

# Architect and Artists Collaborate on Battery Park City Plaza

By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL

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When the architect Cesar Pelli was asked to work with two artists in the design of the World Financial Center Plaza at Battery Park City, he resisted.

"I thought it was a terrible idea," said Mr. Pelli, who designed the complex of buildings now under construction. "My worry was that I'd be saddled with an artist who would be primarily interested in expressing personal and esoteric pursuits. There are many examples of anti-civic art, where the building is seen as background for the artist who feels he must make a confrontational point."

Today, however, the design for the 3½-acre, \$13 million plaza is nearly complete, and Mr. Pelli as well as many detached observers believe that the collaboration — including the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, and the sculptors Scott Burton and Siah Armajani — is pioneering. As they see it, the project is a true collaboration, in that concessions were made by both the architect and the artists as opposed to the more usual practice in which the artist accommodates his work almost completely to the physical setting provided by the architect.

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Although the plaza is not scheduled for completion until 1988, the design has already begun to raise excitement in the world of architecture. Unlike the vast, austere plazas at the foot of many modern skyscrapers, this plaza is broken into four areas, each like a neighborhood with its own personal eccentricities — a small wooded area, or a fountain, or welded steel letters spelling out a poem about New York that is a structural part of a handrail. The plaza is part of the \$1.5 billion World Financial Center, a 6-million-square-foot office development being built by Olympia & York, a Canadian real estate company. The plaza will be paid for by \$11.2 million in state-financed Battery Park City funds and \$1.8 million from the Battery Park City fine arts program.

### 'A Piece of New York'

"We were not interested in plunk-down sculpture," said Victor Ganz, the chairman of the Battery Park City Fine Arts Committee, which had proposed the architect-artist collaboration for the plaza. "Usually the architect finishes his job and then says, 'Go find an artist and put something in the plaza.' We wanted to think in terms of environment, to make the plaza look like a piece of New York. We arranged it so the artists would be involved right from the beginning."

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It was not an easy task, however, to persuade Mr. Pelli that collaboration was a sound idea. But the two sculptors chosen by Mr. Ganz and the Fine Arts Committee, Mr. Burton and Mr. Armajani, turned him around.

"They are artists of a new breed," Mr. Pelli said. "They are public artists, with the emphasis on public. Their concerns were close to mine, philosophically. We all wanted a place that was enjoyable at many levels, like a work of Shakespeare."

Indeed, Mr. Burton and Mr. Armajani, both of whom have previously worked in areas where art and architecture intersect, found their artistic philosophies surprisingly in line with those of Mr. Pelli.

### Importance of Social Values

"What office workers do in their lunch hour is more important than pushing the limits of my self-expression," explained Mr. Burton, a New York artist who is best known for designing chairs that combine artistry and function. "The main moral value in modernism for 100 years was the freedom of the self, but that's a trivial issue now. There are more important things than personal autonomy. Social and communal values are more important."

Mr. Armajani, a Minneapolis artist who is best known for his wooden con-

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structions of reading tables, meeting halls and newsstands that merge artistic and architectural concerns, also follows a similar philosophy.

"Art should be like a good game of baseball — non-monumental, democratic and humble," he said. "With no hits, no runs, and no errors at the bottom of the ninth, we know something historical is happening. Good art leaves no residue."

The plaza, as it appears in a model, looks at first inconspicuous, even lacking in distinction. Upon closer inspection, however, dozens of small and subtle surprises are revealed. There are fountains, steps, a walking path along the Hudson River, a lawn for playing Frisbee. There seems a place for every conceivable public desire, from meditating at the river to nailing down a business deal at lunch.

### 'Responsive to Public Needs'

"We had long discussions about whether we should have a more overall recognizable scheme," Mr. Pelli said. "We decided people are different — sometimes they want vistas, sometimes shady nooks. We wanted a place that was responsive to public needs."

The group's first meeting was tense. "There was a lot of suspicion and anxiety," said Mr. Friedberg. Once a single basic philosophy was

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agreed upon, however, the collaborators developed a mutual trust, and the real business of designing the details began.

The process took two years of meetings, monthly and sometimes weekly, often lasting a full day or more. The team usually sequestered itself in Mr. Pelli's Connecticut or Mr. Friedberg's New York City office, together with a design assistant to make quick models of ideas that came up. Plan after plan was debated and refined. They worked straight through the day, often sending out for lunch to minimize interruptions.

Between meetings, group members made models of different parts of the plaza — a fountain, or a chair, or steps. In discussing the models, references were constantly made to other architectural designs from around the world, especially from New York, and changes and refinements were made.

Said Mr. Pelli of the final plan: "Every part has been thought out 20 times. But you always work with two opposite dangers. You may be doing too little, and make it bare, or you do too much, and it's a crazy quilt. We think we're right in the middle, where it's perfect."

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