

A PUBLIC SPACE HOPKINS PLAZA

PROJECT BY PAUL DRUECKE

A Public Space: Hopkins Plaza
Stephanie Barber 2009

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For the third installment of Paul Druecke's literally and conceptually expansive public space project the artist has chosen Hopkins Plaza in Baltimore, MD. Druecke asks 6 people to photograph this urban square who, after creating their shot of the plaza, each ask someone else to do the same and, as the shiny haired women of the 80's shampoo commercials were want to say, so on and so on and so on. The resulting collection of images become a portrait of the space, a portrait of social interaction, a reference to Einstein's theory of general relativity and how the popular idea of this increasing subjectivity influenced Cubist writers and painters who seemed desperate to reference many perspectives at one time in one space. It becomes a sort of clock or calendar, an address book, a survey of artistic style or merit. It becomes a zillion other things as our imagination can also play the Breck Girl game and consequently the piece itself is referential to the consideration of the piece.

Hopkins Plaza is a pleasant open space. It has concrete and grass. It is actually one solid piece of poured concrete and one third of a city park triumvirate known as Charles Center. These three interconnected city squares (Center, Charles and Hopkins Plazas) were the brain child of a group of downtown business owners in Baltimore in the 1950's who came together to address flagging interest in Baltimore's retail district. Banks, shipping companies, department stores, restaurants and all other downtown businesses were hit by the collaborative punch of changing trends in the shipping industry and the recently created suburbs. Residents began to flee cities all over the United States as new developments outside of city limits became attractive, and a collective desire for ever elusive safety spread across the land after the bar-raising-horror of World War II. As the shipping industry turned to larger,

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

Editor
Exhibition Designer
Computer Specialist
Massage Therapy Student
Graduate Student
Medical Doctor
Hair Stylist
Middle-school Teacher
Community Artist
Computer Security Technician
Architect
Grade School Student
Unknown
Director of Special Projects
Electrical Engineer
Software Engineer
Community Outreach Coordinator
Videographer/Video Editor/Photographer
Executive Director
Archivist
Sound Engineer
Director of Special Collections
Atmospheric Physicist
Political Activist
Web Designer

container ships the Baltimore Harbor, too shallow to dock these giants, began to lose business rapidly. Having developed as a port city all downtown life hinged on the health of this industry.

In response to this economic crisis Baltimore business owners got together to devise a plan to make downtown attractive to residents, businesses and visitors once again. The parks were a lure completed and well received by the media in 1958—a successful enough project that the business owners-cum-city planners were given a budget to continue and expand the

renovation of downtown Baltimore with ever larger and more ambitious projects. Each proposal placed grave importance on the inclusion of public spaces in the city designs. This response to dire economic times seems to define our odd relationship to the paradoxically self-referential term public space. The idea that we have such a concept, an understanding of what is and isn't a public space seems to point to a host of questions which concern human ease and disease with the many diverse environments in which we live. We know that bank offices and most people's homes are not public spaces but we know also that a forest is not exactly a public space—though it is most certainly a public space.

Each of the three city parks which compose Charles Center are home to 'public art'. This is another witty element of Druecke's piece; it seems inevitable that any of the public spaces he would choose as the subject of this project would be rife with public art and the chance to play the elementary and endlessly amusing game of artistic reflexivity implicit in such a face-off. Hopkins plaza is adorned with the Jacob France Memorial Fountain as well as a minimalist sculpture by Antoni Milkowski named The Diamond which sits just outside the park's western entrance. Another entrance at the corner of Charles and Baltimore Street hosts a marker for Joshua Johnson which commemorates this well known portrait painter who began his life as a slave in the very neighborhood on which Hopkins Plaza is built. A homely sculpture named The Birth of Venus by Jonathan Silver stands near a lonely Japanese Maple in an untended raised bed of ornamental grass looking much like a comment on the park itself—which is often empty. The name "public square" does not guarantee the public just as reference to Venus does not guarantee beauty. Recently

I sat by this sculpture for a couple hours thinking about the piece and the nature of the square in general. When a rare park visitor would walk by I would try to engage them in conversation about the sculpture only to be rebuffed time and time again. Returning home I was able to find, quite easily, a spirited discussion on a web site about the piece and varied reactions to it—seems the real public space has become virtual and these dinosaurs of actuality serve only to point out the awkwardness of social interaction in burdensome flesh.

Of course, Hopkins Plaza is less renowned for the public art it is home to than it is for the famous buildings which flank its perimeter. One Charles Center was designed by Mies van der Rohe and has been reconstructed twice since being built. The lesser known, but still impressive, architect John Johanson designed the Morris A Mechanic Theatre—architectural exemplar of the Brutalist style (or as Johanson referred to it “Expressionist Functionalism”). And, indeed, if space is, in part, defined or constructed by time it becomes simultaneously more touching and more philosophically didactic that these public space projects must be re-developed from time to time, regardless of structural or safety issues. Currently the Morris A Mechanic building is abandoned and boarded over though still standing with all its rough angles jutting off—as if trying to face every direction at once so as to disallow any sneaking up. But sneaking up has certainly occurred as bits of plant life have begun to colonize its cracks and crevices as nature begins its slow process of taking back her public space. If human bodies lived longer—say, thousands of years instead of a rare hundred—would they learn to shake off or squeeze out the scars, tattoos, cheek implants and titanium knees through years of endless breathing?



Field Research Photo 2007 Paul Druetke

Continually expanding and contracting, growing and shedding the way the earth handily shakes off the art brute theatres, sky walks, levees, tunnels and roads we temporarily construct on it with eyes to beautification?

The construction of public spaces is not a new concept—early examples include ancient Rome and earlier still Mesopotamia. These cities designated places for roads, sewage, business, residence and commune. Every book written on the topic of city planning or its meta-partner urban renewal references at some point the need to create spaces for public leisure and interaction. It is at once an entirely obvious as well as a truly surreal idea that a group should be drawing up blueprints and budgets with provisions for socializing.

The nugget of (respected and wanted) inanity of this willful planning for fun, which strikes me as odd, exists also in social networking websites. This regulating of social interaction—designating certain spaces and parameters for it—subtly resonate with both 1950's science fiction and very modern marketing tools. The rules

and conditions of friend-making are both more and less ordered on websites than they are in face to face interactions. One can become friends with someone they've never met or someone they'll never think of again after attaining their 'friendship'—appropriate ads will be provided regardless. The space, in both the real and virtual examples, exists because of and without regard to this use.

The aesthetics of commercialism is built in, like an irrigation system, to the concept and planning of our cities. And is it public space—carved by the CEOs of downtown businesses hungry for foot and car traffic to funnel in the buying public, who hire planners, designers, architects and engineers to construct places of pleasure—which will amuse and fortify this public? Are these the public spaces in which people discuss the quality of their lives? Are these the public spaces where the rhetoric of revolution is argued over and refined?

Druecke's decision to make art by asking people to visit Hopkins Plaza, photograph the space, and ask someone else to do the same thing is similar in concept to the conglomeration of business owners gathering to ask city planners, architects, landscape designers etcetera to visit the

space and propose changes and then ask others to come and enact those changes. The art is constructed through this fractured game of telephone and is both rigid and fluid simultaneously. It is also a pleasant and incisive musing on the nature of private and public art work and this musing is exactly how the piece becomes composed. Druecke's use of strangers and their perspective in the creation of what is essentially a portrait is neither a collaboration nor could it be clearly said to have been created by Druecke; consequently it points to the public nature of and questions swirling around the concept of collaboration. Again this echoes the nature of these very sorts of public spaces—they seem to succeed or fail regardless of those who have constructed the buildings and those who have conceived of the design and yet they exist originally because of these people and their volition. The delicate interplay at work between the private and public sectors to create both the public spaces Druecke's project documents as well as the final "piece" he and his new "friends" create is able to comment on all of the questions swirling around our communal construction of space. It is a portrait of portraiture and a portrait of interconnectivity and influence.

A Public Space: Hopkins Plaza, 2007-2009 is the third installment of Paul Druecke's five-city project, A Public Space. In each city, Druecke oversees an invitation process that asks twenty-four people from different walks-of-life to photograph the same public space. Starting with six participants, each person contributes one image and recommends another participant. The first two cities, Houston and Chicago, are complete and have been exhibited in their respective cities. San Diego and Portland are in progress. A Public Space has been featured in InterReview magazine and exhibited at the Berlin Lounge, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the Daley Center, Mess Hall, and Project Row Houses.

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