, or the Park District's boot-licking, named-pavilion treatment afforded corporate benefactors in Millennium Park, Daley Plaza honors a colossal individual whose legacy appears more mixed with each passing decade, and does it with a mostly empty space. What fills this space (or merely makes an

appearance), how the space is perceived in relation to its neighboring spaces, what of the space's structural elements remain unresolved, as well as the history of the Richard J. Daley regime—these are the indeterminate factors that keep Daley Plaza to a small (some would say minuscule) degree authentically public, in the articulation of its meaning if not in the management of its actual use.

The modifier “public,” when you think of it before words like school, sector, or sphere, makes little sense without its contrary twin “private.” The forces of

A Public Space: Daley Plaza invites twenty-four people from different walks-of-life to photograph the same public space, Daley Plaza. The vocations of the participants, in random order, follows:

Cabinet Maker
Lawyer
City Planner
High School Student
Architect
Nomadic Treasure Hunter
Artist
High School Art Teacher
Human Resources Consultant
Landscape Steward
Filmmaker
Writer
Video Game Designer
Attorney
Sculptor
Photographer
Florist
Education Coordinator
Legal Secretary
Former Navy Seaman
High School Student
Musician
Letterpress Printer/Designer
Computer Technician
Landscape Architect
Charter High School Educator

assignment structure our world by defining things as either public or private, in a fixed, dichotomous social order. Such is the strength of the construct that the one status is often not clearly visible until perceived from a position within the other. Then, when fully revealed, what before appeared to be a natural fault line seems startlingly fragile. As with most social orders split by dichotomous arrangement, the line of control between public and private is ever changing in shape and ever widening in breadth, due to pressures that emerge from within one side or the other. In my case, I only started paying attention to Daley Plaza—and the public space that it is—*after* becoming a homeowner in the city. In other words, ownership of *private* property is what gave me reason to inspect, explore, and contemplate a *public* space.

Prior to owning a home, I hardly had reason to be in Daley Plaza. Ever since joining the ranks of the propertied, however, I find myself briskly walking across Daley Plaza from one direction or another, usually with some legal or bureaucratic business on my mind, on a regular basis. After conducting my business in the county treasurer's office or the eleventh floor courtrooms of the Richard J. Daley Center, my habit is to retrace my route across the plaza with leisure. I take the time to wonder about the other people I see, browse the wares if the farmers' market is up, and generally *enjoy* this first moment free of property tax and building repair woes, or anxieties over impending appearances in court. In a strong sense, owning private property has resulted in reasons, or at least occasions, for me to be in this particular public space. The paradox is this: the more the public administrative



bureaucracy tries to discipline privately owned space through taxes, building codes, and various regulations (all in the name of the public), the more occasion that owners have to use and observe the public spaces surrounding the structures that house those bureaucracies.

In order to persist, bureaucracies legitimate themselves by managing appearances and deploying an array of idealized symbols. At the state level, the representation often takes the form of massed bodies arranged in such a way as to symbolize the entire nation. These displays are conducted typically on days of national historic significance, such as in parades held on a nation's independence day like our Fourth of July. Thankfully, compared to the people of many other nations, Americans stage very few of these official spectacles; all of America's participatory spectacles of truly mass scale are informal, voluntary, unofficial and semi-private (and therefore only partially visible). Official national spectacles fare worst of all, since most Americans have the good sense to ignore that to which they cannot relate sincerely. On the smaller scale of the city, so few

people would participate in a grand official display that there is almost no use in staging one. In Chicago, the inversion is near complete: political figures grab hold of community events and use them to parade before the people, instead of having the people parade before them.

Because Daley Plaza is the appropriate space for such municipal displays, but

there being few except for the smallest and least spectacular, the result is a space seemingly empty and underused. The Christkindlmarket, the noontime folk dance performances, and the political rallies notwithstanding, the plaza often feels curiously vacant of the official spectacles one might expect of a city's heart. And then consider the plaza's immediate neighbor to the east, vacant Block 37, the uncertainty of which symbolizes a grand failure of public/private cooperation, and has become illustrative of inertial interests in perpetual disagreement. Tellingly, the non-development of Block 37 raises no audible outcry from citizens; the extended sight lines, the enlarged sun-print, and the hosting of seasonal and temporary events on the parcel seems to quell any clamor for "a plan." Through the absence of official spectacle and a heavy reliance on an aesthetic of the temporary (tents, portable stages, trailers, banners, crowd barricades, etc.), Daley Plaza and Block 37, together, present a statement of bureaucratic untidiness and impermanence. Perhaps it is for this reason that the plaza seems marginally but genuinely available to the appearance of the unexpected.

While most plazas of its kind are saturated with state symbolism, the limited presence of government-orchestrated spectacle in Daley Plaza renders the space partially free of symbolism. Unofficial or grassroots symbols, however, are equally rare, or more so. Without a lot of bureaucratically produced spectacles and a simultaneous enclosure of unofficial public expression, Daley Plaza stands as a symbolic vacuum, a modernist serving platter that is hardly ever used. But because the unofficial cultural universe is endlessly creative, daring, spontaneous, and never fully controllable, the occasional odd and/or outlaw expression finds its way in. On the benign (but still liberatory) side is the now standard use of the Picasso's inclined base as children's slide and play area. In a different register, several years ago a prolific Chicago tagger who wields the moniker Temper, made what was to my knowledge the most aggressive incursion into this imperfect enclosure. He (or she?) scaled the Picasso and painted a perfectly scripted tag about twenty feet high, on the right cheek. The tag lasted well into the afternoon, delighting, infuriating, and

intriguing ("How did he get up there? Weren't there security guards around?") hundreds of passersby, including me. (I just happened to be down at the County Treasurer's office ironing out property tax snafus that went on for almost two years.) For people who saw it, the gesture upset their expectations, and with them their ideas about the kinds of things that are possible in Daley Plaza. While neither as aggressive and certainly not as narcissistic as Temper's graf assault, collectively the photographs that make up this project similarly deliver a wave of reassessment by focusing our attentions on the space itself, their picturesque qualities notwithstanding. When viewing these images, we must ask ourselves What, exactly, is this space?—and so the reassessment begins. And like the play of children on the Picasso, the photographs inject into our memories of the plaza experiences of pleasure. Because this project combines the two—spectres of possibility and pleasure—in a single quiet gesture, it further erodes the gulf separating public and private. It is a slow process, but it is out of exactly these kinds of gestures (many of them!) that a democratic moment may someday emerge.

A Public Space: Daley Plaza January 26th to March 30th, 2006

Richard J. Daley Center and Plaza, Pedway Display Cases
50 W. Washington Blvd., Chicago, IL, 60602

A Public Space: Daley Plaza will be exhibited in the display cases located in the public Pedway below the Daley Plaza Center. The Pedway is open to the public Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The exhibition is made possible by the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs.

Closing Celebration March 17th, 2006, 6 to 8 p.m.

Mess Hall, 6932 North Glenwood Avenue, Chicago, IL, 60626

The public is invited to the off-site Closing Celebration at Mess Hall. The images from the project will be projected along with a brief talk by Paul Druecke, Dan Wang, and the photo contributors.