Description

Peavey Plaza occupies about half a city block between Nicollet Mall to the northwest and Eleventh and Twelfth Streets to the northeast and southwest, respectively. The plaza’s other (southeast) side edges Orchestra Hall, which occupies the remainder of the block. The overall design is asymmetrical but geometrical, employing primarily squares and rectangles over several changes in grade. The plaza begins at street level. Near the intersection of Nicollet Mall and Eleventh Street, at the plaza’s north corner, three flagpoles are supported by a concrete base that holds several bronze plaques. One, presented by the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1999 in honor of that organization’s centennial, reads: “This site is recognized as a national landmark for outstanding landscape architecture.” An entrance to Orchestra Hall is at the plaza’s east corner.

Wide steps and terraces in Peavey Plaza descend to a large open area about twelve feet below grade, most of which can function as an event space or be filled with water to serve as a reflecting pool (or a skating rink in winter). An accessible ramp is at the south corner. Two large fountains made of vertical pipes, one located at the plaza’s west...
corner and the other along the northwest side, create waterfalls that flow down to the lower level. The water features as well as the landscaping elements like pavers and planters are built with smooth and exposed-aggregate concrete. Some of the walkways have brick pavers as linear articulation. Walls are rough-textured, board-formed concrete.

The heavily used plaza has experienced some alteration over the years. A number of the honey locusts that provided a dappled shade have been removed. Earthen berms have been fortified and reconfigured with landscape timbers. Deteriorated concrete stairs and paving have been patched unsympathetically. A number of the original backless benches survive, however, and the plaza’s overall integrity remains good.

History
Beginning in the late 1950s, Minneapolis experienced a renaissance that would continue into the 1980s and directly impact the built environment in downtown, including the development of Orchestra Hall and Peavey Plaza. It began with the revitalization of the “lower loop” at the northern edge of downtown. It had been the birthplace of the city in the mid-nineteenth century and had been losing the fight with decay long before the Depression gave it a knockout punch. Revitalization of the area was hampered by a controversial planning director who did not work well with others and by the economic hardships during the Depression and World War II. After the war, new legislation from the federal and state governments gave the city the power to clean up the area using urban renewal funds.

The efforts to renew the lower loop drew the interest of downtown business leaders, who formed the Downtown Council to advocate for the improvement of not just the lower loop, but all of downtown. The city faced a challenge when General Mills announced its plans in 1955 to move to a new suburban campus in Golden Valley. The opening of the first enclosed shopping mall in the suburb of Edina also brought the promise of the future but threatened the vitality of downtown stores at the same time. The Downtown Council used its political influence and its money to help the city find a new planning director and to increase the staff and budget for the planning department. The department recruited young, progressive staff with graduate degrees in planning and related fields from Harvard, MIT, and other leading universities. The commission’s staff also included two landscape architects, an engineer, and a person trained in business administration and law. Attention to downtown planning was encouraged by several new members to the planning commission with connections to the Downtown Council. Utilizing traffic and real estate research, the planning department drafted the “Central Minneapolis Plan” in 1959-1960 as its first long-term document.

The plan identified future goals for downtown but no specific projects. Working closely with members of the Downtown Council, the planners vetted the goals and earned the support of the business community before presenting the plan to the mayor and city council. While the city council members were displeased that the planners had approached the private sector first, the planners had correctly predicted that if the business community liked the plan, it would convince the city council to adopt the measures. The most popular element of the plan was creating a pedestrian/transit way along Nicollet Avenue as a way to revitalize the area and attract shoppers to downtown. By 1964, the city council was working with downtown businesses to make the Nicollet Mall a reality. The mall opened in 1967 to great acclaim. Designed by the prominent California landscape architecture firm Lawrence Halprin and Associates, the mall banished cars from Nicollet’s retail corridor from Washington Avenue to Tenth Street. Buses were contained on a sinuous path through a landscape designed to seduce pedestrians. The Nicollet Mall was an instant success, garnering international acclaim. The mall was, in fact, almost too successful. Organized festivities drew crowds, as hoped, but the clogged sidewalks made it hard for shoppers to get to stores. Plans were soon underway to extend the mall four blocks south, adding a plaza along the way as a gathering place for programmed events and an anytime refuge from the dense city grid.

The extension of the mall was not completed until the early 1980s, providing a connection to an urban renewal effort near Loring Park. The plaza came about more quickly, thanks to the momentum of the city planning processes begun
in the early 1960s and the desire for the Minnesota Orchestral Association to have a new downtown venue. Since 1930, the orchestra had performed in Northrop Memorial Auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus—considered a neutral location that favored neither Minneapolis nor Saint Paul, rival sister cities. The orchestral association, however, was lured by the excitement of the revitalization in downtown Minneapolis, which stood in stark contrast to the ongoing decline in Saint Paul. The group decided to erect a new hall on half of the block bounded by Nicollet Avenue, Eleventh Street, Marquette Avenue, and Twelfth Street, with the new public plaza as its “front yard” on the rest of the block.

In 1972, the orchestral association purchased its site and officially announced plans to build the concert hall, scheduled to open in 1974. The planning department had officially introduced the idea for the plaza in a 1971 publication, “Minneapolis Today,” that described its vision for the southwestern end of downtown. The city hoped that the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board would develop the plaza, but the board was unable or unwilling to proceed with the project. In 1973, the Minneapolis City Council took on the responsibility for creating the plaza and raising the necessary funds, planning to sell bonds to support construction of both the concert hall and plaza.

The proceeds of the bond sale were not enough to pay for designing and building the plaza. Behind the scenes, the Peavey Company, a prominent grain merchant, offered to make a substantial donation to fill the gap. Meanwhile, “the city has engaged Mr. Paul Friedberg, a nationally noted landscape architect and city planning expert, to prepare a study on the development of the Loring Park area and the future Mall extension,” an orchestral association memorandum reported. “Tommy [Thompson, city coordinator] and his associates have considered commissioning him to design the Mall extension, including the Peavey park-plaza area.” The city began quietly acquiring land for the plaza in the summer of 1973. In October, the Peavey Company made public its donation of $600,000 towards the cost of the plaza in commemoration of its one-hundredth anniversary. In December, the city officially announced that M. Paul Friedberg and Associates, which had completed the Loring Park study by that time, would design Peavey Plaza.

The firm’s principal was one of the pioneers in the Modernist movement that gained momentum in the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s as a rebellion against the picturesque traditions of the nineteenth century. Other members of the group included Lawrence Halprin, Robert Lewis Zion, Garrett Eckbo, and Dan Kiley. Friedberg’s early innovations involved playgrounds at New York City housing projects. He strove to humanize the urban environment by designing “adventure” play spaces where children could create their own activities. His playground designs garnered national attention, but Friedberg also became known for pocket parks, municipal and corporate plazas, and main street malls. His design vocabulary included strongly geometric water features and grade changes emphasized by sloping terraces and hardscape. In 1979, not long after Peavey Plaza was completed, he was made a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in acknowledgement of his groundbreaking work. A year later, the American Institute of Architects “recognized Friedberg’s efforts to integrate the design work of various disciplines” by presenting him with the AIA Medal for an allied professional. In 2004, he received the ASLA Design Medal, the organization’s highest honor. His individual designs have received over eighty-five national and international awards.

Friedberg’s plans for the plaza were finalized by the spring of 1974. He claimed that in addition to its function as the entryway to the concert hall, the plaza “will also be significant as the only major open space at the southern end of Nicollet Mall.” The plaza was intentionally sunk below the grade of the street to “define the Concert Hall Plaza as an open ‘room’ harmonious with the character of Nicollet Mall . . . yet contrasting with it. The depression of the main part of the Plaza also will serve to create a more perceivable defined space, serve the practical function of offering some wind protection and maximize the warmth of the winter sun.”

Peavey Plaza was a fitting companion to the adjacent Orchestra Hall, which epitomized the cutting-edge architecture of the era. In the design for the plaza, Friedberg demonstrated how he adapted and reworked his design vocabulary to
suit the specific needs of the site and program, according to an essay on Friedberg by architectural historian Chad Randl in Shaping the American Landscape. In turn, Friedberg used Peavey as a model for later projects. Its influence is clearly visible at Pershing Park, which opened in Washington, D.C. in 1979 at a prominent Pennsylvania Avenue intersection near the White House.

The construction of Peavey Plaza began in August 1974 and was completed by June 1975. The final cost was approximately $3 million. A corner near Orchestra Hall was left unfinished because the city and the orchestral association were hoping to develop a restaurant there that would connect the plaza’s street and lower levels. They abandoned that plan in 1977, but it was not until 1979 that the orchestral association, which owned that part of the block, hired Friedberg to draft plans to extend the plaza to that area. The construction was completed in 1980.

The plaza immediately became a popular summertime lunch spot for downtown office workers and the Minnesota Orchestra made use of the plaza’s amphitheater-like qualities for outdoor performances, including its popular Sommerfest music series. For a number of years, the lower level was flooded in the winter for skating. While the plaza was well used, however, the effects of the harsh Midwest climate began to show on the plaza’s steps, walkways, terraces, fountains, and vegetation over the next decades. Well-intentioned repairs by the city’s public works department were not always sympathetic to the original design and materials. Local and national preservationists became concerned about the plaza’s future in the early twenty-first century, particularly after the Minnesota Orchestral Association announced plans, in 2007, to renovate and expand its facility. Articles about the plaza appeared in a wide variety of publications, including Landscape Architecture magazine. Preservation Alliance of Minnesota included Peavey Plaza in its “Ten Most Endangered Historic Places” list in 2008. As another indication of the plaza’s significance, the Minnesota chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) sponsored a Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) of the plaza in 2008 and the documentation was entered into the HALS collection in the Library of Congress. The fate of the plaza remains unresolved. In 2010, the city issued a request for qualifications to landscape architects to launch the process of rehabilitating the plaza. At the time of this writing, a team has been chosen for the project but details of the plans are yet to be announced.

References
Recommendation

Peavey Plaza’s rectilinear forms, multiple levels, textures, materials, and water features are motifs that are characteristic of Friedberg’s style, adapted to the Minnesota context. More importantly, the plaza exemplifies the Modernist period in landscape architecture. As early as 1994, landscape architect Peter Walker and writer Melanie Simo identified the period between 1945 and the late 1970s as “one great surge of collective energies—the modern movement, an upheaval of traditional values, beliefs, and artistic forms that have evolved over centuries of the Western World.” As a former chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, Walker had a unique perspective as both a practitioner and an academic. The website of the Cultural Landscape Foundation traces Modernism’s roots to “Europe as early as the 1920s, as part of an avant-garde response to what artists and designers perceived as the cultural irrelevance of the ‘styles’ as well as the socio-political authoritarianism) represented in the formal, rigid geometry of Beaux Arts neoclassicism.” It adds: “In the United States, this sense of irrelevance also extended to the 19th century Picturesque, as neither style adequately addressed the massive social and economic changes brought on by urbanization, suburbanization, and ultimately by the Great Depression. Modernism embraced a diverse palette of contemporary and often experimental materials as well as using familiar materials in unconventional.”

Paul Friedberg identified the “point of departure” as “the middle of the 1950s” when “an irrepressible pressure for change was building in our cities. When it was released it would structurally alter institutions and the city as we knew...
it.” Landscape architects during this period of transition “found the profession burdened with the obsolete Olmstedian baggage of the Arcadian retreat.” Pioneers of the Modernist movement established “a new breed of landscape architect, one who marries people, places, and plants.” To do this, they upended conventional wisdom that saw parks as an escape from the city and, instead, embraced urban forms and materials. Hardscape, rather than lawns, dominated. The aesthetic was rectilinear rather than curvilinear. Friedberg was a leader of the movement, as design journalist Paul Bennett noted: “Friedberg’s unflinching urbanism shocked a profession that was . . . still focused on the suburbs. His influence among succeeding landscape architects who would come to the city was profound.” Friedberg was in his mid-30s in 1965 when his first large Modernist project, New York’s Riis Park, opened to wide acclaim, receiving coverage in a broad range of popular as well as professional media including Life magazine. (Bennett commented: “It seems incredible today: a mainstream American magazine not only publishing an experimental landscape, but one that was part of a public-housing project.”) The park was a seminal work in the Modernist movement, and it launched Friedberg’s star. “For the next thirty years, he would make a name for himself in the city as one of the foremost urban landscape architects,” and his influence went well beyond.

Peavey Plaza, coming only a few years after Riis Park, was acknowledged as a significant Modernist design from the time of its construction. In 1978, a few years after it was completed, it won the ASLA’s Professional Design Competition. Landscape Architecture reported: “This Plaza represents the new urban park form—a 150 x 350 ft. terraced park plaza concept punctuated by a major dramatic waterfall. The concept behind the waterfall was to symbolically represent the streams and natural water displays that are pervasive throughout the area. In addition, it provides a cooling and soothing feeling during the summer and in the winter its sculptured form describes a variety of snow patterns.” The plaudits continued in the following decade. In October 1999, the Minnesota chapter of the ASLA selected Peavey Plaza as one of six Minnesota parks to be recognized by the “100 Parks, 100 Years” program commemorating the centennial of the ASLA. The medallion installed on site identifies the plaza “as a national landmark for outstanding landscape architecture.” The plaza was the second landscape in Minnesota to be significant enough to merit inclusion in the Historic American Landscape Survey, and the first Modernist landscape to receive that level of documentation.

A photograph of one of Peavey’s fountains is featured on the cover of a recent book, Shaping the American Landscape, produced by the Cultural Landscape Foundation. The book contains biographical essays from leading authorities in the field on 149 landscape architects and related professionals, including Paul Friedberg. As the dust jacket observes: “Although the contributors consider many important figures from the past, the book breaks new ground by including seminal designers who are in their twilight years—and in some cases still professionally active—to provide a fascinating look at the modern era of design in action.” Peavey Plaza has also been written up in Valued Places: Landscape Architecture in Minnesota , a book published by the Minnesota Chapter of the ASLA, and in numerous periodicals such as Architecture Minnesota.

While Peavey Plaza might be of national significance given these accolades, it is difficult to make that case definitively until further time has passed and the broader context can be assessed. At this time, though, the local significance of Peavey Plaza is well established. It, along with the Loring Greenway, are the most prominent public Modernist landscapes in Minneapolis. The fountains of Peavey Plaza are often used as a symbol for the city, instantly recognizable as local landmarks. Because of its highly visible location on Nicollet Mall adjacent to Orchestra Hall, Peavey Plaza has served as the introduction to Modernist landscape design for thousands of people. For Minneapolis, a city known for its nationally significant park system, Peavey Plaza marked a major turning point from the picturesque tradition that had inspired the design of virtually all parks created in the previous one hundred years.

Peavey Plaza is recommended as individually eligible for the National Register under Criteria C for its significance in the area of Landscape Architecture as a locally important Modernist landscape. Although some materials and elements have been altered, the original design is extant and the property’s overall historic integrity is good. This is noteworthy because many contemporary landscapes have not survived, including Friedberg’s pioneering Riis Park.
The property meets Criteria Consideration G as exceptionally important in the local context.

The plaza is also eligible under Criterion A in the area of Planning and Community Development. The plaza was major component of the city’s urban renewal efforts in the 1970s along with the construction of Orchestra Hall and the creation of the Loring Park Development District. These projects continued the innovative planning process that had been begun in the late 1950s at the north end of downtown. Under this criterion, it also qualifies under Criteria Consideration G. Although the plaza was constructed within the last fifty years, the exceptional local importance of the planning process in downtown Minneapolis has received scholarly evaluation in works like Alan A. Altshuler’s *The City Planning Process* and Amy Sunderland’s thesis “Loring Park: A Redevelopment Experience.”

For both criteria, Peavey Plaza’s period of significance begins in 1975, the year that it opened, and ends in 1980, when construction of the unfinished corner was completed.

Peavey Plaza is recommended as eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A in the area of Planning and Community Development and under Criterion C for exemplifying Modernist landscape design. Its exceptional local importance meets Criteria Consideration G under both criteria.

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