

The Other West Side Story: Urbanization and the Arts Meet at Lincoln Center

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ABSTRACT

When discussions began about a new performing arts center in Manhattan in the mid-1950s, philanthropists, impresarios, artistic directors, and educators welcomed the opportunity to broaden the audience for the arts. The idea was to go from “class” to “mass,” as Edgar B. Young, the overseer of the project, put it. But most agree that Lincoln Center fell far short of that goal and, instead, re-inscribed the elitism of the high arts in its monumental architecture, conventional programming, and international rather than local gaze. This paper seeks to explore fissures in the monumentality of Lincoln Center by aligning indoor spaces alongside outdoor ones, particularly by adding an attention to spatial patterns and the performances inside the theaters to the more often viewed architecture and demographic changes of the neighborhood. It is an attempt to tie these stages—the setting of some of the grandest performances in the world—to the surrounding streets to reveal the defining features of the intertwining of the arts and urbanization in the post-World War II era that re-made American cities into “culture cities.”¹

On October 22, 1957, John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, attended a performance of the new musical hit *West Side Story* only a few weeks after its Broadway premiere (“Diary”). Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* provided the basis for the musical *West Side Story*, although the original idea by the dancer and choreographer Jerome Robbins was to place the story in the Lower East Side in Manhattan at the time of Easter-Passover celebrations. A tragic love affair between a Jewish Juliet and a Catholic Romeo, it was to be called *East Side Story*. Six years later, Robbins and his collaborators—the composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, writer Arthur Laurents, and later the lyricist Stephen Sondheim—revived the idea in a new setting: a Polish-American gang pitched against a Puerto Rican one, racial and ethnic tensions between youth taking the

¹ I am indebted to the Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter cited as RAC) for a grant to be a Scholar-in-Residence in summer 2005, when most of the research for this article was conducted, and to the caring attention and curiosity of archivist Robert Battaly.

place of religious tensions between families, and it became the *West Side Story* we know today, with the balcony declaration of love moved to a fire escape.²

In the weeks before and after that performance, Rockefeller also attended public hearings of the New York City's Board of Estimate that were to determine the fate of the proposed urban renewal project that included development of the largest performing arts complex in the world, which he was spearheading. These two stories—the musical and the development project—are stories of the same place, a neighborhood in Manhattan from West 60th Street to West 66th Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenues, two blocks west of Central Park. In fact, much of the film *West Side Story* (1960) was shot on the streets blocked off for demolition. Known as San Juan Hill to some and Lincoln Square to others, the neighborhood was home to a working-class population of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, two- to five-story brownstones, small shops, and local businesses. The controversial builder Robert Moses had a different vision of the neighborhood. Moses had commandeered tremendous power in New York City by this time as an appointed rather than elected official who oversaw the growth of a regional system of highways and bridges and the increase of park land and playgrounds. He was known for getting things done. When the federal government program of urban renewal began after World War II, Moses jumped at the opportunity to add federal funds to city and state funds to further his grand vision of rebuilding the city. The Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project, as it was known officially, was the accumulation of Moses's power: the largest urban renewal plan in the country. Arising from the leveled ground of eighteen city blocks would be a new opera house, concert hall, theater for dance, 4,000 middle-income apartments, two public schools, a shopping center, parking garages, a skyscraper hotel, a high-rise office building, a ten-story fashion center, a midtown campus for Fordham University, and new headquarters for the national Engineering Societies. Moses called it a cultural district, “a trilogy of education, creative scholarship and performance” (qtd. in Ballon WK4).³ Eventually Moses's Lincoln Square project slimmed down to about fourteen

² Keith Garebian's work offers the most comprehensive overview of the musical. See also the biographies of Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein for a perspective on their crucial roles in the project (Jowitt; Lawrence; Burton; Secret).

³ For comprehensive narratives of the building of Lincoln Center, see Young, *Lincoln Center*; Stern, Mellins, and Fishman.

blocks because the original plan exceeded federal limitations on land subsidies, but the project was the largest urban renewal grant to be funded; it received \$2.5 million in land subsidies from the federal government and over \$12 million from the city (fig. 1).

Urban renewal projects in the United States from the mid-twentieth century, particularly those directed by Robert Moses, have become prime examples of an authoritarian model of power. These projects steamrolled highways and tall housing projects over poor city dwellers, most often African American and Latino/a, who were too politically weak and mismatched to save small-scale neighborhoods and local flavor.⁴ Exhibiting the nation's growing devotion to cars, cities filled with concrete and highways and divided neighborhoods and communities became a breeding ground for the economic and social crises of the 1960s and 1970s. The force, and truth, of this general narrative has overwhelmed our view of cities in the United States after World War II. Recently, though, even the towering power of Robert Moses has received closer scrutiny, with scholars placing his impact on New York City in the broader context of transformations in U.S. cities and around the world that mirrored his attention to cars, highways, and regional plans.⁵ Similarly, a reconsideration of Lincoln Center demonstrates how specific sites may hold overlooked significance, beyond the typical questions about urban renewal that critique how these decisions were made and by whom. This essay seeks to explore fissures in the urban renewal story and monumentality of Lincoln Center by aligning indoor spaces with outdoor ones, particularly by adding performances in the theaters and plazas of Lincoln Center to the more often viewed architecture and demographic changes of the neighborhood.⁶ Do the performances reinforce the notion of Lincoln Center as a white-washed bastion of elitism, a cultural component of an authoritarian urban renewal project? Or do they enact a different story?

⁴ Jane Jacobs famously began a landslide critique against Moses and large-scale urban renewal projects that was solidified by Robert Caro's massive biography of Moses. See also Joel Schwartz's and Marshall Berman's (ch. 5) personal and insightful treatment of Moses and Jacobs as exemplary of modernism, in all its contradictory dimensions.

⁵ "Robert Moses and the Modern City," an exhibition in three parts, appeared in Spring 2007 at the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University. The accompanying book (Ballon and Jackson) covers some of the material of the exhibition in addition to essays that reconsider Moses's projects.

This approach relies on growing scholarly attention to spatial dynamics as a way in which to understand public interaction, the embodied patterns of daily life, and the more inchoate sensibility we attach to places. Spatial dynamics highlight the temporal and corporeal dimensions of the past in offering a lived register of political acts, neighborhood demographics, and architectural plans. In addition to the daily spectacle of moving through the streets and plazas of the city, staged performances offer a regulated, heightened form of the everyday rituals of movement, giving another way to trace embodied experiences of the past. In the case of Lincoln Center, the performances were—ostensibly—the motivation behind the drawn-out campaign for and eventual realization of a new performing arts complex. Taking a closer look at the performances of the complex, then, animates the marbled buildings and plazas, making the architecture the backdrop to the people acting, dancing, playing music, and viewing these events. Reversing the more common perspectival orientation shows how the performers and the performances made and revealed the built environment. One crucial component of this approach is the use of visual materials: architectural plans and models; photographs of decimation, relocation, and construction as well as performances and festivals; and televised and printed publicity images. These materials substantiate this approach by uncovering the carving and use of physical space, looking at (if not being able to hear or speak to) the audience members at festivals, and analyzing the embodiment in images of the verbal rhetoric undergirding publicity campaigns.

Finally, this approach amplifies many of the concerns in the on-going debate about urban space, primarily in how these spaces affect democratic participation, demonstrate the ways in which community intersects with capital, and continue to marginalize the oppressed in urban life.⁷ In recent years, scholars have used postmodern theory to discuss alternatives to structuralist visions of cities as concentric rings emanating from a center. The structuralist definition has dominated our view of cities so that even those not constructed as concentric rings have been called cities without

⁶ For an attempt with a similar purpose, see Mayor.

centers, cities as edges of the concentric rings of other cities, and ex-urbs that lay out further beyond the ring of suburbs.⁸ While this theoretical approach has been fruitful in envisioning the possibilities of cities in the twenty-first century, what often has been lost in the debates is the material city itself. Historical research can assert that materiality and, more important, muddy the cleanliness of theoretical claims. The case of Lincoln Center addresses not only the ambiguities and contradictions of the spatial workings of city centers but also the universalist aspirations of the arts, a realm of society embedded in our understanding of what cities offer.⁹ Grounding the arts in the streets and neighborhoods of a city affords an opportunity to see how these aspirations become entrenched in the social, political, economic, and spatial workings of urban life.

Monument to Culture

Robert Moses called the Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project a “cultural district,” but others had more colorful names, particularly for its centerpiece, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts: Athens on the Subway, Colossus on Broadway, Monumental Vampire, Monument to Culture, Tomb of the Future, Lincoln Square Folly, and, from President Dwight Eisenhower, A Mighty Influence. The enormity of the project—five buildings covering three “super” blocks housing opera, symphony, ballet, theater, a museum/library, and a school, costing \$185 million at its completion in 1969 (approximately \$990 million in 2005)—could be expected to inspire a range of opinions about its worth. The epithets also expose the social and political issues entangled in the development of Lincoln Center, including the middling of highbrow culture, the controversies aroused by urban renewal plans, the changing demographics of cities, and the pervasiveness of Cold War tensions.

⁷ The work of Habermas, Harvey, and Soja has laid out much of the contemporary agenda in this worldwide debate. In Germany, these concerns were the center of a recent symposium entitled “The Just City?” at the Centre for Metropolitan Studies at the Technische Universität Berlin in January-February 2006. For a recent collection of articles covering many issues and places, see also Herrle and Walther.

⁸ For an overview of these heated debates, see Dear and Flusty 50-72, and a vociferous rejection of this argument by Sui 403-11.

⁹ Sharon Zukin lays out some contemporary intersections between cultures and cities.

As with *West Side Story*, racial and ethnic tensions form the base of the story of Lincoln Center, although the belief that the arts—rather than love—should be able to overcome strife was the moral of Lincoln Center’s story. The complex was built during a time of dramatic change in demographics. In 1950, New York City’s population of Puerto Ricans was 245,000; African Americans 728,000; and whites 6,891,000; by 1960 the population of Puerto Ricans had more than doubled to 613,000; the African American population had grown to just over a million; and the white population had begun to decrease, to 6,052,000. By 1970, the change was even more dramatic between African Americans and whites, with a 50% increase in the African American population, now just over a million and a half (1,526,000). The Puerto Rican population increased as well to 847,000, and the white population decreased to just below five million (4,973,000) (cf. Kantrowitz 920, 923).

These changing demographics were particularly noticeable in the area of San Juan Hill (fig. 2). The area had been predominantly working-class since the nineteenth century, but had changed from an Irish enclave to a mix of white, African American, and Puerto Rican by the 1950s. It was this mix that inspired *West Side Story*—and Robert Moses. As was typical of other Moses’s projects, it was not clear that this neighborhood was indeed a slum; officials even conceded that there were no “structural defects” in the area (Stern et al. 675). It is too simplistic, even if true, to say that the most troubling “defect” may have been the mingling of ethnicities and backgrounds. The push for progress, for remaking cities to showcase the technical, economic, and cultural prowess of the United States, encompassed these discriminatory social practices but cannot be reduced to them. Progress also entailed ideals about bettering the social status of many; providing up-to-date housing with more amenities such as private rather than communal baths and taller buildings with elevators rather than five-story walk-ups; constructing public schools and parks; and spreading the inspiration of the arts to all.

In the Lincoln Square project, high culture—not just parks and parkways—supplanted so-called blight. A photograph in *Look* magazine in January 1960 best captured this new version of urban renewal. Sitting atop a tenement soon to be torn down, the stars and administrators of the performing arts encircled a model of the performing arts complex that would soon replace their rooftop perch. The prima ballerina Alicia Markova in a tutu and pointe shoes and the actress Julie Harris in

costume for *The Warm Peninsula* bookended the less dramatically dressed but perhaps more powerful gathering of impresarios in the middle, including Rudolf Bing of the Metropolitan Opera, George Judd of the Philharmonic Orchestra, and Reginald Allen, the executive director of Lincoln Center. Entitled “Culture City,” the photograph and accompanying short article declared that Lincoln Center would be the new capital for the performing arts in the United States and showcase “America’s cultural maturity” (40-42). A seemingly unrelated article in the same issue of *Look* substantiated the underlying Cold War tensions in this rhetoric. General Maxwell D. Taylor, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army from 1955-59, wrote a plea for raising the defense budget by \$10 billion a year to sustain “[a] modern strategic atomic force [...] Mobile combat units to fight limited wars [...] A crash program to develop antimissile missile [...] A strong war reserve of men and supplies [...] [and] A minimum number of fall-out shelters” (56). In less than a year, General Taylor would become the president of Lincoln Center. It was not such a radical career step as it might seem. Realizing the plans of Lincoln Center required much the same rhetoric as beefing up the defense budget.

Although the goals of Lincoln Center stood as a kind of cultural corollary to many military and political goals of the Cold War, the government could not afford to underwrite the costs of such an enormous project. Moses’s “cultural district” needed funds beyond the budgeted federal and city monies and high culture became a way to pull in private and philanthropic money to fill the gap. John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, stepped into this gap, becoming the leader in garnering private support, much of which was his own. Rockefeller explained his interest in Lincoln Center both by the particularities of the historical moment and the legacy of the arts beyond those particularities. He reasoned that postwar society in the United States was in an era of prosperity, with more leisure time available to more people than at any other time in history. The arts served to fill leisure time fruitfully, and spiritually. For while economic needs were being met and scientific advances in medicine had increased longevity, people’s spirits were diminished, and the arts could satisfy yearnings for fulfillment on a deeper, more meaningful level. Rockefeller noted that famous cities in history—Rome, Athens, Paris, Kyoto—were known for their arts, not their political, economic, or business successes; they were, in effect, “culture cities.” Rockefeller was also concerned with the international dimensions of the United States’s power and recognized that most countries did not think highly of its culture. In his view, Lincoln Center would feature

the best of the performing arts from the United States and provide a place to present the best of the performing arts from countries around the world to U.S. audiences. For Rockefeller, then, the performing arts in the 1950s fused the specific needs of the historical moment with a long-lasting, worldwide legacy.

The moment was also ripe for patrons of the arts to look to Rockefeller. In 1953, Rockefeller wanted to become involved in a philanthropic project in New York City, hoping to contribute something to the city he loved and which had been home to much of his family. The idea of a cultural center in New York had been a part of the Rockefeller family's interests at least since the 1930s, when Nelson Rockefeller, John's brother, consulted with Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia about the possibilities of such a place near or in Rockefeller Center.¹⁰ As Nelson began to be consumed by governmental posts (eventually being elected governor of New York in 1958), both John and his younger brother, David, entered the continuing conversations. For example, New York University began to research the possibility of a center of postgraduate training in the arts and approached both John and David about supporting such an idea. This request prompted John to ask trusted people in the office of the Rockefeller brothers about whether the family should back an arts center. There was more speculation about locations, such as north of the United Nations or between Rockefeller Center and the Museum of Modern Art, all of these Rockefeller-supported endeavors. But extended discussion about involvement in the arts began in 1954 when Lincoln Kirstein, then Managing Director of City Center, began conversing directly with Rockefeller to try to convince him to come on its board.¹¹

City Center—and Lincoln Kirstein—are a crucial and little-known part of the development of Lincoln Center and expose both the ideals regarding the affordability and appeal of the arts that were crucial to the postwar moment and the cabal of wealthy, white men, many of whom were gay, who controlled the city's arts. City Center began operation in 1943 by the power of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who saw an opportunity to bring the high arts to more people in the bankruptcy of the Masonic Auditorium in

¹⁰ Murielle Vaurtrin gives a good overview of the continuity of these discussions and the involvement of the Rockefellers.

¹¹ For discussion of these early ideas about an arts center, see files in the Rockefeller Family, RG 2, Cultural Interests, box 34a, RAC.

midtown Manhattan on 55th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues. The city took over the building and pledged in its charter to maintain low-priced tickets so as to attract the widest possible audience for its opera, theater, and dance. In many ways, it was a kind of model for what Lincoln Center wanted to become: a house that offered many genres of the performing arts to a varied audience of mixed income levels. City Center, too, saw an opportunity in the early 1950s to become a larger cultural center, perhaps associated with a university. But it was the Metropolitan Opera, Philharmonic Society, and Robert Moses who overshadowed the role of City Center when these players set their sights on a plot of land available on Manhattan's west side for a new cultural complex. City Center remained crucial to the development of Lincoln Center, however, first in the close relationship between Lincoln Kirstein and Rockefeller, with Kirstein acting as a guide to Rockefeller as he learned about the arts, and then in ongoing negotiations about the incorporation of City Center into the Lincoln Center complex. Most important, the years-long negotiations with City Center framed one of the crucial issues at the heart of the development of Lincoln Center: who are the arts for?

Mass vs. Class

“Mass vs. Class” was the way that Edgar B. Young, the associate of Rockefeller's most involved in the project, put it (Early Policy Decisions). Lincoln Center had similar aims to City Center in terms of attracting a wide audience, but was not as firm in its commitment to low-ticket prices. Whether the arts served the “carriage” trade, the elite classes, or the masses was the debate that shaped Lincoln Center—in architecture, politics, fundraising, and choosing constituent companies. Critics of Lincoln Center, then and now, often dismiss it as an institution bound to elitist notions of art, perpetuating all the attendant social discriminatory practices of class and racial politics in the United States. But this understanding of Lincoln Center fails to grapple with the serious and concerted intention of its developers to subvert that notion of the arts. Exactly what ideals did Lincoln Center embody? And were those ideals realized?

In 1960, with only one building in progress, Lincoln Center began a promotional campaign. In part, this was a way to advance the steep fundraising campaign; it also demonstrated the centrifugal force of the ideals fueling the project. In an advertisement picturing two mimes that was featured in the *New York Times*, the text claimed that

Lincoln Center “will be great theater, great music—and great *fun*,” a place “to look, to listen, to think, and to *laugh*” (Lincoln Center 9; emphasis in original); one critic likened this “hawking” of the arts to “a side-show at the circus” (“Culture’s Golden Centre” 1103).¹² The way Lincoln Center promoters envisioned emphasizing mass over class was to broaden the audience base for opera, symphony, and theater, not change what kind of cultural offerings might be included. The grand vision of Lincoln Center called for a populist appeal in a country dedicated to democratic ideals at a time when the arts were utilized as a weapon in the Cold War. Cultural programs financed by the State Department went to countries in Africa and Latin America teetering on the edge of communist rule. Featuring jazz and abstract expressionism, these programs proclaimed that art flourished in the individual freedom guaranteed by democracies.¹³ Lincoln Center played both sides of the cultural Cold War, first by claiming “high” culture for everyone, bringing beauty to a broader, larger audience. “The arts are not for the privileged few, but for the many,” Rockefeller wrote, words that adorn a plaque in his honor at Lincoln Center. Secondly, Lincoln Center aimed to best European countries, especially Germany and Russia, in their heralded traditions of opera, classical music, and dance. In fact, the dance critic, Clive Barnes, called Lincoln Center “ridiculous in its conception,” a grandiose idea that could have been realized only in the United States or Soviet Union (qtd. in Stern et al. 716).

Rockefeller, who had not given much money to the arts before this, promoted Lincoln Center as “a new kind of city therapy,” as necessary as housing and medical care (qtd. in Ballon WK4). Those living in the area disagreed, claiming that the displacement of families and demolishing of 7,000 low-income apartments would be irreconcilable losses that could not be compensated for by operas and ballets. With reference to the corrupt political machine that had ruled the city at the turn of the century, a local businessman claimed,

We believe that before we need culture by second rate actors we need decent housing and decent space for small businesses. We suppose that

¹² On the point of not tying Lincoln Center to “any form of exclusiveness,” see, for example, Fred Palmer to General Taylor, 11 March 1961, Rockefeller Family, RG 17B, box 62, folder 799, RAC.

¹³ A number of recent books address this phenomenon, see Caute; Krenn; Littleton and Sykes; Perl; Saunders.

Bob Moses and [Mayor] Bob Wagner will do a ballet for the peasants, or some kind of striptease with the taxpayers being stripped. I thought New York City already had a cultural center—Tammany Hall. (Longgood)¹⁴

The outrage about housing had merit: out of the 4,400 apartments planned, 4,000 of them were to be middle-class or luxury apartments. Additionally, one building that housed artists, called the Lincoln Arcade building, exposed the question of just what constituted support for the arts, a theme taken up in the painting by Raphael Soyer entitled *Farewell to Lincoln Square* (1959). Even as the opposition lost in the face of city, state, and national support for the project, the clamor continued: whose public good was being served?

In many ways, the ambiguous goals of democratizing the arts were best dramatized in the architecture of Lincoln Center. Three large theaters faced a plaza that was supposed to resemble the Piazza San Marco in Venice but has had much less success in drawing the public to it.¹⁵ The complex sat on a kind of pedestal, with steps leading up to it from the street. Walking to it required persistence in crossing up to eight lanes of traffic, including a lane for taxis and chauffeured cars at the front of the plaza. This design favored those arriving in cars, either in the lane at the front or the garage directly underneath. A “pedestrian island in a sea of cars,” one writer called it in 1962, prescient at the completion of the first building. The pedestal floated on cars, sitting atop a garage for 700 vehicles, one level of which offered the patrons of taxis and “private cars” “sheltered access” to the theaters (Molleson 50). (It is hard to imagine even more accommodation to cars, but the Metropolitan Opera insisted for some time that cars be allowed on to the plaza so that its patrons could get out directly in front of its theater. It finally backed down on this matter.) Although the complex opened to the east, to the intersection of Broadway and Columbus Avenues, it closed off its back to the west and presented a cold, high wall to Amsterdam Avenue and the housing projects across the street from it. The box-like shapes of the theaters, covered in travertine marble that unified their facades, offered little warmth and invitation. In many ways, Lincoln Center represented the endpoint of high modernism in architecture and

¹⁴ See also Marja.

prompted attacks from critics and architects of the emerging school of postmodernism. Even as early as 1958, Jane Jacobs ridiculed the design, claiming that Lincoln Center “is planned entirely on the assumption that the logical neighbor of a hall is another hall. Nonsense. [...] It is a piece of built-in rigor mortis” (“Lecture”). She thought that the theaters would be better served by being surrounded by restaurants, bars, and florist shops, and that the city would be better served if cultural institutions were dispersed around the city, spreading improvement in a variety of neighborhoods. If improvement was judged on the value of real estate alone, many agreed that Lincoln Center would likely increase those standards of the neighborhood. But seeing improvement in the dynamism of the action on the streets and diverse participation in the institution, others emphasized that Lincoln Center’s imposing architecture was as out-of-place as its traditional programming in the arts. “A Highbrow Ideal, Lincoln Center Is A Likely Middlebrow Monument,” Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic of the *New York Times*, titled her review of it (129).

Lincoln Center’s status as a monument—beckoning worldwide attention to the cultural aspirations of the United States—overwhelmed its neighborhood (fig. 3). As an urban renewal project, Lincoln Center incurred the social costs of many other such projects, demolishing homes and livelihoods of lower income people. The relocation process stirred some controversy, but less than other projects of greater magnitude, such as the Cross Bronx expressway, a six-lane highway that cut across the Bronx to connect New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut, and caused massive dislocation of people and the severing of communities along its eight-mile path. While Lincoln Center paid some attention to its surrounding neighbors, repairing an arch of a church nearby, for instance, its primary focus lay beyond the neighborhood. No local, community people sat on its board; the very few representatives of the city on its committees were those with broader political power. And, perhaps more enduring, the masses Lincoln Center hoped to attract rarely encompassed the people removed from the site or those that remained nearby in low-income housing. The masses that gathered more attention from Lincoln Center promoters were those middle-class audiences who had recently moved

¹⁵ A picture of the architects at work shows two photos on the wall behind them that served as inspiration: 1) Piazza San Marco in Venice, and 2) a sketch of the site that used ideas from a 1537 design by Michelangelo of the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. I have not found the original picture, but a copy of the picture is in the appendix of Janz.

to the suburbs. The people driving to the center from New Jersey received priority over those who lived on 66th Street who missed the small shops and well-known faces that made their neighborhood.

Organizers for Culture

The architecture and organization of Lincoln Center displayed the grand—and contradictory—ideals of its developers. A 1960 album picture of Rockefeller in the midst of a group of businessmen sitting around a large, square, dark mahogany table, most likely at the Century Club in midtown Manhattan (for men only), included a title: “Organizers for Culture” (fig. 4). To a large extent, these men created Lincoln Center; they had the power to push conservative, recalcitrant institutions like the Metropolitan Opera to be a part of a shared endeavor and they had both the political and financial acumen to rally necessary partners, such as Moses and Mayor Wagner. Almost all of them, however, were businessmen with an avocation for the arts and little direct experience beyond spectatorship. The locution of the title is intriguing for its recognition of this: these men were organizers *for* culture—builders, promoters—rather than *of* culture—producers, impresarios. This may have given them an advantage in that they had managerial, practical minds instead of temperamental, artistic souls. They spent considerable time number-crunching and focused on the hard work of pulling together the huge amount of money needed to oversee the long, difficult construction of so many buildings that had very precise, and often conflicting, specifications.

But they also spent a great deal of time consulting with people in the arts, relying on others’ visions of what such a complex might be. In fact, one of Rockefeller’s first moves was to hire a consulting firm to conduct an extensive review of the project. He then held two crucial meetings early in 1956, one with leaders in the performing arts, primarily businessmen and politicians, and the other with arts educators. Even in this attempt to draw upon others’ expertise, artists themselves were rarely included, and, when they were, rarely accorded much say. This tension between needing others’ opinions and yet spearheading the project was, perhaps, most manifest in the decision to have a different architect in charge of each building. “Six Architects in Search of a Center” was how a 1959 *New York Times* article characterized the struggle (Schonberg SM22). Even though Wallace Harrison served as head architect, Rockefeller and others

questioned his ability to corral the group—and to come up with a compelling design for the opera house. Harrison’s lack of ideas, difficulty in working with the demanding Metropolitan Opera’s staff, and inability to curb a ballooning budget led Rockefeller to contemplate firing him in 1961 (“Consequences” 1961). Rockefeller stuck with Harrison, the least risky solution, a choice that was similar to other dilemmas when all options were problematic.

The debate of mass versus class foundered on the determination to insure “quality” in architecture and the arts, and this became one of the ways that Lincoln Center retained an elitist element. Quality is an inherently elusive, ill-defined characteristic, and nearly impossible to quantify or plan. In Lincoln Center, it translated to grandiosity. The architecture of Lincoln Center, for example, may be a better harbinger of the idea of what culture should be rather than culture itself, or impressive in scale rather than content. Some of this criticism occurred during the first conversations about the center at the Rockefeller Foundation. The request for a significant grant to Lincoln Center—that would necessitate the expenditure of capital funds—roused dissent in November 1956. Some officers were unconvinced of the main premise of Lincoln Center: that placing music, theater, opera, and dance next to one another would inspire greater creativity. They felt that such placement may, indeed, lead to more competition and hostility. Others questioned the need for multiple theaters rather than one multi-use hall and the prognosis that audience numbers for the performing arts were increasing steadily and, even, dramatically. And those dissenting hinted that treating this request from a member of the Rockefeller Family with rubber-stamp approval would exert a heavy toll on trustee and officer morale.¹⁶ Despite these concerns, the foundation granted \$10 million to Lincoln Center at the December 1956 board meeting. In its 1957 Annual Report describing the gift, the foundation recognized that “brick and mortar” were not what it sought to support, believing instead that the “dynamic functioning of the institution is the important thing.” But the foundation believed (or perhaps more accurately hoped) that “the interplay of related arts at the Center and the associated education work may well offer a unique stimulus to creative development” (Rockefeller Foundation 1957 Annual Report).

¹⁶ For the range of officers’ opinions, see Rockefeller Foundation, RG 1.2, Series 200R, box 364, folder 3291, RAC.

Stages

What of the interplay or the reach of the arts produced at Lincoln Center? If the architecture of Lincoln Center bespoke grandiosity, did the performances? The first week's performances of the first building completed, Philharmonic Hall, offer some indication that grandiosity, American-style, ruled the stages as well as the architecture. Opening night featured First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and the NY Philharmonic playing a world-premiere of Aaron Copland in addition to Beethoven's *Gloria* and the first movement of Mahler's 8th symphony. But the night was also produced live on television to millions of viewers across the country. The week progressed with the appearances of the Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Boston symphonies, all featuring work by contemporary U.S. artists in addition to classical European ones.

The schedule of the first full year of Philharmonic Hall, from 1962-63, suggests a more nuanced story. Educational programs appeared throughout the year, aimed at young people, and offered productions at reasonable prices. Christmas featured a week-long engagement of a gospel song-play, entitled *Black Nativity*. More enduring was the beginning of summertime concerts that went beyond the typical classical music fare, including three weeks of American artists in piano recitals, modern dance, chamber music, and jazz. The first year ended with the New York Film Festival, which included the screening of more international films than domestic ones.

If the contradictions incorporated into Lincoln Center were evident from the first conversations, and perhaps most provocatively captured in the photograph of artists on the crumbling rooftop of a tenement, the performances only continued the trend. Handel's *Hallelujah* chorus accompanied the groundbreaking of Lincoln Center, but the first performance of the Metropolitan Opera in its new home in 1966 presented the African American Leontyne Price in the starring role of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*; the premiere performance of the New York City Ballet in 1964 featured Arthur Mitchell, its first African American principal dancer. In both the groundbreaking and these opening performances the symbolic link between urban renewal and high culture could not have been better manufactured—culture as compensation for social destruction (fig. 5). But that culture included African American artists, just as middle and lower class African Americans were being pushed out of the neighborhood. Just a few years earlier, Katherine Dunham's choreography for the Metropolitan Opera's

production of *Aida* was an example of the prominence of some African American artists and the integration of African imagery in cultural productions. The Metropolitan Opera invited Dunham to choreograph *Aida* in the early 1960s and it was finally produced in the fall 1963 season. Before Egypt as African rather than Arabic became a topic of research and controversy in the academy, Dunham staged this conception. Featuring belly dancing, martial arts, and movement from Moroccans and Somalis, Dunham's choreography roused dissent and praise, including such dismissive comments as "dandy for voodoo but not for Verdi" (Terry 15). There were similar expectations about the exclusivity of the audience, as described by the writer Ralph Ellison in a visit of tenements in the area of San Juan Hill in the late 1930s. Seeking signers for a petition, Ellison interrupted a vehement argument between African American workingmen about the merits of two divas of the Metropolitan Opera. As one of the workers explained, "Strip us fellows down and give us some costumes and we make about the finest damn bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Hell, we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans for *years!*" (Ellison 523). Despite comments about the incompatibility of African imagery that Dunham's choreography inspired and the unlikelihood of African Americans in the audience of the hallowed opera and ballet theaters of New York, this integration was there and only increased in the 1950s and 1960s.

The narrative of Lincoln Center substantiates trends that define postwar U.S.: the social costs of urban renewal projects, the centrality of New York City in cultural and political quests, and the prominence of the arts in cities undergoing dramatic changes in demographics. But it also masks other significant developments, particularly the role of African Americans and other minorities in the arts. As white people continued to leave for Long Island and New Jersey, and Lincoln Center symbolized and contributed to the elitism of the arts, African American and other minority artists claimed material and cultural space. Not only did they appear in institutions previously reserved for white artists, they offered fuller visions of Africa and the Caribbean to a broader range of New Yorkers. This partial social achievement was similar to that of the musical *West Side Story*: the story of Puerto Rican youth claimed space and success on Broadway just as that population was routed out of neighborhoods by urban renewal projects. The fame of Chita Rivera in the Broadway show and Rita Moreno in the film, both of Puerto Rican background, suggested a new opening for Puerto Rican dancers, singers, and

actors. In actuality, there were few other Puerto Ricans in the Broadway show or film, and white actors given the Puerto Rican roles in the film had hair dyed and skin darkened by make-up (Garebian 149). But this result masks the attempt to hire Puerto Ricans for these roles. Jerome Robbins spent eight months traveling throughout the country to settlement houses, schools, and theatrical agencies, looking both for professionals and non-professionals, to find good candidates for the Broadway show. He found some who looked “right” but froze on stage. Given the extraordinary demands of the show in acting, singing, and, especially, dancing abilities, Robbins ended up relying on professionals, only one of which was a recent migrant from Puerto Rico who had acted in theater there (Schumah 135).¹⁷ These efforts represented attempts to overcome discrimination in hiring, to “discover” talented people from various groups, even if it more often resulted in failure yet again. This more muted story of attempt and failure shows how these productions in elite institutions were a way to confront race relations in the midst of growling debates over urban renewal and civil rights, but the performances succeeded best as a way in which to re-imagine social roles, if not into wholly equal relations then at least toward a reckoning of that possibility.

Streets

The streets of the city appeared occasionally on the stages of Lincoln Center, but the Hungarian scholar András Tokaji has put forth a more provocative argument connecting the development of Lincoln Center to the streets of New York through the figure of Robert Moses. Moses’s projects, particularly the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, forced a dislocation amongst poor African Americans and Latino/as that pushed them from intimate neighborhoods, razed for highways, into high-rise housing projects, the breeding grounds of gangs, violence, and further isolation. Breakdancing, graffiti, and hip-hop emerged from this environment and Tokaji argues that the spontaneity, urgency, and liveliness of those art forms heightened the contrast with the aging, ossified, and increasingly irrelevant art forms presented at Lincoln Center.

While Tokaji’s argument has a comfortable coherency, the relocation of people was not as neat as he describes, nor was the contrast between the streets and stages so

¹⁷ For a critical view of the way in which *West Side Story* has functioned in forming (stereotypical) Puerto Rican identity in the U.S., see Negrón-Muntaner ch. 3.

stark. Reports from the relocation agency for the Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project indicate, for instance, that most families moved to other sites in Manhattan (55.8%) and, of those, 59.62% settled into areas nearby to Lincoln Square. The second largest group migrated to the Bronx, but it was a substantially lower percentage of the total (10.8%) (Braislin, Porter & Wheelock, Inc. 29). The contrast of the streets and the stages in Tokaji's argument highlights much of what Lincoln Center lacked, with its buildings on a pedestal, its plaza cold and empty, and its fortress-like wall presented to the housing projects at its back. But it also glazes over the ways in which the streets found a place at Lincoln Center, albeit one circumscribed and limited. The occasional performances of various minorities, of jazz and modern dance, of the stylized gang warfare of *West Side Story*, are some examples of the ways in which the street punctured the sanctity of—and was appropriated by—the high arts.

More enduring institutional examples are the performances in the Fountain Plaza of Lincoln Center, begun in 1970, that evolved into the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival in August 1974 and continues today (fig. 6). The first performances featured theater companies from Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn and one from East Harlem; the second appearance, in 1971, included community theater groups from New York City, Washington, D.C., and the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Building on these performances, Leonard de Paur, an African American hired to enhance community relations, organized the annual Out-of-Doors Festival that featured “ethnic” performances of Latin American music, street dance, and Chinese theater—all in the vacuum-like hole of the plaza. It began by targeting children and featuring lesser-known New York artists and has expanded to become a long-standing summer tradition with performance groups from around the world. Even more important, given Tokaji's argument about hip-hop, this festival served as the first major formal performance venue for hip-hop, featuring a battle of breakdancers in August 1981 that turned into a haphazard battle of fistfights on Broadway, in front of Lincoln Center, because the battle did not have a clear winner. Teams and supporters divided between Manhattan and the Bronx versus Queens and Brooklyn came from all around the city to Lincoln Center to watch the breakdancing battle, surrounding and cheering on the dancers, just as they did when battles took place on the streets or in the park. The flock of young people prevented those from sitting in seats from seeing much of the dancing on stage, although many witnessed the later action on Broadway. That event (perhaps its street

battle as well as its stage one) gave new visibility to hip-hop—as one participant said, “all of the sudden, it became mainstream!”—and contributed to its fast spread around the nation and the world (Cooper 97).

Since 1989, Midsummer Night Swing has joined the Out-of-Doors Festival as a favorite summertime activity. Featuring dance music and lessons for the month of June, the plaza lights up with the crowds dancing to live music. It is the “ballet of the streets” that Jane Jacobs proclaimed as fundamental to city life and that many who built Lincoln Center expected the complex to become. A diverse audience has come to Lincoln Center, although rarely inside its theaters, and this marking of space is emblematic not only of the partial success of Lincoln Center but of the arts in the United States at large.

Lincoln Center Today

Lincoln Center has just begun a decade-long renovation, with the explicit intention to tie the complex to its surrounding neighborhood. The first part of the renovation concentrates on 65th Street, originally widened to the width of an interstate highway to accommodate cars streaming into the underground garage, and avoided by walkers via a pedestrian bridge connecting the main complex of Lincoln Center with the Juilliard School and Alice Tully Hall. The plans are to reduce the traffic lanes, remove the pedestrian bridge, widen the sidewalks, create entrances to the institutions directly from the street, and open retail stores and restaurants at street-level. Other plans involve a more direct entrance up to the main plaza, one that privileges pedestrians by sinking the lane for cars dropping off concert-goers to an underneath entranceway into the complex.¹⁸

These renovations are long overdue and, perhaps, still not enough to combat the conservative programming of many of the resident companies, the ticket prices that are far out of range for most New Yorkers, and the sense of a mausoleum (one of the first epithets it inspired), that continues to cling to the white fortress-like buildings. But these attempts are more hopeful than that of the latest resident company to join Lincoln Center: Jazz at Lincoln Center. It is long overdue that jazz be put on the same level as opera, but the new performance space for Jazz at Lincoln Center reiterates many of the

¹⁸ See <http://www.lincolncenter.org> for a visual presentation of the renovation.

ills of the original plans for Lincoln Center, updated to the early twenty-first century. Located on the 8th floor of the Time-Warner Building at Columbus Circle, a luxury residential and retail building, a concert-goer is forced to wind through an up-scale mall to get to the performance spaces. The theater itself is backed by windows with a gorgeous overview of Central Park, but that serves as small compensation for the divorce of jazz from the streets on which it began.

In contrast, the mausoleum of Lincoln Center is almost warm, its colossus even endearing (fig. 7). Lincoln Center has not achieved its aims—not everyone enjoys the arts it offers—“class” has more often won out over “mass.” But in many ways the current renovation to open up the center and connect it more directly to the streets is an after-the-fact recognition of the fissures that have always been present in the idea of Lincoln Center as an elitist mausoleum. The renovation is an attempt to match the architecture to the vitality that the complex has aroused in spite of itself. In uneven and imperfect ways, the mass from the streets has enlivened the institution, not overcoming the discriminatory practices that put it in place, but at least recognizing that even “Athens on the Subway” can be an occasional public forum.

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BILDUNTERSCHRIFTEN FÜR FOULKES

Figure 1: Map of the project. Courtesy of Archives of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc.

Figure 2: W. 62nd Street, 1940s. The La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College/The City University of New York.

Figure 3: Construction of Lincoln Center with one building (Philharmonic Hall) near completion (1962-63). Photograph by Bob Serating.

Figure 4: "Organizers for Culture." Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center.

Figure 5: Opera stars Leontyne Price and Robert Merrill along with William Schuman, President of Lincoln Center, at the ceremony celebrating the closing of the roof of the Metropolitan Opera building, 20 January 1964. Photograph by Bob Serating.

Figure 6: Out-of-Doors Festival, 12 August 1975. Photograph by Susanne Faulkner Stevens. Courtesy of Archives of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc.

Figure 7: Looking south across Manhattan, July 1965. Photograph by Bob Serating.