

THIS AMERICAN PIAZZA

DIRECTOR PARK, A RATHER STARK URBAN PLAZA, PACKS IN THE PEOPLE.
IN THAT REGARD, IT SUCCEEDS WHERE SO MANY LIKE IT HAVE FAILED.

BY DANIEL JOST, ASLA

Italians love their piazzas, and American tourists love them too. But most attempts to create piazzas in the United States have failed. Boston City Hall Plaza. Copley Square. Harlequin Plaza. Some of the most infamous names in landscape architecture history have belonged to piazzas. They were too hot in the summer, wind-swept in the winter. People hated them.

To heal a failing piazza, designers have often prescribed plantings. Dean Abbott transformed Copley Square in Boston with a lot of trees and open lawns. EDAW's 1998 design for Harlequin Plaza in Greenwood Village, Colorado, replaced its checkered pavement with a grove of 390 aspens. And Utile and Reed Hilderbrand have plans for adding shade trees around Boston's City Hall. "[P]eople now want spaces that are softer and greener," Yvonne V. Chabrier wrote in this magazine in 1985, and that has largely been the prevailing wisdom ever since.

Simon and Helen Director. Park is neither soft nor green. Portland, Oregon's newest downtown park is mostly covered in warm gray granite pavement. What few trees and other plantings it has are mainly on one end. And in photographs, it can seem somewhat bright and a little bleak. But it was filled with people on a Sunday in July when I went to see it. The sky was gray, the temperature in the 60s. Yet people were eating, drawing, playing chess, chatting, and watching other people. A little girl was running through the fountain fully clothed. "We were at a movie and she thought it was too scary," her grandmother, Leslie Houser, told me, but she had apparently forgotten about that.

SONHEIM PHOTOGRAPHY





BELOW

Portland's Director Park is less soft and green than the parking lot it replaced.

OPPOSITE

OLIN and ZGF provided shelter and water, among other amenities, to attract people.



Director Park, which opened in 2009, was more than a century in the making. Daniel Lowmsdale's plan for Portland from around 1852 shows the parcel as part of a line of future parks along the city's western edge and names the adjacent street Park Avenue. Over time, 18 blocks along that street became a staccato promenade with trees, lawns, and paths. But the block between Yamhill and Taylor, where Director Park sits today, was one of six central "park" blocks that were developed with buildings in the late 1800s. A century later, the site had surface parking.

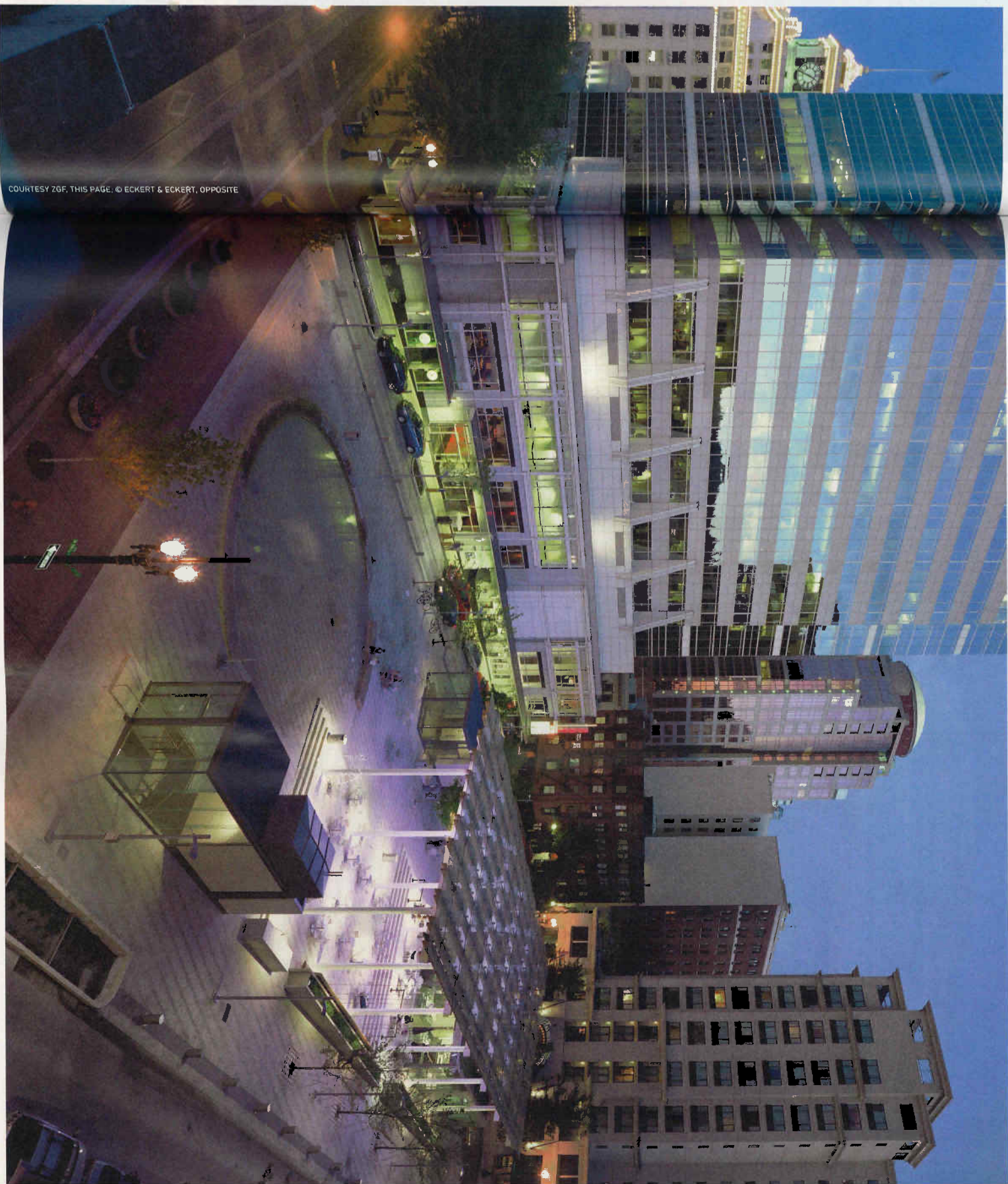
Moyer favored a park. Twelve stories' worth of cars could park in an underground garage connected to his tower's garage, he argued. He bought what is now the Director Park property for \$7 million in 1998 and pledged \$1 million toward the park's design and construction.

At first, there was talk of whether the park should look like the historic park blocks, with lawns and lines of trees. Moyer wanted to realize Lowmsdale's plan, to unite the northern and southern park blocks by bulldozing everything in between them.

In 2001, the city asked the landscape architect Laurie Olin, FASTA, among others, what to do. These experts said to preserve most of the buildings, create a set of urban plazas, and give the streets a nice makeover to tie it all together. Local leaders finally united behind this vision in 2004, when plans for a new tower killed hopes for unifying the park blocks. Director Park is its first fruit.

"There was always this idea that at some point in the city's future, these blocks would become parks," says Chet Orloff, who chaired a citizens committee for Director Park. So when a 12-story garage was proposed for the site in the mid-1990s, people were upset, including Tom Moyer, whose company was developing a 27-story tower across the street.

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COURTESY ZGF, THIS PAGE, © ECKERT & ECKERT, OPPOSITE



LEFT
The chess area can be taken over by movable furniture.

OPPOSITE TOP
A model of the fountain at Director Park, which is part splash pad, part wedding pool.

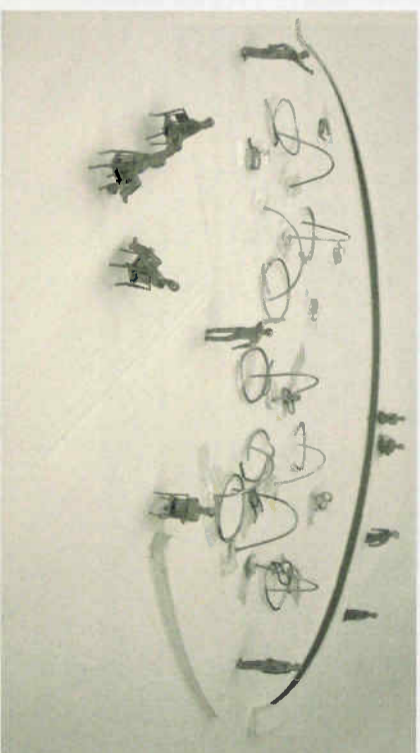
The dearth of vegetation in Director Park today is partly a result of poor coordination early on. TVA Architects designed the garage beneath the park for Moyer's company; meanwhile, Portland's Bureau of Parks & Recreation oversaw work on the park itself, which cost \$9.45 million. It hired the local firm Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects as prime; OLIN of Philadelphia, which led the design; and Mayer/Reed of Portland to do the planting design.

By the time the park design got under way, the garage was under construction. TVA had thoughtfully planned for all the cars to enter through Fox Tower across the street. This meant no garage entrance to usurp space and cut off views into the park, as you find in Pershing Square in Los Angeles. But the lid of the garage presented some challenges. The site is 200 feet by 100 feet and drops nearly 9 feet from its southwest corner to its northeast corner, where the lid was almost com-

ing out of the ground, Olin says. So they needed a series of stairs right against the sidewalk, whether the designers wanted them or not. Trees would also be impossible to grow there without raised planters, which Olin opposed.

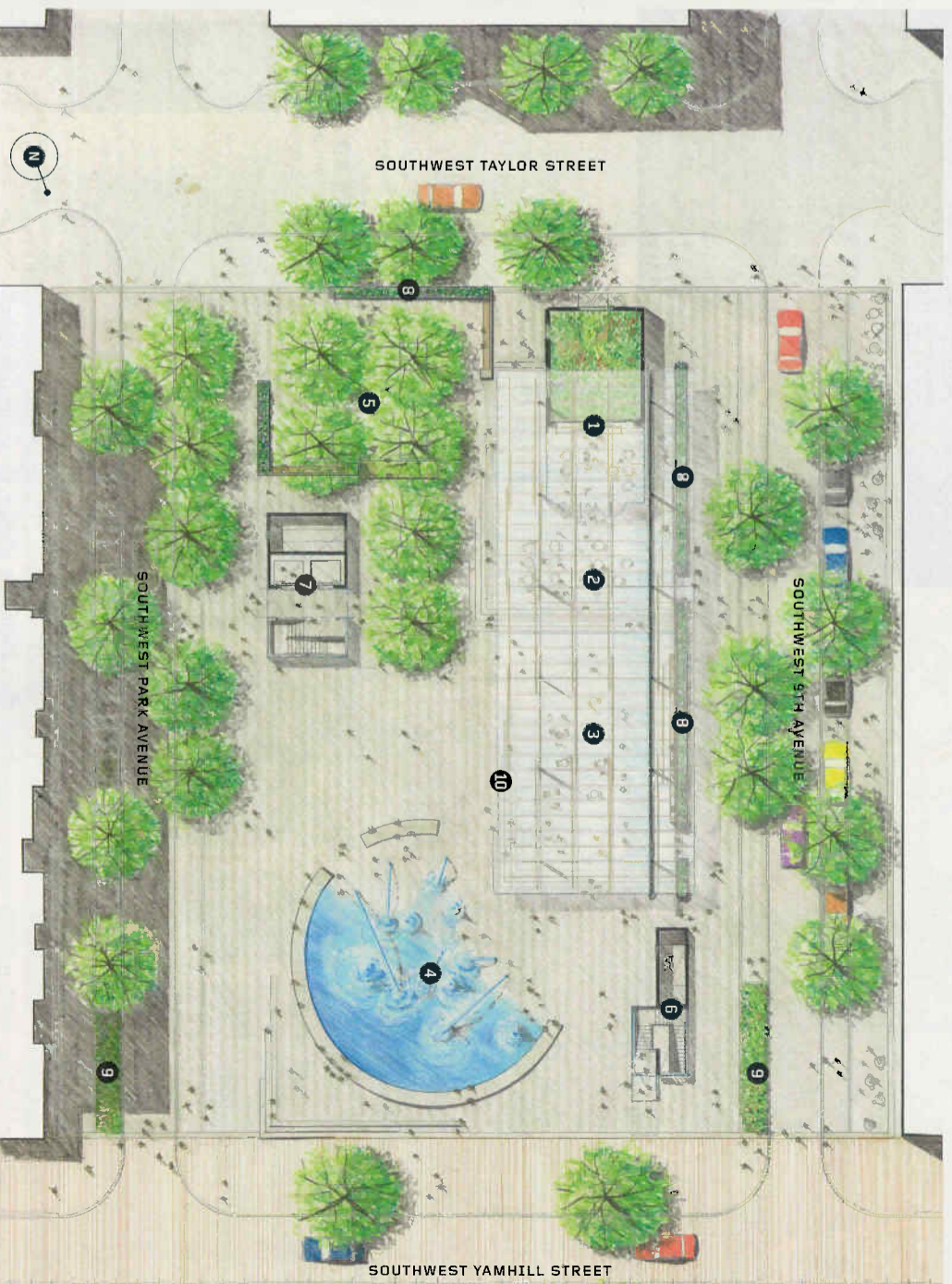
TVA's architects designed the pedestrian entrances to the garage, but ZGF was able to collaborate with them on the buildings' placement and materials, says Brian McCarter, FASLA, ZGF's lead landscape architect. One of these structures divides the plaza main area from a more intimate space with a giant chessboard and a small bosque of trees.

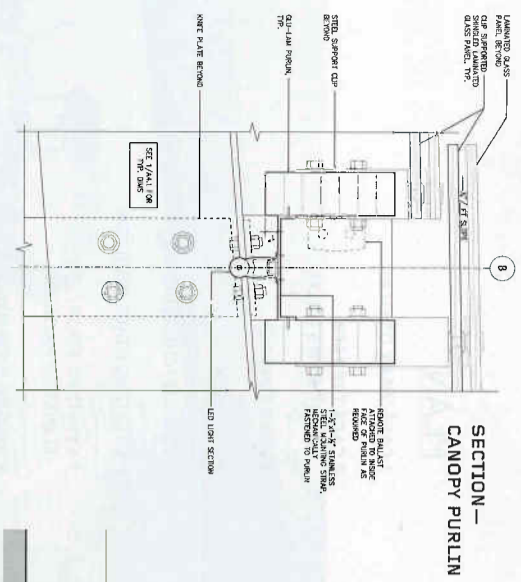
The main area has only a few trees on its far edges and no other plantings to look at. Instead, the people are the flowers, Olin says. And everything about the design is made to attract people and make them feel comfortable. There are a café, plenty of movable tables and chairs, a shelter, and an interactive fountain. Terraces and other short partitions



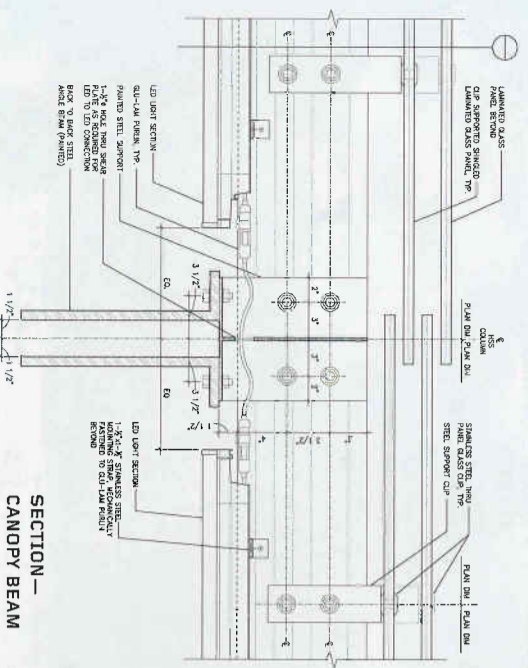
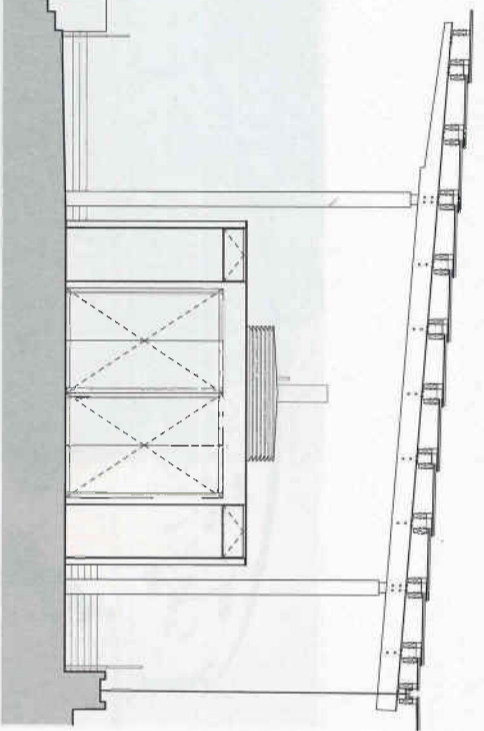
PLAN

- 1 CAFÉ/PARK OFFICE
- 2 CAFÉ TERRACE (CUSTOMERS ONLY)
- 3 PARK TERRACE
- 4 FOUNTAIN
- 5 BOSQUE/CHESSBOARD
- 6 EXISTING STAIR PAVILION
- 7 EXISTING STAIR/ELEVATOR PAVILION
- 8 RAISED STORMWATER PLANTER
- 9 SUNKEN STORMWATER PLANTER
- 10 GLASS CANOPY

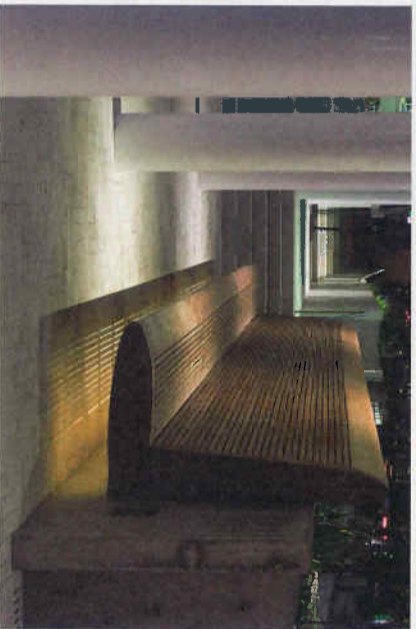




SECTION —
CANOPY PURLIN



SECTION —
CANOPY BEAM



carve up the area into smaller sections that provide a whole lot more intimacy than your typical piazza.

The designers worked with various local agencies so they could run the plaza's Gobi granite paving across Park and Ninth, which are curbside streets. OLIN's paving pattern was inspired by the woven grass baskets of the Columbia River people. Some of the pavers, from China, have a reeded, hand-tooled finish; the others have a flame finish that shines when wet.

It was important to Olin that the space work during a light rain. "I'm from the Pacific Northwest, and even in the dead of winter, it's kind of nice to be outside," Olin says. "People will sit on their porches." In Seattle's Pioneer Square, there's a little glass pergola that people sit under, and Olin always wondered why there weren't more glass shelters like it. So he proposed one, a much larger one, which ZGF designed. It's 110 feet long, with slender white posts

and natural wood girders. Its roof is unusually high, about 28 feet. Had it been lower, Olin was worried it wouldn't have felt as open and inviting. At night, the canopy becomes a colorful lantern, with an LED installation by the artist Dan Corson. "People just stop and stare," says Alicia Hammock, who manages the park. "As soon as the lights go on, it just warms and connects the entire space."

All the water from the canopy channels into a narrow planter at its edge, where it is filtered, then goes to a cistern for use in irrigation. The designers considered a waterfall to connect the canopy and the fountain but couldn't figure out how to make that meet health codes for human contact.

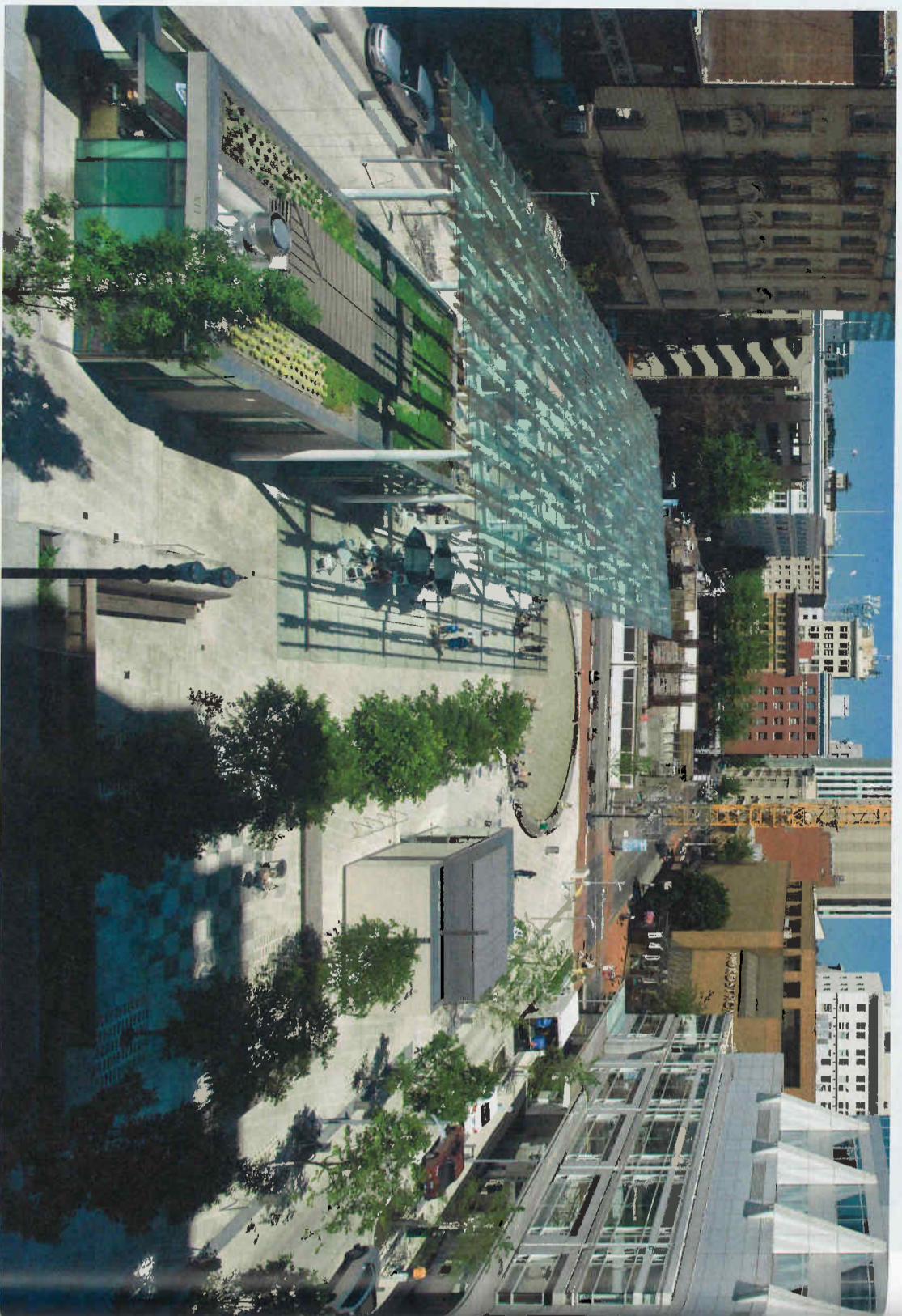
Olin says he was intimidated at the thought of designing a fountain in Portland at first. "Beethoven is just down the street," he explains, referring to the Ira Keller Fountain. "I thought, Don't do Beethoven. Do Chopin. Do Mozart. Do something light!"

ABOVE
The glass canopy drains into a stormwater planter, which is hidden from the main space by a high-backed bench.

OPPOSITE
The canopy invites people to sit in the park, rain or shine.

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The circular fountain is part splash pad, part wading pool. Water shoots up from jets in the circle's center and collects in a half circle behind one of the concrete walls that define it. Atop the wall is a continuous ipe bench that is truly musical: rather than lay the boards radially, Olin had the wood bent to follow the circle's edge. He had sought to create a bench like this at Columbus Square in New York but was unable to find craftspeople who could bend ipe. ZGF introduced him to West Coast Architectural Woodworking, which made it happen. The generous width and length of

the bench invites people to lounge, and Olin approves: "People worry about the homeless, but if you make the homeless uncomfortable, everyone else will be too."

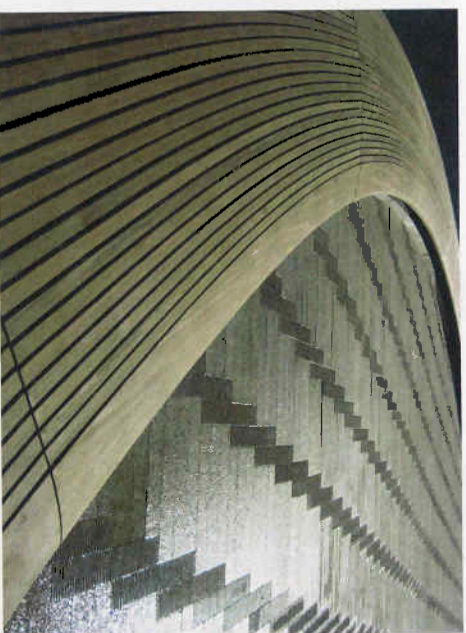
Most spray pads just attract kids under 10. Parents have two choices: Stand on the sidelines or get soaked, and adults without children feel about as welcome as they would on a jungle gym. But at Director Park, adults can sit on the bench and dip their feet in the water. The jets (and the splashing kids) are far enough away that everyone is comfortable.

ABOVE
The café enlivens the space.

OPPOSITE
The landscape's Gobi granite pavement mixes reeded and flame finishes and looks great wet.

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COURTESY OLIN



Parents are also thankful for the park's public restroom—a feature seldom found in new parks today because people are afraid they invite inappropriate behavior. But Olin says, "It's unforgivable to build great public spaces and not give people a place to go to the bathroom."

In 2012, the city took hourly counts of park users at Director Park every day, and in the summer months, there were typically more than 100 people here during each hour between noon and 7:00 p.m. Last August, an average of 2,046 people were counted in the park each day between 10:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. (though people who stayed more than an hour may have been counted twice).

So what sets Director Park apart from other stark piazzas that have failed? Two differences that aren't self-evident are its context and programming. Portland has a milder climate than most American cities—much closer to the Mediterranean climate in Italy and its piazzas. Olin points out that the city has embraced urban living more than most others as well: "There's a type of community in Portland you don't find in L.A." The city is also greener and mossier than most places, and a surprising number of park users I met said the novelty of a not-so-green park was part of the attraction. "You can get a little browbeaten with the greenery here," said one visitor, Rachel Haigh, who grew up in Southern California.

Director Park is not the only successful piazza in Portland. There's also Pioneer Courthouse Square, a red brick piazza designed by Walker Macy that's just a block away. But even in Portland, the piazza has not always worked. O'Bryant Square, developed in the 1970s, became a hangout for drug addicts. Portland's Lovejoy Plaza is not a failure, but it's not as lively as Director Park.

"If you have really hideous architecture, it's almost impossible to overcome," Olin noted, when we talked about the failure of so many piazzas. Both O'Bryant Square and Lovejoy Plaza are in less bustling parts of the city, have poor sight lines from nearby streets, and have many inhumanely scaled buildings around them. Pioneer Courthouse Square and Director Park are located in the heart of Portland's vibrant downtown. Three of the streets surrounding Director Park have ground-floor restaurants or retail; the site abuts a movie theater, offices, and apartments.

"The other thing is, no matter how big or little a park is, it needs management," Olin says. Pioneer Courthouse Square, which is managed by a nonprofit group, has about 300 events a year—from a Christmas tree lighting to sand sculpting. Director Park, which is managed by the city's parks department, has an annual budget of \$4.75,000. Hammock, a full-time employee, has a tiny office on-site. Part-time "park hosts" set up all the chairs and tables and chess pieces every morning, store



LEFT
A generously wide
ipe bench encourages
lounging.

OPPOSITE
Parents dip their
feet in the park's pool
while children splash
near the jets, a safe
distance away.

them away every evening, monitor the bathrooms, and keep an eye on what's happening in the space from approximately 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. in the summer. Maintenance people keep the light-colored pavement clean. Hammock has less than \$10,000 each year for programming the space after other regular expenses are paid. But she works with institutions like the Portland Opera and local bands who are willing to play the site for free to gain some exposure. There are also community dances and art classes and occasional private events that bring in a very small amount of the annual budget.

Director Park shows that lots of trees and lush plantings may not be necessary to attract people to a space, but Olin argues that the materials and proportions of the park play a role in its success. "You could put food in Boston City Hall Plaza and it would still be hateful," he says. The scale of the plaza and its rooms matters, and so do the touch and quality of the materials people come in contact with. "People like Lamborghini's," Olin says. "Making a bench a bit longer and more generous, it says, 'Come sit here.'"

Project Credits

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