

On the boards

Gathering Space

Public process, environmental concern, and strong design weave three municipal buildings together to form a cohesive civic center for the city of Seattle.

BY HEATHER HAMMATT, ASLA

On November 30, 1999, the world watched as a mass citizen protest swarmed the streets of Seattle in a demonstration against the World Trade Organization. The city's infrastructure was overwhelmed, and what began as a peaceful protest soon became chaos. This problematic event identified a need for a civic gathering space in downtown Seattle (See Critic at Large, *LAM*, April 2000).

A master plan was defined for a terraced plaza that would bridge three city blocks with a series of plazas, open space, and street improvements, connecting Seattle's Justice Center, City Hall, and the Public Safety Building. The underlying idea was to create a new public landmark and gathering space for the city of Seattle, a space that would foster public life and debate, while extending pedestrian connections into the surrounding neighborhood and providing a place for events.

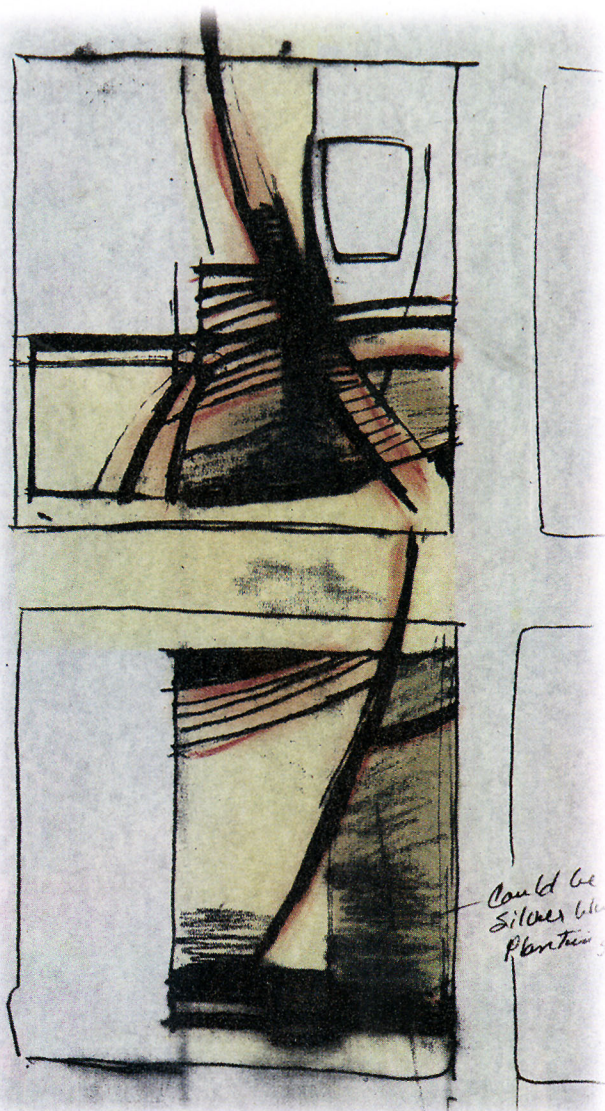
Seattle is a public-process-oriented town, and proud of it. The design process for a new civic center included numerous public meetings and workshops. "We tried to get as much information from the people as we could to fold into the design," says Jennifer Guthrie, principal project

manager with Gustafson Partners in Seattle, the landscape architects chosen for design development, paired up with Swift and Company landscape architects, also in Seattle.

"We have waterfront and parks in random areas, mostly north of town, but nothing in the lower side of town, and it is needed," says Guthrie. Other parks in the area have not been well maintained and are not used by the public, according to Guthrie. "This design is taking on a lot of responsibility for this part of town. It is meant to be the people's park," says Guthrie. "This part of town isn't a real people magnet. People come in at 8:00 and leave at 5:00, and there is nothing to attract people to stay longer."

The proposed design works to create an 18-hour-day atmosphere, providing different scaled spaces—from public stages to intimate seating areas—and enlivening street level spaces with retail and restaurants, giving people reasons to remain downtown after work. Programming for the architecture

Concept sketches, above, began the process of shaping the site's topography into terraces overlooking sheltered plazas that span a dramatic 80-foot grade change and three city blocks (see section below).

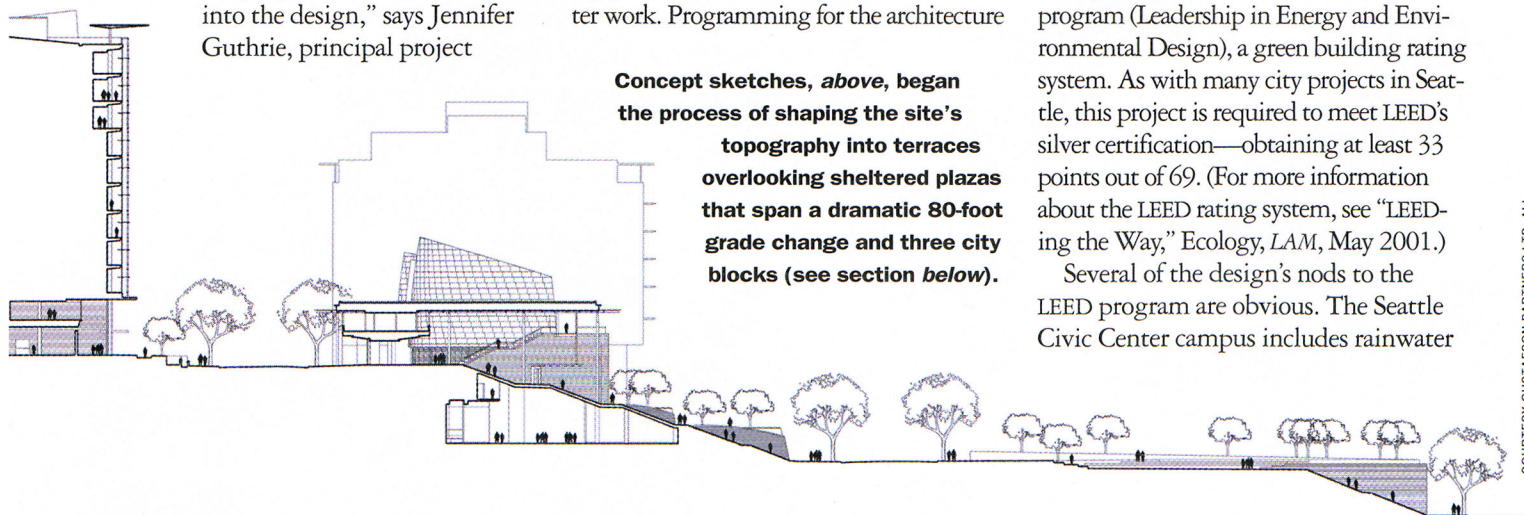


Could be Silver like Planting

surrounding the new plaza had a direct effect on the landscape and was integrated throughout the design process.

Concern for the environment, an issue high on Seattle citizens' agenda, also played a crucial role in the design. The design team paid special attention to the LEED program (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a green building rating system. As with many city projects in Seattle, this project is required to meet LEED's silver certification—obtaining at least 33 points out of 69. (For more information about the LEED rating system, see "LEED-ing the Way," Ecology, *LAM*, May 2001.)

Several of the design's nods to the LEED program are obvious. The Seattle Civic Center campus includes rainwater



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harvesting tanks to collect water from the roofs of buildings on site for irrigation and to augment interior flushing systems. The design team worked with lighting designers to minimize light pollution or wasted light. Local materials were used where possible and practical.

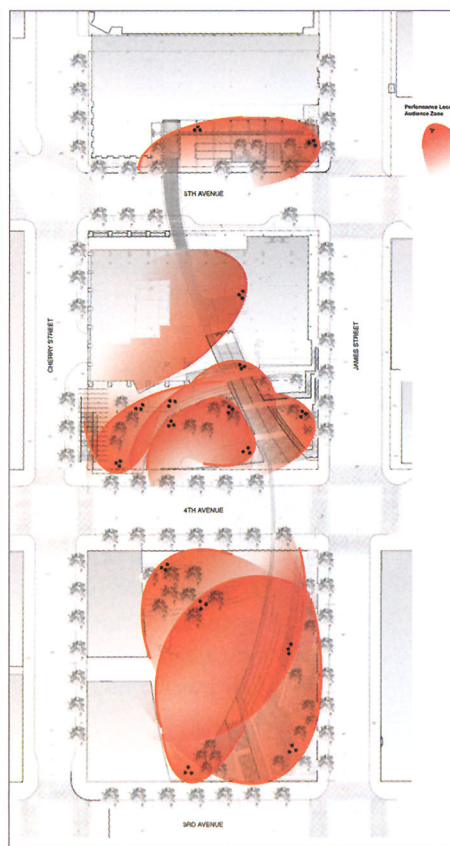
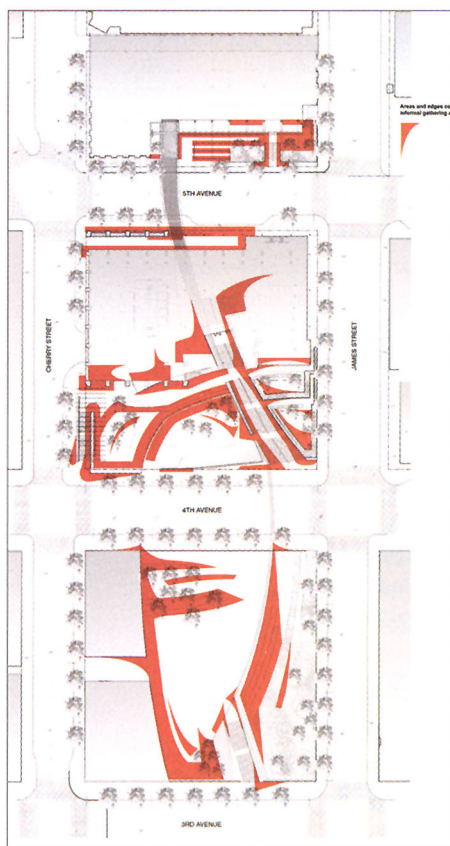
"The translation of LEED is interesting. Is it taking local resources or going farther away [off site] to select materials that will last longer?" says Guthrie. "We tend toward selecting materials that might be farther away to get but will last a long time and withstand more use."

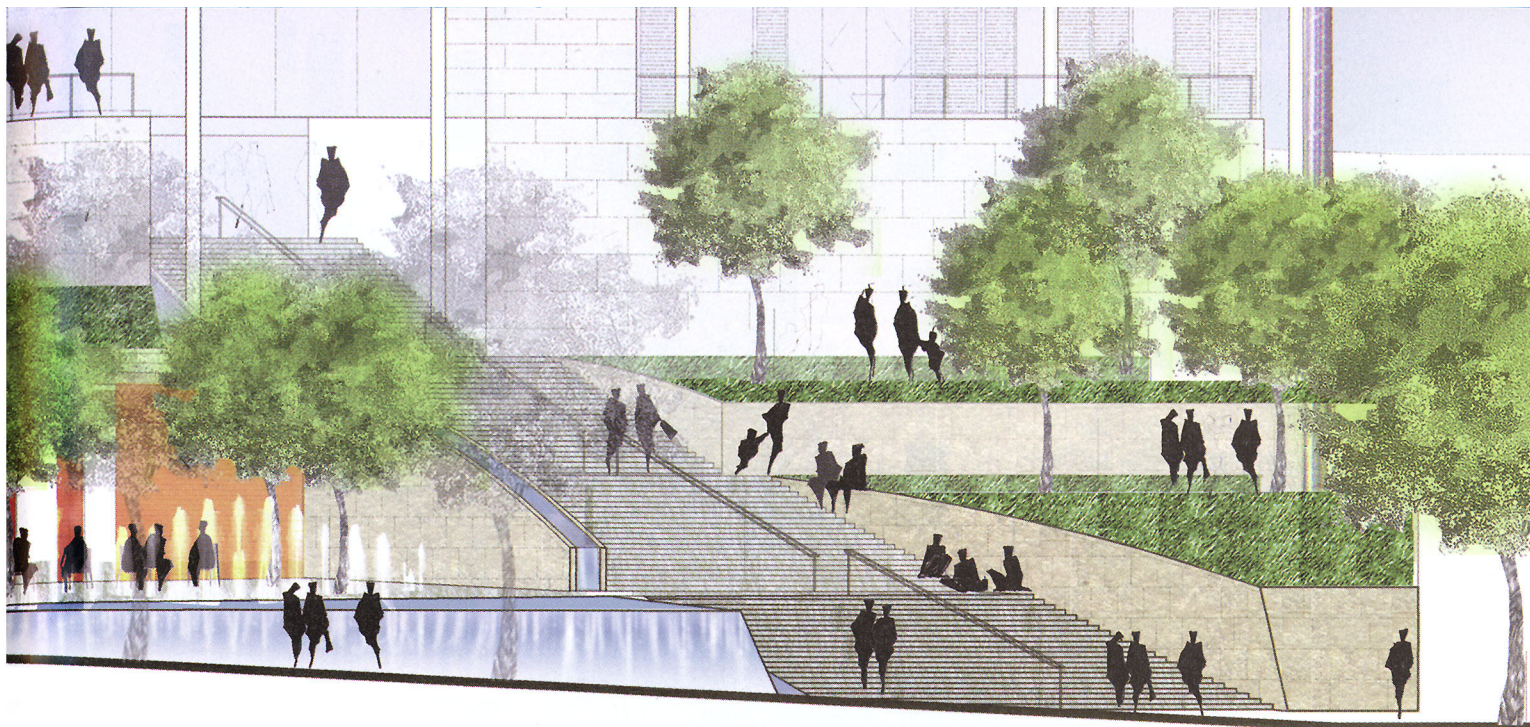
The site is the second steepest series of

The three diagrams below explore potential usage for the new design.

The first shows Demonstration Areas—darker orange representing the focal areas for exhibition or public speech, moving to lighter orange for crowd gathering. The second illustrates Gathering Areas—axes and edges conducive to informal gathering and people watching. The third illustrates Performance Areas—darker orange representing the stages or performance areas, with lighter orange highlighting the audience zones.

blocks in Seattle. This existing topography gave the design form, requiring a vertical grade change of 80 feet over the site's three city blocks. The original master plan located most building on the high side of the site. "We had the challenge of getting people from the low point to the high point," says Guthrie. "The design incorporates an elegant swath of stairs, modeled after the step dimensions at Versailles, from lowest corner to highest point." The design then harnesses the drama of the natural





topography to create a sequence of perches and terraces overlooking sheltered plazas.

"With this project, we were charged with designing a site that said something about Seattle. Water surrounds the city and is a major connector cutting through the city hall site," says Guthrie. The importance of the city's connection to Puget Sound is brought out in the details of the proposed design.

"Puget Sound is our front lawn," says Guthrie. The horizontal planes of the proposed plaza are designed to mimic, with native stone, the shimmering, blue-gray quality of the Sound on a stormy day. From the base of the plaza design looking up, the warm colors and distinct textures of the design's vertical surfaces

resemble the character of an Italian hill town, an idea that Gustafson incorporated from her experience viewing Seattle from the Puget Sound ferry on her daily commute to work.

Gustafson Partners was asked to participate in this project as part of a competition, based on other work that they had done in the area and beyond

The City Hall block (shown in elevation above) incorporates an elegant swath of stairs and a water feature to accent the drama of the site's steep descent. The presence of water and the manipulation of topography are apparent throughout the site plan (below).

and due to the convenience of their January 2000 opening of a satellite office in Seattle. Gustafson Partners' other office is in London.

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PROJECT CREDITS

Landscape architects: Gustafson Partners, Seattle (Kathryn Gustafson, lead designer; Jennifer Guthrie, principal project manager; Marcia West, ASLA, project manager; Rodrigo Abela, project architect; Gareth Loveridge, Anita Madtes, Alan McWain, Shannon Nichol); Swift & Company, Seattle (Barbara Swift, ASLA, principal; Lisa Corry, ASLA, project manager; Oona Johnsen, Dean Koontz).

