

The Pleasures of Plazas

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Although visitors may be surprised to hear it, New York is a city of seasonal delights. Some of these pleasures even surprise New Yorkers, to whom summer refreshment has traditionally meant the inside of a cool, dark bar. There are more options now, including informal concerts on the new office-building plazas and people-watching in the open spaces that, by zoning decree, have cut swathes of green through ranks of tall buildings. For pure, outrageous summer theater, this city's pedestrians are unmatched.

New Yorkers are not known for loitering, but at this time of year they slow down to a full stop in the tree-lined and fountain-embellished plazas of the Avenue of the Americas. At midday, or in the early evening, they make these places a social event. They know where to find the smaller, block-through passages and parklets that have appeared behind these buildings, and between Fifth and Madison Avenues. All this is a very recent product of the city's planning agencies, which used incentive-zoning to harness "amenities" to the building boom that is only a memory now. But in Manhattan at least, the results remain.

In other boroughs the process is slower because there have been fewer profit incentives for builders to provide special street features. But the city has found other ways. Pedestrian malls are now being constructed on Fulton Street in Brooklyn and in Far Rockaway, financed by community development grants and local businesses. Others are planned for Woodside, Jamaica and Flushing.



Special preservation districts created for Sheepshead Bay and City Island are strengthening their waterfront attractions for the local community and the city as a whole. The Atlantic Avenue district in Brooklyn has reversed the decline to seediness of a 19th-century street; its period storefronts have been saved and revitalized with new shops and trees.

This kind of planning adds up to something we have begun to call the quality of life, which a city is singularly equipped to provide with cosmopolitan variety. Cosmopolitan means many kinds of appeal, and many kinds of places. It is the inimitable nature of neighborhoods, the pleasures of special streets, the shared delights of pedestrian events.

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