



PERSPECTA 50

URBAN DIVIDES

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RADICAL URBANISM IN THE DIVIDED CITY:
On M. Paul Friedberg's Riis Park Plaza (1966)
Marisa Angell Brown



Photograph of M. Paul Friedberg, ca. 1990s.

The “wrong side of the tracks,” “Skid Row,” and “the outskirts of hope”—all phrases that testify to the ways in which poverty is often given spatial definition in modern America. It has been theorized as a place apart from the prosperous center, not just a condition but a space that is physically, socially, economically, and culturally peripheral to an imagined center, whether that center is figured as the middle class or as Main Street. Documentary photographers in the late nineteenth century and their better-known heirs in the 1930s—Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans—published the first photo books of urban slums and rural shack towns, in which poverty was represented as a different country, a world apart. The title of New York journalist Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), the first publication in this genre, said it all: the poor were “the other half,” ostensibly making the book’s readers “this half,” as the cultural historian Maren Stange has pointed out.¹

The national public housing program, established in 1933 under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act and expanded in 1937 with federal legislation authorizing the establishment of local housing authorities that could finance and develop public housing, suggested an alternative conception of poverty, attempting through the design of new projects to obscure some of the physical divisions between “this” and the “other” half. In its nascent period, the 1930s, public housing architecture took design cues from tropes associated with the local middle class, from the neo-Georgian brick developments in Atlanta and the tropical stucco villas of Miami to the International Style projects in New York City, Cleveland, and other urban centers where cutting-edge modernism was known.²

These projects, always built on relatively inexpensive land—land that was either at the physical periphery of the center, or that had been cleared of existing tenements deemed to be “slums”—were conceived as jumping-off points into middle-class life, liminal spaces that served as a way station between two divided economic and cultural spheres. This is most powerfully expressed in photographs of the new public housing projects that were commissioned by the local and federal housing authorities, which drew visual connections between the projects and the distant skyscrapers of the city center. These images elided any relationship between the new developments and the surrounding tenements, providing a visual cue to the overarching goals of the public housing program at its start, which was designed to draw outlying slums into the middle-class fold.

Similar, operationally, to the importation of the architectural styles and

methods of the colonial powers into their colonies, early public housing architecture was deliberately conceived by the agencies that guided and approved project designs to transform indigent subjects figured overwhelmingly in photographs as abject, often black, women into modern “domestic workers.”³ This is why the Housing Division’s (the agency tasked with overseeing the public housing program in its early years) planning requirements stipulated strict minimums on sunlight penetration into unit interiors and dictated efficient kitchen and closet designs that were intended to support cooking and cleaning in the “domestic workshop.”⁴

But this transition did not take place. The public housing program was suspended during World War II, and after the war the 1944 G.I. Bill and a subsequent revision to this bill in 1945 offered financial incentives to private developers and home buyers to kick-start the construction and purchase of new homes for returning veterans. In effect, the bill laid out “easy terms for borrowers and virtual carte blanche for developers,” allowing borrowers to obtain loans of up to 100% of the home’s purchase price.⁵ As the historian Kenneth Jackson and others since have demonstrated, rapid suburbanization and white flight from the urban centers ensued, creating a postwar built landscape that was increasingly stratified by race, class, and even gender as suburban men commuted back and forth between the city and suburb while women remained at home.⁶

Was urban renewal a corrective response to white flight (in that its aim was to attract suburban whites back into the city center) or was it an extension of the same segregationist drive to further divide the postwar landscape by creating islands of white leisure, work, and residential life within increasingly heterogeneous urban centers? Urban historians, political historians, and sociologists ascribe different motives to the individuals, agencies, and community groups that promulgated urban renewal, but in the end most agree that the massive program—authorized under the 1949 and 1954 U.S. Housing Acts, which allowed the federal government to subsidize private developers in acquiring and razing slums and building new residential, commercial, and industrial projects in their place—further stratified the postwar city by race and class. By the early 1960s, in words reminiscent of Riis’s 1890 book, there was talk of an “other America,” which was understood to be not only poor, but also black and Latino, and now segregated spatially in public housing projects in the growing ghettos of many urban centers.⁷

What started out as a project to create transitional launching pads to the middle class had become, by the 1960s, a project associated with segregation and

containment, with keeping residents “in” rather than hop-scotching them “out” of the slum. This evolution was captured in contemporary sociological accounts of life in the projects from this time and in representations of them in the media, which

1 Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14–17.

2 The regionalism of early public housing architecture has not been adequately understood. Ever since the 1932 International Style exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art—where a model of one of the first public housing projects was exhibited—and Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson’s accompanying publication, *The International Style* (1932), which posited the factory and the low-cost housing project as the two building types that embodied the style and aims of modernist architecture, the sense that early public housing architecture was, across the board, modernist has dominated our understanding of public housing design. Richard Pommer’s “The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37, no. 4 (December 1978): 235–64, and Richard Plunz’s treatment of public housing in *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 189–227, have supported this misconception, but many public housing projects in the 1930s outside urban centers bore little connection to modernist design principles, either in form, plan, or applied ornament.

3 The document that most clearly lays out the design objectives of the early public housing program in its nascent phase is Col. Horatio B. Hackett, “How the PWA Housing Division Functions,” *Architectural Record* 77 (March 1935): 148–84. Hackett was Director of the Public Works Administration (PWA) Housing Division. Throughout this document, Hackett uses terms then in vogue in scientific management and home economics, presenting the new public

housing projects as domestic factories designed to enable productivity. This new view of the home was advocated in multiple reports at President Herbert Hoover’s 1931 Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, predating the PWA. See, for example, White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, *The Home and the Child: Housing, Furnishing, Management, Income, Clothing* (New York: Century Company, 1931), 18–24; and Marisa Angell Brown, “Imagined Communities: Race, Gender and the Architecture of Alterity in American Public Housing Design” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, Department of the History of Art, 2014): 27–53.

4 Hackett, “How the PWA Housing Division Functions,” 174.

5 Alexander von Hoffman, “History Lessons for Today’s Housing Policy: The Political Processes of Making Low-Income Housing Policy,” August 23, 2012, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/files/w12-5_von_hoffman.pdf, 19.

6 Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7 Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1962); and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963).

8 See Sam Castan, “Modern Design for a City Ghetto,” *Look* (September 21, 1965), M7-M8 and “Major Changes Urged for Public Housing,” *Chicago Daily News* (undated news clipping from 1965), CHA Scrapbook, Box A, Bertrand Goldberg Archive, The Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, the Art Institute of Chicago.

pictured these spaces as prisons indelibly separating their occupants from the downtown spires they were once intended to relate to.

The particular projects that were understood to be agents of spatial apartheid were those built in the cities that had seen high numbers of incoming blacks (from the southern states in the years following the Depression) and Puerto Ricans, who emigrated to the United States in large numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. These included the Robert Taylor Homes (1962) on the South Side of Chicago—called a “\$70,000,000 ghetto” and “the Congo Hilton” shortly after completion.⁸ By the 1960s, Samuel Zipp writes, public housing projects such as these “evoked the divided urban landscape—suburban plenty at the fringe and urban deprivation at the core—that marked the dawning age of ‘urban crisis.’”⁹ The well-known bookend to all of this is the photograph of the Pruitt-Igoe Homes being blown up by dynamite that was used by Charles Jencks and also by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter in important texts from the 1970s to argue for the ideological bankruptcy of modernist architecture.¹⁰

There was a brief period from the early 1960s to the early 1970s in which a number of architects and landscape architects charted a new course in the design of public housing. Informed by broad changes in American thinking about race and ethnicity and also by currents in postwar sociology, these projects reveal architecture grappling with race and poverty, and also with the question of how architecture might effectively engage in social activism and cultural critique. This essay looks at one of these projects in particular: the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg’s 1966 design of two acres of space within the Jacob Riis Houses (1949) stretching from East 6th Street to East 10th Street between Avenue D and FDR Drive on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Riis Park Plaza, as it was called, was a seminal intervention into urban space. It suggested alternatives: alternatives to the postwar dichotomy between suburban plenty and urban deprivation; alternatives to the segregated space within the postwar city; alternatives to a model of urbanism that ignored play and creativity as elemental needs; and alternatives to the historical practice of landscape architecture, which until this period was focused more on horticulture than the design of public space. It was a seminal project in the history of American architecture, an early experiment in radical urbanism in the divided postwar city that demonstrated sophisticated ways in which activism might shape architecture.

Tragically, Riis Park Plaza was razed in 2000, but understanding how it worked is relevant today. Some of the things we have long associated with the past—seg-

regation and slavery, for example—are still with us (the Global Slavery Index estimates that 45.8 million people are currently held in bondage globally, while racial segregation continues to divide our twenty-first-century cities).¹¹ Architecture is implicated in these issues as it is our medium for giving these ideas spatial definition and therefore materiality. It may be that most of the buildings and spaces that get built over the next century extend the powerful arm of global capital and instantiate the urge to divide our habitat along racial, class, or gendered lines. But are there possibilities for resistance—and does architecture have a role to play in such resistance?

Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner of Urban–Think Tank think it does; the exhibition they curated in 2015 at the 6th Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture in Shenzhen, *Radical Urbanism*, as well as their accompanying essay, “The Evolution of Radical Urbanism: What Does the Future Hold for Our Cities?” suggest that there is a vibrant global history of radical urbanism, which they define as architectural and urban projects, exhibitions, publications, theories, and even performances that challenge and critique political and social norms, bringing utopic notions of possibility in direct engagement with contemporary social and political action.¹²

Along these lines, it may be helpful to begin to assemble a canon of radical urbanist experiments that grappled—and continue to grapple—with division so that we understand that there is a tradition of such work in American architecture. It may also be helpful to understand the particular ways in which twentieth-century radical urbanists used design to further social activism and to analyze their successes and failures. What we may find is that the most powerful tools that architects have are the same tools that make architecture so imperative to political and economic expansion: the production of space.

* * *

When Friedberg was given the Riis Park Plaza commission, he was only thirty-four years old and had a thin resume. Prior to this commission, Friedberg collaborated with the architect Simon Breines on remodeling the outdoor space surrounding the Carver Houses (1958) in Harlem in 1963. This project involved replacing a series of inaccessible lawns and small fenced playgrounds with a series of three outdoor “rooms”: a modernist garden, a playground, a wooden maze, and a sandlot, and in between, a large multi-use space that had elements of an open-air amphitheater and contemporary bandstand with a small canteen.

The project was spearheaded by Brooke Astor, who approached the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) as she wanted to fund a new publicly accessible recreational space in Harlem through the Astor Foundation.¹³ NYCHA selected the Carver Houses because there had been conflict between residents and the building’s managers over use of the central open space, which had been fenced off due to the managers’ insistence that the landscaping was being destroyed.¹⁴ Breines, Friedberg, and Robert Zion (who worked in I.M. Pei’s New York office at the time) were invited to submit designs for the Carver Houses commission; Breines and Friedberg chose to work as a team and were ultimately given the commission.¹⁵

The project was in many ways a first draft of the ideas that would come to fruition at Riis. As soon as the Carver Houses project was completed, it was deemed an important contribution to the physical landscape of Harlem and harbinger of a new direction in public housing design. In 1964, the chairman of NYCHA wrote to Astor that Carver Houses was “a ‘must’ on the schedule of every inspection tour conducted by the [New York City Housing] Authority,” while a 1966 publication promoting NYCHA’s achievements devoted a three-page spread to the distinctive bandstand, amphitheater, and spray pool.¹⁶ In 1965, the Park Association gave its annual design award to NYCHA for Carver and its other open space projects as, one journalist noted, “recognition of breakthroughs in the design and concept of public housing” which previously had been the “grimmiest” in the country.¹⁷

9 Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

10 See Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 23; and Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977; repr., New York: Rizzoli, 1991 [1977]), 9–10.

11 See The Walk Free Foundation, www.globallslaveryindex.org.

12 Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, “The Evolution of Radical Urbanism: What Does the Future Hold for our Cities?” *Arch Daily*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.archdaily.com/778308/the-evolution-of-radical-urbanism-what-does-the-future-hold-for-our-cities>.

13 Simon Breines to the Client Award

Program, New York State Association of Architects, August 21, 1964, Vincent Astor Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder “NYCHA”, Special Collections, New York Public Library.

14 Ibid.

15 Friedberg credits Breines with taking a lead role in the design.

16 Bill Reid, the Chairman of NYCHA, to Brooke Astor, October 6, 1964, Vincent Astor Foundation Records, Box 11, Folder “Carver Amphitheater Committee.”

17 Thomas C. Wheeler, “New York Tries a New Approach,” *The Reporter*, June 17, 1965.

18 The Astor Foundation donated \$700,000 towards the \$900,000 budget. *The Vincent Astor Foundation, 1964–1968* (New York: Vincent Astor Foundation, n.d.), 6, Vincent Astor Foundation Records.



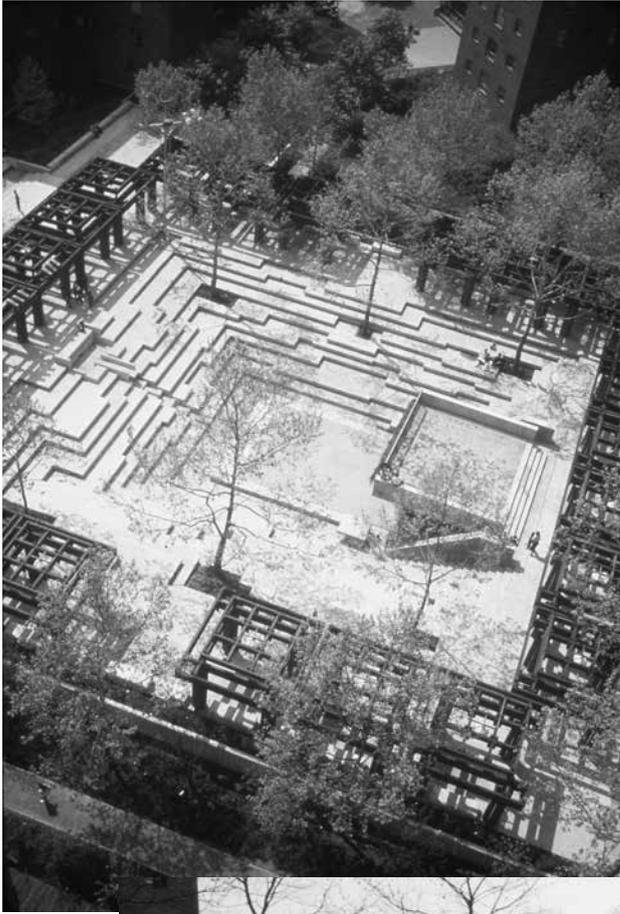
(Fig. 1) Kahn & Jacobs, Carver Houses, before Simon Breines and M. Paul Friedberg's design intervention. Photograph courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.



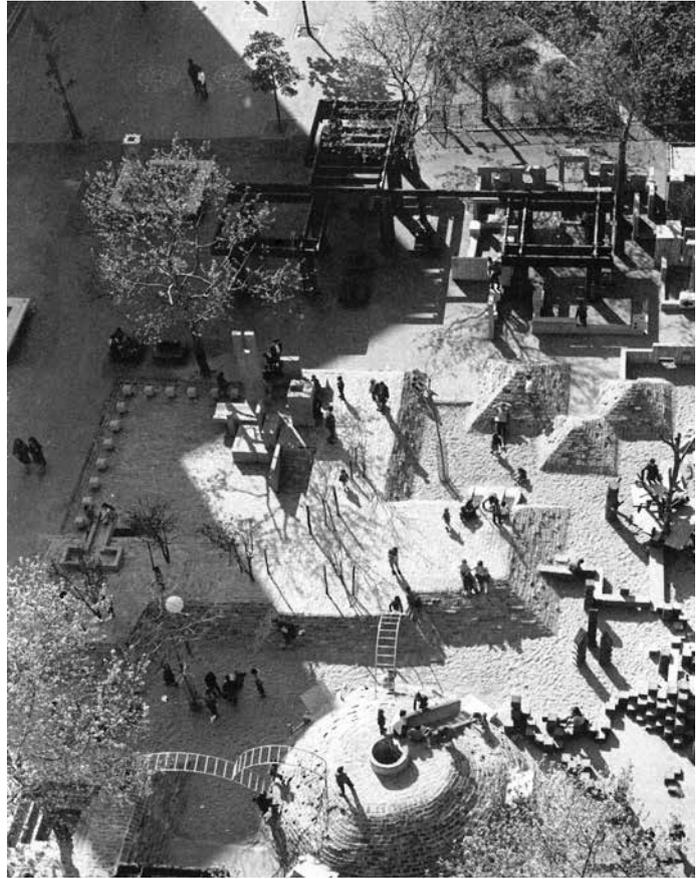
(Fig. 2) Simon Breines and M. Paul Friedberg, Carver Court, showing the playground at top of photo and bandstand at bottom (modernist garden located north of the bandstand is not visible in this photograph). Photograph courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.



(Fig. 3) Simon Breines and M. Paul Friedberg, Carver Court on dedication day, showing level changes and pergola at top of photograph, brick walls facing the raised stage and canteen built into one of the brick walls at right bottom, viewed from the north. Photograph courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.



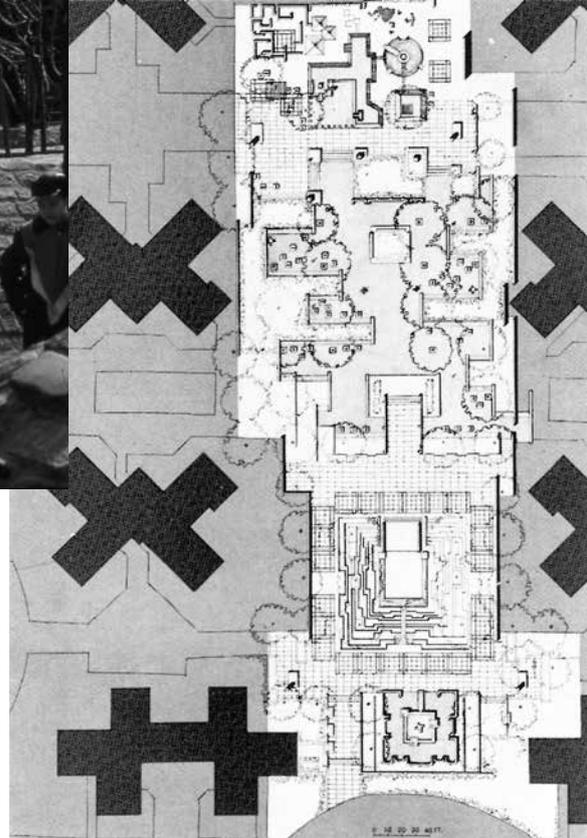
(Fig. 4) Riis Park Plaza amphitheater. Photograph courtesy of M. Paul Friedberg Partners (MPFP).



(Fig. 5) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 6) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 7) Riis Park Plaza site plan showing, from bottom to top, the walled elderly garden, amphitheater, open plaza with modernist plantings and adventure playground. Plan courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 8) Riis Park Plaza: kids climbing in amphitheater. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 9) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 10) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.

Three years later and several miles south of Carver, Riis Park Plaza was dedicated in May 1966. For NYCHA and for the city, Riis Park Plaza was even more of a public relations success than Carver had been; Lady Bird Johnson gave remarks along with New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and Astor,¹⁸ and it received awards from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the American Institute of Architects, the New York State Association of Architects, the New York State Council on the Arts, the City Club, the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Municipal Art Society, and the Public Housing Agency.¹⁹ As a result, Friedberg became a significant figure in public housing design: he was asked by NYCHA to draw up plans for the insertion of Riis-like spaces at the Forest Houses, Foster Houses, Van Dyke Houses, and the Brevoort Houses in 1967 and was even retained around this time by the St. Louis Housing Authority to suggest design alternatives for the troubled Pruitt-Igoe Homes as well.²⁰

What had made such a splash? The two-acre space, as at the Carver Houses, replaced a series of fenced rectangular grass lawns and small playgrounds surrounded by broad concrete walkways. Contemporary journalists noted that the former chain-link fencing had been posted with “Keep Off the Grass” signs and other notices that prohibited residents and children from damaging, defacing, or actively using the grounds. The space that Friedberg designed, by contrast, was open and accessible and was programmed to accommodate a variety of activities, experiences, and age groups. It worked for all ages and all energy levels, encouraging social integration by letting each loosely defined space flow into the next without the disruption of fences, gates, or other physical barriers.

At its southern end, a small “elderly garden” provided benches for reading and conversation. With a fountain at its center, the whole area was loosely bounded with a brick wall to create a sense of enclosure. The heart of Riis Park Plaza was its amphitheater, located just to the north, an immense multilevel space that could hold up to 2,000 spectator-participants, with dressing and rehearsal rooms at basement level designed in consultation with Joseph Papp, director of the Shakespeare in the Park series at the outdoor Delacorte Theater, and built-in jets that could convert the entire space into a giant water park in the warmer months.

A modernist garden separated the amphitheater from the plaza’s northernmost point—an innovative adventure playground, the first of its kind in the United States, which featured interconnected climbing structures, jungle bars, and slides made of cobblestone, old railroad ties, bits

of repurposed concrete sewer pipe, and a sand floor with the overall appearance of an ancient ziggurat or igloo city, a fanciful landscape in miniature that provided a contrast to the standard swing/slide equipment installed in most playgrounds of the era. When it was completed, one journalist noted, the playground was a site of “frenzied activity—the children play as if the whole thing might disappear tomorrow.”²¹ NYCHA photographs show the playground and amphitheater as sites of exuberant use, with science demonstrations and dance-offs, while newspaper accounts noted that Twyla Tharp performed at Riis in August 1967, and in the summer of 1968, a long list of children’s performances included an acting troupe called the Paper Bag Players, a magic show, and a puppet show, while the space was booked in 1970 for a jazz and Latino music performance and more children’s skits.²²

Coming when it did, Riis Park Plaza was a spirited defense of the city as an idea and should be understood within the context of the emerging critique of the homogenized American suburbs in books such as *The Exploding Metropolis* (1958), edited by William H. Whyte, and the better known *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) by Jane Jacobs. Whyte and Friedberg were friends, and Friedberg later recounted that they “sympathized” and “had similar ideals... He was an advocate. I was a producer.”²³ Jacobs’ book would become the bestseller, but *The Exploding Metropolis* was the opening salvo against suburbanization and large-scale urban projects that we now link with Robert Moses. As Whyte put it in his introduction, “This is a book by people who like cities.”²⁴ For a landscape architect to not only agree with this point of view but attempt to instantiate many of these ideas into urban space was an unexpected move.

Friedberg talked about Riis Park Plaza as if it were an urban habitat rather than a garden or park. Although—or perhaps because—he came to landscape architecture through horticulture (his father owned a nursery in New York where he worked as a boy; he received his B.S. in Horticulture from Cornell University in 1954 and planned to take over his father’s nursery before he moved into landscape architecture), by the 1960s, he was dismissive of the notion that the most valuable tools of his trade were “flowers and trees and lawn,” which he termed “archaic” and irrelevant given the enormous economic, social, and physical challenges of the modern urban ghetto.²⁵ Rather than celebrating nature, Riis Park Plaza celebrated urban social life in all of its complexity, contradiction, and unruliness without devolving into either caricaturing urban life or treating it as spectacle.

When asked what he thought he had contributed to the field of landscape architecture, Friedberg said, “It’s enjoying the city, removing the landscape architecture bias of the past [of] the preconceived notion that the city is a hostile place.”²⁶ Riis Park Plaza transgressed two different, but linked, sets of norms: it upended the postwar suburban/urban dichotomy that equated the city with poverty and abjection—think of the popularity of film noir in Friedberg’s time, which represented the city as an ominous, forbidding landscape—by offering a celebratory reading of the city. In addition, it tested the traditional skepticism toward urban infrastructure that was expressed in mainstream landscape architecture of his era, while eschewing an avant-garde aestheticizing branch within the field that took direction from abstract and surrealist art. Friedberg’s work, rather, was related to—and probably also indebted to—the older landscape architect Karl Linn’s “neighborhood commons” work in Philadelphia in the early 1960s, combining park-playgrounds that were designed in concert with local residents in inner-city neighborhoods.²⁷

19 *The Vincent Astor Foundation, 1964–1968* (New York: Vincent Astor Foundation, n.d.), 6; Vincent Astor Foundation Records.

20 Memorandum to Department and Division Heads of NYCHA from J. Christian, General Manager of NYCHA, November 13, 1967, New York City Housing Authority Collection, New York, Box 73B1, Folder 9, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, New York; and Mildred F. Schmertz, “Designing the Spaces in Between,” *Architectural Record* 143, no. 3 (March 1968): 128.

21 John Morris Dixon, “Riis Plaza: Three Acres Filled with Life,” *Architectural Forum* 125, no. 1 (July–August 1966): 73.

22 “Dance Programs of the Week,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1967, D5; “Children’s Activities Listed,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1968, 30; “Amusements Listed in City for Children,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1968, 38; “Amusements Scheduled for Children Throughout City,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1968, 28; “Things for Youngsters to See in the City,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1970, 70; “Entertainment Events,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1970, 2; *East Side News*, September 3, 1971,

New York City Housing Authority Collection, Box 92C5, Folder 22.

23 M. Paul Friedberg, interviews by Charles S. Birnbaum, James Sheldon and Shirley Veeneman, October 5–6, 2006, and May 22, 2008, Pioneers Oral Histories Series, Cultural Landscape Foundation, 16.

24 William H. Whyte, Jr., ed., *The Exploding Metropolis* (1958; repr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

25 Friedberg, Oral History, 27; and M. Paul Friedberg, discussion with author, February 13, 2002.

26 Friedberg, Oral History, 24.

27 Karl Linn, interviews by Lisa Rubens in 2003 and 2004, Oral History Regional Oral History Office, the Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley, 71–72. Both Friedberg and Linn mention each other in their oral histories. See Friedberg, Oral History, 13, and Linn, Oral History, 52, in which Linn recounts meeting with Friedberg, Edward Bye, Jr., and Conrad Hamerman from time to time to discuss their work.

Ironically, all of this lost was lost on Lady Bird Johnson, whose dedicatory comments presented Riis Park Plaza as a bucolic oasis within the larger urban landscape. This was evident from her first words—“Oh, how nice; oh, how lovely ... [look at the] green trees and bright flowers and moving waters”—to her prepared comments:

I suspect if some of those early Greeks were to stand in Grand Central at 5 o'clock today and see the exodus to the country each afternoon, they would be perplexed and say: “Where are you going? If you are so smart and progressive, why haven't you learned to bring the countryside down?” And that's just what you have learned here in Riis Plaza.²⁸

This fundamental misunderstanding of Riis, viewing the new park as an escape from urbanity rather than a celebration of it, is not surprising, given that Johnson came to Riis Park Plaza in the midst of her national “beautification” campaign. This mistake is important as it points to the pitfall of privileging the historical written record over formal and spatial analysis within history. In this case, much of what Friedberg was up to can only be gleaned through a close reading of Riis Park Plaza combined with his own statements about his work and about this project in particular as other observers—not only Johnson, but also Astor Foundation and NYCHA staff—were either not attuned to the subtleties of Friedberg's design or valued it primarily as a juvenile crime prevention measure.²⁹

What does a close reading of Riis Park Plaza reveal? First, it is instructive to see when, how, and where Friedberg used trees, shrubs, and flowers and to keep in mind as a counterpoint to the abundance and Romanticism of Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park which then—and even now—set the standard for landscape architecture in New York and beyond. In the amphitheater and in the garden room at Riis Park Plaza, trees and shrubs were used as supporting players; many mature trees from the original plan were saved, and new ones were strategically planted to provide shade or to act as sentinel-like markers in space, creating lines and grids that directed movement and divided space into increasingly intimate, but never naturalistic, rooms. In the adventure playground, Friedberg clearly took pains to incorporate existing trees into the design, in one instance building a cobblestone climbing structure around a tree, and in another case using an existing tree as the center of a simple deconstructed tree house. In a few places, Friedberg even left the trunks of some trees that had been sheared off at the top as climbing equipment.

The overall effect suggested that natural materials had a role to play in the urban habitat, but only inasmuch as they supported both the needs and the physical infrastructure of urban culture—a far cry from the painterly, picturesque treatment of trees in Olmsted's Central Park, where nature has been aestheticized and the city outside screened as much as possible.³⁰ Riis Park Plaza illustrated the rhetorical defense of the city found in *The Exploding Metropolis*, crystallizing many of what this emerging urbanist group considered to be the best parts of urban life in one space: play, community, energy, and diversity.

Second, a close reading of Riis Park Plaza reveals Friedberg's attention to space, and the sophisticated ways in which he deploys space as a building material. In every part of the scheme, from the amphitheater steps, waterways, and water spouts to the stepped-timber climbing structures, the relationship between line and space is emphasized, casting space as a substance with as much physicality as the materials it abuts. There is a density to space in these moments, a sense that, like water, it rushes in to fill gaps wherever they occur.

It is interesting to note that some elements of Riis Park Plaza align with the tenets of Minimalism, which emerged in the early and mid-1960s and was first formulated as a movement in the *Primary Structures* exhibition in the spring of 1966 at the Jewish Museum in New York, a month before Riis Park Plaza was dedicated. In both Riis Park Plaza and in Minimalist sculpture, modern industrial materials are manipulated to activate the surrounding space with the aim of creating a phenomenological interplay between viewer and artwork or play piece, pulling him or her into a relationship with it. Like many Minimalist sculptors, Friedberg was also critical of figuration, writing in 1970 that figurative play structures, like fire trucks and sculpted animals, were “literal design [that] restricts a child's imagination” by cuing him or her to one specific use.³¹ Riis Park Plaza, by contrast, was abstract and made use of only a few materials: cobblestone, wood, concrete, steel, and sand.³² Friedberg also noted that “all the sculptors were into designing play pieces because some kids were climbing on a Calder... However, you could never really play on this stuff.”³³ His contribution “was to create a play piece that was sculptural as opposed to a sculpture that was a play piece.”³⁴

Friedberg said that psychological research on play from the 1930s through the 1960s was an important influence on his work as it highlighted the importance of play in development.³⁵ In the first part of the twentieth century, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938 translated and

published in the United States in 1944) for the first time theorized play as central to the development of culture and connected it to sacred ritual and mythmaking, while Jean Piaget's *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1951) argued that play and games had a crucial role in the psychological formation of the self. Brian Sutton-Smith, whom Friedberg directly

28 Lady Bird Johnson, quoted in Bernard Weinraub, “Mrs. Johnson Opens Riis Playground,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1966, 1 and 50.

29 In an undated letter to Brooke Astor from Fannie Nealy, Chairman of the Carver Amphitheater Committee, Nealy writes, “Before this [amphitheater] program began ... small children got into all sorts of mischief. Adolescents looking for trouble, forming gang fights and upsetting the whole neighborhood. Your kindness eliminated all this last year.” Vincent Astor Foundation Archives, Box 11, Folder “Carver Amphitheater Committee.” Linda Gillies, Director of the Astor Foundation, also wrote to Brooke Astor about this on May 25, 1966, stating that Riis Park Plaza was “the best way we have ever used our charitable dollars to combat delinquency.” Vincent Astor Foundation Archives, Box 8, Folder “Riis Park.”

30 Media coverage of Riis Park Plaza was extensive in the 1960s: Editorial, “New York's Great Open Space,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1966, 45; Ada Louise Huxtable, “At Last, a Winner,” *New York Times* May 24, 1966, 49; Philip H. Dougherty, “On a Hot Day a Kid Can Go to the Riis Playground and Just ‘Let Go,’” *New York Times*, June 21, 1966, 45; “Frog into Prince,” *Progressive Architecture* 47 (July 1966): 170–72; Mildred Schmertz, “Shaping the Community in an Era of Dynamic Social Change,” *Architectural Record* 140, no. 1 (July 1966): 196–99; John Morris Dixon, “Riis Plaza: Three Acres Filled with Life,” *Architectural Forum* 125, no. 1 (July–August 1966): 68–73; “Urban Playscapist,” *Progressive Architecture* 47, no. 8 (August 1966): 70–72; Scott Kelly, “Plaza on a Grass Plot,” *Industrial Design* (October 1966): 53–57; and Charles L.

Mee, Jr., “Putting the Play in Playgrounds,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1966, 112, 117, 119, 120.

31 M. Paul Friedberg, *Play and Interplay: A Manifesto for New Design in Urban Recreational Environments* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 82.

32 Was Friedberg aware of Minimalism when he designed Riis Park Plaza in 1965? Minimalism was still in its early days at that point, and the only publications or exhibitions that pointed toward this new direction in contemporary art were a handful of essays and downtown gallery shows featuring the work of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, which exhibited neither the playful humanism of Riis Park Plaza nor any sense of the social value of activating space in this way. Although Riis Park Plaza was certainly a critique of traditional landscape architecture—and Friedberg's treatment of space was one part of this critique—the design leveraged space for greater ends, marshalling space as a “catalyst” to support the individual child's psychological development and the creation of social bonds with others. See M. Paul Friedberg, “Looking Back,” *Process Architecture* 82 (Tokyo, 1989): 8.

33 *Ibid.*, 28.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Friedberg, discussion with author.

36 *Ibid.* See works by Brian Sutton-Smith, such as: *The historical and psychological significance of the unorganized games of New Zealand school children* (1953) and *Theories of play and games for cognitive development* (1967).



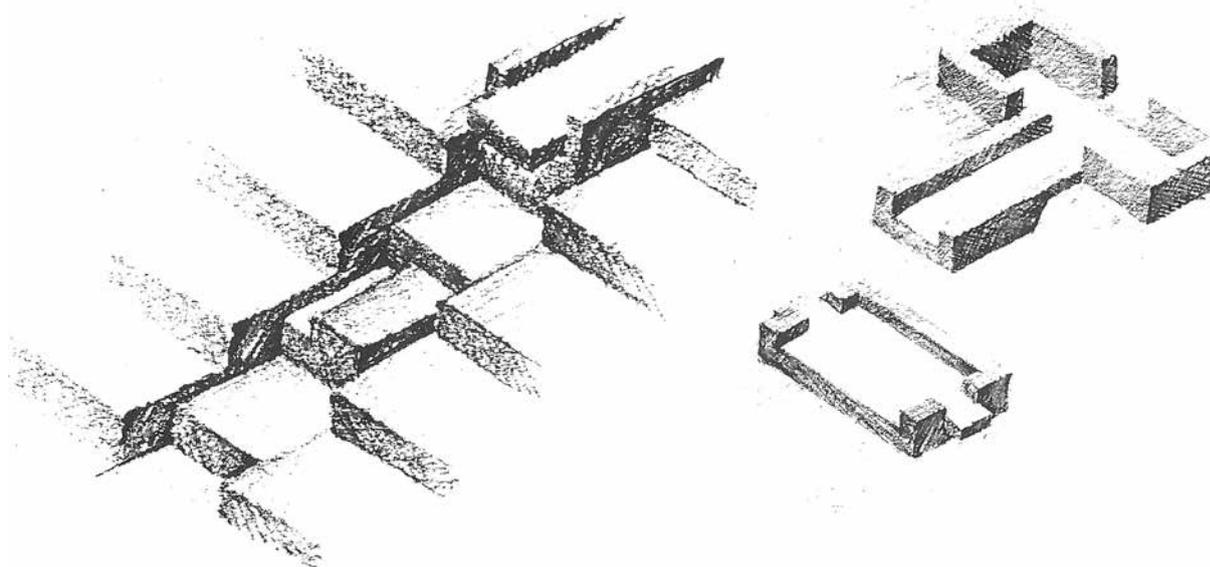
(Fig. 11) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 12) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 13) Riis Park Plaza: detail of the water features turned on, sculptural fountain in the elderly garden. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 14) M. Paul Friedberg's drawing of elements of the amphitheater and its waterways. Drawing courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 15) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.

named as an influence, wrote prolifically on the psychological and cultural significance of play in different cultures and its fundamental importance to maturation.³⁶

This research had special ramifications for the children who would use Riis Park Plaza, as they did not benefit from nursery school education like their wealthy peers. This made public playgrounds important, but previously unrecognized, centers of psychological and social development. (Friedberg viewed Head Start, a federal program established in 1965 to provide free nursery education to lower-income children the summer before they started elementary school, in part to make up for this deficit, as an analogue of the play spaces he designed.)³⁷ Riis Park Plaza was designed to facilitate several different experiences: role playing and spectatorship in the amphitheater; “interplay” or “linked play,” in which many children at once could move from one play structure to the next (from igloo to tunnel to monkey bars) without stopping; and, finally, the sense of physical and emotional challenges overcome, as Friedberg’s play structures required more daring than most off-the-rack designs.³⁸

37 M. Paul Friedberg, *Playgrounds for City Children* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Childhood Education International, 1969), 7–8.

38 Friedberg writes about “linked play” and its psychological dimension in *Play and Interplay*, 44.

39 In an article written a few years after Riis was completed, Karl Linn wrote, “We have to build soap boxes as well as sand boxes—neighborhood block commons, forums, plazas and teenage assemblies... Democratic decision-making, so-called, has been too limited to the middle-aged middle class.” See Karl Linn, “White Solutions’ Won’t Work in Black Neighborhoods,” *Landscape Architecture* (October 1968): 24.

40 Friedberg, *Play and Interplay*, 149.

41 Arthur Rosenblatt, discussion with author, March 24, 2004. It should be noted that an amphitheater was central to another radical urbanist design of this period, Bertrand Goldberg’s Hilliard Homes on the South Side of Chicago, completed in the summer of 1966. See the author’s forthcoming article in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

42 Some of the most explosive change occurred

in East Harlem, where fifteen public housing projects were built between 1941 and 1965, accounting for 10% of the public housing constructed by NYCHA in this period. Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*, 258 and 21.

43 See Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

44 *Ibid.*, 137.

45 NYCHA put a bathroom into the amphitheater in 1967 to serve the larger community, indicating the agency’s willingness to promote broad usage of the space.

46 Mildred Schmertz, “Shaping the Community in an Era of Dynamic Social Change,” *Architectural Record* 140:1 (July, 1966), 197.

47 Press Releases on Mayor Lindsay’s programs, John Vliet Lindsay Papers, Box 138, Folder 148, Series VIII, and Box 358, Folder 374, Series XVI, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

If the play space presented an environment of permissiveness—one that was the antithesis of the restricted and protected grass lawns that occupied this space previously—the amphitheater was its analogue, a nearly empty space intended to empower residents by inviting them to program its use.³⁹ (Friedberg explained, “The amphitheater ... needn’t direct community action into any specified behavior that is not authentically its own. An amphitheater is simply a resource that can reflect the feeling of the community in the ways in which it is programmed.”)⁴⁰ Deployment of this powerful archetype invoked the culture of the classical Greek polis, or city-state, at a time when New York City, Chicago, and other large American cities were in crisis. The civil rights movement troubled the notion of America as a democratic nation, and this use of classical Greek architecture signified a new vision of the *demos* that included the population living in public housing, including African-Americans and recent immigrants.

Inserting amphitheatres into public housing projects in this social and political context not only provided residents with greater recreational and cultural opportunities, it recognized and authorized residents’ social and political identities and even their capacity and power to agitate for change. Recalling Friedberg’s use of amphitheatres in his design work at the time, Arthur Rosenblatt—who was the Deputy Administrator of the Parks Department when Riis Park Plaza was built—stated, it was “the time of riots and ‘power to the people.’” Residents wanted a place to assemble, whether peacefully or otherwise, and spaces like Riis gave them this ability.⁴¹

With its open vistas, Riis Park Plaza provided nearly two acres of continuous space for “interplay” for children and adults, recasting the divided city into a generative, nurturing, challenging, and fun place to be. It not only disrupted postwar dichotomies between suburban (good) and urban (bad), middle class and poor, landscape architecture and urban infrastructure, but it also remapped the social geography of the Lower East Side by breaking down spatial divisions between different racial, ethnic, and age groups. The late 1950s and early 1960s were a period of intense demographic transition in public housing projects throughout the city and in low-income neighborhoods in general.⁴² The Lower East Side, where the Jacob Riis Houses were built, was divided internally by urban color lines. These lines were in flux in the early 1960s as white immigrant communities from Eastern Europe and Ireland, who had arrived in New York in the 1920s and 1930s, were slowly giving ground to increasing numbers of Puerto Rican and black residents, more recent arrivals who were often a generation younger

than the old guard.⁴³ In addition, the East Village began to emerge in the early 1960s as a haven for musicians, artists, and hippies. Sociologist Christopher Mele describes the shifting but very real spatial segregation of the Lower East Side during this era as “a hybrid neighborhood identity always in flux and fraught with episodes of conflict and compromise.” He further notes that turf wars were common among the many youth gangs in the neighborhood that primarily identified according to racial and ethnic identity.⁴⁴

Construction of Riis Park Plaza did not dismantle this spatial segregation—it couldn’t—but it did disrupt it. The Jacob Riis Houses contained 1,187 units, housing nearly 3,000 residents when it was built; the amphitheater, which was built to hold up to 2,000 spectator-participants, was therefore built as a community resource as it was too big to have been conceived solely for Riis tenants.⁴⁵ Newspaper accounts of the programs held in the amphitheater in the 1960s and 1970s reveal a heterogeneous mix of American and Latin jazz, soul performances, modern dance, and children’s magic and puppet shows. In addition, the simple fact that Riis Park Plaza provided linked space for both the elderly and for children was telling, since, as Mele writes, these two groups at this particular moment in time and in this particular location were often divided by race, culture, religion, and language: elderly residents were more often part of the white Eastern European immigrant community, while young children and families were more often black and Latino.

It is difficult to overestimate how radical this space was for its deep engagement with contemporary psychological and sociological theory, and the way that it determinedly marshaled the tools of landscape architecture to produce a proudly urban and generative public space within a context of class and racial division. In this, it differed both from the Carver Houses project—which gestured toward many of these moves, but did not succeed to the same degree as Riis—and other similar projects of this time, such as Albert Mayer’s 1960 redesign of the outdoor space at the Jefferson Houses in Harlem, which a critic later called “a grim proletarian parody of the country-club terrace,” a simulacrum of World’s Fair-like festivity and spectacle that was more a whitewashing of urban problems than a true engagement with them.⁴⁶

After 1966, Friedberg was commissioned by NYCHA to design amphitheatres, playgrounds, and parks in other of the city’s public housing projects, but none was as ambitious in scale, design, or programming as Riis Park Plaza. With the election of John Lindsay as mayor of New York City in 1966 and his appointment of Thomas Hoving—future director of the



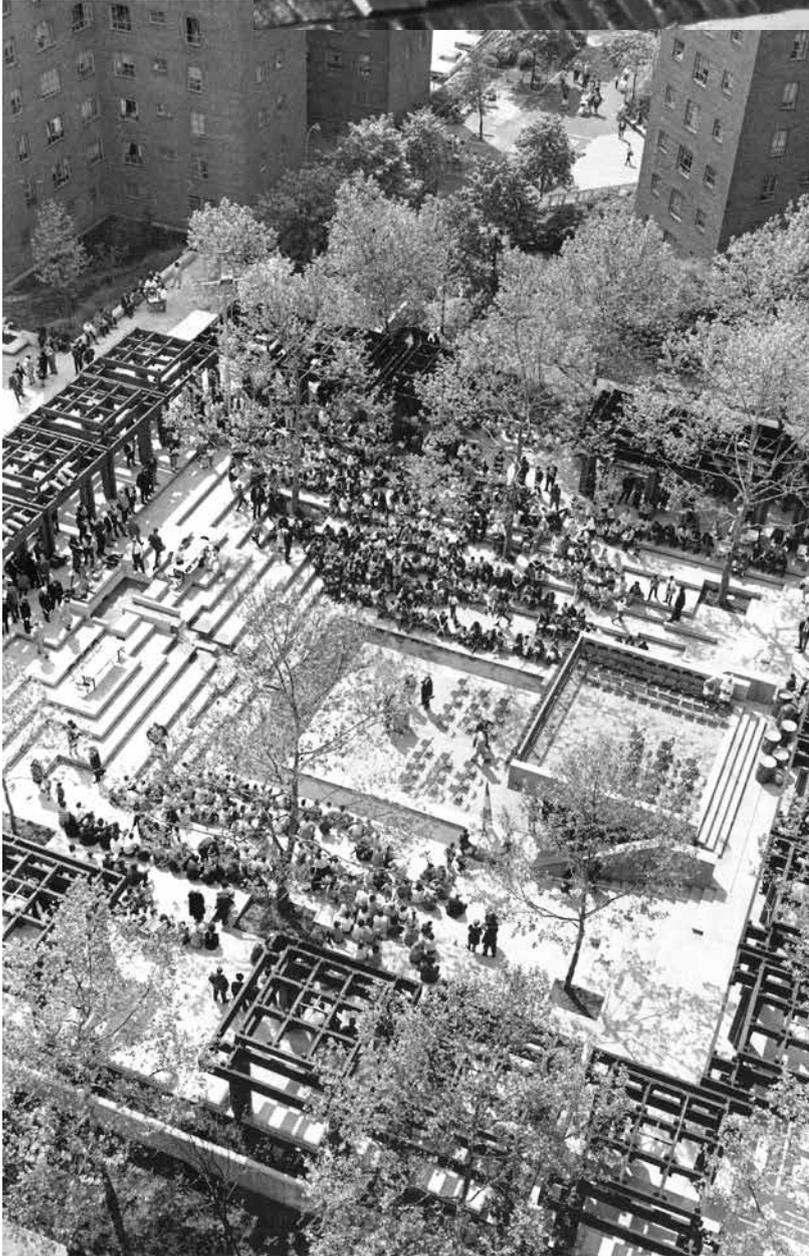
(Fig. 16) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground.
Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 17) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground.
Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 18) Riis Park Plaza adventure playground.
Photograph courtesy of MPFP.



(Fig. 19) Riis Park Plaza amphitheater. Photograph courtesy of MPFP.

Metropolitan Museum of Art—to be the city’s parks commissioner that year, recreational and open space design, including in NYCHA projects, transitioned to a model of simplistic spectacle, including a “Movie in the Street” program that dispatched trucks to ghetto communities during the summer to show films outdoors and a program in which “mini-pools” for swimming were put into many public housing projects in the city, also in the hot and troubled summer months.⁴⁷

Hoving openly described the spaces and programs that the Parks Department sponsored during this time as “bread and circuses,” “pre-explosive maintenance” that were intended to “keep [poor kids’] fucking minds off of getting drugs and shooting each other.”⁴⁸ It was in this context that he hired the architect Morris Lapidus, known for designing lavish resorts in Miami Beach in the 1950s, including the Fontainebleau, Eden Roc, and Americana hotels, to create a \$1.9 million community pool and playground in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood⁴⁹ which was to “rival the flossiest pool in Palm Beach.”⁵⁰ This signaled a direction in public housing design in which architects associated either with luxury and leisure or with the design avant-garde, which were—and are—brought onto projects to create a buzzy splash (both on-site and in the media), without seriously engaging with the needs and desires of users. These programs were aligned with Lindsay’s overall approach to fixing a deteriorating city, which a contemporary newspaper reporter characterized as superficial, ineffective, and self-serving: “Lindsay was always pre-occupied with the appearance rather than the reality of things... [He] often asked his aides, when making a decision, how will this be played in the *Times*? How will it look on the six o’clock news?”⁵¹

From our vantage point today, the spatial apartheid of the 1960s urban ghetto was transparent. On the Lower East Side and in many other urban neighborhoods at this moment, urban color lines could be read in storefront signage and in the kinds of meat and produce stores stocked. Today, these lines are often less transparent, existing internally within neighborhoods or even laterally within individual “mixed-income” buildings. A recent mobile documentary project by the transmedia director Michael Epstein called *Walking Cinema: Museum of the Hidden City* (2015) captures this point beautifully. The film follows a Latino family of four that has been awarded, through city lottery, an apartment in a private luxury high-rise in San Francisco as they tour the modernist roof-deck garden, the large fitness center, and the pet “spaw” in the lobby. In one heart-breaking scene, the mother notes, “I don’t know my next-door neighbors because they never say hi. I only see them

close the door, open the door, but I don’t know who they are. Yeah, they do activities here, but only for those people who go and talk about their work. I can’t show up and be like, ‘Hey everyone, I’m a housekeeper in a hotel!’”

Divides have been and will always be central to the relationship between race and American architecture; they may even be the physical and social crux of the way that race and architecture interact in the United States, from segregation and desegregation to what we now recognize as resegregation.⁵² Divides are, of course, both the physical manifestation of ideas about social relationships and, at the same time, important players in these relationships; once built, they interact physically with the groups that have been divided. As we make our way into the twenty-first century, all of the data so far shows that inequality is on the rise and that the “middle class” is splintering.⁵³ Architecture—and landscape architecture—can serve as handmaiden to the global system that produces this stratification, or it can resist. It may be that there are greater possibilities for resistance in the design of public space—both because of its intrinsic nature and because, as Saskia Sassen points out, many of our recent global protest movements “are not marches: they are occupations of a space,” indicating the potential for these places to catalyze, or at least support, social change.⁵⁴

What does such resistance look like, and how does it work? A close reading of Riis Park Plaza reveals one architect’s attempt to subvert inequity by crafting a physically, psychologically, politically, and socially impactful public two-acre commons in the heart of a charged frontier.

48 Thomas Hoving, quoted in Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and his Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 113. Hoving used the same language, calling these programs “bread and circuses” again in author’s interview with Thomas Hoving, February 26, 2004.

49 Note that Lapidus had grown up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, not Florida.

50 See “Florida Architect is Designing a Pool for Brooklyn Ghetto,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1966, 30; “20 New Minipools Planned in Slums,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1968; “Bedford Stuyvesant Community Pool,” *Architectural Record* 155, no. 7 (June 1974): 95–104; and Morris Lapidus, *Too Much Is*

Never Enough (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 9–11.

51 Journalist quoted in Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 114. Lindsay wrote in his 1969 memoir that mayors can “give symbolic evidence of concern,” revealing the extent to which he viewed social programs as symbolic—not always results-driven—efforts. See John V. Lindsay, *The City* (New York: Norton, 1969), 115.

52 See studies such as: Bader, Michael D. M., and Siri Warkentien. “The Fragmented Evolution of Racial Integration since the Civil Rights Movement.” *Sociological Science* 3 (2016): 135–166.

53 Saskia Sassen, “The Middle Classes: An Historic Actor in Today’s Global World,” *Juncture* 20, no. 2 (2013): 125–28.

54 *Ibid.*, 126.



(Fig. 20) View of the Jacob Riis Houses. Photography courtesy of New York City Housing Authority.

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