

# The Sabotaging of Pubic Space: Design Notebook The Sabotaging of ...

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# The Sabotaging of Public Space

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**O NEW YORKERS crowding into The Market at Citicorp Center, this delightful potpourri of shops, restaurants and pedestrian space is a lively and useful enrichment of Manhattan's East Side. It is clear that what could have been just one more forbiddingly elegant corporate tower is, instead, a new and very vital part of New York.

It is particularly pleasant to be able to buy a fresh-baked brioche and a newspaper and to sit in the middle of it all, watching the passing scene on all levels. But what few realize is that this didn't just happen because someone at Citicorp liked brioches and people-watching. This handsome sky-lit atrium that forms the heart of the Citi-

corp complex is actually a public space created by zoning.

More correctly, it represents a builder's zoning option—if he chooses to provide a covered pedestrian space connecting two streets, which must include retail stores as part of the deal, he can build a larger building than rou-

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fine zoning allows. That, obviously, can be more profitable or useful for the builder, while it provides, at the same time, a public benefit for New York. And to give full credit, Citicorp's atrium has carried out the intent of the law far beyond the zoning's actual physical requirements.

In zoning, however, intent and result

do not always match. New York builders are notoriously adept at formulating a package that satisfies the letter of the law and does the least to fulfill what city planners had in mind. Some prominent new buildings raise serious questions of both intent and result.

Under New York's sophisticated and innovative "incentive" zoning laws, it is now possible for the builder to select from a number of options that provide special public amenities in exchange for increased building size. There is a complex and intriguing list of trade-offs, from plazas to the neighborhood features of many special zoning districts, all meant to protect what is good about New York and to improve what is not good enough.

And so, if your eyes glaze over at

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the mention of zoning, and you don't know an F.A.R. (floor area ratio, or the size of the building in relation to its site) from C.P.S. (covered pedestrian space), just think of the Citicorp Market. And thank not only Citicorp and its architects, Hugh Stubbins and Associates with Emery Roth and Sons, but New York's planners—particularly the work of the Urban Design Group and the Planning and Development Offices of Midtown and Lower Manhattan.

Covered pedestrian space zoning has been evolving slowly over the past few years. Partly because of the economic downturn, and partly because it takes time to turn regulations into brick and steel, we are only now able to judge the results. Significantly, this zoning has affected three of New York's newest, largest and most spectacular midtown structures: Citicorp (53d Street to 54th, Lexington Avenue to Third), the Galleria (57th Street to 58th, between Park Avenue and Lexington) and Olympic Tower (Fifth Avenue from 51st Street to 52d).

Citicorp's covered public space is a resounding success. The city's intent has been dealt with creatively to make it an outstanding part of the building's design and economic package. At present, the Galleria and Olympic Tower are, for quite different reasons, miserable failures.

Citicorp is a success because it has capitalized on the requirements of the bonus zoning in the most constructive and generous way. The city's regulations have not been evaded; they have been carried out far beyond the minimum specifications. Using expert consultants, Citicorp developed an aggressive, imaginative marketing concept, and its architects emphasized a dramatically attractive container for it. The theme, and the way that space is defined, have made it easy to bring in the right kind of stores, in a joint merchandising and design strategy. The result is handsome and inviting, functionally efficient, commercially viable, and, from the city's point of view, socially and urbanistically desirable.

The Galleria fails, not for lack of good intentions, but because the building got into financial trouble and the original plans were not carried out. Since the real estate division of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company took the building over from Madison Equities, condominium sales have picked up and the project appears to have turned the corner. But the conditions required by law for the pedestrian space have not been met, and the features designed for that purpose by the architect, David Kenneth Specter, remain unused.

As at Citicorp, the architect went well beyond minimum specifications. He created a theatrical interior space—a 90-foot atrium rising to a sky-lit roof, instead of the city's required 30-foot minimum ceiling. This baroque-brutalist passage was meant to be a lively conduit for shoppers, strollers, cafe-goers, people on their way to offices, apartments and a club, or just passing through from 57th to 58th Streets. A large, stepped platform was supposed to function night and day as a cafe-discotheque and store displays were to line the entrance. There was even talk of a strolling violinist.

Today, the place is dead. Few people stroll through, with or without violins. That this is a public pedestrian passage may be one of the city's best-kept secrets; its function is quite obscure from the outside.

## Citicorp's public space is a resounding success. The public spaces of the Galleria and Olympic Tower are miserable failures.

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Olympic Tower's covered pedestrian space, above, with planters at right blocking off what is supposed to be a public area. Above right, Galleria's desolate atrium contrasts with liveliness of Citicorp's, below.

Inside, the cafe space is walled off with solid rows of stock planters, emphasized with a rope. The windowed offices that form the court's tiered walls and were meant to supply light and life, have their curtains uniformly drawn. The stores are empty, the show-cases dark.

As the result of an extremely complex zoning package, the Galleria received substantial city bonuses. The bonus for the approximately 7,000 square feet of the covered pedestrian space with shops would be worth about \$7.5 million in additional condominium sales. That is a lot of money for so little public return. There isn't even a place to sit down (I sat on the floor the other day to make these notes). Right now this is just a fancy building lobby with two entrances. The impression one gets is that management, and perhaps the tenants, would like to keep it that way.

If the Galleria is an aborted effort, Olympic Tower is a near cop-out. This

building probably got the most impressive set of bonuses going; it covers 50 percent of its 40,000-square-foot Fifth Avenue plot with a massive F.A.R. of 21.6, stacking up 51 stories of some of the most expensive apartments and offices in the world. It is a smashing financial success, with all or most of its 230 superpriced apartments apparently sold for some \$47 million.

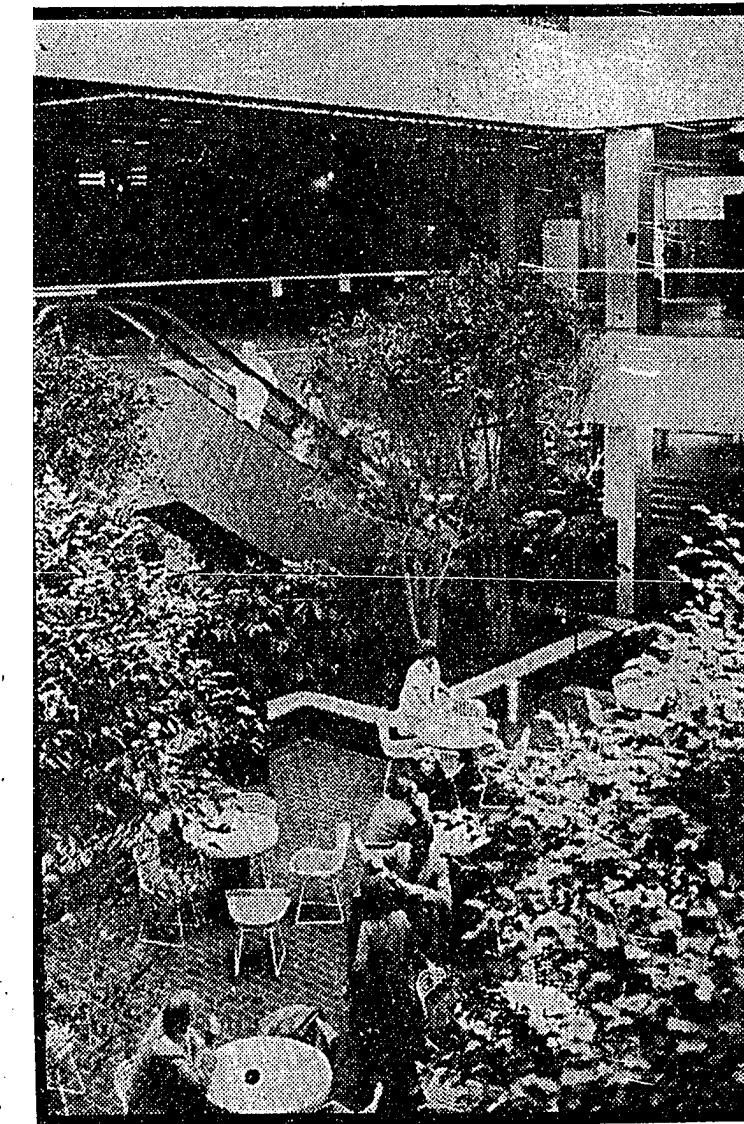
Part of the bonus package is the covered pedestrian space from 51st Street to 52d. And how has the builder, the Arlen Realty and Development Corporation, carried out its end of the zoning bargain? This "mall" was pictured in glossy brochures as bustling with elegant stores and restaurants, alive with a spectacular waterfall and other public amenities.

Well, there is a waterfall of sorts, part of the only scaled-down feature that has survived. It backs a pleasant, but small sitting area, topped by a skylight, that takes up about one-third of

one wall. I counted 22 wire chairs and five tiny tables recently. I could not count the endless number of ordinary plants deployed around the rest of the ing it useless to anyone. "Allowable obstructions," a party wall and service doors are some of the dominant features of the blank bare tunnel, with its slightly higher than 30-foot-minimum ceiling. There is one occupied store and a kind of Tempo cigar stand.

It is not just that Citicorp and Galleria have done so much more and so much better with design that is disturbing; it is that what has been done here beyond the token seating area has been done so conspicuously on-the-cheap. It could even be argued that this minimal effort and lack of retail space flouts the law's requirements and intent.

Citicorp has created a lively amenity in a much less desirable part of town. The Galleria has an ambitious design that can still be turned into a striking public feature. Olympic Tower has given the city the back of its hand.



Garth Huxtable