Urban Fabric: Lexington's New Courthouse Plaza

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Lexington’s New Courthouse Plaza

For the past thirty years, Lexington, Kentucky, like many other mid-sized cities across America, has been trying to reshape and reinvigorate its downtown. Starting with urban renewal projects in the mid-1970s (which resulted in the construction of Rupp Arena, a civic convention center, hotels, and retail shops), the vitality of Lexington’s urban landscape has been actively competing with its ever-increasing suburban periphery—economically and socially. This competition continues today, manifesting itself in the design and development of two new courthouses and a large public plaza in the center of Lexington’s downtown. Seen as the “next big thing” for downtown, the Fayette County Circuit and District courthouses, finished in 2002, have been viewed as hopeful catalysts for downtown investment and economic activity. A recent interview with a local small business owner represents the sentiments of many who look forward to the opportunity associated with their construction: “I keep saying that all we need is one big thing downtown that will send everybody down here,” said Tony Likirdopulos during building construction (Brim).

Downtown parks and plazas have long been viewed as essential ingredients of urban life, possessing an inherent ability to attract public gatherings, infuse civic life with energy, and define cultural identity. Once the civic nucleus and commercial hub of central Kentucky, Lexington’s historic courthouse square, commonly referred to as “Cheapside,” attracted people from miles around during monthly “court days.” During the better part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this large open space in the center of town filled with people who traded goods, exchanged news and gossip, discussed political issues, and were entertained.
Although these activities no longer occur, Cheapside has been converted to a small urban park, replete with dappled sunlight, benches, and two small fountains. In recent years (in the ongoing attempt to draw more people to the downtown), it has become home to Thursday evening music festivals where people come together at the end of the day to relax and enjoy the summer months. The park seems benign enough, and one would expect the meaning associated with the park to be reflective of its civic character and physical pleasures.

Cheapside, however, has narratives that have been concealed by its landscape and that are not mentioned in any Lexington travel books. During the antebellum period, the city became one of the largest slave trading centers in the south, and many slave auctions took place at the steps of the county courthouse (Coleman). However, there is no evidence of these events, no signs or symbols that reveal or recognize this painful history. In fact, the only references to nineteenth-century history are the commemorative statues of Civil War generals John Hunt Morgan and John Breckenridge, which silently and not so subtly give recognition to confederate ideology.

Lexington's image has long been associated with this elite agrarian class. Changes brought about by the Civil War transformed the antebellum economy of Kentucky's Bluegrass Region (which was based upon dark tobacco, hemp, livestock, and slavery), to one centered upon equine breeding operations (Alvey; Clark). Today, Lexington is recognized as "the horse capital of the world." It is this image—a landscape reflecting genteel pastoralism rather than reminders of southern slavery and segregation—that is marketed to tourists and maintained by influential citizens, designers, politicians, and real estate developers. This image is not only reinforced by the larger cultural landscape consisting of expansive horse farms, plank fences, rolling hills, tree lined rural roads, and dry-laid limestone walls that the local government works hard to preserve, but it is also promoted by designed public spaces in the downtown.

Thoroughbred Park, which was built in 1990, is one such example of an attempt to use open, urban space to draw energy and investment to the downtown through the promotion of such an idealized identity. Built in 1990, this park was constructed to mark the western gateway of the downtown. Privately funded by the "Triangle Foundation," a philanthropic organization whose membership is comprised of Lexington's wealthiest citizens, Thoroughbred Park was designed (without public input) to formalize and project a very literal depiction of the town's self-idealized cultural identity. The life-size bronze racehorses, the roar of the crowds emulated by the fountain jets, the representational rolling Bluegrass landscape, and the Run for the Roses—all combine to depict the significant components of the horse racing industry for which Kentucky is famous. Although valid as one component of Lexington's cultural identity, these images ignore and even camouflage others.

Thoroughbred Park has been criticized as being a racialized landscape; however, because it promotes an idealized civic image that has been built upon Lexington's racial inequalities (Schein). The large knoll, while representational of the surrounding Bluegrass landscape that supports the thoroughbred industry, also turns its back on and blocks the view of Goodlettown, a low income, historically African-American neighborhood. The location of the park also serves to reinforce the geographic boundary between the historically affluent white neighborhoods and racially segregated black neighborhoods that developed after the Civil War (Schein). "What people choose to display, omit and convey is a reflection of how they want to be viewed," comments Doris Wilkinson, a University of Kentucky professor and first African-American woman to earn an undergraduate degree from the school (Mulvihill). Indeed, over the past two decades, cultural geographers, architects, landscape architects, design historians, and social theorists (among others), have challenged the concept that landscapes are simply physical reflections of the culture within which they were constructed. Landscapes, they argue, are more than just inert representations or manifestations of past ideologies whose text-like qualities can be read by literate observers; rather, "[landscape] is an active participant in social processes of cultural reproduction and change" (Duncan 11).

One can make the case that by not recognizing the contentious history of the city, the landscape of Lexington acts to perpetuate cultural identities and social systems. The omission or concealment of these narratives conveys both the power and authority of a traditionally elite, genteel, agrarian class with Euro-Virginian roots, and inhibits the struggle of Lexington African Americans to narrate their past and construct their identities in a complex and continually changing world.

Call for Entries

Ten years after the construction of Thoroughbred Park, the mayor of Lexington asked the Triangle Foundation to again assume a philanthropic role and fund the design and construction of Lexington's new courthouse plaza. Initially the Triangle Foundation agreed, and a design for the plaza was developed by landscape architect Robert Zion. Again this design was developed without any public input. This time, however, when the foundation revealed its proposed design for the plaza, the public rebelled. Many people expressed unhappiness about the design, noting that the public had been given no say in shaping the plaza that was to become the new civic center and symbol of the downtown. Public frustration with the process peaked in the fall of 1999. Eventually, the Triangle Foundation withdrew its funding, and the following year the urban county council decided to sponsor an international design competition to generate ideas and public support.

The following design titled "Urban Fabric," which was submitted by the authors, was a response to the competition's call for submissions. Its design concepts are described here to offer an example of how the landscape can be implicated in the evolution of cultural identity and function as a place where the negotiation of contested identities can be played out.Acknowledging the concealed narratives that are imbedded in Lexington's historic courthouse square (Cheapside) and the idealized cultural identity represented by Thoroughbred Park, this design seeks not only to give recognition to members of the community long ignored by the dominant members of society, but also to provide a public place which welcomes and embraces the rich diversity of influences that have gone into making Bluegrass culture. The Courthouse Plaza, as a physical embodiment of democratic ideals, is an appropriate place to acknowledge and celebrate multicultural expression as a centerpiece of civic identity.
Design inspiration and description

In this design, the courthouse plaza is divided into two parts by Short Street, which serves to separate the two buildings. The demographic division of the city is embodied in the division of the plaza: the north side is generally considered black, the south side essentially white. In keeping with this urban geography, the landscape components of the north plaza are derived from a West-African dance, called the “Calenda,” which was brought to North America by enslaved blacks, and those of the south plaza are inspired by the “Square Dance.” While this distinction suggests a strict separation of African and English traditions, both dances are linked to the merging of these traditions and forms. The Calenda is a progenitor of the “Buck and Wing” and other similar dances emerging from plantation culture (Emery), while the Square Dance is performed to music both rooted in Old English ballads and evincing the sounds and rhythms of African influence.

The Courthouse design, modeled on the movement of these dances, reflects this blending of cultures. In the Calenda, two lines of dancers advance towards and retreat away from each other repeatedly in time to a steady rhythm, eventually meeting and connecting in the middle. In the Square Dance, couples dance in pairs, whirling and turning about each other in set form. In the Courthouse design, the diagrammatic patterns of both dances are captured three-dimensionally in slices of earth that rise out of the plaza and gradually ascend in height, accentuating the natural slope and providing an intensified axial frame through the center of the site.

Covered in Kentucky Bluegrass and contained by limestone retaining walls, these earthworks incorporate regional vernacular materials and reflect the experiences of both blacks and whites. On the north side, water “weeps” from the limestone walls to both honor the sweat and tears of those who were enslaved and, perhaps more simply, to acknowledge slavery as part of Lexington’s history. On the south side, two reflecting pools are embraced within the dancing earth forms and serve as mirrors to society. Native Kentucky Coffeetrees run the length of the plaza and provide both a counter-rhythm to the earthworks, a consistent “downbeat” to structure the melodic movements of the dance, as well as much needed shade. This native tree also symbolizes how both cultures are now deeply rooted in this place.

The two plazas are woven together through a quilted paving pattern, which acknowledges the unique identity of both cultures through a shared art form. On the south side, patterns taken from traditional Kentucky quilts, which reflect both black and white cultures, move through the four-square earthworks, becoming the tiled reflecting pools within. These patterns are derived from strong geometric forms—particularly the square and rectangular strip—to produce the efficient piecing associated with fundamental block patterns favored by Kentucky quilters (Clarke). In the north plaza, these paving blocks take on characteristics of African textiles, which include striping, contrasting colors, asymmetrical designs, and multiple patterning (Wahlman).

There is also an exchange between the two plazas: ideas from both sides penetrate the other in the same way that African music and dance influenced Bluegrass music, and that rural farming culture influenced African-American self-expression. Where the two plazas come together a new fabric is formed, tak-
Image 1: Lexington's new courthouses under construction

Image 2: Thoroughbred Park

Image 3: Lexington's downtown

Image 4: The paving and spatial organization of the plaza design derive from quilting patterns and characteristics.
Image 5: Pattern design for Lexington’s Courthouse Plaza.

Image 6: Scale model of the proposed design.

Image 7: Elevation view of the proposed design.
An old and seemingly vanquished spectre is once again haunting politics—the spectre of anarchism. In the past few years striking media coverage of angry, black-clad, balaclava-wearing youth demonstrating outside of the global meetings of government and corporate power-holders has stirred memories of the moral panic over anarchism which marked the beginning of the 20th century. The "uncivil" disobedience, especially where it concerns damage to corporate property, attributed to so-called "black bloc" anarchists at global capitalist summits since the 1999 World Trade Organization (W.T.O.) meetings in Seattle have returned anarchists to the headlines and landed them on the covers of Time and Newsweek in addition to a feature story on television's Sixty Minutes II. As well, police assaults on anarchists during economic summits—including pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets and mass arrests, in addition to shootings and even killings—have suggested to the general public that anarchists are something to be feared. That view has been reinforced in mainstream media depictions of anarchists as "thugs" and "hooligans."

That anarchists should run afoul of the authorities is hardly surprising. Indeed, anarchism has a long history of direct conflict with State institutions and their defenders. There is no surprise, of course, that rulers should so desire to construct anarchists as nihilistic fanatics for they question the very legitimacy of rulership itself. As the anarchist historian Peter Marshall notes, the radical implications of anarchism have not been lost on rulers (of the Left or Right) or ruled (by them) since they might be made obsolete, and inspiring the dispossessed and the thoughtful with hope since they can imagine a time when they might be free to govern themselves" (x). In contrast to the violence of government, most anarchist practical initiatives have been directed towards building new communities and institutions.