

The Personality of Plazas

In countless towns throughout Latin America, the center of the community is a small open space, or placita, that serves as a forecourt for the local church or chapel. It is an enduring pattern, one that descends as much from the formal planning principles of the Laws of the Indies as it does from the timeless relationship between civic (in this case religious) authority and community spaces. These Dispatches consider the extent the placita/church model can serve as a focal point for Latin-American communities in the United States.

Illustrations courtesy
Weintraub and di Domenico.

Two *placitas* in New York City — Tiffany Plaza in the South Bronx and McKenna Square in Manhattan's Washington Heights — demonstrate how a plaza's personality depends on the relationship between its design and its connection to neighborhood life.¹

Both plazas, designed by Lee Weintraub and John di Domenico for New York's housing agency, are familiar yet foreign: They emulate the strong visual and spatial relationship between plazas and churches in traditional Latin communities; and they use materials, colors and visual language similar to that found in the homelands of the neighborhoods' Hispanic residents. Nevertheless, their design is a striking departure from the surrounding utilitarian landscape of tenements, walk-ups and taxpayer strips.

Tiffany Plaza, which was created by closing a lightly travelled street and melding it with a vacant lot, consists of two formal spaces: a forecourt for St. Athanasius Church and a bosque. The forecourt, which is defined by special granite pavers, includes a raised speakers' platform that serves as a focal point for gatherings. The plaza is bounded on opposite sides by the church and by an arcade and wall that shroud a linear fountain. Yet the space flows freely; gatherings spill from the forecourt into the surrounding streets and sidewalks.

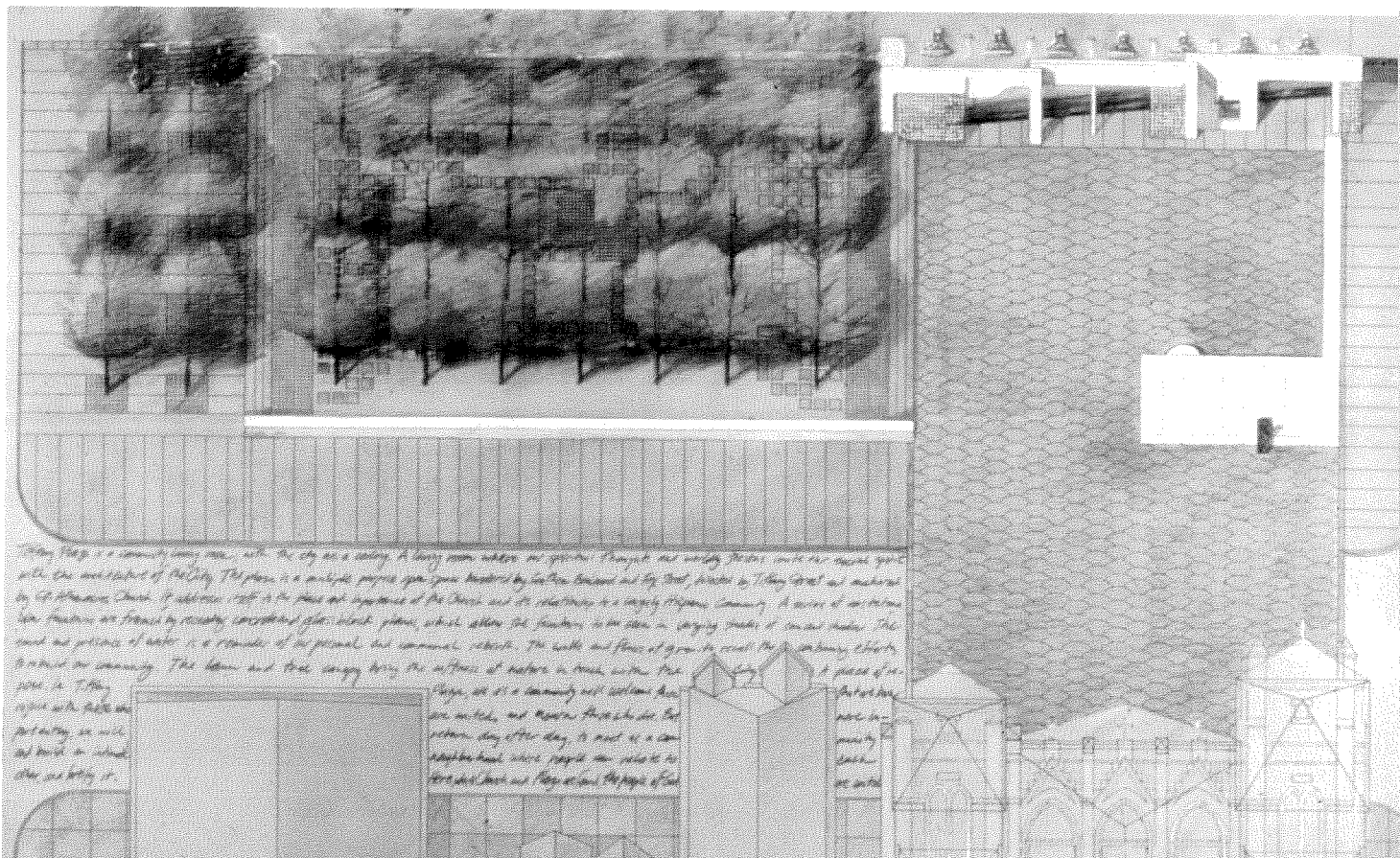
Tiffany Plaza has become the anchor for an emerging neighborhood. Since it was built, hundreds of housing units have been constructed or carved out of abandoned buildings in nearby blocks. Like the neighborhood, the plaza's role has evolved incrementally: It has come to be a place where community residents share their sense of struggle, investment and accomplishment.

At McKenna Square, the designers tried to replicate the same formula. A forecourt extends from St. Rose of Lima Church, across a street and into a small public park; a sculptural *templita* stands on axis with the church entrance and is enclosed by an arcade; and a tree-shaded sitting area is off to the side.

But McKenna Square enjoys neither the use nor the community support that Tiffany Plaza does. The design, Weintraub concludes, suffers from a too-rigid reliance on ideas that worked well at Tiffany and too little attention to the site's difficult conditions. McKenna Square, a triangular patch created by the meshing of two grids, is surrounded by busy streets that could not be closed; even though the forecourt connects the park to the church with special paving, traffic isolates it. Opposite the church is a nondescript row of commercial and residential buildings that establishes neither the presence nor sense of unity that Tiffany's wall and arcade do.



sketch.



Weintraub also speculates that the difference in neighborhoods also influenced the outcome. By the time McKenna Square was redesigned the surrounding community was relatively well established, and the square had difficulty attracting a constituency. "One day they went to church and it was there," he explains.

Another lesson these plazas offer, Weintraub says, is that designs for neighborhood spaces can have a limited shelf life. As conditions in the community change so will the demands put upon the space. For example, the degree of drug use and homelessness these areas face were not anticipated years ago. At Tiffany Plaza, which had become infiltrated by drug dealers, fences now surround the bosque and block off the arcade. Another example is the expansion of the informal economy; street vendors now come to Tiffany Plaza to sell fish, fruits, shaved ice treats and other foods. Had this been anticipated, Weintraub says, the designers would have incorporated better spaces for selling food.

An expectation in both projects was that the church would be the glue that would hold the plaza together. This was true at St. Athanasius, whose pastor, Father Louis Gigante, is committed to the resurrection of the neighborhood through the development of affordable housing. Tiffany Plaza serves as a place for religious celebrations and informal gatherings before and after services — a place where, as Weintraub puts it, "people congregate under the watchful eye of the church." But St. Rose of Lima has played less of a role in the development of McKenna Square and the surrounding neighborhood. "It depends on the leadership of the church, not just the institution, but the personalities."

Each plaza itself has a personality, which derives from its design, its sur-

roundings and the way that people inhabit it. The vocabulary of the *placita* does not translate literally in New York City, but it constitutes the root of a brand new language.

— Todd W. Bressi

Note

1. Tiffany Plaza was first reported on in *Places* in 1987 as part of the "Inhabited Landscape" competition.

Left: McKenna Square, inspirational collage.
Below: McKenna Square (plan) and the *templita*.

