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Places to Linger

Plaza owners commonly discourage people from lingering in their spaces. Balsley Park invites people to stay: Retaining walls, movable cafe chairs and tables, benches and a grassy lawn offer visitors a variety of places in which to sit or even lie down.

Corner Cafe

A cafe is at the corner, with service windows facing the terrace and the street; the owner pays no rent. The closest public restroom, though, is in a Starbucks a half-block away.

Balsley Park, pedestrian shortcut and cafe terrace

Photos courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates

New Life for an Old Plaza

Balsley Park is a prototype for the transformation of useless, barren urban plazas. It offers hope to the hundreds of such spaces in New York and elsewhere that could, if given a second chance, bring civic life and pride to the neighborhoods they have disappointed and scarred.

The park is at the corner of Ninth Avenue and 57th Street in Manhattan, an area where Clinton, a working-class neighborhood of walkups and workshops, gives way to Midtown, Columbus Circle and the institutional campuses of the West Side. Originally known as Sheffield Plaza, it was built in 1978 under zoning rules that granted extra development rights to projects that provided public spaces like plazas, arcades and galleries. Unlike most spaces of this type, the plaza was not adjacent to the project under whose auspices it was built, an apartment building nearly a half-block away.

The plaza failed almost immediately—partly because of its detachment from its sponsor building, partly because it was poorly maintained, partly because of its dependence on an amphitheater program for the space, which never sustained itself. One bright spot was a twice weekly farmers' market that had “become a neighborhood gathering place where the relationships between regular customers and long-time vendors have been cemented.”¹

The community pressured for change, but rejected the first two proposals for redesigning and reconstructing the space. The plaza owner, Adam Rose, then commissioned Thomas Balsley Associates to come up with a new plan, under the condition that the firm act as lead in the public approval process. The landscape architects worked with a local design committee, which helped establish a consensus on a new program (“a green park serving a broad constituency”) and encouraged the designers to translate the programmatic elements into artistic gestures of form

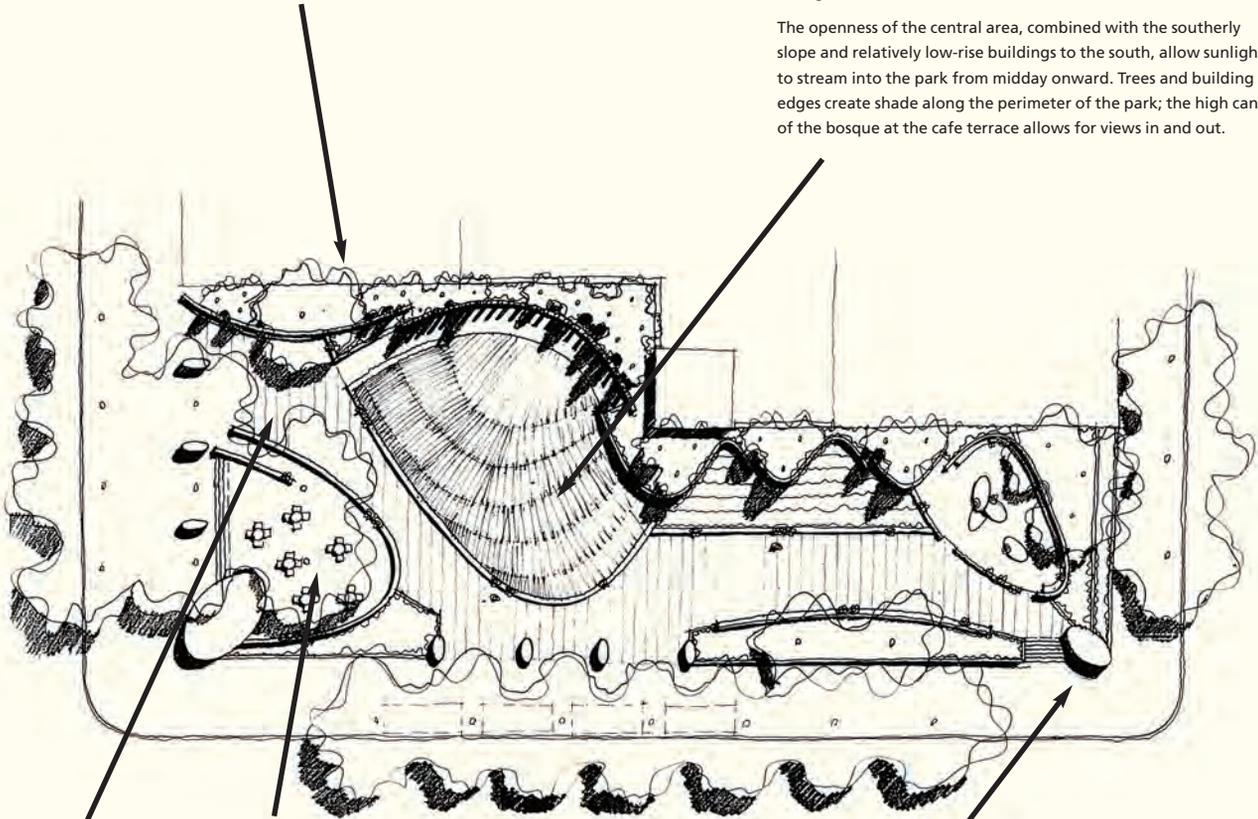
A Satisfying Edge

The previous plaza had suffered from its ambiguous relationship to the adjacent building. The plaza butted against the building, with no functional connection to it, creating a lengthy dead zone.

The new design incorporates a multi-layered yet clear boundary for the park. Along the building edge, colorful ribbon wall panels alternate with screens made of pipes placed close to each other; behind them are evergreen trees. In front of the wall are transition spaces, such as a mound, garden and play area, that allow park users to occupy the edge. The combination of colors, materials and visual permeability creates a complex, layered edge that serve as a soft backdrop.

Sunlight and Shade

The openness of the central area, combined with the southerly slope and relatively low-rise buildings to the south, allow sunlight to stream into the park from midday onward. Trees and building edges create shade along the perimeter of the park; the high canopy of the bosque at the cafe terrace allows for views in and out.



Places to See and be Seen

The site plan takes advantage of, and accentuates, the elevation changes in the park. The high points—the cafe terrace and mounded lawn—are designed as places that encourage people to stay and provide multiple vantages over the entire space.

Limited Access

Originally, the city required urban plazas to remain open all the time. In exchange for commitments by private owners to upgrade their spaces, the city now allows the spaces to be closed at night. Thus the perimeter of Balsley Park has been hardened, with fences and planters along most of two sides and sliding and swinging gates closing off the entry points.

Rooms and Halls

The park is laid out as a series of discrete spaces—cafe terrace, lawn, children's play area—connected by an allée and a diagonal walkway.

The diagonal short-cut for pedestrians walking between Ninth Avenue and 57th Street creates extra activity in the park: The north end lines up with a stop on a crosstown bus line; the shortcut also accommodates pedestrians heading from the Clinton neighborhood to a subway station one block east.

While the differentiation of functions allows the park to accommodate numerous activities, the differentiation of spaces from each other and from the street (with walls, fences and grade changes) creates a sense that the park is fragmented and cramped.

Balsley Park, site plan
after reconstruction
Courtesy Thomas Balsley
and Associates



A Park, not a Plaza

The large, mounded lawn, perennial gardens and evergreen cypress plantings along the edges are meant to convey the notion that this is an urban park, not a plaza.

Top: Sheffield Plaza, before reconstruction

Bottom: Balsley Park, lawn and cafe terrace

Credits

Balsley Park

Location: Manhattan, 9th Ave. between 56th and 57th streets

Client: Rose Associates

Designer: Thomas Balsley Associates (Thomas Balsley,

Steven Tupu)

Design: 1998-1999

Construction: 1999-2000

Cost: \$1,000,000

and color that would strike a distinctive pose for this prominent corner.

Balsley’s plan incorporates several design and programming strategies to help it accommodate a range of uses and users. The new park includes a children’s play area, cafe terrace and lawn for sitting in the sun, as well as a transverse path that provides a short-cut from one street to the other (the presence of pedestrians reinforces a sense of activity in the park). The new park has room for the farmers’ market and includes a new cafe at the corner, although early plans for bookselling stalls fell through.

Indeed, the park attracts a wide range of visitors—including neighborhood residents of all ages, from the elderly to children with their nannies; hospital staff, blue-collar workers and Midtown office workers; high school students and others—who come alone or in small groups. When the weather is right, it’s a spot for lunching, meeting, sunning, reading, playing, enjoying an unexpected breeze or simply watching everyone else.

Like so many reborn public places, Balsley Park offers unexpected glimpses of the graces of urban life. One recent day, a maintenance worker meticulously wended his way through the park, picking up litter, dusting off the benches. Along the way, he paused to acknowledge each park visitor with a tip of his cap and a “good afternoon.” It was a gentle, gracious act that conferred ownership of the place on park worker and park visitor alike, a moment of social connection that has blossomed from the web of agreements between owner and community, designer and user, that are the roots of the civic realm.

— *Todd W. Bressi*

Note

1. Jerold Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space, The New York City Experience* (New York: Wiley, 2000), 113-114.