

Project 2 – Redesign of Jones Plaza

6 Week Project

The redesign of Jones Plaza is a response to the current Plaza design, considered by many to be an inferior public space. The City of Houston and Central Houston, Inc. has asked the students to consider the redesign of this plaza by addressing several programmatic considerations. But the studio is about more than this...and makes some assumptions which lead into concept.

- Site holds value as a contextual measure of place and form (both in land and structure)
- Process is emphasized – questioning and establishing intention imperative
- Response is generated through analysis, creative exploration and commitment
- Independent problem solving is critical in graduate learning

The site is located at the intersections of Capitol, Louisiana, Texas and Smith in the heart of the Theater District and comprises one city block. Significant to the site is its adjacency to the following buildings: Pennzoil Building by Phillip Johnson, Bank of America Center also by Phillip Johnson, Jones Hall by Cawdill Rowlett Scott (CRS), The Alley Theater by Ulrich Franzen & Associates, The Wortham by Morris Aubrey Architects, Bayou Place (an adaptive reuse of the Albert Thomas Convention Center now an Entertainment Center by Gensler).

Mind mapping: A way of ‘seeing’, analyzing, comprehending and synthesizing in order to generate conceptual ideas. Graphically convey ideas in a loose and free thinking format, but requires simplicity and the trust of one’s thoughts. Thoughts are only initial ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘being’ with the problem. Exploration comes through the process. Mind mapping is only a starting point for evaluating a problem. Process analysis and exploration develop independent solutions generated through the student’s design capabilities and become a measure of understanding ‘place’ in design.

The student must create a solution for the redesign of Jones Plaza in response to programmatic requirements, but through a process of site and contextual exploration.

The Following represents the client’s programmatic description of the project:

Improvement Program for Jones Plaza

Client: Central Houston, Inc. / City of Houston

Vision for Jones Plaza:

Jones Plaza will be an active public square uniquely situated in the heart of downtown Houston’s corporate office core and nationally renowned Theater District, a place of sophisticated artistic and design excellence.

JONES PLAZA:

It is a space where one can:

- Go to both day and evening to see and be seen
- Enjoy a glamorous, beautiful meal, have a business lunch or have just a snack to extend the Theater District experience
- Be comfortable in a place with a green garden feel, enjoy the seasons
- Go to an iconic destination defined by sophistication, sense of whimsy, creativity and artistic excellence
- Easily access from sidewalks, streets, parking, tunnel and train

Desired Program Elements:

Excellent public plaza space where one is comfortable:

- Seasonal shade and breezes
- Sight lines from within, adjacent sidewalks and buildings
- Space that accommodates natural pedestrian flows across plaza and from tunnel/ garage below
- Space with activity where one feels comfortable congregating with others: a social space
- Green oasis with seasonal flowers and plantings---respite in a dense, busy, paved environment
- Space that feels like an extension of Jones Hall and Alley Theater experience: forecourt, audio/video projection, etc.
- Space that is special in the evening because of its lighting
- Space that feels exceedingly well managed, safe (space manager on site day and evenings)

Food service day and evenings:

- Trendy, upscale restaurant of 12,000 square feet oriented to 250 destination and business patrons
- A hip place for drinks, quick before performance: snacks, great meal and after performance desserts: surrounding employees, Theater District regulars/ patrons and residents
- Meal prices range from \$12 to \$40 per person---menu places accent on health, featuring fresh preparation of selected products using a variety of local/regional purveyors; adjusted seasonally, menu would include broiled, grilled and baked American specialties; in-house bakery and reasonably priced wine selection
- Of a conservatory type design that incorporates feeling of performance, entertainment in a green setting: welcoming bar and piano, private dining area, visual kitchen, outdoor patio and ability to cater events on the plaza

Accommodate programming---events and activities:

- Special functions of performing arts organizations
- Small (200-300 attendance) concerts/ performances
- Catered special events: receptions, parties, etc.
- Temporary art exhibits
- Potentially other: checked out books, games, etc.

Accommodate the obvious:

- Buy a newspaper

- Have a WiFi connection
- Find out what's going on in the halls around
- Find a restroom

Iconic artistic elements ranging from freestanding art installation to environmental art using landscaping, fixtures, water, lighting, air shafts, etc.

Parking valet function in addition to major parking garage entrances for performance halls and business
Easily recognized comfortable connection to tunnel system and light rail transit station

Design considerations:

Public areas must be flexible and adaptable

Use of existing structure, utilities preferred as design/cost consideration

Two major underground garage entrances (Texas & Capitol) must remain

Four stair connections to garage must remain (although could be enhanced)

Ventilation of garage must be accommodated

Roof of garage approximately at street level must remain waterproof

Minimize barriers due to elevation change from sidewalks

Site assets:

Great location for public square in heart of one of country's largest performing arts/ business districts

Activity in neighborhood day and night 7 days per week

Very large daytime population within two blocks: 25,000 to 30,000; large evening population within two blocks: 5,000 to 15,000 (max.)

Site connects to Theater District and downtown office building tunnel systems

Surrounding architecture is magnificent collection of late 20th century works: Alley (Franzen), Jones Hall (CRS), Pennzoil (Johnson), Bank of America (Johnson)

Site has legacy of large events open to the public

Current issues with current design/ programming:

Plaza sparsely populated except infrequent occasion when there is a programmed event

Smith and Texas face of plaza is a large uninviting wall of structures

Space is designed for performances on stage, not really flexible

Large amount of site dedicated to rarely used restroom facilities intended for large events

Space does not accommodate day to day public social life

Too much hard surface; not enough green

While there is tunnel access to the plaza, using the narrow stairs is not a comfortable experience

Plaza Bistro restaurant is poorly utilized---location could be a major factor (buried at back of plaza in a building that looks like the restroom buildings)