

DEFINING PERSHING SQUARE PLAZA

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## Dedication

My thesis is dedicated to my mother, Marie. Without her unconditional support and love nothing in my life would be possible.

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To Joe, whose tolerance of my crazy, stressed-out behavior will always be more than appreciated. Thanks to my sisters, Heather and Kelli, for their constant belief in me. I would like to thank Tommy and Romo for always being there to calm me down. To my beautiful nieces, Alice and Fiona, who are constant reminders of all things good in life.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NYC: New York City

DOT: Department of Transportation

## ABSTRACT

### DEFINING PERSHING SQUARE PLAZA

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Taking public space from an inert container of culture and examining it as a major cultural factor, “Defining Pershing Square Plaza” analyzes the New York Plaza Program site as it relates to three investing groups. Open space cannot be understood through a single definition, but instead must be considered in the context of people, time, history and culture.



## Chapter One

### Introduction

Anthropologists have frequently assumed the concept of space to be a given in their field work and ethnographies. Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) and Margaret Rodman (2007) highlight that most social scientists assume that space is unproblematic and do not account for it when conducting research. In this thesis, I focus on space, not as a meaningless container in which culture exists, but as a dynamic and fluid component of culture. For some theorists, place is so crucial that it is considered to be a requirement for being human: “to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to know your place” (Jess and Massey 1995: 89). Knowing your place, or having a sense of spatial positioning, is argued to be as innate in human as senses of smell and taste are (Herbert and Thomas 1997: 209). Place is a component that should not only be considered but also closely examined. Theoretically, place is an intricate concept that both is created by cultures, while also creating cultures. I contend that place is far from unproblematic; place is a complex tool through which culture is expressed.

In this thesis, I bring the concept of place and the controversies surrounding it to the forefront by examining New York City’s Plaza Program. This program attempts to convert underused streets into public plazas in an effort to catalyze a vibrant social

atmosphere. Pershing Square Plaza, the site of my research, is a place for three major social groups coexisting and colliding in the one space. Pershing Square Plaza is created by these groups' construal of what the place is and should be. The three primary constituents, New York City Department of Transportation, the Grand Central Partnership, and public users all contribute their definition of this space in the current time, and some thoughts for its use in the future. Using Pershing Square Plaza as my example, I will discuss the complexity of place, highlighting the fluctuating and indeterminate definition of one space. The complexity of place can be seen in the difficulty of concretely defining what a place is as New York City Department of Transportation, the Grand Central Partnership and the general public, while imperative to the creation of Pershing Square Plaza, all create the plaza from three very different social viewpoints. These three vantage points of place all originate in a city-wide plan to strengthen urban life.

This plan was initiated in 2006 when New York's Mayor Bloomberg's launched PlaNYC 2030, a city-wide initiative to maintain and improve New York City's (NYC) quality of life over the next 25 years (NYC PlaNYC website). The plan was announced December 12, 2006, after which the city government met with advocacy groups, held town hall meetings, and offered online outlets in order to address issues the public regards as most critical. The goals of PlaNYC are organized into three categories which summarize NYC life over the next 25 years: "we will be getting bigger, much bigger; our infrastructure will be getting older (and it's pretty old to begin with); our environment will be at risk (and that's not a risk worth taking)," (NYC PlaNYC website;

“Background”). Under the first category, the city getting bigger, there are 10 goals. The third of the ten goals is to ensure that all people live within a ten-minute walk to a park. “Too many neighborhoods lack trees and broad sidewalks. As we grow, our challenge is to find more creative ways to make our neighborhoods greener and more active than ever,” (NYC PlaNYC website; “Lands”). PlaNYC argues that one of these creative ways is through the implementation of the NYC Plaza Program.

The Plaza Program began in 2008 by New York City’s Department of Transportation (NYC DOT). The DOT pairs with community-based, non-profit organizations to transform underused vehicular streets into “safe, attractive, comfortable, and social public spaces,” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”). New York City’s public right of way, streets and sidewalks, comprises 64 square miles of land, enough space to fit about fifty Central Parks; the Plaza Program re-claims streets at appropriate locations to make new plazas. (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “About”) In an attempt to differentiate a plaza from a sidewalk, the NYC DOT defines a plaza as a place on its own rather than a space to pass through According to the DOT a plaza is: “a public space in the city that provides a place for people to enjoy the public realm,” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “What’s a Plaza?”).

The claim that the NYC Plaza Program will re-invent New York City's public realm by transforming vehicular byways into pedestrian destinations recognizes New York as a pedestrian city. The Plaza Program seeks to balance the distribution of public spaces between modes of transportation and the individual:

Whether we are driving, taking the bus, bicycling or riding the subway, each of our trips begins and ends with a walk as a pedestrian. To make walking the most

enjoyable choice, NYCDOT will reclaim portions of streets in appropriate locations to share the public right of way more equitably. These improvements will provide more space for pedestrians by creating attractive destinations that allow for convenient walking and for places to sit, rest, or to simply watch the world go by.

NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”

These suggested improvements reinforce the PlaNYC’s fear of overdevelopment of the city. Although private concerns are considered, and will be discussed in Chapter 3, public re-claiming of vehicle space for public pedestrian use creates an open space that cannot not fall victim to commercial or private expansion. By redefining an already public space with a new purpose, the Plaza Program produces the more active open space PlaNYC hopes to create as the city grows.

How and where these plazas are designated is managed by the DOT office. DOT works with local communities to determine sites for new plazas and target those neighborhoods that lack open space. These plazas occur throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Applications are submitted in rounds, according to the due dates established by DOT. A review process, which is more fully explored in Chapter 2, ranks the applications based on a list of weighted criteria.

These plazas, the DOT claims, are designed to reflect the need and personality of the surrounding neighborhood, (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”). This claim parallels another PlaNYC goal to preserving the character of neighborhoods, as well as welcoming newcomers. In order to ensure that the individuality of the neighborhood is met, it is the responsibility of a non-profit organization to not only nominate a space, but also to support and maintain the plaza once it is created. The role of the non-profit is developed in Chapter 3.

Pershing Square Plaza was nominated by the Grand Central Partnership, a community-based non-profit, in the first round of applications for the Plaza Program.

Pershing Square Plaza was approved and is now in the process of formalizing its permanent design. In its evaluation of the approved plazas, NYC DOT describes

Pershing Square Plaza:

The project will create a pedestrian plaza on the west side of Park Avenue, between E.41st and E.42nd Streets. Adjacent to historic Grand Central Terminal and Pershing Restaurant, the plaza will provide commuters and tourists with an additional 8,000 square feet of outdoor space in one of the City's busiest commercial districts.

NYC DOT website; Plaza Program

Pershing Square Plaza is located on the west side of Park Avenue between 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets. Its north entrance is across 42<sup>nd</sup> St. from Grand Central Terminal. On its west side sits the Pershing Square Restaurant. To the east is the Altria Building and to the south is 100 Park Ave.

The physical positioning of Pershing Square Plaza offers little insight into how this space is defined and distinguished as a space. A closer look at the plaza allows us to consider some broad questions about space and place. To clarify further discussion, the first question to consider is whether or not there is a difference between space and place as they are often interchanged in vocabulary. Philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues that space is undifferentiated; it is the physical plane on which place exists. This assumption, that space is solely a physical environment and can be understood without human interaction, could explain why it is often ignored in anthropological research. Unlike the physical environment, place is the attributed relationship to people, meaning, purpose, and boundaries. Place is culturally constructed from physical space and the social

interactions that exist within and around it. It is these relationships that create meaning or set of meanings, for a specific group of people, thus creating place. While anthropologists Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga (2007) argue that attaching meaning to space transforms “space” into “place,” political scientist Alexandra Kogl (2008) argues that the notion that “space plus meaning equals place” equation is not sufficient in recognizing the many layers of definitions place may have.

Space plus meaning may not be the only inadequate definition as others contend that any space is unable to exist without meaning; undifferentiating space from place in that way. Edward Casey, a philosopher, argues no space occurs without human creation; like place, all space is “culturalized” (Feld and Basso 1996: 14). Casey argues that space and time are reproductions of some preexisting cultural medium and if they exist within human culture then they are products of human creation. I agree with the assessment that space and place cannot be distinguished from each other by stating that one has meaning or human interaction and the other does not. Cultural vantage points affect all space; any space which humans encounter becomes defined by their cultural understanding of space. Buildings are built and parks are designed with particular social motivation. Even the landscapes that are, or attempt to be, untouched are designated that way because of a cultural system that values nature in a specific fashion. It is not only the effect humans have on the physical landscape, but the landscapes’ effect on the culture. French sociologist Henri Lefebvre states that place is an active participant in defining itself: “space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations,” (Low 1999: 114). For the purpose of

avoiding confusion in this thesis, I will use space to describe the physical landscape, but with the understanding that it is not a culturally unaffected entity.

My research is conducted in an urban environment which lends itself to unique considerations of how public space is defined. Urban geographers and philosophers alike have sounded theories on how these spaces function. William Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Space* (1980) examines the buildings surrounding plaza areas in New York City. Whyte's research does not consider pre-conceived plazas, but instead plazas that just emerge with people establishing a place. In Mark Kingwell and Patrick Turmel's edited volume of essays, the contributors offer multiple ways to approach public space in cityscape: "the threats posed to it by surveillance and visual pollution; the joys it offers of stimulation and excitement, anonymity and transformation; its importance to urban variety or democratic politics" (2009: x). Place is an individualized perspective influenced by shared culture. My argument that a physical space can have many definitions is supported by Kingwell and Turmel's list of how public space can be conceived. In the case of Pershing Square Plaza, there are three major groups that are investing in the creation of this space, but there are many more than three viewpoints. The general perspectives brought from each group add another layer of dimension to the plaza. All of these perspectives on public space make us realize the many dynamics that contribute to how plazas and other public spaces are both conceived and regarded.

In the following chapters, I take a closer look at how Pershing Square Plaza is defined. I consider it both as a physical space and through the cultural expectations

projected upon it. The space is impacted by the physical vantage points, the cultural perception, human actions and the temporal context of the three major groups.

The first invested group I will be discussing is the Department of Transportation. The DOT aims to create a plaza that improves quality of life for the surrounding community. For the DOT, the goal is to design a lived space through which the neighborhood can thrive. However, this idea of a destination plaza conflicts with the current constraints of time and instructions for how to use it. When researching the Department's role in and relationship to the plaza, the New York City website offered significant resources to the creation and status of the program. The PlaNYC report and the Plaza Program procedure is just some of the information available online. In order to gain more insight into this group, I conducted an interview with Vadalía Kungys, the Department of Transportation's Plaza Program representative.

Working closely with Mr. Kungys and the DOT is the non-profit organization, the Grand Central Partnership. The Partnership has been working on the plaza since the late-1980s. It is this commitment and passion that led them to envision a plaza that may, or may not, exist anywhere outside of their imaginations. This abstract version of Pershing Square Plaza allows the Partnership to support ideas of how space should be used and who should use it. The Partnership has been working towards a public space goal since its creation in the late 1980s as shown in their developmental literature. My interview with Marc Wurzel, general counsel for the Partnership, provided more background on the project, as well as hopes for the future.



With both the city and the Partnership organized around the construction of the plaza, the last group to consider is the users, or the public. For the public, the space is where part of their day exists, even if it is for a momentary stop-over. It is the public who must negotiate through the theoretical space of the plaza to use it for what they see fit. I spent an average of three days a week in the plaza during September and October 2009. I informally spoke with users, as well as kept diligent notes regarding personal characteristics, purpose of being in the plaza, and time spent.

My methods, including my secondary source research, led to more questions than answers. I set out to define a one-block square as a place, and discovered that place is not one-dimensional. The Department of Transportation, Grand Central Partnership and the public all experience the plaza differently, therefore leading each group to separate, yet equally valid, place definitions.

## Chapter 2

### The city:

#### New York City Department of Transportation

Under the heading of land, one of the goals in PlaNYC is “Open Space: ensure that all New Yorkers live within a 10 minute walk of a park,” (NYC PlaNYC website; “Lands”). In addition to other infrastructural improvements, creating or enhancing parks in every community is planned to maintain the quality of life in the urban environment. It is the responsibility of the New York City Department of Transportation to oversee one way to meet this goal, PlaNYC’s initiative, the NYC Plaza Program. A plaza is not necessarily a park, and so there is a language shift from the original PlaNYC initiative. Instead, the Plaza Program states that the plazas are designed to “ensure that all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk from quality open space, (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “About”). This misnomer of language is the first indication of how space can exist at once under many different definitions. For DOT representative responsible for Plaza Program, Vadilia Kungys, an open space doesn’t have to be a greenspace; greenspace can exist, but just having a public place serves a similar need (personal communication, September 20, 2010). New York is a pedestrian city and the Plaza Program recognizes the need for a balance between the public spaces used for other modes of transportation and the individual pedestrian:

Whether we are driving, taking the bus, bicycling or riding the subway, each of our trips begins and ends with a walk as a pedestrian. To make walking the most enjoyable choice, NYCDOT will reclaim portions of streets in appropriate locations to share the public right of way more equitably.

NYC DOT website; “Sidewalks”

Kungys acknowledges that quality open space not only enhances quality of life, but also helps maintain New York as a competitive city (personal communication). Despite the slight change in language, preserving some sort of pedestrian space prevents overdevelopment and overcrowding.

With concepts such as greenspace, park, open space, and plaza all under discussion, it is important to establish the parameters within which the Plaza Program is working. As first defined in the introduction, a plaza is: “a public space in the city that provides a place for people to enjoy the public realm” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “What is a plaza?”). The DOT differentiates a plaza from a sidewalk because it is a place on its own, rather than a space to pass through (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program). How and where these plazas occur is managed by the DOT office. Although at one point these open spaces were to be parks, the Plaza Program is not under the Parks Department jurisdiction. Instead the Department of Transportation has authority, as the open space that is designated to become plazas consists of underutilized streets and sidewalks, both of which fall under DOT jurisdiction. Streets and sidewalks account for approximately one-quarter of all space in New York City. In order to be converted to plazas, the selected streets do not have to be de-zoned or even de-mapped; instead, they are, as Kungys said, “re-purposed,” (personal communication) While they are no longer

streets by definition, they are still by design. The conversion of these areas presents theoretical issues when trying to define them.

Among the almost 50,000 acres of possible property, select sites are nominated during phases to be converted from underused vehicular streets into “safe, attractive, comfortable and social public spaces” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”). Applications are submitted to the Department of Transportation from non-profit organizations throughout the five boroughs of New York City. These applications are filed by a deadline, three rounds of which passed on June 30, 2010. The round ending in June 2010 has twelve applications under review. Prior to a round closing, DOT hosts information sessions for non-profit groups interested in submitting an application. Non-profits are qualified to apply if they are incorporated in New York State, are compliant with annual state and federal filing requirements, are a certified tax-exempt 501(C) and are geographically located near the target area of the proposed plaza, (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Are You Eligible?”).

The DOT reviews the applications by grading each application on a variety of criteria. Kungys stated that each criterion is weighed differently but the heaviest emphasis is on five criteria: open space, site context, non-profit capacity, prior work, and neighborhood (personal communication). The weight given to these criteria highlights how the DOT defines effective public space. Open space is based on a ratio of 1.5 acres of open space per 1000 people within a community district. Established in 1975, there are 59 community districts in New York City representing a variety of land uses and populations (NYC website; Department of City Planning). While open space is valued in

the city, public space is only effective if it is used. If the DOT is following PlaNYC guidelines in attempting to improve quality of life, it would be ineffective to have an open space amongst lots of parks, or in a region that population is extremely low.

Site context refers to access to public transportation, surrounding land uses, and if the area could appropriately support a plaza. How an area supports a plaza returns to the standard of public space is public use, then the site needs to be easily accessible. The DOT is concerned with surrounding land uses because the plaza is supposed to work within the landscape of the community. If there are not restaurants, coffee shops, stores or even public restrooms in the area of the plaza, the plaza as a public space does not work because the public may not have a reason to be in the area or need an open space.

The non-profit capacity addresses the responsibility the organization will have once the plaza is constructed, and how capable they will be in maintaining the plaza. Kungys mentioned that one measure of this capability was whether or not the applicant had a consistent and paid staff (personal communication). This criterion is weighed heavily because once the design and construction of the plaza is complete the management is turned over to the non-profit organization. If it does not have strong organizational capabilities, or proper staffing, the management may not be successful, leading to an inability to achieve the goal of creating quality open space.

Prior work is closely linked to the non-profit capacity as it assesses how much work has been done on the concept before the application. If a project is well developed and has been vetted in the past, DOT has a better gauge of the support a plaza may receive. Again, in order to be a success, the support must be place before the plaza is

constructed. Factoring the support of a place that does not yet exist in success-measuring is a consideration discussed further in Chapter Three.

DOT also considers neighborhood composition as a significant criterion. DOT looks at census tracts for lower to moderate income neighborhoods. By targeting the low to moderate income bracket, DOT is sending a message that these groups are in greater need of quality public space. Often these socioeconomic groups live in more congested neighborhoods, Communities experience overcrowding due to less expensive rents that do not have the capability to create and support space specifically used as open space. Figure 1, below, is a map of New York City broken down by Community Boards.

This map outlines the 59 community boards throughout the five boroughs. The blue indicates community board properties with active plaza program sites, while the red highlights the priority of communities based on the need for open space. These areas are highlighted in conjunction with the PlaNYC benchmark of 2.5 acres of park space per thousand people. The red sections of the map indicate those areas are most underachieving in reaching this standard. The blue sections are districts on the way to supporting that goal.

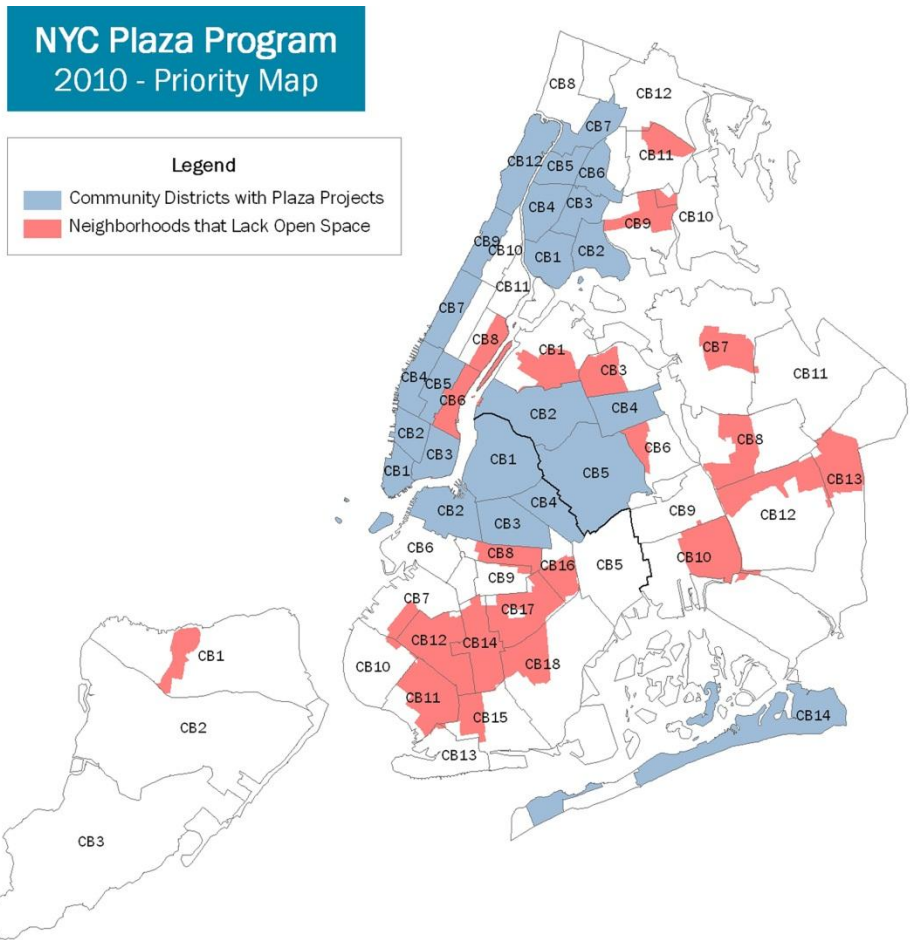


Figure 1:  
 NYC Plaza Program Priority Map  
 NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Priorities”

When considering the Pershing Square Plaza project, four of the five criteria were met. Despite the proximity to Bryant Park, Community Districts 5, (where Grand Central Station is located), and 6 were still priority districts for the plaza program. Kungys stated that when considering the high population there is the smallest amount of open space among all districts (personal communication). Grand Central Station is located in Community District 5. As the map below indicates, there is far more commercial space

(as indicated by the red coloration) than open space (green), given the number of people in the district.



Figure 2:  
Community District 5 Land Use Map  
NYC website; Mayor's Community Affairs



Access to transportation is not an issue as Pershing Square Plaza is positioned across the street from Grand Central Terminal, home to almost the entire subway system as well as other train lines. Convenience to transportation is supplemented by the surrounding commercial district. The many businesses, retail shops and food chains, including the adjacent Pershing Square Café, offer a strong context for people to enjoy the plaza area.

Grand Central Partnership, the subject of Chapter 3, is a strong and well-established non-profit in the area. The scope of prior work is directly correlated to the capacity of non-profits. For example, it is the obligation of the non-profit to provide the data showing the street is underused by vehicle traffic. As cited in Chapter 3, there is a long standing body of work researched and proposed in relation to Pershing Square Plaza. This is also an opportunity to highlight area support. Kungys states that most community boards would rather see a street are converted into a plaza rather than a parking lot (personal communication).

Pershing Square Plaza did not score highly on the criterion of being located within a low to moderate income neighborhood. District 5 is mostly a commercial or business district, as shown in Figure 2. Kungys commented that this did not damage the plaza's prospects to be approved (personal communication). Although the surrounding land use as a business community benefits the project in the context requirement, the success of the area is also a detriment. This raises an interesting contradiction between the appropriate site context and the low to moderate income. For Kungys, site context refers to the surrounding land uses of the proposed site (personal communication). DOT

considers if the sites have access to public transportation and if they are close to amenities. These types of questions could reflect back on the socio-economic status of the neighborhood, as access to amenities is an indicator of how lucrative a neighborhood is. Lack of amenities could reflect a lower socio-economic community. These two criteria are conflicting, but both are highly weighted, therefore reflecting some sort of balance. The quality of businesses in a surrounding community reflects on the quality of the community itself. It seems counterintuitive to assume that a plaza created to improve quality of life can only exist where quality already exists. The struggle between economic power and others is considered again in Chapter 3.

The failure to meet the income criterion did not delay Pershing Square Plaza, as the four criteria it did score highly on were enough for it to succeed. Pershing Square Plaza was approved as one of nine plazas out of the twenty-two first round applications. But this approval is just the beginning of an expected three-year cycle from selection to completion (Kungys emphasized “expected” since the first round of plazas are still in planning stages leading to flexibility in this timeline (personal communication)). Once accepted, the site is put into a capital program, meaning it is budgeted for by Department of Management and Budget. This is the first of outside agencies working with Department of Transportation in the development of a plaza. Next, the Department of Design and Construction writes a project plan and specifies the scope of work. Design and Construction manages the project for one year, scheduling meetings every three weeks. These meetings are between the agency, the non-profit, and design firm hired for a particular plaza. Working together, Design and Construction and the non-profit

develop a design to address the community needs that will also be appropriate for the neighborhood: “with community input through public visioning workshops, we will create a vision that complements the neighborhood’s architecture, culture and history to make public plazas that become active local destinations” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Process”). As Pershing Square Plaza just entered into the final design phase in August 2010, public opinion is being sought during fall 2010. Public comments and suggestions are welcome as to what should be incorporated into the plaza design.

The design team includes such professionals as landscape architects and engineers but, as Kungys points out, having one design standard is difficult as the plaza is supposed to reflect the individuality of the neighborhood (personal communication). The overall goal of providing more space for pedestrians leaves substantial freedom in how the plaza is designed. Kungys cites some plazas will be extensions of parks or plazas that are designed to be open air markets (personal communication). There are a few requirements that remain standard, such as one linear foot of seating for every 30 linear feet of plaza, or the inclusion of some sort of public art project. Within these standards, however, there is flexibility: “There should be diversity of seating—such as formal, informal, moveable. We all know that a corner ledge of a building works if you need a place to sit and things like this are considered” (personal communication). Standards such as seating requirements substantiate the proposed goal of providing more safe space for pedestrians to utilize.

Once the design is established, it goes out for contractor bids, which takes about five months. When a contractor is selected, DOT predicts it then takes six months to

build. Construction for Round I plazas is predicted to begin in 2011. Given that all of the plazas in Round I are still in the design phase, including Pershing Square Plaza, post-construction plans have yet to be finalized. Once the plaza is built, the agreement for management is worked out. This agreement will lay out the expectations DOT has for the non-profit when it comes to management.

The immaturity of this program lends itself to not having clear evaluation measures. Just as the management plan will be established when needed, the post-assessment process is also being composed. For Kungys, his idea of a successful plaza is one that is used: “that is how I would think to define success-- if people use it. It is incredible how much people want to sit down” (personal communication). This sentiment echoes the NYC Plaza Program claim that it will re-invent New York City's public realm by transforming vehicular byways into pedestrian destinations, (NYC website). The sites were selected partly because of a lack of vehicular use, so it makes sense that a plaza's success would be defined by its use.

By defining a place in accordance with its everyday use, the unassuming streetscape of a plaza becomes classified as a “lived space” or as a space that is shaped by ordinary people during daily activity (Kogl 2008: 14). Lived space is “defined by and defines everyday cultural practices and the daily round” (Kogl 2008: 18). By introducing opportunities for cultural interaction or even a moment to sit, DOT is creating a place beyond the transitory vehicular streets that once existed. Individuals and groups add everyday experience of place through their use. Instead of driving through as one may do if the road was still open to traffic, the current everyday practices that exist in Pershing

Square Plaza, such eating lunch, reading the paper, socializing or just sitting down, define the plaza as a “lived space” since the place exists because of and for these uses.

Kogl (2008) emphasizes the “daily round” of lived space not just as a reference to the repetition of use, but the cyclical nature of the relationship between place and its users. The cyclical idea of a “round” alludes to the idea that there is constant interaction between the ways that lived space influences how people use space and the ways people use the space influences the continuing identity and existence of the space. Prioritizing all types of seating, as Kungys suggests should be done, works well with this theory. The plazas are not formally defined in light of how they should be used, but rather through the uses themselves (personal communication). Through repetition of use and introduction of new experiences, the plaza will be able to reshape itself, figuratively speaking, to fit the needs of the users. As Kungys pointed out, there is no set standard of how a plaza should be designed. Pershing Square Plaza has yet to be formally designed so the current and future uses may not be the same. Introduction and repetition of use will continually create a lived space, whether the design changes or not. If all plazas are designed to be lived spaces, intended for use, this supports the argument that place or space cannot exist without human interaction as discussed in the introduction.

Kungys makes analogies to how European plazas are used (personal communications). Kungys explains that in European plazas, it is not about the plaza but the historic and beautiful surroundings. In one sense, this concept is a way to embrace the city for the structures, for the neighborhoods, for the experience. This experience emphasizes the destination of the city, and by locale the destination of the plaza. Kungys

attributes the reduction in noise (the loss of vehicular access) to a reduction in the urban feeling, a chance to appreciate the city in a new way (personal communication). Again, this experience would occur within the plaza and thereby contribute to its existence as a lived space. How the city is interpreted from the vantage point of the plaza further defines how the space is lived in. For the time the user is in the space, the plaza becomes home base.

The plaza not only becomes a lived space because it is used, but also because it is intended to be used. The DOT description of plazas concludes by stating that “these improvements will provide more space for pedestrians by creating attractive destinations that allow for convenient walking and for places to sit, rest, or to simply watch the world go by,” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”). The plaza is now intended to be seen as a destination, a place to be used. The plaza is a planned space, with intended uses, one of which being walking and watching the world go by. This sort of activity contradicts the notion of a destination but is part of the daily cultural practices of the surrounding community.

Because Pershing Square Plaza is located within a business neighborhood and directly outside one of the largest transportation hubs in New York City, the plaza, when open, is accessible to tourists, commuters, local residents or any other person walking or biking through the neighborhood. The influx of passing population lends itself to anthropologist Marc Auge’s (1995) theory of a “non-place.” The plaza, because it is not dictating cultural practices, could be described as a non-place instead of a lived space. Auge defines a non-place as a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or

concerned with identity (1995). Individuals do not culturally identify with a place, but become a member of a category. Within their category they are expecting to utilize the space in a specific way, along with all others in the category, lacking of any individuality of experience. Instead, the place, or plaza, is defined partly by words or text, “instructions for use” (Auge 1995, 96). By this, Auge means prescriptive, prohibitive or informative signs, codes or words to establish how the individuals are supposed to interact with the space.



Figure 3:  
Pershing Square Plaza Welcome Sign

Pershing Square Plaza has a list of prescriptive guidelines, including when it is and is not a plaza, where you can and cannot sit, and how to function when in the space. With

guidelines such as these, there are parameters to the intended flexibility. The plaza, like a supermarket or an airport, which Auge offers as examples of non-places, is less about the site itself, than about supporting a related, yet external, goal, such as providing food or reaching a final destination. For Auge, the plaza, as merely a stop-over, cannot be considered a place in and of itself as it would be if it were a lived space.

A non-place is non-symbolized space in the sense that the place is not a symbolic representation of any cultural motivation. The plaza program is culturally motivated in that it strives to offer “quality open space,” and Pershing Square Plaza is a manifestation of this goal. The plaza has a larger symbolic meaning to the city population as a whole, but it may lack individual meaning. Using Auge’s example of a supermarket better explains this concept. A grocery store chain or the model of a grocery store represents cultural ideas about food, economy, and consumption. Individual grocery stores, while host to this symbolism, are nothing more than a place to grab a carton of milk. In the same way, Pershing Square Plaza is a host to the blatant cultural motivation of the Plaza Program, but does not convey that symbolism to the general public passing through.

This distinction highlights a conflict between defining the plaza as a lived space and as a non-place. Kogl’s (2008) criticizes Auge’s non-place theory, questioning the places Auge cites as examples, such as supermarkets and airports. She argues that these sites are part of everyday life and it is possible that they will become marked by ordinary activities. Lived spaces co-exist with the cultures that occupy and use it on a daily basis. If supermarkets, airports, and plazas exist to host a cultural activity, such as eating lunch, then they in turn have an effect on that activity.



Yet because non-places are restricted by signage there is less opportunity to become attached through personal use. Signs direct the intended use of the space. Interestingly, it was use that defined lived space. This conflict may not always be the case as Pershing Square Plaza becomes a permanent structure. If the restrictions are lifted in the future, the guidelines of use may also lessen. Even if this aspect of non-place is reduced or removed, the lack of time and personal attachment could still qualify it as a non-place, but it could be the Department of Transportation means the use to be a simple reprieve. How the plaza is currently used and what effect time has on the usage is returned to in Chapter 4.

The Department of Transportation is not solely responsible for the design, and therefore cannot be the only group defining the plaza. The plaza is a reflection on the collective work between the DOT and the non-profit. In the next chapter, I will examine the role the non-profit plays and how this influences the creation of Pershing Squaring Plaza.

## CHAPTER 3

The non-profit organization:

Grand Central Partnership

The Department of Transportation's relationship with the cooperating non-profit is rooted in a shared commitment to bringing open space to local communities. As discussed in Chapter 2, the capacity of the non-profit organization applying for a plaza is one of the heavily weighted criteria when considering a site. The requirement is considered crucial as the community-based group must first commit to nominating the space and assisting in design, as well as operating, maintaining, and managing the space. This requirement is especially important as the spaces are supposed to be designed to be "safe, attractive, comfortable and social public spaces" that are "appropriate to the context and individuality of the neighborhood," (NYC DOT website; "Sidewalks"). Anthropologists Setha Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld argue that including the local community in location and design of public lands will lead to higher usage of the space, as well as a safer and better maintained space (2005: 11-2). Hence, strong community-based, non-profit organizations are regarded more favorably as partners in the creation of a plaza. The collaboration with a non-profit organization introduces another perspective from which to define Pershing Square Plaza. In order for a non-profit to apply, there must be some proof of previous work, meaning that these

organizations often already have a space that is somewhat formulated, considerations and plans have begun. This creation may or may not develop through the design process. Beyond helping with design, the non-profit partners are also responsible for the future success of the plazas, maintaining them in the hopes that they remain well-used sites.

Social sustainability of the public space is critical to the success of the plaza. This is not only because the NYC DOT entrusts the neighborhoods to be responsible for improving the shared space in their communities once the initial role of the government is complete, but also because the social relationship with the plaza reproduces social expectations and values. With participation of the local neighborhood, through the support of the community board and non-profit, the plaza is more likely to achieve “social sustainability” (Low et al 2005: 5). Low, Taplin, and Scheld draw a parallel between social sustainability and an ecosystem in the natural world (2005). In a cultural ecosystem there is preservation while still developing the health and success of the system, i.e. the continuance of cultural values. Cultural values exist within the plaza as place does not exist without human creation. Place embraces “individual entities and peculiarities, relatively fixed points, movements, and flows and waves- some interpenetrating, others in conflict and so on” (Lefebvre 1991: 88). Just as an ecosystem is reliant on all of its members in order to be self-sustaining, the plaza produces and maintains cultural values through the individual members of the associated community. DOT representative Vadilia Kungys noted that Pershing Square Plaza had no issues in qualifying based on their associated community as they have a large supporting non-profit organization in the Grand Central Partnership (personal communication).

The Grand Central Partnership was established in the mid-1980s by midtown Manhattan businesses and property owners to combat the lack of capital investments and cutting of essential services by the city. Marc Wurzel, general counsel for the Partnership, reflects back on the decade before the founding as a period of serious disinvestment by the government, a period when 42<sup>nd</sup> Street was better known as “seedy and showing its wear and tear in a very negative way” than for the glamour of Times Square as it is more commonly known today (personal communication, February 19, 2010). This type of reputation made it difficult for businesses to survive in the area, as customers and employees feared for their safety. During this same period, the Mobil headquarters, a large employer and patron of surrounding business, which had been a mere block east of Grand Central, relocated further upstate, contributing further to the anxiety of businesses about the future of the area. Based on the model of near-by Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, Grand Central Partnership began as a volunteer organization in 1985. In 1988, the area covered by the Partnership was designated a special assessment district. According to Wurzel, a special assessment district is an area where the majority, if not all, of the property owners agree to pay an additional city tax (personal communication). The tax is collected by the city government, who in turn pass it along to a district management team responsible for delivering specific community-desired needs (personal communication). The Grand Central Business Improvement District is the special assessment district for which the Grand Central Partnership is the district management association. The district has grown significantly since the Partnership’s inception in 1985, from 48<sup>th</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup> streets creating the north and south

boundaries and 5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> avenues marking the western and eastern boundaries; today the district has grown, expanding as far north as 54<sup>th</sup> Street, south to 35<sup>th</sup> Street, with the west and east boundaries staying more or less the same as seen in the 2008 district map from the Grand Central Partnership's 2007 Annual Report, as seen in Figure 5.

In the midst of their infrastructural improvement, the Partnership was concerned with the first impression the space directly across from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street exit of Grand Central Terminal would make. This space, owned by the city, was used for two purposes. Part of it was used as a storage area for transportation department equipment, while the front vestibule was rented to a host of discount stores. The Partnership approached the city with the idea of a four or five-star full-service restaurant, with potential to be a gathering place for the public (Marc Wurzel, personal communication). The city agreed to move the stored barricades and traffic cones and at the end of the discount store's lease, to turn the management of the building over to the Partnership.

**GRAND CENTRAL PARTNERSHIP**  
Business Improvement District

**NEIGHBORHOOD MAP**

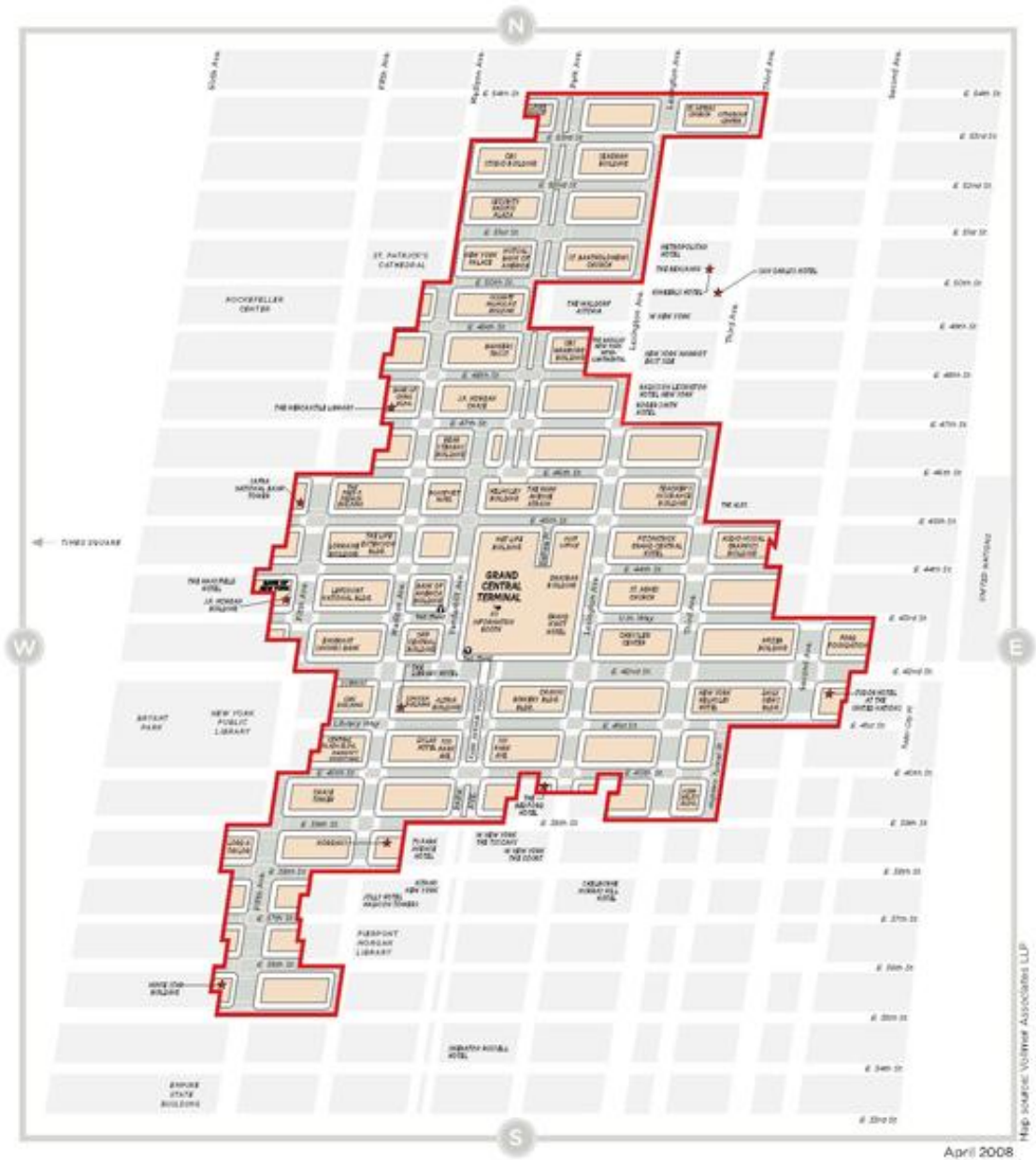


Figure 4:  
Grand Central Partnership District Map

Grand Central Partnership Annual Report 2007

With this new responsibility, the Partnership focused on the desire to create public space, something the neighborhood lacked beyond the terminal itself. In their original Master Plan that the Partnership presented to the city, they listed public space as a priority. They recommended the following:

4. Close Park Avenue from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 40<sup>th</sup> Street, except for a single lane for bus access between 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Street and convert the recaptured two-block area into a pedestrian park, with new paving, trees planting, lights, and seating. This becomes an extension of the Whitney museum Branch on the ground floor of the Philip Morris Headquarters, which is bonus indoor open space.
5. While maintaining the 41<sup>st</sup> Street traffic crossing, extend the parkscape along the lower viaduct to 40th Street. The proposed 41<sup>st</sup> Street library promenade leads into this park, and enlarges the pedestrian zone where outdoor bookstalls, retail carts or street fairs can be accommodated.

A Draft Master Plan for Reviving the Public Face of New York's Grand Central District, September 1987

The drawing below accompanied the above description:

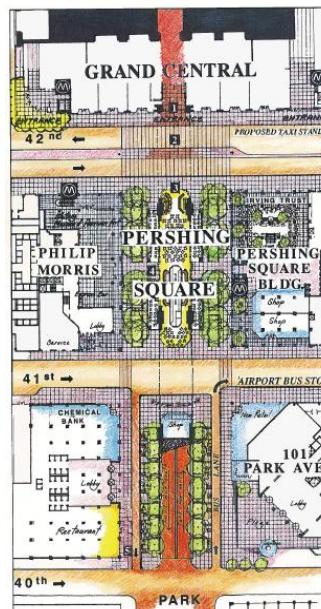


Figure 5:  
Grand Central Partnership's Master Plan drawing of Pershing Square  
A Draft Master Plan for Reviving the Public Face of  
New York's Grand Central District 1987

Both the recommendations and the sketch come from the first of ten major planning ideas for reforming the district: Parklike setting for a Landmark. Part of this goal of a parklike setting for the terminal is to find a “suitable tenant for the underbridge area” (the storefront under the overpass ramp leading to Grand Central Terminal), (1987). Suitable tenants would not include the string of discount retail stores which previously occupied this space. The goal of this section of the plan was to create an area of positive first-impression, while providing for much needed open space. The goal of the open space was to improve the community sense and the neighborhood attractiveness. The Plaza Program, formulated 20 years later, gave the Partnership the opportunity they had been waiting over a decade for to create more open space in the neighborhood. In our interview Marc Wurzel spoke about these goals being met by a new administration and the PlaNYC initiative, both of which encouraged creation of urban plazas (personal communication).

This opportunity was not lost on the Partnership, and Pershing Square Plaza was one of the first round plazas to be selected; design began in 2009 with construction slated to begin 2011. While the planning for the permanent plaza is underway, Grand Central Partnership has closed down the street on weekdays from 11 am to 3 pm between May and October. At all other times, it remains a vehicular road. Currently, the plaza consists of the outdoor eating area of the Pershing Square Café and approximately 4-6 tables and 16-24 chairs for the public. This is not the ideal option for the Partnership, but it is a step in in their goal of closing down the entire street for a permanent plaza. Despite the



shortcomings of the current design, in its “The Working Heart of Manhattan”

informational booklet, the GCP characterizes Pershing Square Plaza:

With the cooperation of local authorities, the adjacent roadway became Pershing Square Plaza, a traffic-free public oasis with public seating that shares space with the Café’s outdoor dining area during warmer months. The plaza has also become a unique open-air venue for events, promotional activities, and musical performances.

10

While I have never observed the special events listed, below is a picture of the plaza on a weekday between 11 am and 3 pm:



Figure 6  
Wednesday afternoon at Pershing Square Plaza

The tables and chairs are on the edge of the sidewalk, a break in the road and then barricades to indicate the restaurant seating. This “traffic-free public oasis with public seating” seems to be overselling in the “public oasis.” The idea of an “oasis” reflects the goal of the DOT to identify the plazas as destinations, but it is the Partnership that sees

Pershing Square Plaza as a haven in itself, rather than a destination within the city's urbanscape as Kungys, in Chapter 2, did. Both groups are forming an idea of a space that has yet to come to fruition and this idealized space is intended to be captured in the final design.

The disjuncture between the actual space and the description of the ideal space lends substance to the theory of abstract space. Alexandra Kogl (2008) introduces the concept of "abstract space" whereby a space is imagined and created by influential and powerful societal actors (14). Here power and imagination define a space without living or experiencing it. Similarly, Benedict Anderson "imagined community" is the idea of or representation of a national culture since an entire national community cannot be known or even all met (Massey and Jess 1995: 182). The idea of imagined community does not just have to be on a national level. The general idea of an abstract space or an imagined place is the social construction is projected onto a physical space by a particular culture. Imagined places can be created by a culture about any space. In her research in Papua New Guinea, Paige West (2006) discovered the village of Maimafu is a place is created over years of discourse, action and social and material relationships by and between the locals, government, missions and non-government organizations. West argues that Maimafu is:

a place and not a place; it is a place when the world is being made by interactions between its residents and outsiders, or between outsiders, like me, who have some stake in this places' being real.

2006: 12-3

West found that Maimafu was being defined by people who had never been to New Guinea or those who have minimal experience there. For the outsider culture, Maimafu

is a real place; because it needs to be in order to fulfill whatever cultural need has been created. Maimafu and, on a smaller scale, Pershing Square Plaza are created because there is a larger cultural force deciding that it must exist in order to represent a cultural meaning. The Grand Central Partnership and the Department of Transportation both have cultural motivations behind creating the plaza. The political and preventative motivations of the city were discussed in Chapter 2. For the Partnership, the motivation is also political, as well as economic.

A place like Pershing Square Plaza could be paralleled to Maimafu as it is an abstract space designed on a political and economic level to reflect some sort of social motivation. Pershing Square Plaza may exist for the social goal of maintaining the “quality of life,” by the Grand Central Partnership and the city, but this does not mean it will exist in the everyday in the same way. The value system of the city and the non-profit may be different than that of the community and each other, creating a variance on how quality of life is judged. For the city, quality of life is linked to the access to outdoor public space. For the Partnership, quality of life is related to the level of success in the neighborhood as well as the comfort and first impression of visitors. While the DOT’s value system is constant, each non-profit has its own social, political and economic objectives tied to their value system. Quality of life is as variable as each plaza is supposed to reflect the unique personality of neighborhood through design. Each value system creates the plaza as an imagined place. The value system of the defining group creates a place that may not physically embody them, but in their own imagination, the plaza is a symbolic improvement to “quality of life”

Lefebvre (1991) articulates a similar idea to abstract space in his concept of representational space; these spaces “need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness... [they are] redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements” (41). Here representational space is not a concrete description of the physical space, but instead is a symbolic creation of how the space is recreated through all sensational recollections, thus representational of the created. Pershing Square Plaza has not yet been permanently created, and already the Partnership has created this image of an urban oasis. The vast urban landscape of New York works to the advantage of the plaza as an abstract space because the population of actual users will be much smaller than the population of New Yorkers who may be exposed to the imagined definition. Planning for plazas to be lived spaces in turn creates abstract spaces. There are cultural expectations of the idea of a plaza to fulfill a specific function, despite the diversity of locations and design. The abstract space of a plaza is imagined by the DOT on a larger political scale, while the Partnership imagines Pershing Square Plaza in the specific neighborhood context.

The larger city context of the plaza may lead to a lack of intimacy by users but the passing public still physically connects to the plaza. For those creating the abstract space there is an innate sense of unknowing, being that they do not have to be in the physical space in order to experience it. Defining a space as an ideal image can occur on a small scale, like Pershing Square Plaza, but the idea can also exist on a much larger level. Geographer Gillian Rose’s study of how “Englishness” is portrayed within England shows that the dominant definition of England, even within the country, is one of an “idyllic” England with a physical environment of the countryside. This scene evokes

specific emotions and associations (Jess and Massey 1995). This imagined England is not what the diverse country is, but as the country itself embraces and perpetuates this meaning, it is then passed on to other cultures continuing the imagined community. In a similar fashion, the Partnership's creation of an imagined Pershing Square Plaza as an urban oasis perpetuates to a larger group who may or may not experience the space for what it is. The imagined space of Pershing Square Plaza is currently vastly different from the concrete infrastructure, but it is the imagined space that is being sold to the community. The language in both the Partnership and DOT literature defines an abstract space as the representation of the plaza is valued more than the physical space. Through the construction of the imagined space, as well as the physical space, the Partnership and the city are in power and therefore have control over what cultural values and expectations get created and promoted.

Abstract space exists within the scope of one's power and imagination, possibly defining a space without living it; or in the case of Pershing Square without even finalizing the design concept. Abstract space is often defined by those in power. Lefebvre argues that the production of space proceeds "according to the dictates of Power" (1991: 116). Pershing Square Plaza is created in the cultural scope of a community that values business and financial success:

power invents or at least privileges certain meanings, and reinforces those meanings by marking spaces with them, using monuments, statues, symbolic buildings and even empty spaces such as plazas and public malls.

Kogl 2008: 18

Kogl states that those in power have the ability to create or favor how a place is defined, even in an open space such as a plaza. Pershing Square Plaza reinforces the cultural value

of financial success which, in turn, associates a particular shared place-identity within the community. Kungys stated that setting up design standards were difficult as each plaza existed in a unique community (personal communication). Standards would not allow for the power of the city and the non-profit group to fortify community values, whatever they might have been.

Influencing the community values is the surrounding land use. Grand Central Station provides access to transportation as well as services is within proximity, including the neighboring restaurant. Pershing Square Cafe is operational today, the first of the Partnership's Master Plan's goals to be fully met; the rest of the goals listed are still in a working phase. Marc Wurzel commented on the possibility of having a restaurant in the adjacent building instead of a retail space because the Partnership wanted a gathering place. Wurzel goes on to cite William Whyte as a source of inspiration for the Partnership when planning the area:

his sort of treatise on public space influence what we do here and this concept that you take a nine to five community, whatever space you have you want people to gather in, you want to have a sense of community; you want people to be invested in the community.

personal communication

William Whyte's *The Last Landscape* (1968) examines theoretically how metropolitan landscapes look and will look. The title refers to landscape in need of saving open space, and Whyte argues that the spaces that should be saved first are those that are most useful and closest to people (163). Just as Wurzel suggests, shared open space creates individual investment in community, and therefore open space should be in the community, close to people. The Partnership's desire to create "a distinct urban charisma

that announce ‘You are Here—Enjoy It’” (A Draft Master Plan for Reviving the Public Face of New York’s Grand Central District 1987: 7), takes the space that thousands of people utilize every day and attempts to save it, as well as transform it to an inviting and useable place. The transformation (or creation) of Pershing Square Plaza exemplifies Whyte’s argument that there is opportunity to create open space even in the most jammed metropolitan areas. He reasons that underused, neglected, or obsolete areas are prime loci for open space. Unlike his map of how to preserve and convert these areas in *The Last Landscape*, Whyte’s *The Social Life of Small Urban Space* (1980) examines the buildings surrounding plaza areas in New York City. Whyte’s research does not consider pre-conceived plazas, but instead plazas that just form as people sit and socialize, establishing their place. His research considers things such as seating arrangements, something both the DOT and the Partnership stressed as a critical aspect in the design of Pershing Square Plaza.

Whyte also states that open space is a separator of communities and to be used as a tool for structure and identity. Pershing Square Plaza is a means to cultivate a sense of community among the nine to five working population linked to the businesses in the areas surrounding the terminal that the Partnership is targeting. This sense of community does not extend to those passing through the area, such as visitors or tourists. By defining this space to create a sense of community, through a shared business culture, the plaza also aims to create a sense of identity based in place. Place-identity refers to a person’s or culture’s development of a sense of place, or personal feelings developed from life experiences (whether in the physical space or through imagined space). These

individual life experiences are embedded in social relations and therefore reflect shared values with various groups of people. Differing from the categories of people in “non-places” who fulfill an assigned niche, individuals create place-identity through creating a personal connection with the place with which they can share or not.

Place-identity can occur because there are some entry qualifications that allow acceptance into the culture. By locating the plaza near Grand Central Station, now reformed thanks to the work of the Partnership, and next to a restaurant that is catering to a more affluent client (the least expensive sandwich on the lunch menu is fourteen dollars), the plaza encourages certain cultural values, specifically socioeconomic ones, which tailor to a certain type of public, therefore setting a specific entry requirement. Although the public seating and the restaurant seating are the same table and chairs, a specific monetary qualification goes with sitting on one side of the barricade. The public that comes to the plaza for the free public tables may not share the same values as those who visit the restaurant.

While the restaurant does provide a gathering place, and one that will flow well into a public plaza, an interesting connection can be drawn between the locus of the restaurant and the idea of who should and should not be using the space. During one of my days at the plaza, a particularly beautiful day, the restaurant was busier than I had ever noticed before, specifically with patrons requesting the outdoor seating. The five tables reserved for the public were all occupied, including the one I sat at alone. For research purposes, I got up from my seat and walked to the corner. No more than a minute later, two waiters from the café grabbed my table and four chairs and set them



inside the restaurant barricades. In comparison, a few weeks later, on a dreary day, the tables reserved for the public were all occupied and two men crossed the barricades to sit. The café had no patrons in outdoor seating, so the men were able to sit for a time before a waiter walked outside with silverware for a table. It was at this point that the waiter asked the men to order or to leave and pointed towards the crowded public seating. The pattern apparent in who can and cannot sit where indicates that those able to afford a 22 dollar salad are more worthy of a place to sit than those who pack a lunch from home.

The shared space of the closed street does not reflect shared values between the two sides of the barricades. Doreen Massey (1995) argues that individuals or specific cultures establish their place as the center, and all other places as their periphery. What is important to note about this concept is that the distance from center is not measured in physical distance but in cultural similarity and difference. Public seating and café seating may be the same table and chairs on the same street, but placing them on one side or the other of the barricades establishes a different cultural center.



Figure 7  
Pershing Square Plaza and the outdoor café of Pershing Square Restaurant

Establishing boundaries around a place by restricting public access with metal barricades allows for identifying a place as a culture (see Herbert and Thomas 1997; classifications of space). Bounding place creates a sense of identity and social unity. Boundaries, physical or ideal, are created around these places in order to maintain or deny access to a place-identity. While DOT's Kungys valued the flexibility in seating options in designing plazas, flexibility could present a cultural conflict in Pershing Square Plaza. On one hand, the movement of tables is a positive reflection of the personal interpretation of the plaza; on the other hand, having one particular group or cultural identity dominate the space, undermines one principal purpose of the program: to allow public access. Place-identity is flexible and culturally constructed, just as place is, so with the permanent design this rift could shift or disappear.

As barricades delineate the café from the public, the same barricades separate the cars from the pedestrians. Yet this common bond among urban pedestrians is complicated by the introduction of further boundaries. The current plaza design establishes a financial power as a significant criterion in order to be accepted into a public space. The abstract space of Pershing Square Plaza, what is currently being propagated, is to benefit the community by reassuring cultural values, one of which is financial power. As mentioned in Chapter 2, creating support for the plazas during the application process is crucial to the plaza's approval. In order to promote the plaza and gain community backing, the non-profit has to sell a space that is yet to exist. They must create an abstract space in order to have the actual space approved for construction. Imagined geography produces images and creates identities which then form the bases

both of the future character of the place and the behavior of people towards it, (Massey and Jess 1995: 2-3). Geographers Massey and Jess (1995) indicate that the imagined construction of a place will form the future of the place. Pershing Square Plaza's future is unknown as the plaza has not yet been constructed. The Partnership has already defined Pershing Square Plaza in both abstract terms, and concrete financial terms. How these definitions get translated and incorporated into the public's everyday life will be something to consider when the permanent design is complete.

Until then, the community created on the public side is transient, out of necessity, and in search of a place to sit. The café side is an extension of an establishment that creates its own community through shared socioeconomic status. The 1987 goals of the Partnership's Master Plan included improving the pedestrian life of all citizens and improving the quality of services for those who work in the area. The plaza is meant to meet both of these goals but without having a concrete definition of the plaza, the abstract space collides with the physical reality. It is in need of directions for use, almost as if it is a non-place. It is the public who is left to decide how to negotiate this conflict of lived space, non-place and abstract space. The public's use of the plaza is the most reliable source we have in defining what Pershing Square Plaza actually is. In the next chapter, I will discuss the public usage patterns and compare and contrast the public experience from the spatial construction by DOT and the Partnership.

## Chapter 4

### The users:

### The Public

No matter how the Department of Transportation or the Grand Central Partnership defines it, Pershing Square Plaza exists, in theory, for the public. It is the public that will ultimately define the plaza. It is the public that will negotiate the meanings the Plaza holds for them and its contributions to how they construct their own identities in terms of place. The public, as I refer to them, are users of the plaza during the open hours. Use of plaza varies from lunch at the café, sitting to tie a shoe, or passing through on the way somewhere else, and everything in between. The public is a broad term to describe those invested in the space but are not associated with the DOT or the Partnership. It is they who will negotiate if it is, indeed, a lived space rather than an abstract space or non-place.

The tangible definition falls to the public because, as we saw in the introduction, place does not exist without human influence; and the direct human influence on Pershing Square Plaza comes from those who use it. While the physical structure may exist without human interaction, it is the interaction between people and space that creates the place. Cultural materialist Barbara Bender argues that places are created by people through their experience and engagement with the world around them (1993: 1). Engagement by the public, as seen in lived space, creates the space that is Pershing

Square Plaza. Similarly, Lefebvre contends that physical space that comes into contact with people is now social space as it has social relationships inscribed in it (1991).

Lefebvre continues by arguing that place embraces “individual entities and peculiarities, relatively fixed points, movements, and flows and waves--some interpenetrating, others in conflict and so on” (1991: 88). The public that interacts in the plaza, whether through reading the paper or eating lunch, each produces an individual relationship with the place. It is this engagement that offers members of the public a chance to create the plaza as a place for themselves. Given that the plaza is in a neighborhood that is not only home to commercial centers but also is an area that commuters wind their way through to different places, the peculiarities of each sector of the public introduces distinctive but sometimes overlapping interpretations of the Plaza as a place. As Lefebvre (1991) argues, place takes on the meaning of the person in the space; place adapts to individual oddities and motivations. If these interpretations of Pershing Square Plaza are shared, they may foster a sense of community in the future, achieving a goal of the NY DOT. If they are not shared, or if they conflict with the abstract ideals of the DOT or the Partnership, there could be a further disparity in defining Pershing Square Plaza.

The plaza is a fixed place on a map that is home to an ebb and flow of people, whether they are community members or visitors. The plaza program is designed to work with this natural tide of people, to make walking through the city the most enjoyable choice (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Creating Plazas”). It is this pedestrian movement that Michel de Certeau (1984) argues re-appropriates the original work of the urban planners and cartographers to exist in everyday life. No matter the

view from the top of the tallest building in New York City, it the everyday practices of those below that create the city. De Certeau parallels these everyday life experiences to language. Walking becomes akin to writing an “urban ‘text’” (1984: 93). Walking in an urban setting is analogous to speaking an utterance. His work with New York City pedestrians interprets the process of walking as building meaningful places. Walkers have the power to select certain places and not others; they can follow pre-conceived routes or create their own. It is the selection of the individual which actualizes a space (de Certeau 1984: 98). New York City’s concept of reclaiming sidewalks and streets for pedestrians through the Plaza Program fits well with de Certeau’s (1984) dismissal of landscape perspective, or viewing the city from a broad scope. De Certeau argues that space cannot be treated as an untouchable object, nor can it categorized by those who look down upon it. As the Plaza Program is a concept created from the top down, these plazas are creating a landscape for the Department of Transportation and the Grand Central Partnership to produce cultural values. These groups are designing the plazas from the high tower where, de Certeau argues, they cannot see the real city space. De Certeau argues that even in the immobile urban world of New York City, the walkers “make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others,” this disappearance and exaggeration distort and fragment the city landscape (1984: 102). Even if the landscape of the city is created with the intention of promoting quality open space for the public, it will be the pedestrians who create it. For example, Kungys stated the seating requirement would be consistent throughout all plazas, including edges of buildings (personal communication). Figure 8 shows a group of people sitting on the adjacent building as all

public chairs were occupied. For lunch time, this building façade becomes something completely different than what will be during rush hour. For this time, it is exaggerated, a part of Pershing Square Plaza. When the temporary plaza is closed up, the side of the building may not be seen as such an appeal place to sit as commuters rush by.



Figure 8  
Utilizing alternative seating

If a person has never experienced the building in this way, they may not think of it as the edge of a public plaza. The space that is rarely used, like a word that is rarely spoken, often becomes difficult to access or displaced in everyday living. It may still exist in definition, such as in a dictionary or on a map, but to the public it has no meaning as it is not part of their everyday existence.

Lefebvre (1991) argues that “space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations” (in Low 1999: 114). Here, Lefebvre theorizes that place is active in defining itself, those who experience the place, and the larger culture it is defined by. Just as de Certeau argues pedestrians write text as they experience space, Lefebvre may be suggesting that the public, in how they use a space, is contributing meaning to it,

transforming it into place through the very activation of social relations that further constitutes meaningful place itself. Place has influence on how it is used as it supports the social relations within it. The social relations that occur within contribute to how those creating the relationships experience the space. This relationship is elaborated in the design of the individual plazas. For example, Pershing Square Plaza is attempting to create a first impression for those traveling through Grand Central Station, as well as an outlet for the traditionally nine to five community that works in the neighborhood. The space of Pershing Square Plaza suits these types of social interactions. It is a brief stopover for visitors and residents or regulars locals with another intended destination. Its location, hours of operation and design dictate expectations of how it is to be used. The current plaza is designed in a transient manner, setting up when it will get the most use, during lunch. This design reflects the transient nature of the area, as people are constantly coming and going. The social relationships that exist within this space are influenced by such parameters.

In comparison, a plaza in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, also a Round I plaza, is intended to be a permanent public market and plaza. It is slated to “create a town square similar to those found throughout Latin America” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “Round One”). This type of plaza supports more intimate relationships with greater social purpose, such as exchanging of goods. Interestingly, the plaza in Washington Heights aims to create an atmosphere reminiscent of plazas in Latin America. This plaza now has a definition of place beyond its city boundaries, reflecting



place of an entire culture or cultures. This reflects back to the DOT's criteria in Chapter 2 and the idea of abstract and imagined space discussed in the Chapter 3.

Returning to the idea of the cyclical impact of social relationships and the place, if place and users are interdependent, then place needs to be considered as both a product of cultural processes and as a cultural process. The cultural process of place is capable of producing place in a dialectical fashion. It is a product of cultural processes as discussed above, existing only through human interaction. But place as a cultural process itself can be seen in the flexibility of the plaza designs and purposes. If a plaza is an open-air market, a different set of relationships would emerge in comparison to the set of relationships within a completely green space. People make places as extensions of themselves and yet, place simultaneously defines people (Gray 2007: 227). Each unique personality, like those of individuals, supports or opposes the cultural practices that will occur within it. The cultural practices and relationships that are expressed in the Washington Heights plaza, those of Latin American influence, are created, supported, reciprocated by the public that frequents the plaza; just as Pershing Square Plaza's public creates a space as an extension of their cultural influences.

The cultural influence of the Pershing Square Café has a large impact on the bordering plaza. As this restaurant is a part of the surrounding community, as well as an active part of the plaza's landscape, the cultural practices experienced here not only account for the correlation between people and place but places the plaza in the larger cultural setting that is built and experienced within it. As place is an experience, it is unique in that it is created in a "specific mix in social space-time. Nowhere else can have

precisely the same characteristics, the same combination of social processes,” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 4). The participants and space are both individualized elements of a place, and they coexist to produce meaning.

The meaning that is created through the plaza must be contextualized within the larger cultural landscape. What the DOT and the Partnership decide is meaningful may not be what users of the plaza deem meaningful when considering the space and time from which the groups are creating the plaza. In Nancy Munn’s 1986 writing on the Kula Ring in Gawa, she introduces “spacetime” to define the spatiotemporal relationships within a shared space. The most relevant aspect of this concept for our purposes is that “sociocultural practices ‘do not simply go in or through time and space, but [they also]...constitute (create) the spacetime...in which they “go on”” (Munn 1986: 11). The interconnectivity between space and time is not a haphazard relationship. Once a particular spacetime is created, it then becomes a structuring factor through which social processes occur. Experiencing culture through space and time, spacetime, like place, becomes a social process in itself. Munn’s theoretical concept is not entirely dissimilar from Marshall Sahlins’s “structure of conjuncture” (1985: xiv). “Structure of conjuncture” is a theoretical framework that considers all acting and interested cultural categories within a specific historical context. Spacetime and structure of conjuncture both highlight that the cultural actions are subjective in light of the time and place in which they exist. The exact space and time will only exist in that moment, and it is that moment through which the participants will experience a process, event, or state of being.

This notion of spacetime supports the need to consider defining a place within the specific cultural context of the moment. Like any cultural process, time is a factor.

Time, like space, is crucial to anthropological research. Ethnographies often analyze culture within the container of space, as well as in a time vacuum. Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) addresses concerns about time in anthropological fieldwork. Fabian is concerned with the anthropologist's tendency to naturalize time, to be something that does not need to be considered when writing ethnography, again a similarity to place. Fabian's classification of time into three categories, physical, mundane and typological, considers that, like place, time is not only a factor in cultural process but is a cultural process in itself. Time, like space, is an essential dimension of social reality; therefore, it too should be viewed from a specific cultural perspective.

Time plays an interesting role in Pershing Square Plaza in two ways. First, a visitor actually spends very little time in the public section of the plaza, averaging approximately four minutes. This brevity of use reflects well on Kungys's concern that people just need a place to sit down, but it neither fits well with the DOT idea of a plaza as a destination, nor with the Partnership's goal of building a community space. The public's usage is dictated by the current operating hours from 11 am to 3 pm. It makes sense that the public would primarily use the plaza for lunch breaks. The short snippets of time these visitors experience the plaza are often not recurring; most people do not use the plaza on a daily basis for the purpose of sitting and enjoying the plaza, use as a pedestrian pathway, I would contend, has a higher reoccurrence rate due to its location. Pershing Square Plaza is a space in an urban center, defined as a place by larger groups,

such as DOT and the Partnership; how it is built and experienced by the people of New York are not as easily determined. Edward Casey, quoting Immanuel Kant that, “there can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience,” poses that place is the first concept people understand as it occurs with experience; (Feld and Basso 1996:16). This argument reflects back to Chapter 1 and the theory that to be human means to know your place. As Casey (1996) argues, experience is necessary to define a place, a quantity is not explicitly stated, leaving us to wonder how much experience is needed. Is four minutes enough to define a place? While four minutes is a minimal amount of time when considering the thirty to sixty minutes of a typical lunch break, it is important to remember that these visitors choose the plaza for a purpose. Some bring lunch from home and others carry out from local fast food restaurants. These people do have the option of staying at their desks, in their offices, or at the restaurants, but instead they choose to sit at the tables in the plaza. Even if they do not know exactly where they are, or the political and financial investment in this plaza, the plaza is fulfilling some kind of purpose for these users. Knowing the place and knowing why they are there may not be clearly reasoned, but the plaza is one of many choices for which to experience that moment of one’s day.

It is this type of experience that Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues dictates what a person knows and how he constructs a reality. However, Tuan claims that it is only through intimate experiences that a person can come to a true understanding of place (1977). Lack of serious time commitment on the part of the user brings us to the question of people’s ability to have “intimate experiences” in the context of how they use a particular

space. This idea lends itself back to the argument of the plaza being a non-space. Like Auge's examples, time and energy are not expended enough to fully define a space as a place. Using the framework that time spent equates intimacy two factors may prohibit Pershing Square Plaza's users from forming intimate relationships with the place. First, the time they spend at the Plaza on a daily basis is exceedingly brief. Although I only documented three repeat users, once the plaza is completed and permanent, more users might regularly use the plaza, allowing for more exposure and therefore more intimacy. Secondly, the plaza is intended to be a public space. The possibility of forming an intimate experience in a shared space is less than that of a private space. Within the larger urban environment the open space could lead to a fondness for the idle moment the plaza allows or it could lead to a detachment from a real connection to the plaza itself. This idea will be discussed at greater length below.

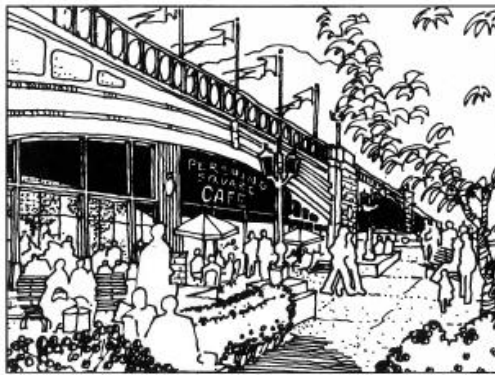
The second consideration of time comes when remembering that Pershing Square Plaza is just three years old, and has yet to be fully developed. Its immaturity leads to the question of how a place can be fully defined if it is yet to be fully developed. If place, like culture, is a process produced by social action, then the connection between space and time also highlights how it is important to consider that place is created in a specific time with a specific ideology. Places are culturally relative and historically specific; socially constructed by the people that live in them and know them, (Rodman 2003). Place as associated with a particular culture "must be understood as complex and contingent results of ongoing historical and political processes" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 4). Place has to be contextualized: "the way in which people- anywhere,

everywhere- understand and engage with their worlds will depend upon the specific time and place and historical conditions” (Bender 1993: 2). It is not only the current cultural context of a space that impacts its definition, but the history of a space, who has used it and how, also weighs on the creation of space. Tuan (1977) argues that time has to be thought of as distance is in relation to place; time should be applied as a cultural construction to space just as distance is; therefore, a place can only have as much history as the cultural context through which it exists. Tuan goes on to state that “completed, the building or architectural complex now stands as an environment capable of affecting the people who live in it,” (1977: 102). These theories contend that place can only be known within the historical context of its existence; a place existing once it is completed. If the existence of a place has yet to occur like Pershing Square Plaza as it has yet to be designed and not even begun to be constructed, how can that place be defined?

It is not enough to contextualize the space where the plaza will occur within the city’s cultural history, as New York City has been under cultural construction since the Dutch settlers landed in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. This history is only the cornerstone from which to consider the current cultural context of the NYC DOT Plaza Program, non-profit, and public. It provides an impression at a specific moment in time, in a specific cultural, political, and historical context. Given that the definition of space depends upon the time, place and historical conditions, it may not be possible or even useful to create an accurate definition of Pershing Square Plaza. As argued in Chapter 3 the plaza is defined and categorized as an abstract space because the idea of the plaza sets and meets goals of community. For the Partnership, historical time may be blurred as this has been part of

their Master Plan since the nineteen-eighties. This disjunction in the temporal context of the plaza raises questions about the need for a space to physically exist in order to exist within a culture. For the Partnership, the plaza is more fully developed as a place, although it may be imagined. But for the public, who does not have easy access to the Partnership's Master Plan, the history of the space is limited, therefore limiting their ability to fully define the place. Just as the historical frame of reference may be blurry, the future direction is also blurry. How the plaza will ultimately be designed will have the greatest impact on how the public uses it and through which defines it. There is no clear timeline from which to contextualize the plaza as it began at different times and is still ongoing.

For users of the outdoor Café, lack of time to develop the space is not as much of an issue. The restaurant is better established, but it is also much clearer in its message of how the space should be used.



A glass-walled cafe, set in a pedestrian park, forms a unified forecourt for the Terminal.

Figure 9  
Sketch of Pershing Square Café  
A Draft Master Plan for Reviving the Public Face of  
New York's Grand Central District 1987

Its ambiance, menu, and clientele fight the seedy image the area once had. The illustration above, from the Grand Central Partnership's Master Plan, is similar to the current restaurant even though it was drawn in the 1980s. The establishment and follow-through of these plans, with the doors opening in 1999, has allowed Pershing Square Café to establish a longer cultural context within the neighborhood and the city.

The completed physical structure of the restaurant, and lack thereof a completed plaza setting, is an opportunity to consider Setha Low's (1999) further analysis of place as a social production and place as a social construction. For Low, social production of space includes all factors whose intended goal is the physical creation of the material setting, social, economic, ideological, and technological. Social construction is then the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as understood within social processes, such as exchange, conflict and control (1999: 112). Social, economic, ideological, and technological motives are all culturally based, and represent efforts to create a specific experience of the space. In the case of the restaurant, the café stands as a physical manifestation of the cultural motives, which were guided by the goals of the Partnership. Therefore, the social production and the social construction of a place are dependent on one another. The social construction of space uses the interactions and exchanges that not only happen between people within the space, but also between the space and the people, thus, creating meaning for those experiencing the place. For example, prioritizing seating for the restaurant users constructs the space as one to be shared, as most restaurant users are in a party. In comparison, most plaza users are individuals or couples. The social production of the space is one that is guided by the call



for a “vibrant social plaza” by the DOT and an “urban oasis” by the Partnership. This guidance is rooted in and guided by the production of space.

Theorizing social construction and production of space illustrates that not only is the plaza favoring a particular socio-economic group, as discussed in Chapter 3, but it is also tailored for groups over individuals. The plaza seating, as Kungys states, is meant to be flexible. If a table is occupied by one person, another visitor would ask if a seat was taken, and if the answer was no, which in all cases it was, the asker would pull the chair back a distance from the table. In some cases it was just a foot or two and in other cases, the chair would be moved to the other side of the plaza.



Figure 10  
Lunch time at Pershing Square Plaza

In the picture above, the gentleman in the background has removed a chair from the table of the man in the foreground. The size of the tables is a factor in defining the use of the plaza. All the tables in the restaurant and café seat four. This same table space is used as an extension of the office for many, including the man in the foreground of the above

photo. The table seems much smaller when it is covered with portfolios and laptops. Attempting to share an eating space with a work space is awkward and I never observed a table being used simultaneously for these two functions during my time in the field. Not only did work space and lunch space never cross over in the public seating, but sharing eating space did not occur either. In comparison, the café tables are obviously slated to provide space for four meals as they are set with four place settings. The public's tables are the same size but sharing a meal on a small table is acceptable only if visitors come in as a group. Individuals would move the chairs back, allowing just one person to eat at the table. While Kungys articulated that moveable seating was to the advantage to public use (personal communication), shared seating is not the social catalyst it could be. With the seating options as flexible as they are, it allows more freedom as individuals to decide how the time in the plaza will be spent; this time is spent mostly alone. Again referring to the Figure 10, both men are reading, one from a newspaper and the other from his portfolio, so their intention on how to use the space is the same. While they may share the same intention, their experiences differ as the gentleman in the back removed himself from the table to enjoy his activity alone.

The action of moving the chair from the table in order to enjoy personal space returns to the level of intimacy a user may have with the place. A personal social connection is not made if strangers separate themselves from each other, but allowing alone time may offer solace to an individual. This could form a more intimate experience because, in a sense, it is unaffected by external factors. On the other hand the plaza is a public environment and the pattern of shared but separate experience of Pershing Square

Plaza introduces the question of place as public space. If place is not only the relationship between the individual and the space, but also the social relationships that occur within the space, the lack of intimacy that occurs between people in the plaza must be considered. Sociologists Calvin Morrill, David Snow and Cindy White (2005) argue that for years scholars ignored social relationships in urban settings, claiming the urban environment was not suitable for socialization. Combating this out-dated theory in their edited collection of personal relationships in public places, Morrill and Snow state that relationships occurring over brief periods in public places “would not be considered relationships at all because of their lack of durability” (2005: 6). Lack of durability in relationships parallels lack of time in the space, again evaluating time as the indicator of intimacy or strength. If Pershing Square Plaza is meant to be a social place, as it is claimed to be by the DOT and the Partnership, how is socialization being defined? There are those who come to the space with pre-existing relationships. I observed this many times, most frequently among former colleagues or business associates reconnecting over coffee, often for purposes of networking, for new jobs or for new business relationships. Here the relationship is established within another home base, the plaza only offers another outlet for this relationship to express itself within. If socialization is expected among strangers just because they are sharing the same table on a public street, it is less likely that any sense of intimacy will be created.

Lack of intimacy may also be the result of the nature of the activities that occur within the public realm. The plazas are public. They are accessible to anyone who is a pedestrian, and the assumption is the activities that occur there will be open to the public.

Reading a paper or eating lunch would be examples of such public activities. Such activities may not foster long-lasting relationships, but do introduce some level of social behavior. According to Morrill, Snow, and White, Erving Goffman (1963) was one of the first sociologists to consider these fleeting public relationships. Goffman suggests that societies construct a familiar distinction between acts that are appropriate in public and those that are not (1963). Varying degrees of judgment occur depending on one's point of reference. The ideas of social norms come to an intersection in Pershing Square Plaza because this public place is not home to one set of social expectations. Considering the transient population that utilizes the plaza, expected social norms move in and out the plaza. Cultural expectations of how public space should be used are as individualized as the people who hold them.

Cultural expectations and norms are reflections on the context of the plaza. The public's expectations of the place strongly reflect their concerns about social-time and their dependence on technology. Pershing Square Plaza users are weighed down by technology, primarily cell phones, laptops and MP3 players. The goal of the plaza program is to establish places for social interaction to occur in a city that may otherwise be cold and strange. Pershing Square Plaza is serving as site for socialization, but not necessarily with others in the community. The reliance on technology, especially cell phones, hinders in-person socialization. Communicating with others on the phone, being consumed with work on a laptop or blocking out surrounding noise with ear buds are all communicative signs that signal that someone does not want to talk with another person.

The cultural context in New York City in 2010 is that you must always be connected, or plugged-in.

A technology that presents a challenge when it comes to cultural norms in this plaza is the use of cell phones. More and more, it is becoming acceptable for cell phone conversations that are meant to be private to be public, yet another consequence of the technology shaping culture. While some users of the plazas were drawn into the personal soap operas of others, other users shot looks of disapproval toward the loud party. If the individuals knew the conversations were being listened to, they might have thought twice about sharing personal information, but on the other hand, being in public gives a person a sense of anonymity allowing a person to speak without fear of consequence. I witnessed other activities that were unusual for the public plaza setting. One afternoon, there was a man conducting a job interview at a table. He and the woman he was interviewing were dressed as if they were in an office setting, and their mannerisms indicated the same. The weather was beautiful that day which might have accounted for their desire to be outside, but they were misplaced among the rest of the users. It turned out they were conducting a business meeting.

In another instance, a construction worker was smoking a cigarette. While cell phone conversations may still be a debatable activity in public space, cigarette use raises an interesting commonality. Every smoker I observed in the plaza set a noticeably larger distance between themselves and the rest of the users. Smoking, once a common social activity, has no set distance in the public. Goffman (1963) uses the terms “tightness” and “looseness” to describe the rigidity of such socially acceptable behaviors (199). Cigarette

smoking as a public behavior and tightness of the lack of acceptability refers back to the importance of the cultural and historical context of the time. Context then relates back to the question of intimacy. If the plaza is defined only through the lens of a particular user on a particular day, how then does the place become defined? How the plaza is used an individualized choice, but these choices are dictated by the larger cultural expectations of current public behavior.

The preceding paragraphs support the idea that in order for the public to define Pershing Square Plaza, they must first experience it. The Department of Transportation encourages this experience. It is clear in their distinction between a sidewalk and a plaza: “unlike a sidewalk, a plaza is a place in its own right rather than a space simply to pass through. A plaza is a destination,” (NYC DOT website; Plaza Program; “What’s a plaza?”). The plazas as destinations are “neither passive containers nor absolute determinants of the activities that occur in them” (Kogl 2008: 108). It is up to the public to ultimately dictate how a place will be defined. Pershing Square Plaza provides an excellent opportunity to study the process of this definition-making as cultural forces continue to influence the physical and social structure of the yet to be designed plaza.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The previous chapters have presented theories, such as lived space, non-place and abstract space, through which one could define Pershing Square Plaza. The Department of Transportation, the Grand Central Partnership and the public have very different ideas about what a plaza is. As place is a multi-dimensional cultural object, it stands to reason that a plaza would have multiple meanings. Pershing Square Plaza is a place that has a relationship to time and social context, and that exists as both a physical structure and an imagined place. It is a product of a government program, a non-profit's goal, and a public need. It navigates a field of power that incorporates economic and cultural expectations. Resolving the multiplicity of meanings linked to a one-block space is not an easy undertaking.

The photograph below shows the multiple personalities of the space. Taken during the posted plaza time, the blockades have not been put out at the corners on Park Avenue; instead, the street is being reclaimed by the vehicular traffic, (seen here in the iconic New York City taxi cab). This oversight introduces a whole other level of function and definition of the space. The plaza supposed to delineate pedestrians from vehicles, if this does not happen how is the plaza defined.



Figure 11  
Pershing Square Plaza as a vehicular road

Considering that place is a cultural construction and is defined within a specific context, it is easy to see how one place does not have just one meaning. The meanings are important to those they are created by, but meanings do not fully define the place. “Place can be ambiguous and is never absolute because it is not defined primarily by its geometry” (Kogl 2008: 15). Kogl goes on to explain that “space takes on the texture of a place over time as human activity leaves marks on the environment, which are then partially erased and replaced with new marks, which are then partially erased and so on” (2008: 18). The layers of meaning are built on the foundation of the meaning that was created before. A place is always evolving in meaning, but not always in the same way for the all people. The same space may be understood through an individual’s or culture’s sense of place; “different groups have very different views of the place, very different sense of its identity. And they have, too, very different ways of participating in, using, and contributing to the place,” (Massey 1995: 61). I would argue that geographer Doreen Massey’s statement is most relevant in public spaces, because unlike the personal



association with one's home, individuals share the experience of public space, and as discussed earlier there is less intimacy. A public space is therefore open to many more views than a private space is due to sheer number of engaged people.

It would be impossible to select one definition as the true definition over another without considering the element of power. Pat Jess and Massey (1995) point out "in each case what is at issue is a different set of relations to place and to the power relations which construct social space" (150). As we saw when discussing the role of Pershing Square Café, socioeconomic power affords some visitors greater access to seating than others. Department of Transportation has the power to accept or reject applications of plaza sites. DOT shares the power of design and construction with the selected and worthy non-profit organizations. The lack of a post-construction plan may shift the balance of power between DOT and the Partnership, but that has yet to be determined. Power over Pershing Square Plaza is crucial to place creation. Jess and Massey (1995) argue that power is both for control over land and because of control over land. No matter the management plan, DOT will always retain ownership of Pershing Square Plaza property, and therefore will always have some sense of power. But if the management plan does as expressed on the Plaza Program website, plazas will be in the control of the non-profit partners. This claim to control an area can be a "primary geographical expression of social power" (Rose 1995: 100). Possession of a territory creates an active engagement of power between the social relationships within the place and the place itself; but in a case such as Pershing Square Plaza, where possession is not clearly defined power is difficult to assert. Ownership of property is clearly DOT, management is clearly

the Partnership, but possession belongs to the public. Power does not need to be claimed only by possession, but often the two are closely linked. Place can only embody meaning up until the point that those in control of the space allow:

power invents or at least privileges certain meanings, and reinforces those meanings by marking spaces with them, using monuments, statues, symbolic buildings and even empty spaces such as plazas and public malls.

Kogl 2008, 18

Kogl states that those in power have the ability to create or favor how a place is defined, even in an open space such as a plaza. This connection back to public space such as malls returns us again to Auge's idea of a non-place. His argument for a non-place is that these spaces come with instruction for use; these instructions are dictated by those in power over the space. Kogl's idea of marking places with reinforced meanings also recalls her idea about abstract space. Although it may not be founded in physical reality, abstract space can be powerful because it can create images are indicative of what the creators want, and possibly not what is really there. Conflict for power over Pershing Square Plaza mirrors the conflict of meaning between the three invested groups. As Kogl states, power privileges meaning, and production of space proceeds "according to the dictates of Power," (Lefebvre 1991: 116); therefore the lack of a fixed power over Pershing Square Plaza reflects the lack of consensus on defining the place.

Conflicts over meaning can create what Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zungia define as contested spaces; "geographic sites associated with social conflicts that engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power," (2003: 245). Contestation occurs when the relationship between the space and the dominant power and the space and the subservient resistance are in opposition; it is

the place of those people in power that often overshadows the other places. In *Rethinking Urban Parks*, Low, Taplin, and Scheld classify such contested spaces as having a “dissonant heritage,” meaning that there is a history plagued with disagreement (2005: 13). While the history of Pershing Square Plaza is not long enough to be “plagued with disagreement” as discussed in the previous chapter, it could be considered a contested space as it exists within one cultural landscape with multiple definitions. A consensus is not formalized, and most likely never will be as the surrounding neighborhood and users of the plaza are in constant flux. While a consensus may not be reached, there are still those who believe their definition is the ultimate; this is typically those in the more powerful social network.

The issues of power and contested spaces are closely related to the validity of a defined place. It could be argued that all places are contested spaces as it is a cultural identity that creates the place and in a global society, no culture remains untouched by others. Space in a global society is therefore not only defined by those inhabiting the space; place is created both by the cultures occupying the space and those which do not occupy the space. If place is being defined from within and without of a culture, ideologies may not be shared, and therefore the place is not the same. Place can be defined as a real and experienced space or an imagined and idealized space. James Fernandez, in his study of sacred African places, raises the question of how architectural construction evokes tones or feelings and how that might translate into place (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003: 187). The architectonic creation is a place because the place is not a naturally occurring space. Fernandez’s assessment of architectonics supports the

idea that human contact brings some sort of meaning to the landscape, and his conclusion intimates, in a more abstract philosophical fashion, that physical space might not exist without human participation. While both places may define the same space and are both social constructions, those who have a social relationship with the space through physical interaction at least have a concrete grounding. No matter the real or imagined relationship to the space, place created by individuals or groups is a meeting point of person, history, time, and space. The validity of any definition is based in the cultural context from which the definition is being created.

In conclusion, the conflicting definitions of Pershing Square Plaza and the contested power shuffling work to the advantage of the plaza and the Plaza Program in general. If the goal is to truly reflect the unique personality of the neighborhoods where these plazas will be built, it would stand to reason that, given the dynamics of New York City, it would be impossible to arrive at a totalizing definition of the Plaza. I would argue that not only is every place a contested space, but that the levels of conflict exist in relation to personal investment in the site. The Department of Transportation set a goal to create a place for city dwellers and visitors to relax, eat lunch and enjoy the city around them; if the public who spends just 4 minutes of their day in the plaza, the place the DOT has created exists. The Partnership has larger aspirations. My research was conducted in the months of August through October during the advertised times the plaza was open. I did not have an opportunity to experience the after-work concerts that are hosted through late spring and early summer evenings. Events such as these are opportunities for the Partnership to substantiate tangibly their abstract space of a community mecca. It will be

through whatever design plans are agreed upon by DOT and the Partnership that the public forms a relationship with the plaza. It may offer a new first impression to a visitor leaving Grand Central Station or it may provide a welcome relief for a local worker needing to break free from a cubicle. For many visitors, they experience the Plaza as a fleeting moment in a city of places. For those who have the access and time to activate a more personal relationship it could become more. A public definition of a place may not be possible as it is up to the individual to establish a relationship with a place. Any formalized public definition is going to be produced by a community group or a city representative, another cultural investor. The intended flexibility of the Plaza Program, as seen in the very beginning in the shifting of language from park to open space, recognizes the intricacy of defining open, public space. The lack of consensus allows for more public connection and possibly less fixed power.

Place is always going to be contested and debated in a multi-vocal fashion. As discussed in the introduction, place is too often thought of as simply location, a container in which culture exists. Pershing Square Plaza is an example of how place is constantly being negotiated within a culture. It serves as one example of how place is an active participant in cultural activity. Margaret Rodman argues that places have multiple meanings constructed within the space, such that the physical, emotional, and experiential realities of individuals need to be understood as individual places separate from the general geography (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2007:205). Pershing Square Plaza has multiple meanings depending on which invested group is defining the space. For the public it is about the individual experience with the plaza; but for the DOT and the

Partnership, the physical and experiential connections are not as important. For these groups, it is about the emotional and political need that they see being filled by creating this place. With Rodman we again see the connection between place and voice. For de Certeau, pedestrians write as they stroll, similarly Rodman argues that anthropologists should give voice to place. Anthropologists attempt to present cultures through a multi-vocal point of view, listening to many facets of the population. Rodman argues that geography should be considered from a multi-locale point of view; with consideration given to more than one location of the culture.

In Chapter 4, we examined the possibility of the plaza being completed through which a more complete definition could be developed. I would argue that even when the DOT completes Pershing Square Plaza and turns over its management to the Grand Central Partnership, its definition as a place will remain in flux. Place will always be a contested topic because it is constantly being redefined. Place, just like culture, is not a stagnant process that produces one result. Rodman's theory of considering culture as multi-locale is advice I strongly echo. While a culture may be studied within constructed boundaries, those boundaries are flexible and do not hold the same meaning for everyone who may exist within them. Pershing Square Plaza, as is true of all public space, is a fluctuating force of culture, not a rigid frame in which to hang a snapshot of culture.

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Brianne Cassetta graduated from Tappan Zee High School in Orangeburg, New York. Brianne received her Bachelor of Arts with honors in Anthropology from the University of Southern California in 2006. Her undergraduate thesis “Gender and Wine Consumption” was presented at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Western Anthropology and Sociology Undergraduate Research Symposium. Brianne graduated from George Mason University with her Master of Arts in Anthropology in 2010. Brianne works as a Park Ranger for the National Park Service.