

Coast Fountain Melds Art and Environment

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE Special to The New York Times

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PORTLAND, Ore.—On Tuesday, Portland will start the water flowing in the fountains of what may be one of the most important urban spaces since the Renaissance. The word “fountains” requires a little clarification. “Waterfalls” would be a more accurate description. Thirteen thousand gallons of water a minute will cascade down 18-foot-high, rock-like concrete cliffs, 80 feet wide, in a new block-square park. (The falls were turned on for a preview for this observer.)

The water starts as rivulets in a maze of concrete slabs at the top, at street level. As it increases in volume, it splashes and sprays with the sound of a dozen mountain streams to a sunken pool 10 feet below street level.

In the pool, “floating” concrete platforms overlap rising, amphitheater-type steps 100 feet wide, leading up again to the street. More terraced steps go down at either side. It is possible to climb, crawl, walk or sit anywhere in this man-made landscape, including behind the falls.

A framing, planted earth berm, banked slightly above street level, protects and separates the combination grotto, park and public plaza from the distractions of traffic.

This remarkable exercise in art and environment happens in one Portland city block, 200 by 200 feet, bounded by South West Second and Third Avenues and Clay and Market Streets. It is the work of Lawrence Halprin and Associates of San Francisco.

Mr. Halprin, a distinguished landscape architect, achieved a special measure of mixed fame and notoriety for the much smaller, charming experiment in a similar watery idiom a few blocks away in Lovejoy Park.

A People Park

He calls it a “people park,” and it was such a smashing success that it became a national hippie heaven long enough to be noted by the national press. It was, inevitably, the site of a hippie wedding. It is equally admired by nonhippies.

Both Lovejoy Park and the new plaza are part of Portland’s South Auditorium urban renewal project. The two parks were sponsored by the Portland Development Commission.

The new, major work is called the Auditorium Forecourt, because it faces the remodeled civic auditorium, a building of unrelieved blandness sauced with piped-in music at nonperformance hours. The building now becomes background for the forecourt—a fortuitous state of affairs.

The falls, steps and terraces are designed in a kind of geometric naturalism, constructed of plain and textured reinforced concrete. The work, which has taken a year, is by the Schrader Construction Company. The cost is \$512,000.

The result is more than a terraced water-garden; it is a total piece of sculpture.

It could be called environmental sculpture or environmental art, but whatever the name, Mr. Halprin is on to something that makes the conventional piece of modern sculpture plonked onto the conventional corporate or public plaza look obsolete. That is merely a traditional concept given a 20th-century look. This is 20th-century art.

Examples in Rome

It is not that Mr. Halprin has actually invented something new; it is simply that he has rediscovered, in contemporary terms, what made the Fontana dei Trevi, for example, or the Piazza Navona, work. (Rome

has had to clear the cars out of the Piazza Navona to make it work again.) They were “people plazas.”

What the Auditorium Forecourt clearly shows is the creative understanding of the socio-esthetic use of open space. Simply put, that means public city spaces of deliberately conceived beauty and pleasurable utility.

This is something past centuries have understood to be the soul of a city and its people, and it has been achieved through the highest urban and architectural art. These spaces have been the human and artistic cores of cities. The 20th century has substituted the parking lot.

Space is defined by the buildings around it. At present, the forecourt is loosely walled by the auditorium to the east, a parking garage to the north and commercial construction to the south. Portland still has to finish the job by enclosing the plaza.

The Critical Block

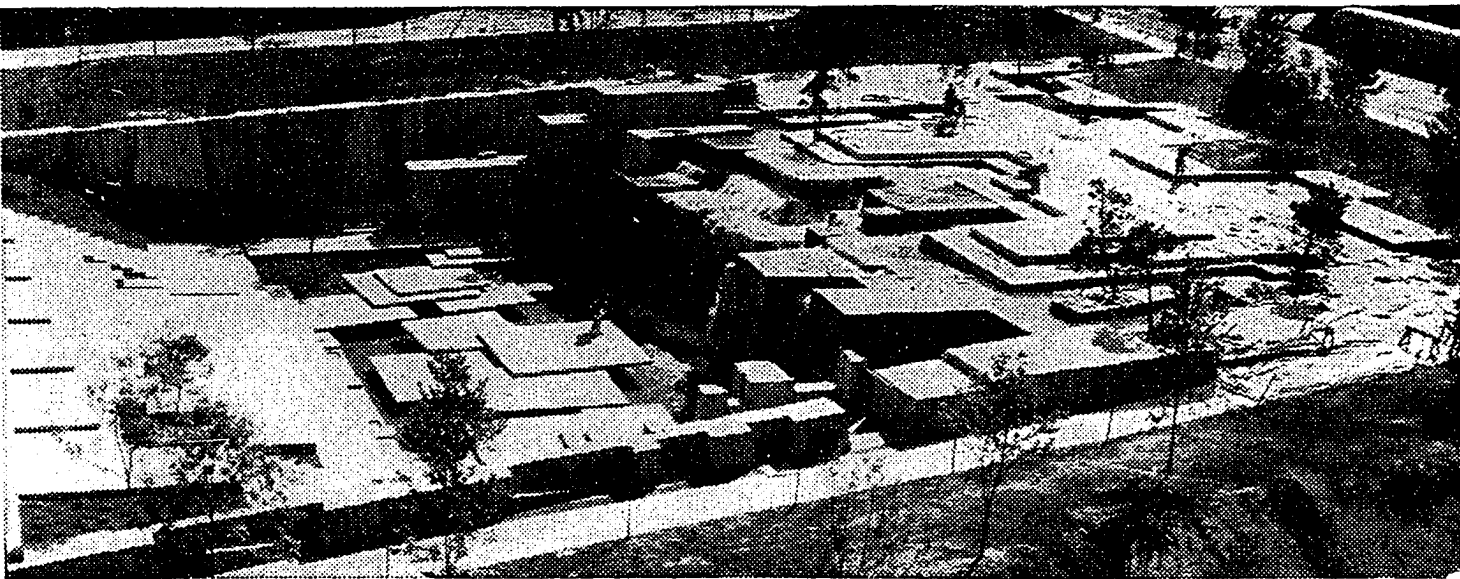
The critical block, facing the forecourt and auditorium, is empty, held by the Franklin Savings and Loan Association. Franklin has demonstrated a building taste that runs to what is called, locally, California Valley Williamsburg, and that would be a disaster.

New York narrowly missed a Halprin fountain-plaza this

year. With the urging of the city and the precedent of Lovejoy Park, the firm was commissioned by the Uris Buildings Corporation to design the new Jeanette Park in the redevelopment of lower Manhattan. The park adjoins Uris’s 55 Water Street project, which will be the largest private office building in the world.

As the design grew in size to match the scale of the space and the height of the building, there was a disagreement about costs and practicality. The contract was canceled. The plaza will be built according to the plans of Paul Friedberg and Associates.

But for now, to see the best, go West.



Garth Huxtable for The New York Times

The Auditorium Forecourt, a new park with waterfalls made from steps of concrete, opens Tuesday in Portland, Ore.