Building Cultures by Designing Buildings: Corporatism, Eero Saarinen, and the Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

WESLEY R. JANZ, AIA
Ball State University

In 1964, the inaugural production of the Lincoln Center repertory company opened to critical acclaim. The debut of Arthur Miller's play *After The Fall* was "an impressive start" (Chapman); one that would "arouse an audience and enrich a season" (Nadel). The cast, which included Faye Dunaway, Hal Holbrook, and leading man Jason Robards, Jr. was lauded: "no performance was less than compelling," stated Howard Taubman, the theater critic of the *New York Times*.

The theater, a temporary facility that was designed and built under the guidance of co-producing directors Robert Whitehead and Elia Kazan, was also praised. The critic John McClain termed the playhouse "a quite fabulous structure," and Howard Clurman agreed; "the moment you enter it your attention is riveted on the stage" (Hyams). "I was staggered by what I saw," asserted the playwright S. N. Behrman, "everything seemed there for the purpose of sitting down and seeing a play" (Hyams).

In less than a year, Miller, Whitehead, and Kazan were gone. This paper will suggest that among the reasons for their departure was the contrast between the architectural sensibilities of the temporary theater structure and the culture-building intentions of the corporate group that directed the Lincoln Center project.

CULTURE AND CULTURE-BUILDING

The creators of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts intended to create a new culture by positioning these institutions and buildings as specific solutions to a national problem (Van Maanen). A fundamental belief allied these corporate men: Americans had to become cultured—they had to appreciate the performing arts—if postwar America was to be considered as one of the greatest civilizations in the world's history. These new monuments to culture were to be glorified as being representative of the rules, rituals, and values of a culturally mature America that these leaders would build in their image and to their advantage.

This paper advances two lines of inquiry. The first studies the prime movers that commissioned Lincoln Center, the Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater at Lincoln Center, and the temporary facility. The second considers the architectural intentions of these non-architects as they gave physical form to the preeminent culture they envisioned.

THE CAMPUS OF THE LINCOLN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Lincoln Center was the focus of the eighteen-block Lincoln Square Urban Redevelopment Project on the Upper West Side of New York City. Spearheading the Lincoln Center component were Commissioner Robert Moses, Dwight Eisenhower, the President of the United States; Nelson A. Rockefeller, the Governor of the State of New York; and the third John D. Rockefeller. The Center's unofficial title, the "cultural capital of the world," expressed the founders' ambitions: Lincoln Center would not merely rival other cultural centers, it would dominate them.

The initial architectural directory of Lincoln Center, as assembled by architect-in-charge Wallace Harrison, listed Alvar Aalto, Max Abramovitz, Pietro Belluschi, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Sven Markelius, and Harry Shepley. These men configured a campus that counted the following programmatic elements: 3,800-seat opera house; philharmonic hall that held 2,800; dance theater with 2,200 seats; education building; library; parking garage; and repertory theater. Arguing on behalf of acoustic calm in the urban "maelstrom," these architects promoted a "fortress" model that turned the back of each stage house towards the surrounding streets.

With the basic plan set, the preeminent constituencies selected architects. Harrison's decades of involvement with the Metropolitan Opera Association led to his commission. New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra Society chairman Arthur Houghton, Jr. recalled a positive experience with Max Abramovitz on a private sector project. This relationship and Abramovitz's partnership with Harrison led to his Philharmonic Hall assignment. Lincoln Kirstein managed the New York City Ballet, the dance group most likely to become the Center's resident company; he authorized Philip Johnson to design the dance theater. What brought these

architects to Lincoln Center was only part coincidence; they had worked for the Rockefeller family and had contributed the United Nations Secretariat Building and Seagram Building to America's modernist vanguard. These glass slab prototypes and their worldwide progeny conjured up associations of efficiency, cleanliness, organization, and standardization that fitted the bill for what has been called "the heraldry of big-business America" (Curtis 266).

The cultural center's design attests to the primacy of the performing arts elite: an east-west axis that stretched from Central Park to the Metropolitan Opera House passed through a plaza shielded by the philharmonic hall and dance theater. Unlike those who designed the decorated fronts of Broadway's commercial theaters, Harrison, Abramovitz, and Johnson designed stark, monumental buildings that turned away from the sidewalk and towards an internal plaza. The architects further specified that the exterior balconies of the buildings' plaza fronts were to be of uniform height. These clarifications excluded all others—even future Lincoln Center buildings—from their composition.

THE LEADING MEN OF THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

To organize the Lincoln Center effort, John D. Rockefeller 3rd assembled a group of relatively unknown men that took the name "The Exploratory Committee for a Musical Arts Center." These principals were Anthony Bliss, C. D. Jackson, Irving Olds, and Charles Spofford of the Metropolitan Opera Association; Arthur Houghton, Jr. and David Keiser of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra Society; Lincoln Kirstein, Robert Blum, and Devereux Josephs.

Throughout their lives, these men had occupied positions that bound them together and to others with similar backgrounds and experiences. All attended either Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. All except Kirstein were members of the Century Association men's club. All were community servants (included were leadership roles in the Welfare Council of New York City, the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the United Negro College Fund, and the New York Public Library). All were corporate activists at the highest levels (involved were the board chairmen of United States Steel and the New York Life Insurance Company, the publisher of *Fortune* magazine, a descendant of the founders of Corning Glass, and the sons of a business partner of J. P. Morgan, the chairman of Filene's, and the richest man in the world). Most consulted on national policy issues; all but Bliss, Blum, and Kirstein served on the Council on Foreign Relations, Jackson had led the National Committee for a Free Europe, and Spofford had served on the Council of Deputies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). All had served in the armed forces. These shared settings gave this directorate a unity of vision and purpose—influenced by individual experience and aspirations—that focused their energies.

When the Exploratory Committee met, hundreds of corporations, foundations, schools, philanthropies, and special interests had a presence. If questions arose, as they did, about the inclusion of a branch of the New York Public Library, an expanded Juilliard School, placement of a favorable article in *Fortune* magazine, an exhibit in the midtown Manhattan headquarters of Corning Glass of children's art inspired by Lincoln Center, additional Rockefeller Foundation support, or the availability of the Metropolitan Museum of Art musical instrument collection, answers, or at a minimum avenues through which to pursue further discussion, were in the room.

Tensions certainly existed within the Lincoln Square and Lincoln Center spheres of influence. Robert Moses knew well and appreciated His Eminence Francis Cardinal Spellman, the Archbishop of New York: the Archdiocese had completed $353 million of construction during two decades of Moses' tenure. In turn, when Spellman's alma mater wanted to relocate and enlarge its Manhattan campus, Moses gave Fordham University what it wanted—valuable land at Lincoln Square. Joseph Kennedy owned one building on the Lincoln Center site—a building which Moses refused to include in condemnation proceedings—which Kennedy refused to sell until his exorbitant price was met. As a result, the architects' site plan was reconfigured so that construction on Philharmonic Hall could begin. In his greed, Kennedy influenced the campus plan as he taunted the New York City elite that managed the project.

Exploratory Committee member Irving Olds had been the chairman of the board at United States Steel, arguably postwar America's most influential corporation. In addition, he stood at the forefront of an older patrician elite who wore their historical pedigrees proudly. He must have felt alienated from those, like the Rockefellers, who had recently inherited their economic, social, and philanthropic positions. C. D. Jackson fought Communism with a zeal that must have offended some. Devereux Josephs' role as the gatekeeper of $250 million allocated for private colleges and universities surely was appreciated by his fellow Ivy League alums. Irving Olds was twenty-six years older than Anthony Bliss.

Such tensions paled in comparison to what was shared: these men knew each other and their histories, saw each other socially and professionally, married women who shared backgrounds and interests, and raised children along similar lines. They knew implicitly what each other was doing, why it was being done, and how it was to be done.

Why might these men have assumed leadership positions in the Lincoln Center project? Each must have been honored to serve on this premier clubbing venue. Programs offered at the cultural center would educate the populace, create jobs, and expose the citizenry to both culture and cultures. Their corporations could profit from association with the project. In joining the President of the United States, each man advanced his national policy-making role and agenda. The opportunity to dominate the Soviet Union in military, economic, *and* performing arts existed. Promoting New York City as "the cultural capital of the world" would attract

interesting people, corporations, and performances to the metropolitan area. Imagine the willpower required if one were to refuse the call of Lincoln Center.

THE INNER CIRCLE OF THE VIVIAN BEAUMONT REPERTORY THEATER

Long-standing organizations had guaranteed the success of the cultural center's opera house, philharmonic hall, and dance theater. Unique to the Lincoln Center effort was the need for a repertory theater building *and* a repertory organization. To address these challenges, the Lincoln Center Advisory Council on Drama was formed.

Robert Whitehead, the producer of numerous Broadway hits, became Lincoln Center's drama consultant. The postwar period was a time when, according to Whitehead, "America faces its responsibility as a world power and influence" and when "the process of enriching . . . native talent, of giving it maturity and stature can only emerge through the planned continuity of a theater." To ennoble the nation, talented actors, and the theater, Whitehead would create the world's greatest repertory theater.

Elia Kazan was a provocative outsider; his studio had introduced the "method" and nurtured Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Lee J. Cobb, James Dean, Julie Harris, and Shelley Winters. Kazan's "inside" dimensions are less appreciated. He had, in his own words, "learned how to tie a tie" through attendance at Williams College and the Yale Drama School. From 1946 on, he had *de facto* first refusal rights on any Broadway-bound play. Because of his work's dense social content, Kazan's cooperation with the House Committee on Un-American Activities, as chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy, astonished onlookers. These qualities, combined with his appeal to the patriotic right, must have influenced his selection as co-producing director.

Only stage designer Jo Mielziner equaled Kazan's Broadway influence. The two men dominated postwar Broadway, staging Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman.* Remarkably, *Variety* magazine had named Mielziner Broadway's "Best Scenic Designer" in 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, and 1953!

The first woman to step onto the Lincoln Center corporate stage did so with a $3 million check in hand. Vivian Beaumont was the wealthy daughter of a May department store founder. In 1936, she married Ralph Seward Allen; the couple would become members of New York's *Social Register.* Ms. Allen was devoted to drama, music, and rehabilitation; she served on the board of directors of the Musicians' Emergency Fund, was a member of the National Council of the Metropolitan Opera Association and the auxiliary board of the New York Philharmonic, and established a foundation that was devoted to research into new methods of saving sight.

The Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater would be Eero Saarinen's first prominent New York City work. Saarinen was a compelling practitioner. He had obtained business commissions from Deere & Company, General Motors, IBM, and TWA, and big-name experts such as MIT, the Universities of Chicago and Michigan, and Yale University. Media experts, including John Entenza, Douglas Haskell, Henry Luce, Allan Temko, and Saarinen's second wife Aline Louchheim Saarinen, were effective promoters. Cultural workers, such as Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art and Walter Paepke of the Aspen Institute and the Container Corporation of America, also supported the architect.

In retrospect, this group failed to resolve three issues of primary importance. First, what repertory theater model would inspire their efforts? In other words, what plays would the company perform? Kazan wanted a theater dedicated to American classics by the American playwrights O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. Mielziner advocated a dependence on classic English and European drama, including Ibsen and Chekhov. Beaumont anticipated not the "unpleasant plays" of Tennessee Williams or a "dreadful thing" by Moliere, but sentimental favorites such as *The Music Man* and *Diary of Anne Frank.* Saarinen, the architect, wanted to evolve something completely different from existing theaters. Second, Kazan and Mielziner supported the proscenium style stage of Broadway while Whitehead and Saarinen favored a thrust stage. Would the group agree on a production style? Finally, why was the group given so much freedom? That is, what problems would arise for the repertory theater company and building because the Lincoln Center elite was distracted by the Metropolitan Opera and Philharmonic Hall buildings and the public debates that threatened the entire Lincoln Square development?

In November 1959, it was revealed that cost estimates for the repertory theater were so high that drastic steps had to be considered. Among the actions taken was the formation of the Repertory Theater Association with Lincoln Center directors George Woods and Dr. George Stoddard elected its president and vice president, respectively. Woods was the chairman of the First Boston Corporation board and a director of the Campbell's Soup Company, the Kaiser Steel Corporation, and the New York Times Company. Stoddard was the Chancellor of New York University.

Woods and Stoddard knew each other. They had served on the board of the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut. There, Woods, at the height of the McCarthy era, had led a successful campaign to fire a stage manager for his alleged leftist activities. Stoddard had fought this action and lost.

Within a month, the theater plans were reduced, a budget established, and an opening date set. The need to re-open bids extended the opening date and put Whitehead and Kazan in a bind; they had committed to playwrights and signed contracts with forty actors. A temporary home had to be found.

THE ANTA-WASHINGTON SQUARE THEATER

Saarinen, Mielziner, and Whitehead determined that a modified prefabricated building could be erected at Lincoln

Square for $400,000. The Lincoln Center board was appalled. "It would be an execrable eyesore," one member said. Stoddard, in direct challenge to Woods' power, provided an option: for one dollar per year, he offered a plot of land owned by NYU that was near Washington Square Park. The American National Theatre & Academy (ANTA) offered to raise money for the temporary facility, which was to be christened the "ANTA-Washington Square Theater."

This proposal threatened the inner circle's authority and diminished their Lincoln Center enterprise. The move to Greenwich Village was antithetical to the concentration of power, culture, and architecture that defined the Center. ANTA and NYU had managed to have the theater built on the property of one (not Lincoln Center) and named after the other (not Vivian Beaumont Allen). In addition, the permanent Lincoln Center buildings were of primary importance; any attention given to temporary structures was a distraction.

The board was also concerned with the theater's architecture. A stage house had been omitted, inadequate soundproofing would cause two performances to be stopped during downpours, there was insufficient space for adequate lobbies or lounges, and not enough lavatories. Still, "the audience was enthusiastic; the design was vigorous and simple; and it was achieved by using stock prefab factory materials" (Mielziner 123).

This was a prefabricated shed, one-story in height, made of ribbed steel panels, with exposed heating and cooling machinery, decorated with an institutional "A N T A" logo. The ANTA-Washington Square Theater aggravated John D. Rockefeller 3rd and his minions because it represented rules, rituals, and values that were, at best, of secondary interest to Lincoln Center's leading citizens.

These design sensibilities inverted the architectural language of power appreciated by the inner circle. If money was really such a concern (the Lincoln Center Capital Campaign goal was an astounding $160.7 million), the $618,000 construction cost of the temporary facility might have caught the eye of the Lincoln Center wise men. If construction schedules were a problem (the temporary facility existed only because completion of the permanent theater was several years behind schedule), the seven months needed for construction should have represented a good solution. If "seeing a play" was a central objective, it would appear that the ANTA-Washington Square Theater was a model of efficiency. If the fulfillment of New York City's cultural legitimacy was the goal, this neighborhood theater offered one possible approach.

Such ambiguity in lower Manhattan did not phase the clarity of the work underway on the Upper West Side. The performing arts elite had control of Lincoln Center where it mattered the most—the buildings of their organizations dominated the site. Three additional programmatic elements were under construction on the project's architectural fringe: Saarinen and the repertory theater, Pietro Belluschi with his Juilliard School commission, and Gordon Bunshaft and the library-museum. Saarinen and Bunshaft, as late additions to the group, found themselves with too little site. To resolve their predicament, the architects combined their two programs into one theater-library structure that buttressed the northwest corner of the performing arts fortress.

THE VIVIAN BEAUMONT REPERTORY THEATER

"Beautiful," said Adam Gimbel, president of Saks Fifth Avenue. "Exciting," opined Norman K. Winston, builder of the United States Pavilion at the 1964/1965 New York World's Fair. New York State Supreme Court Justice Irwin Davidson whispered to his wife, "There's nothing like it in the world" (Dougherty). These socialites had gathered for the October 20, 1965 inaugural gala of the Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater.

Built entirely with private funds, the theater had cost over $10 million. Ada Louise Huxtable, in her description of the theater as "the sole moment [at Lincoln Center] that lifts the spirit of those to whom the twentieth century is a very exciting time to be alive," highlights the theatrical temple that fronts a plaza joining the Juilliard School, Metropolitan Opera House, and Philharmonic Hall. In this plaza reside an expansive reflecting pool, a mammoth Henry Moore bronze called "Reclining Figure," and an Alexander Calder work. An overhanging roof, framed with giant Vierendeel trusses that span 150 feet, holds the main library floor high above the theaters. Glass-and-travertine walls enclose a main lobby decorated in travertine and bronze, with red carpeting and white silk wall panels. Two theaters—one with 1,140 seats, the other a 299-seat experimental playhouse—were included. In the larger auditorium, seats were apportioned between the 779-seat orchestra and a shallow, 5-row loge; walls and ceilings were of rich, cordovan-brown wood battens and the carpeting and seats were a vibrant red. The building was "radiant," claimed Charles Moore, "a dramatic reading, delivered with authority and power and without the aid of elaborate props."

However, several miscues deserve mention. Because of the site's falling topography, a bleak automobile drop-off area and the lobby floor were depressed below grade. Unwilling to limit their staging options, the designers created a strange proscenium-thrust compromise; both stage forms suffered. The house seats, the great majority of which were set for a thrust configuration, created poor sightlines for the side sections. The 10,000 square foot stage dwarfed actors and scenery. A permanent turntable, forty-six feet in diameter limited trapping at center stage. The acoustics were not good, even though the furthest seats were sixty-five feet from the stage. The automated stage lighting system never operated reliably and was replaced.

Beyond these functional problems were the overt physical expressions of the visions that informed the project. The Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater was a drama fortress that overwhelmed the sidewalk, street, and pedestrian as it turned away from subsidized rental properties across the street and protected the people who inhabited its lobby. In

stark contrast to the ANTA-Washington Square Theater, the permanent repertory theater building was not inexpensive, easy to build, focused on seeing a play, or part of the community of New York City. Notwithstanding the claims of Huxtable and Moore, this was a seriously flawed new monument of culture.

GREAT PERFORMANCES

Each leading man and woman of the Lincoln Square and Lincoln Center projects was, in some ways, a new Pericles who signalized new power and independence by building America's cultural acropolis. Robert Moses, Francis Cardinal Spellman, John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Irving Olds, and Vivian Beaumont Allen were modern-day potentates and rulers, determined to take advantage of what they shared and what they did not, as they set out to create an American civilization to rival all others. They would build, like Pericles and the Athenians before them, an edifice to house "a concentration of human creative energy and a triumph of drama, philosophy, and art such as has been known in no other place or time in all of the Western world" (de la Croix, 138). This was their Periclean imperative. That a building design project was central to their nation- and culture-building imperatives reveals their predispositions towards designing the built environment to their advantage.

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