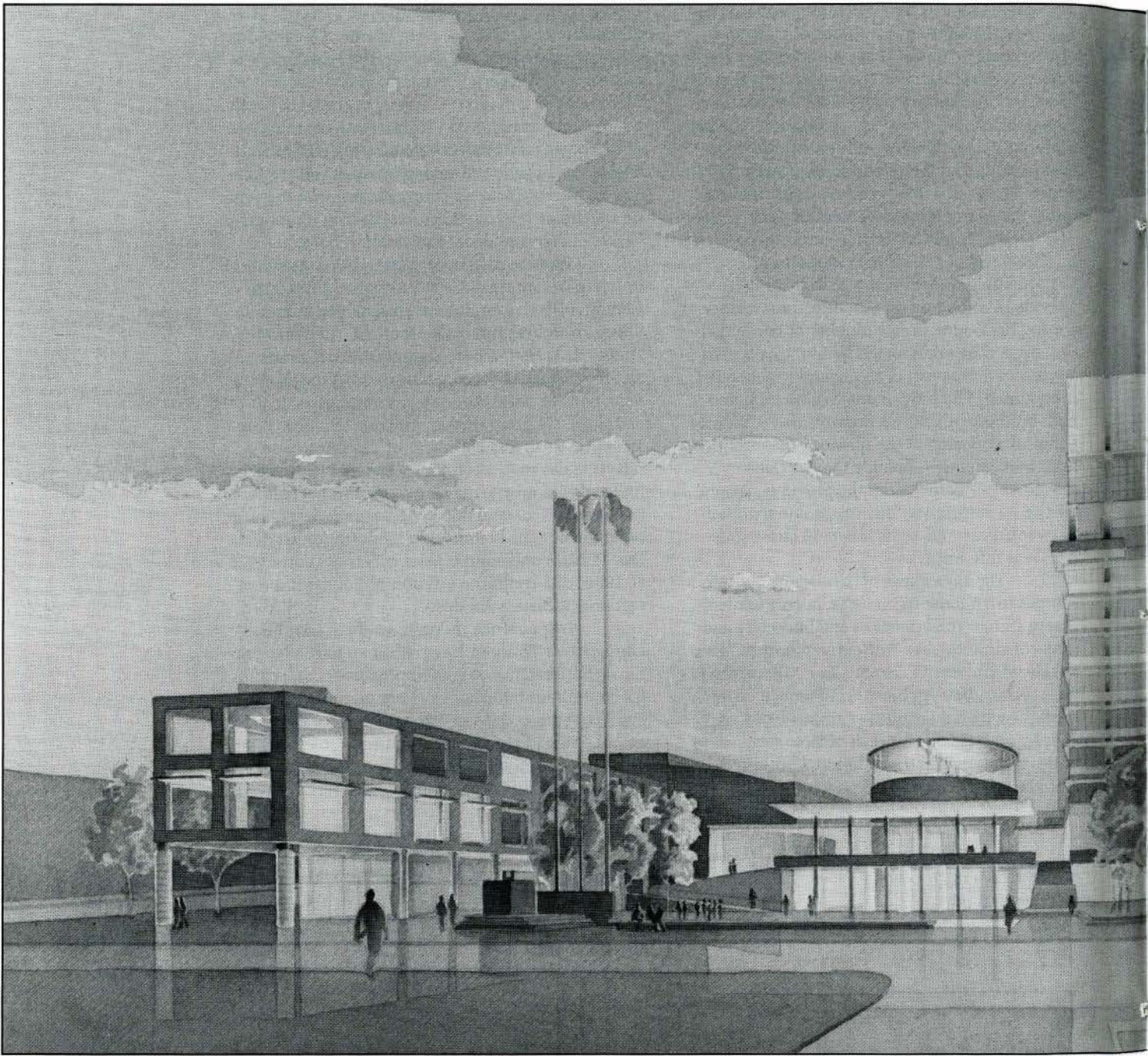


# *RE-VISION AND The Public Square in*



b y J i l l D e l a n e y

# REPRESENTATION: *the Privatized City*

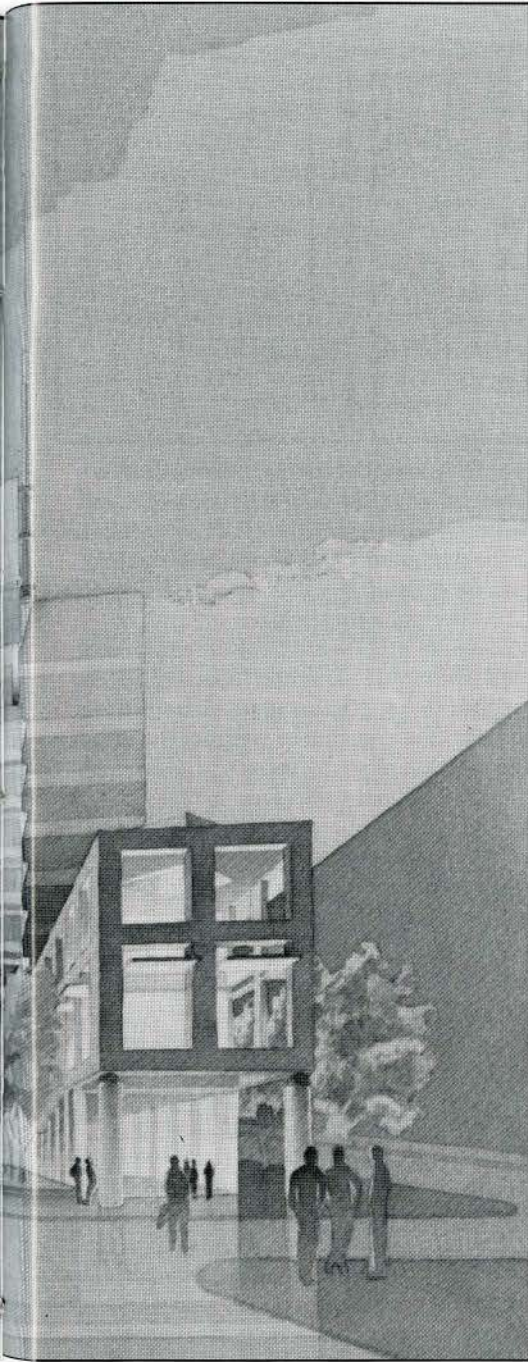


Figure 1. Kitchener, Ontario, City Hall and Civic Square, perspective view at night looking west from King Street; drawing by Howard Sutcliffe, 1989. (Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects)

In recent years, the design of public space in the city has received much attention, from both promoters and critics alike.<sup>1</sup> This paper investigates one particular trend in this area: the development of city hall-civic square complexes in Canada. Of primary interest is how the use of the civic squares in the new city halls of Kitchener, Ontario, and Edmonton, Alberta, seek to represent and even engender new understandings of civic identity and citizen identity. The argument will focus on how these spaces participate in a process of legitimation, commodification, and spectacularization of what might be called the new entrepreneurial city.

One of the main reasons for looking at these new city hall-civic square complexes is their marking of a significant change in the mode of city hall building in Canada. The current round of city hall-civic square building is perhaps most comparable to the spurt of high-Modern city hall building of the 1950s. The most successful of these earlier attempts was undoubtedly Toronto City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square, which confidently announced the city's throwing off of its stodgy "Toronto the Good" image and its attempted entry into the realm of "world-class" cities.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note the ideological similarities between these two urban episodes: in both cases, the business and political elite used this form as part of a restructuring of the city, as a claim of their power over that city, and as a claim over the space of that city.

The civic squares and city halls of Edmonton and Kitchener represent the shifting definitions of civic and citizen identity under a new neo-conservative entrepreneurialism. Both were essentially industrial urban cities, Kitchener from the 19th century, and Edmonton since the discovery of oil in the area in 1947.<sup>3</sup> Both cities represent typical modern planning agendas of the post-Second World War period: urban clearance and renewal in the core to produce a central business district with office towers, shopping malls, or underground concourses and parking lots. Both also created institutional precincts: in Edmonton the city hall was key to this design, in Kitchener it was discontinuous. Most people lived and shopped in the suburbs, as with the gargantuan West Edmonton Mall. Kitchener is notorious amongst heritage activists for tearing down its 1925 neoclassical city hall to allow a private shopping mall to be built.<sup>4</sup>

By the early 1980s it seemed apparent to both cities that changes needed to take place, not only to move their outdated industrial production-based economies into the postindustrial consumption-oriented age, but to "re-image" the city, based on a rebirth of the downtown core.<sup>5</sup> This meant concerted programmes to make the downtowns appealing to the lifestyle-conscious executives and management they hoped would occupy the new commercial buildings, cafes, and retail centres of the entrepreneurial city. Both chose to build new city hall-civic square complexes as major catalysts for this re-imagining.

Before discussing these two cases in more detail, it is useful to set out some (necessarily) brief definitions. The construction of identity can be seen as a process of representation, of knowledge-building, and of projecting (both outward and inward) a particular knowledge of the "self" and "other," which both arises from and perpetuates difference and sameness.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, identity can also be seen as an act of positioning and of being positioned; for instance, of being inside or outside, of being included or excluded, or of being inclusive or exclusive.<sup>7</sup> It is through these activities of representation — of creating knowledge, meaning, and distinction — that identities can be seen to be formed and reformed.

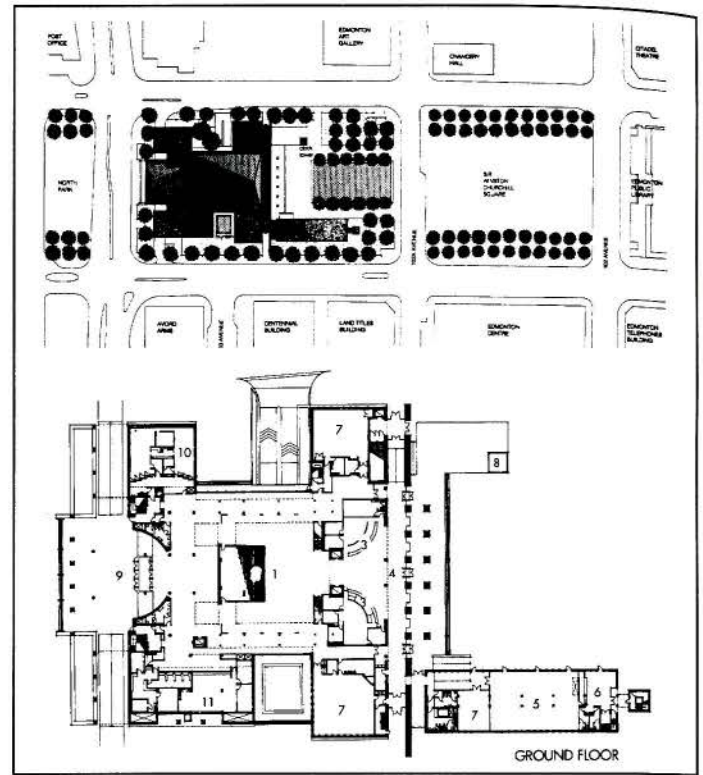
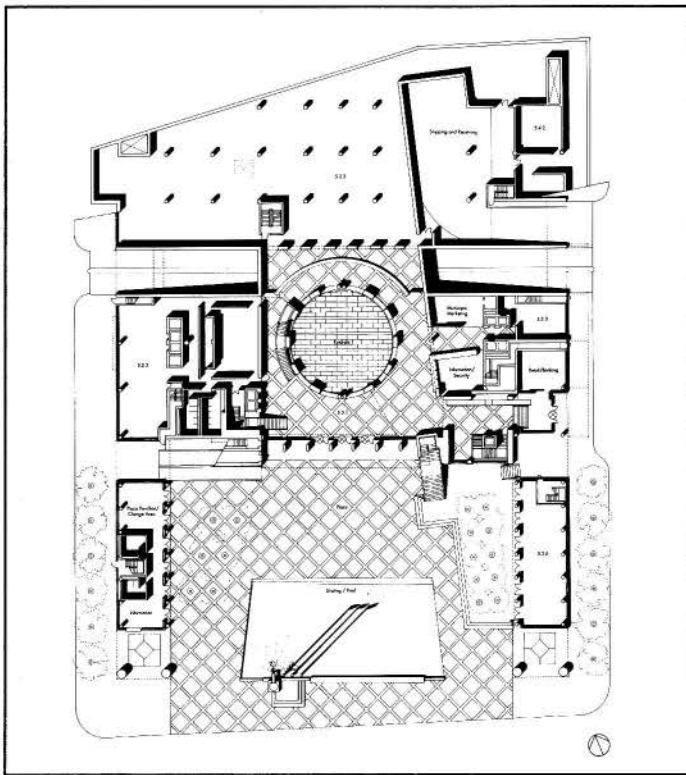


Figure 2 (left). Kitchener City Hall and Civic Square, first floor (plaza level). (Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects)

Figure 3 (right). Edmonton City Hall and Civic Square, site plan and ground floor plan; Dub Architects, 1992. (*The Canadian Architect* 40, no. 2 (February 1995): 19, 22)

Hannah Arendt, in her work on the public sphere, stresses its importance as a “space of appearance” in which citizens can form and articulate their political identities.<sup>8</sup> For Arendt, the public sphere is actively formed at the local level through direct participation by the citizens. (It should be made clear the distinction here between the public *sphere* and public *space*: the public sphere can be situated in public space, or not; it is not the same thing — it is not place specific.) At the same time, citizen identity is formed through this political action and discourse. In other words, the citizen cannot truly be a citizen unless he or she is positioned *within* this particular “space of appearance,” the public sphere. It is their position within this space that gives citizens their active political identity.<sup>9</sup> This understanding raises the question of whether the architectural space of the civic squares helps in the creation of such spaces of appearance. Arendt’s concern, along with many of her Frankfurt School colleagues, is that citizens are under threat of becoming mere spectators and clients, of being positioned on the “outside,” as citizen identity becomes increasingly commodified.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to stress that this new citizen identity is an ideal held by its creators as part of their programme of restructuring the city. It is hardly the only one available to urban dwellers, who exist with multiple identities based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, profession, religion, and so on. Feminist writers on the public sphere, such as Nancy Fraser and Rosalyn Deutsche, also ask that we consider the existence of multiple “publics” within the city.<sup>11</sup> However, Meaghan Morris has suggested that perhaps we think of the new citizen identity as one of the “citizen-tourist.”<sup>12</sup> The citizen-tourist gains an identity by consuming and participating in representations of citizenship within a carefully constructed series of private and public spaces within the city.

Architecture can also be seen as a form of representation — as actively productive of meaning rather than passively reflective. Such a definition is based on an understanding that space (including architectural space) is constructed rather than natural or immanent; constructed through a complex interrelation of bodily practice and experience, the production and application of knowledge and meaning, and cultural imagining.<sup>13</sup> Architecture can be thought of as part of a larger process of “social spatialization,” in which social relations (including identities) and relations of power become sedimented in space over time. Through this process we create “imaginary geographies,” places and spaces in which images, stereotypes, and myths becomes embedded.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, civic squares and city halls seem to be ideal sites for the creation of such imaginary geographies. Of course, all identities are contingent rather than fixed, and this makes space a “site of struggle” for the production of identities and the

appropriation of power.<sup>15</sup> Architectural space, through all its relational and productive activities, takes part in the positioning of subjects and subjectivities, and thus in the process of constructing identities.

The term “civic identity” has traditionally referred to the particular image the business and political elite attempt to create for their city, in activities frequently reminiscent of the boosterism of the last century. Today, however, such activity can be seen as a larger tendency toward the commodification of the city. The concept of boosterism has been succeeded by that of “place marketing,” in which places are viewed as commodities to be advertised, marketed, and consumed.<sup>16</sup> Civic leaders have fervently taken up the lessons learned through Disney, and are busily “re-imagining” their cities. This new identity is conceived in part to attract outside investors and businesses into the city, but also in part to recast the local citizen as the consumer of these “products.” The new identity may have little connection to the present heterogeneous condition or characteristics of the city. It may also serve to exclude many of the citizens in its representation. In this sense, the new civic squares are implicated in the recasting of civic and citizen identity. They are spaces carefully constructed to re-order our knowledge and experience of the city.

These civic squares also seem to act as spaces of legitimation: they legitimate both the privatization and commodification of the city, and the role of the local government as “service provider” and promoter for the new urban entrepreneurialism.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, this is not a major change for the role of modern local government in the Western hemisphere; it is perhaps more the change in method and degree that is notable.

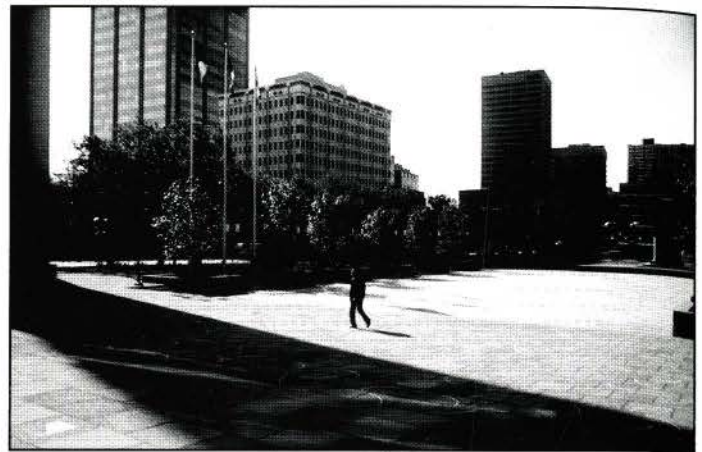
In Kitchener in the 1980s, city councillors who supported the idea of a new city hall and civic square saw it as “providing the city with a focus,” imbuing its citizens with civic pride, and presenting a “window of opportunity” for the revitalization of downtown Kitchener.<sup>18</sup> The city hall and civic square were seen as the linchpin of redevelopment of the downtown core and as “another opportunity to promote greater use and investment.”<sup>19</sup> The city hall and civic square were thus seen to be useful in creating new synergistic identities for both city and citizen. In line with this, the competition programme stated:

Special consideration should be given in the design to ceremonial activities to take place both inside and outside the building. The building and the Civic Square should provide conditions for public theatre and spectacle of both programmed and spontaneous nature.<sup>20</sup>

The result at Kitchener is a civic square that seems architecturally programmed to function as a stage set (**figure 1**). It is enclosed on three sides by the city hall, with the paving raked slightly toward the back of the square in a theatre-like manner. In the centre is a large reflecting pool/skating rink (**figure 2**). Above the main entrance to the city hall and accessed by a monumental staircase is an exterior balcony that could act either as an elevated stage or as a viewing platform for events in the square. In either case, the balcony, covered by a dramatic canopy, adds significantly to the spectacular nature of the space, in which the citizen can simultaneously be spectator and part of the spectacle — but only, it seems, if such activity is on an unannounced but predetermined agenda. Only weeks after the new complex opened, a Kitchener citizen was ordered off the square for rollerblading by none other than the mayor himself. “He [Mayor Dom Cardillo] took his thumb and told me to get lost,” said the citizen. “He was like a king up there.” The man was then escorted off the property, and began skating on the sidewalk — only to be confronted by the city police, who threatened to charge him with trespassing if he didn’t leave the area.<sup>21</sup>

Kitchener’s civic square is just one of many examples of how the public square has been used in this attempted transformation of the city and the citizen. These public squares are ultimately caught up in an effort to turn the city core into a site of consumption, and to turn the citizen into a citizen-tourist through the use of spectacle. Indeed, Harold Chorney argues that spectacle has a long tradition in the modern urban politics of Canada. The citizen, he claims, has been forced to retreat, in Simmelian alienation, in the face of the unrelenting drive of urban capitalism into a position of passive spectatorship.<sup>22</sup>

This argument can be revised somewhat, in light of the increasing shift toward a culture of consumption: it is not simply a matter of the alienated citizen in retreat, but of an active realization on the part of the political and entrepreneurial elites that spectacle itself can be a formidable and acceptable tool for restructuring the public



**CITY HALL PLAZA SPACE RESERVATION**  
Community Group

**Edmonton**

**PART 1** To be completed by requester and returned to Corporate Communications, 3rd Floor, City Hall, Fax: 496-0297

Date required: \_\_\_\_\_ No. attending: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: start set up) event start) event finish) take down finish)

Name of group: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (t) \_\_\_\_\_ (f) \_\_\_\_\_ (ao) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Site contact: (if different from above) \_\_\_\_\_

Room Use: (what you are using the room for) public meeting \_\_\_\_\_ media conference \_\_\_\_\_ special event) \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

\*On a separate sheet please give a detailed description of your special event.

Equipment: We would like to use the following City equipment (all equipment to be set up and taken down by requesting group; group responsible for cleaning or maintenance). Please indicate number required.

stacking chairs (#12 max.) # \_\_\_\_\_ 3' round tables (#) # \_\_\_\_\_ 2.5' x 6' tables (20 max) # \_\_\_\_\_

We will set up equipment: \_\_\_\_\_ OR \_\_\_\_\_

We require Public Works assistance to set up and take down and will pay for the service: \_\_\_\_\_

A public address system can be made available through Public Works but set-up, take down and staffing charges will be assessed. P/A system required: \_\_\_\_\_

If any of the agreed-to expenses are incurred, please send invoice to: same as address above; \_\_\_\_\_ or to: \_\_\_\_\_

Date sent to requester: \_\_\_\_\_

**PART 2** To be completed by City of Edmonton and information returned to requester.

Public Works required: \_\_\_\_\_ Estimated cost: \_\_\_\_\_

Security arrangements required: \_\_\_\_\_ Estimated cost: \_\_\_\_\_

Insurance required: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Public Works cost authorization signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Risk Management authorization signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Costs sent to requester for approval: \_\_\_\_\_

**PART 3** User acceptance of costs and liabilities. Please sign and return to Corporate Communications

**LIABILITY RESPONSIBILITIES OF USER GROUP.** The undersigned facility user agrees to indemnify and save harmless the City from any and all liability, costs, damages, claims, suits, expenses or actions (including legal costs) arising out of the use and occupation of City Hall space, including damage to any property or personal injury including death, occurring on or about City Hall during the reserved time of the event, except for such liabilities occurring as a result of sole negligence of the City. The City assumes no responsibility for the loss of or damage to the property of the facility user, its employees, or its guests.

Upon request of the City, the facility user shall obtain and maintain in full force and effect comprehensive general liability insurance in the amount not less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000) per occurrence for personal injury and property damage. Evidence of such insurance may be required by the City prior to use of the facility.

Group authorization signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 4 (top left). Edmonton City Hall and Civic Square, view of the space reserved for public demonstrations located between the clock tower and the building facade. (J. Delaney, 1996)

Figure 5 (top right). Edmonton City Hall and Civic Square, view from the front entrance across the Civic Square showing the (empty) reflecting pool. (J. Delaney, 1996)

Figure 6 (above). Edmonton City Hall plaza space reservation form, 1994. Note the liability clause at the bottom of the contract. (City of Edmonton)

and private spheres.<sup>23</sup> Spectacle strips something of the city's conventional supports, of its history, and its process, and makes it simply, inevitably, and seemingly innocuously "there."<sup>24</sup> The object's rationale, its reason for being, seems self-evident. It positions itself and its spectators in such a way that it does not seem to require second thought.

In his discussion of sovereign and disciplinary power, Foucault sees the power of the visible and the spatial as lying in the way in which they can make some things visible in very particular and acceptable ways, while hiding others.<sup>25</sup> It is in this sense that identity and architecture can be linked, as the spatial and the visual position the spectator (both physically and culturally) to experience particular things. The spectacle of these civic squares, then, may be seen as a form of "social spatialization," in which an imaginary geography of *civic-ness*, as a fundamentally programmed and consumptive state, is produced.

Edmonton City Hall presents an extreme instance of the city hall as spectacle (figures 3, 4). The \$50 million building is, in fact, almost entirely symbolic, housing only those portions of the government with a need to be in direct contact with the public (and, of course, Corporate Communications). Ninety per cent of the city government is housed in other buildings around the downtown. Edmonton City Hall is meant to act as the ultimate public space, and succeeds in being the ultimate space of spectacle.

Upon completion of the city hall in 1992, the mayor stated that he hoped the building would "act as a catalyst" and be a "symbol of a vigorous and growing city ... [and] a focal point and landmark for Edmontonians."<sup>26</sup> The public square of this city hall is even more expressly centred on a reflecting pool/skating rink than at Kitchener. A small space to the side of the square has been allocated for public demonstrations. The pool can be drained for larger meetings (figure 5), but this must be arranged in advance. Those wishing to demonstrate or otherwise use the public space are handed a long list of regulations and requirements (figure 6). Under no circumstances will demonstrations be allowed in the "city room," the interior public square that separates the council chamber from the exterior public square.<sup>27</sup> It is a space available, however, for very loud and boisterous shows of civic pride, such as Grey Cup festivities — even though the Eskimos are a privately owned team.

IN THESE CIVIC SQUARES, THE USE OF SPECTACLE spatializes the passive consumption of the citizen-tourist, as Arendt so feared. Citizenship becomes another item to be fulfilled under the auspices of "consumer demand."<sup>28</sup> The creation of public space and the (political) public sphere have been conflated in these squares, legitimating the take-over and spectacularization of the public sphere by the local state. The term "public" becomes limited to governmental institutions, which identify what is acceptable within this officially designated space. The citizens are discouraged from looking to and at themselves for their identity, and instead encouraged to accept this spectacle of civic representation. This representation reconstitutes our view of the city, and helps to legitimate its privatization and commercialization. The local state withdraws from socio-economic democratic activities, and replaces them with vague allusions to "civic tradition" and *public-ness*. These squares are spaces of power, in their ability to transform our identity as citizens and transform the definition of the public sphere. They may end up not engendering a true public sphere, a "theatre of political participation," as Arendt might have hoped, but rather a theatre of passive consumption.

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990); Michael Sorkin, ed. *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Michael Webb, *The City Square* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Richard Bolton, "Figments of the Public: Architecture and Debt," in *Restructuring Architectural Theory*, ed. Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 42-47; Kenneth Frampton, "The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects: A Reading of the Human Condition," in *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* (London: Architectural Design and Academy Editions, 1982), 6-19; Detlef Mertins and Brigitte Shim, "Public Space: The State of the Art?" *The Canadian Architect* 33, no. 5 (May 1988): 25-41; Detlef Mertins and Virginia Wright, eds., *Competing Visions: The Kitchener City Hall Competition* (Toronto: The Melting Press, 1990); Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City," *October* 47 (winter 1988): 3-52; Detlef Mertins, *Metropolitan Mutations: The Architecture of Emerging Public Spaces* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1988); "Whatever Became of the Public Square?" *Harper's* 281, no. 1682 (July 1990): 49-61.
- 2 On Toronto City Hall, see Geoffrey Simmins, "The Building of Toronto's New City Hall: A Painful Coming of Age for the Association," *Ontario Association of Architects: A Centennial History, 1889-1989* (Toronto: Ontario Association of Architects, 1989), 137-46, and Trudi E. Bunting, "An Empirical Analysis of Symbolic Urban Imagery: A Case Study of the New City Hall in Toronto," M.A. Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1967.
- 3 On Edmonton, see J.C. MacGregor, *Edmonton* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975); on Kitchener, see John English and Kenneth McLaughlin, *Kitchener: An Illustrated History* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983).
- 4 See Jack Pasternak, *The Kitchener Market Fight* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1975).
- 5 On this decision in Kitchener, see *City of Kitchener, Downtown Revitalization Plan* (Kitchener, Ont.: City of Kitchener, 1987). The decision in Edmonton is best reflected in the city council minutes and documents from the "PRIDE" downtown improvement programme.
- 6 Brian Wallis, "What's Wrong With This Picture? An Introduction," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, 1984), xi-xviii, xv.
- 7 See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989).
- 8 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198-99, and Maurizio Passerin D'Entrevs, "Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Citizenship," in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 146.
- 9 *Ibid.* See also Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
- 10 See Arendt; Habermas; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80; and Deutsche, 3-52.
- 11 Fraser, and Deutsche.
- 12 Meaghan Morris, "Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower," *New Formations* 11 (Summer 1990): 5-18.
- 13 For this argument, see Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), and Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternate Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 14 Shields, 272.
- 15 Michael Keith and Steve Pile, "Introduction, Part 2: ... and the Place of Politics," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 27-28.
- 16 Mark Goodwin, "The City as Commodity: The Contested Spaces of Urban Development," in *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*, ed. Gerry Kearns and Chris Philo (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993), 145-62.
- 17 Deutsche, 10.
- 18 "9-2 Vote Clinches Plans For City Hall," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 24 May 1989, A1.
- 19 City of Kitchener, "Kitchener City Hall National Architectural Design Competition: Conditions and Programme," May 1989, 53.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 "Skate Scrap: City Hall Square Ban Upsets Kitchener Man," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 3 September 1993, A1.
- 22 Harold Chorney, "The Phenomenology of the Urban: From Social Theory to Public Policy," *City of Dreams: Social Theory and the Urban Experience* (Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Canada, 1990), 176.
- 23 Bolton, 42-47.
- 24 Hal Foster, "Contemporary Art and Spectacle," in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle and Cultural Politics*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985), 81.
- 25 John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing," *October* 44 (spring 1988): 103.
- 26 Mayor Cec Purves, in his invitation to architects to compete. Penina Coopersmith and Trevor Boddy, "The Sad Ballad of Edmonton City Hall: How a Competition Failed," *Trace* 1, no. 3 (July-September 1981): 43.
- 27 See, for example, "City Hall is For You; Just Read and Obey," *Edmonton Journal*, 31 October 1992, and "City Hall Access Rules Too Strict - Reimer," *Edmonton Journal*, 5 November 1992.
- 28 Susan J. Smith, "Society, Space and Citizenship: A Human Geography for the 'New Times'?" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 14 (1989): 152.

---

**Jill Delaney has a doctorate in architectural history and theory from SUNY - Binghamton, in New York State. Research on this topic was conducted in part as a SSHRC Doctoral Fellow.**