

## Critical Response to Lincoln Center Since Its Opening

Perhaps no other performing arts center in the United States has inspired more written commentary before, during and after its construction than Lincoln Center. Although the federally-initiated John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has garnered much discussion in terms of its funding, Lincoln Center has been the subject of continual debate in terms of its design, its planning, its role as an urban renewal catalyst and its overall significance—not to mention, its programming, its organizational structure, its constituents and its unresolved plans for redevelopment. Noted *New York Times* theatre critic, Clive Barnes, remarked:

It is curious that Lincoln Center met with hardly any opposition while it was being planned, but once it was built and operating, it became a continual Aunt Sally, with almost everyone taking pot shots at its architecture, its constituent companies, its overall planning, its subscription systems, even its catering facilities.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Barnes' assertion about an early lack of opposition, *Times* critic, Paul Goldberger, later countered that Jane Jacobs (and other planning critics) had been highly critical of the center, describing it as “a sterile island cut of from the life of the city.”<sup>2</sup>

Regarding its design, Lincoln Center has continued to inspire divergent responses among critics, architects, planners and preservationists. While some complaints about the complex have lessened over time, others have become more pointed. Ada Louise Huxtable, who had originally championed Abramovitz, Johnson—and even Harrison, to a certain extent—wrote an unfavorable critique shortly after the Metropolitan Opera House opened in which she recanted her previous endorsements.<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging that such searing criticisms might seem “churlish...in view of the fact that on any busy evening Lincoln Center is an agreeable place, full of light and movement and the tangible promise of varied entertainments,” the critic then launched into a diatribe against its buildings' designs.”<sup>4</sup>

Describing Philharmonic Hall, the New York State Theater and the Metropolitan Opera House as “a gift wrap job of travertine trim and passé partout colonnades applied to basic boxes,” she further characterized them as structures “that the public finds pleasing and most professionals consider a failure of nerve, imagination and talent.”<sup>5</sup> Even the Vivian Beaumont Theater, which Huxtable had previously praised as a distinctive piece of modernism, was now said to have been “done better by Mies at Barcelona in 1929.”<sup>6</sup> She ultimately concluded that the campus “has defaulted as contemporary architecture and design.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, in spite of Huxtable’s later disdain for the trio of buildings, she never wavered in her praise of the plazas.

In contrast to Huxtable’s assertion that the buildings lacked innovation, Paul Goldberger, writing about the trio of Lincoln Center Plaza buildings in 1979, insisted that “far from looking backward, [they] seem now to be odd precursors of the current fashion for designing in classically inspired styles.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, this stylistic “precursor” to what would become known as Post-modernism was actually, according to preservationist, Kathleen Randall, formalism.<sup>9</sup> Characterized by “architecture that emphasizes form over pure functionalism or structural expression,” formalist buildings, such as those designed by Abramovitz, Harrison and Johnson, incorporated historicized elements thereby “creating an instant, easily readable monumentality.”<sup>10</sup> The term also echoed Johnson’s original characterization of the architects’ goals of “looking away from the Puritanism of the International Style toward enriched forms.”<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Goldberger dismissed the architecture of Avery Fisher Hall, the New York State Theater and the Metropolitan Opera House, claiming, “their problem was never that they were classical, but that they were so badly classical. The three main buildings are prissy and overdetailed both inside and out, with a heavy-handedness of form and a vulgarity of detail that looked poor in the 1960’s and look no less so now.”<sup>12</sup>

Architectural historian, William H. Jordy, also acknowledged the classicism of the complex, while also stressing its Beaux Arts antecedents. Citing a continuum between Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, Rockefeller Center and Lincoln Center, Jordy stated:

Although...formal qualities of Lincoln Center generally characterize all classically inspired architecture, its most immediate prototypes for American architects are Beaux-Arts buildings. So Lincoln Center brings the tradition of American Beaux-Arts full circle, back to the Court of Honor at the Columbian Exposition of 1892. Or, a circle within a circle: if Rockefeller Center had marked the arc from Beaux-Arts to modern, so the later Center marks the arc from modern back to Beaux-Arts, with Wallace Harrison among the principal participants in both enterprises.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Wallace K. Harrison’s early training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts informed his design for Lincoln Center. Although executed in a modern idiom, the campus’ axial plan, symmetry and processionalism embodied Beaux-Arts principles as exemplified by the City Beautiful Movement.

In contrast to Paul Goldberger’s criticism of Lincoln Center’s architecture, Clive Barnes was more divided in his assessment. In his piece entitled, “Lincoln Center: Bravos and Barbs for America’s Number One Cultural Supermarket,” dated September 1968, the critic called it “A Kubla Khan pleasure palace, reviled, admired, tolerated, and now, inescapably and wonderfully, a part of New York City.”<sup>14</sup> Lodging both compliments and criticisms, Barnes assessed the Vivian Beaumont Theater: “the best-looking building at Lincoln Center...is also the least effective;” Moore’s *Reclining Figure*: “perfectly arrogant and attractively mottled;” the New York State Theater: “the magnificently proportioned main lobby does carry a hint of the cold-steel, machine-gun-scrutinized terraces of Alcatraz, but the theater is always a pleasure to visit;” the Metropolitan Opera House: “If an opera house is a machine for making opera, you must forget the Met’s gaudily homely looks and concentrate on how well it works;” and the overall design: “The buildings do have a comfortingly solid look, but their architectural quality, I think, falls short of being marvelous.”<sup>15</sup>

Martin Bloom, writing for the *AIA Journal*, was less divided. Alluding to Huxtable’s 1966 reassessment, Bloom endorsed her opinions regarding the design, writing, “Although marble was chosen to sheath the buildings in an attempt to give a dignity and quality of the eternal to a new center, its particular application does not give a sense of solidity. It seems more

like exterior wallpaper.”<sup>16</sup> Then, specifying the motives behind this and other stylistic choices,

Bloom asserted:

The design of Lincoln Center evolved during a transition period in 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. In the 1950s, designers were unsure of what constituted monumentality. It was difficult for architects to deal with classical subjects at a time when modern architecture was only just finding its voice. There are many elements throughout the center, both inside and outside of the buildings that betray either a lack of assurance as to what might constitute a dignified and monumental performing arts complex or a tendency toward outright vulgarity.<sup>17</sup>

The critic summed up his appreciation by writing, “At best it is a half-hearted classicism, not as evocative of the past as it could be nor as innovative as ‘50s architecture might have desired.”<sup>18</sup>

Concurring with Bloom’s statements, Herbert Muschamp’s assessments in 1996 and 2001 also acknowledged the architectural uncertainty pervading the design. Muschamp wrote:

The design of the center, too, was ahead of its time, at least in one disturbing respect: It previewed the stylistic confusion that would overtake architecture in the decade to come. Classical buildings for a time that didn’t believe in classicism, ornamented buildings for a time that didn’t believe in ornament, public spaces for a city that has always had great difficulty grasping the concept of public amenity: architecturally, Lincoln Center is the sum of its contradictions.<sup>19</sup>

However, despite his reservations, Muschamp had praise for the individual buildings of the campus. Comparing it to the Campidoglio in Rome, the architecture critic called it “a great urban stage” in which “the main plaza and the three buildings facing onto it add up to one great theater, a monumental showcase of urban spectacle.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Muschamp lauded the “‘off-stage’ buildings” that “do not violate the cohesion that prevails throughout the complex,” and added, “Given that each of the buildings at Lincoln Center was designed by a different architect, that appearance of unity may be the center’s most remarkable achievement.”<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the interiors of the individual buildings, the *New York Times* architecture critic was unusually effusive. Regarding Avery Fisher Hall, Muschamp reminisced:

I was dazzled by this building, designed by Max Abramovitz: by the broad expanses of glass, by the escalators and, especially, by

‘Orpheus and Apollo,’...stretching through the air. I’d never seen an artwork like this; the metal plates were minimal, but the sweep across space was truly Baroque, and you practically moved through it, while the escalators wafted you upward.<sup>22</sup>

While Muschamp found the original concert hall’s interior “thrilling” and “regally modern,” he was adverse to the current incarnation, which he contended was “nightmarish.”<sup>23</sup> He concluded that Lippold’s “gleaming metal cascade still glints with the promise of modernity and an era’s belief that a better city lay within reach.”<sup>24</sup>

Muschamp called the New York State Theater “the most successfully realized of all the houses at Lincoln Center,” adding that “no theater in New York has a more ennobling flow space.”<sup>25</sup> While he alleged that the theater could never “recapture the aura it possessed while George Balanchine was alive,” he did resolve that it was still one of “Johnson’s greatest works,” and through proper restoration, could reclaim its glory.<sup>26</sup> Although not as enthusiastic about the Metropolitan Opera House as he was about the State Theater, Muschamp was nonetheless approving. After acknowledging the unfortunate compromise that Wallace K. Harrison had to endure in order to complete the project, Muschamp enthused:

Still, when the lights go down and the curtain goes up, the Met is one of the world’s great opera houses, the quality of its sound and sightlines all the more miraculous considering that it seats nearly a third more people than the largest European houses.<sup>27</sup>

Alluding to the opera house’s crystal chandeliers, the critic characterized them as “A poignant blend of Old World opera house and space-age Sputnik, these fixtures literally crystallize Lincoln Center’s mid-century, hybrid esthetic.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, *Times* music critic, Bernard Holland, looked unfavorably upon the individual auditoriums of the campus, which he detailed in his 1997 article entitled, “A Music Mecca Loved but Reluctantly.”<sup>29</sup> Acknowledging the fact that Lincoln Center attracted five million visitors every year, Holland, fraught with resignation, claimed, “In one way or another, the buildings have let their inhabitants down, but with little hope of significant change, we have gotten used to them.”<sup>30</sup> Regarding Avery Fisher Hall, Holland wrote that it “gives off a glare, a

brightness, an unpleasant impression of heat... The new appurtenances, helpful as they are, add more hideousness to what was already an antimusical atmosphere.”<sup>31</sup> Assessing the New York State Theater’s interior, the critic complained that its backstage areas were too small for its operatic needs, while its audience space was too big to achieve any sort of intimacy with its performers.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps owing to the benefits of amplification, Holland did offer that the acoustical design of the State Theater was “certainly better than it was.”<sup>33</sup>

By comparison, Holland’s survey of the Metropolitan Opera House was less incisive as he applauded the fact that “Given its intractable problems, size being one, the Met shows admirable resolve and intelligence.”<sup>34</sup> Lamenting the lack of intimacy of the house, he nonetheless praised its “relatively good” acoustics and its development of “the most sophisticated and smoothly operating backstage in the world.”<sup>35</sup> Holland’s conclusion about Alice Tully Hall was that “it was too big for the small and too small for the big.” James S. Russell, writing for *Grid*, thought that Alice Tully Hall resembled “a dated airport lounge, with acoustics that are regarded as substandard for a hall of its modest size.”<sup>36</sup> Quoting *New Yorker* critic, Alex Ross, Russell noted, “At Tully Hall, the missing element was the intangible one of atmosphere.”<sup>37</sup> Martin Bloom’s 1981 review of the Vivian Beaumont Theater’s auditorium called it “the theater that never worked,” and Russell’s 1999 assessment claimed that “the size of the stage (three times the size of a typical Broadway theater) has defeated even the most talented directors.”<sup>38</sup>

The prospective sale of Jasper Johns’ *Numbers, 1964* in late 1998 impelled *Times* art critic, Roberta Smith, to conduct a critical examination of the organization’s art holdings.<sup>39</sup> Regarding *Numbers, 1964*, Smith remarked that it was “one of the [center’s] most historically important” works, and observed that the New York State Theater itself was the “only one that conveys any of the artistic vitality of the moment that the building came into being, and the core of this vitality is the Johns.”<sup>40</sup> Clarifying this statement, Smith wrote, “The art that Mr. Kirstein and Mr. Johnson chose, while not all of equal quality, forms an illuminating time capsule,

reflecting their different sensibilities and sampling the waxing and waning artistic reputations of a significant transitional period in New York art.”<sup>41</sup>

Commenting on the individual artworks and their relationships to the theater’s interior spaces, Smith asserted that the Higgins work “adds an appropriate motif of movement and grace to the inner lobby of the theater,” while the Bontecou “is as specifically scaled to its site as the Johns, answering back to it from the opposite side of the lobby, albeit more aggressively.”<sup>42</sup> Maintaining that other pieces within the theater represent “artists and movements whose stars were fading,” Smith noted “The decline of Abstract Expressionism is palpable in the fluttering forms of Reuben Nakian’s bronze sculpture...and the lacerated surfaces of a sculpture by the now forgotten Francesco Somaini.”<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the critic thought that Lipchitz’s *Birth of the Muses* “conjures European modernism with a certain period-look vitality.”<sup>44</sup> In reference to Nadelman’s *Circus Women* and *Two Female Nudes*, Smith pronounced them “one of the most commanding indoor sculptural spectacles in New York City.”<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to the State Theater’s collection, Smith was not as approving of the center’s other holdings, stating, “Much of the other art at Lincoln Center seems to have been pretty moribund from the start and is certainly irrelevant now.”<sup>46</sup> Offering a summation of the Lippold, Hadzi and Lipton works, she concluded that none of them had “held up too well.”<sup>47</sup> Responding to Chagall’s paintings, Smith called them, “lovable and cheerful but only faint echoes of a great talent that was at its height in the 1910’s and 20’s”<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to Roberta Smith’s mixed response toward Lincoln Center’s art, most of the reactions to the center’s planning of have been disapproving. As early as 1966, Ada Louise Huxtable complained:

Lincoln Center has been created on a traffic island of converging avenues and the situation worsens constantly as new buildings open. The underground parking that repeats the tangle above ground is neither the corrective nor the supporting circulation design that should have been part of the original scheme.<sup>49</sup>

Clive Barnes, writing two years later, agreed, “This great bag of buildings makes transport and parking difficult, puts heavy demands on the area’s restaurants and bars, and runs the danger of becoming a separate precinct apart for the normal life of the city.”<sup>50</sup> He then added, “But such town-planning objections, however valid, are overruled by the spirit and momentum of Lincoln Center.”<sup>51</sup>

But perhaps the most enlightening of all was Paul Goldberger, who criticized the center for its undemocratic design. Dissecting its inefficiencies, Goldberger wrote:

The center has never managed to make itself physically meaningful to any but the middle- and upper-middle-class patrons of arts institutions. It turns its back on the public housing to its west across Amsterdam Avenue, thus symbolically separating itself from New York’s less affluent citizens. And it has never even related all that well physically to the parts of the city to which it turns its front—the buildings sit flatly on their plaza, their arrangement paying little heed to the unusual shape of their site at Broadway and Columbus Avenue.<sup>52</sup>

Ironically, despite Huxtable, Barnes and Goldberger’s conclusions about the center’s inability to interact with its local community, the three critics were unanimous in their approval of its public plazas. Huxtable decried:

Fortunately, the scale and relationship of the plazas is good, and they can be enjoyed as pedestrian open spaces, a value that may well increase with use and age. This, and the massive amounts of entertainment that will be provided are its major successes.<sup>53</sup>

Goldberger was even more enthusiastic, pronouncing the central plaza “a joy.”<sup>54</sup> Contrasting his review of the center’s buildings, the critic called Lincoln Center Plaza:

[O]ne of New York’s few true urban squares, and a further answer to those who would say that Lincoln Center has no redeeming value urbanistically. It is a splendid place, as is its more intimate neighbor, the reflecting pool in front of the Vivian Beaumont Theater containing Henry Moore’s ‘Reclining Figure.’<sup>55</sup>

Disagreeing with his colleague about the north plaza’s reflecting pool, Clive Barnes described it as “sad...a thin puddle of grubby, often paper-infested water.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, the critic did have encouraging words for Kiley’s allée, observing: “At dusk the trees are lit, campily but

charmingly, and it is nice and human to walk through them. There are not many places in our city where you can walk among trees at night.”<sup>57</sup>

Other commentary regarding the plaza areas has been just as favorable. One *New York Times* journalist writing in 1969 called Lincoln Center Plaza “an oasis on the West Side” and noted, “Even those who have spent a lifetime in the city are a little agape in Lincoln Center’s wondrous lobby under the skies.”<sup>58</sup> Another journalist echoed Huxtable’s original review of Philharmonic Hall, asserting the distinctive sense of place created by the plaza when filled with people: “The plaza and the buildings by themselves convey an atmosphere of elegant official culture, but fill them with people and they assume a bright air of anticipation of a gala that is about to begin and envelop everyone in something special. There is a sense of going out and, if you are there, you become part of it.”<sup>59</sup> Another reporter wrote, “The pleasures of the public spaces are a prelude to the pleasures inside.”<sup>60</sup> Martin Bloom, while criticizing the isolating “checkerboard” relationship of the plazas to one another nevertheless praised each one individually:

One finds that Lincoln Center makes some of its most favorable impressions in its internal plazas. The main plaza with its central fountain and concentrically radiating pavements can be pleasant at performance time when it is animated with people moving toward and through the various entrances to the theaters and by those observing it all either from the rim of the fountain or from café tables along the sides. The glass-enclosed lobbies and promenades behind the columns that punctuate all of the plaza elevations contribute brightness and a sense of festivity to the space. Under the right conditions, the effect of all this can be disarming.<sup>61</sup>

Adding to his appraisal, Bloom lauded Lincoln Center Plaza North as “serene and dignified.”<sup>62</sup>

Even Huxtable, who had retracted her favorable opinions of the buildings at Lincoln Center, reaffirmed her praise for Lincoln Center Plaza North and its marriage of art and landscape design:

When the pool in front of the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center has water, the Henry Moore provides that essential, fulfilling element of style and definition that raises the whole complex to urban art. Not least is the strong, evocative sensuousity of the work, as opposed to geometric abstraction. There is an extra

dimension of implied human reference that does much to make people relate to the space. The all-important result must usually be achieved in the modernist aesthetic by finesse of proportions and scale.<sup>63</sup>

Assessments of Damrosch Park, on the other hand, have been favorable as well as disapproving. Three years after hailing the central plaza as an “oasis,” *Times* reporter, Murray Schumach, had similar plaudits for Damrosch Park, which he called “an enclave of relaxation and security where the young play, the old dream and the only reminder of the city’s tension is an occasional otherworldly police siren filtered through breeze-stirred trees.”<sup>64</sup> Contrasted with this opinion, Clive Barnes referred to the park as “an awkward neighbor put there by the city,” while Martin Bloom called the south plaza area “unresolved” and the bandshell “ungainly.”<sup>65</sup> However, Bloom did allow that the park “has become the focus for many popular free events, day and evening.”<sup>66</sup> Perhaps owing to the more significant alterations of Dan Kiley’s original Plaza North landscape, Herbert Muschamp found Damrosch Park to be the only redeeming design of all the Lincoln Center plazas: “With the exception of Damrosch Park...all of the center’s public spaces are calling out for the attention of a gifted landscape architect.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Goldberger, “Architecture: Lincoln Center and Changes Wrought by 20 Years,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1979, III, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Huxtable, “Adding Up the Score,” p.29.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of formalism, see Kathleen Randall, “Modern Icon: Lincoln Center,” *Landmark West! Newsletter*, Spring 2000, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Schonberg, “Six Architects in Search of a Center,” p.22.

<sup>12</sup> Goldberger, “Architecture: Lincoln Center and Changes Wrought by 20 Years,” p.15.

<sup>13</sup> William H. Jordy, “Rockefeller Center and Corporate Urbanism,” *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1972) pp.387-388.

<sup>14</sup> Barnes, “Lincoln Center: Bravos and Barbs for America’s Number One Cultural Supermarket,” p.37.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.38, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, Bloom, AIA, “Cultural Colossi: Lincoln Center at 19,” *AIA Journal*, August 1981, p.36.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp.36-37.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Muschamp, “Lincoln Center’s Enduring Vision,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 1996, p.C1.

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- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 *ibid.*, p.C25.
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 Holland, "A Music Mecca Loved but Reluctantly," pp.1ff.
- 30 *ibid.*, p.1.
- 31 *ibid.*, p.34.
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 *ibid.*
- 35 *ibid.*
- 36 James S. Russell, "What's Wrong with Lincoln Center," *Grid*, Summer 1999, v.1, no.3, p.114.
- 37 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 38 "the theater that...": Bloom, "Cultural Colossi: Lincoln Center at 19," p.36; "the size of the...": Russell, "What's Wrong with Lincoln Center," p.114. In spite of these previous reviews criticizing Saarinen's theaters, under the direction of Bernard Gersten, Lincoln Center Theater, comprised of the Vivian Beaumont and Mitzi E. Newhouse Theaters are thriving. To date, long-running hits include the Tony award-winning revival of *Carousel* and *Contact*.
- 39 Smith, "Art Worth More Than Money Enriches Lincoln Center," p.E1ff.
- 40 *ibid.*, p.E8.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 *ibid.*
- 43 *ibid.*
- 44 *ibid.*
- 45 *ibid.*
- 46 *ibid.*
- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 *ibid.*
- 49 Huxtable, "Adding Up the Score," p.29.
- 50 Barnes, "Lincoln Center: Bravos and Barbs for America's Number One Cultural Supermarket," p.44.
- 51 *ibid.*, p.44.
- 52 Goldberger, "Architecture: Lincoln Center and Changes Wrought by 20 Years," p.15.
- 53 Huxtable, "Adding Up the Score," p.29.
- 54 Goldberger, "Architecture: Lincoln Center and Changes Wrought by 20 Years," p.15.
- 55 *ibid.*
- 56 Barnes, "Lincoln Center: Bravos and Barbs for America's Number One Cultural Supermarket," p.38.
- 57 *ibid.*
- 58 Murray Schumach, "Lincoln Center: Visitors Relax in a Lobby Under the Skies," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1969, p.49.
- 59 Richard F. Shepard, "About New York: Lincoln Center's Outdoor Gala," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1978, pp.19ff.
- 60 "Urbane Renewals," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1979, p.20.
- 61 Bloom, "Cultural Colossi: Lincoln Center at 19," p.35.
- 62 *ibid.*
- 63 Ada Louise Huxtable, *Goodbye History, Hello Hamburger*, (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1986) p.144.
- 64 Murray Schumach, "Damrosch Park Sounds a Quiet Note," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1972, p.33.
- 65 "an awkward neighbor...": Barnes, "Lincoln Center: Bravos and Barbs for America's Number One Cultural Supermarket," p.42; "unresolved" and "ungainly": Bloom, "Cultural Colossi: Lincoln Center at 19," p.35.
- 66 Bloom, "Cultural Colossi: Lincoln Center at 19," p.35.
- 67 Muschamp, "Lincoln Center's Enduring Vision," p.C25.