THE CORPORATE PLAZA AND THE OFFICE TOWER: The potential for a mutualistic space-form relationship

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Within the context of a site/place on which a skyscraper is developed, the role of the corporate plaza is usually limited to providing a base to glorify the unique form of the skyscraper (the office tower). In such cases, the potential for a symbiotic relationship between the skyscraper and the plaza is not realized. In exploring the possibilities of a symbiotic relationship the first step was to research the skyscraper and its evolution. This analysis based on existing literature revealed the 'motive' behind the design and construction of skyscrapers and the reason for its strong physical image - “the corporations desire for an attention drawing device”.

This desire has resulted in the design of the skyscraper as an object in the urban landscape with a high degree of ‘recognizability’. Although the skyscraper’s character of recognizability plays an important role in the perception of the site it fails to provide for the development of ‘experiential meaning’. This experiential meaning which is a critical component for the environmental image of the site/place can be provided for in the plaza space. In order for the meaning, that is developed at the plaza, to be associated with the skyscraper, the skyscraper and the plaza should have a sense of continuity and appear as parts of a whole. To achieve this sense of continuity, the design of the plaza space needs to reflect/incorporate the elements that contribute to the strong physical image of the skyscraper as a means of reinforcing the image of the skyscraper that is stored in the memory.

The remainder of the thesis was to apply and test the above statement/idea in a design solution. The first step in that process was the analysis of existing plazas against the statement - case
studies. The case studies reinforced a few aspects that needed to be addressed in the design of the plaza: 1) Reference to the imageable character can be made through the use of materials as much as shape and forms (and there might be other possibilities based on the character of the building) 2) The functional aspect of the plaza is critical for the successful use of the plaza, an assumption that supports this thesis.

Once inferences were made from the case studies the next step was to decide on a site to redesign a plaza space—The PPG place in Pittsburgh.

The PPG place, a complex of 6 buildings, exemplifies the postmodern movement and was designed by one of the chief proponents of the movement, Philip Johnson. The once stark and desolate plaza was refurbished recently with the addition of fountains around the obelisk in the center. A skating rink is operated in the plaza during the winter months.

The design process was initiated by three layers of analysis:

1) Analysis of the imageable qualities of the building
2) Analysis of the issues pertaining to the usability of the plaza
3) Analysis of the urban context

These three layers of information provided a broad framework for the design of the plaza, from which the final design concept was distilled. The space that is thus designed facilitates a high degree of usability as well as a relationship to the imageability of the skyscraper, ensuring a holistic image for the site/place in which the skyscraper and plaza coexist in a mutualistic relationship.
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"The corporate foyer is part of a new, generally high-rise, building complex, its main function is to provide an elegant entry and image for its sponsor...

The decorative porch: A small decorative entry, sometimes planted or supplied with seating or a water feature. It often is too narrow or shaded to encourage much use.

The impressive forecourt: A larger entry plaza, often finished in expensive materials (marble, travertine) and sometimes designed to discourage any use but passing through

The stage set: A very large corporate plaza flanked by an impressive tall building that it helps frame. The plaza often is detailed so as to discourage use by “undesirables” or to minimize its use for sitting or eating. It is primarily a stage set with building as a backdrop."

(Marcus, Francis, 1998, p.21)
The unique characteristics and potential of the corporate plaza as a result of their association with the office tower has not been realized despite the fact that the office tower plaza has become a significant type of urban open space over the last 50 years. The early notions of the purpose of the office plaza indicates the source of the problem. The predecessors of office plazas were seen in the modernist town plans. But as Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris point out, “(the) public open space was never a place for social activities, It served merely to embellish the buildings, to accentuate their importance in the city fabric... Brochure sketches and renderings of different projects showed the modernists predilection for the tower in the park - high rises surrounded by limitless and abstract open space” (1998, pp. 63-64). The idea of the plaza as a subservient space that serve to “embellish the buildings” has persisted over the last 50 years. Marcus and Francis criticize the restriction of the function of the plaza “to provide an elegant entry and image for its sponsor” (1998, p.21). Lynch refers to this phenomenon as “bottomless landmarks with a floating quality”. He goes on to cite the example of Boston, “The John Hancock building, the custom house, and the court house are all dominant on the general skyline, but the location and identity of their base is by no means as significant as that of their top.” (Lynch, 1960, p.81).

The notion of “significant” top ascribes a dominant quality to the office tower relegating the plaza to a servient space. This dominance does not necessarily mean that the two should be seen as two distinct elements, the dominant and the subservient element, but rather as a “principal with an associated cluster” (Lynch, 1960, p.106). This plaza with a characteristic of an associated cluster can contribute to the ‘place/site’ as much as the tower contributes to the ‘place/site’ with its dominance. The plaza’s role is much more than just to embellish the tower, and thus needs to be seen as an element that can contribute to the site/place on its own and in conjunction with the tower.
Within the context of a site/place on which a skyscraper is developed, the role of the corporate plaza is limited to providing a base to glorify the unique form of the skyscraper. The potential for a symbiotic relationship between the skyscraper and the plaza is not realized.
In exploring the possibilities of a symbiotic relationship the first step is to research the skyscraper and its evolution. From the perspective of understanding the relationship between the skyscraper and its plaza, it is sufficient to look at the history of the skyscraper from the late 1950s, the period that saw the first corporate plazas being incorporated in the office buildings. There are various aspects of the evolution of the skyscrapers since the late 1950s that can be studied. But this thesis shall analyze the evolution of the skyscraper, as an object in the landscape. For this reason the thesis does not delve into issues such as changes in elevator technology in the last 40 years, advancements in the development of glass for high-rise structures, the prolific development of Asian skyscrapers etc., although these are very significant issues in the evolution of the skyscraper since the last 40 years.
THE TRANSITION TO THE MODERNIST TOWERS

By the early fifties, the design vocabulary of office towers had undergone a major shift. The idea of borrowing from historic references to decorate the tower and the use of stone and masonry had completely died out. The significant reasons behind this shift are, the change in economics of large scale construction, the non-availability of skilled craftsmen and the availability of new materials and advancements in construction technology. The early 50’s were a period of uneasy transition from the revivalist style to the modernist and not many buildings worth mentioning were built during this period. The buildings were built in a style that maybe identified as an unhappy marriage of the old-fashioned masonry setback buildings of the pre-war era and the sleeker buildings of the international style. But one building built during this period was to influence the direction of office towers for the next two decades. The United Nations building was not a commercial building but an institutional one to start with but its influence is undeniable and it was significant for two main reasons. Firstly the fact that it stands alone in an “open site” (Goldberg, 1981, pg.105) is an indication of the beginnings of the “plaza” in the form of an open space around the built form. Earlier buildings were designed to occupy the entire site. Secondly the form of the building marks the beginning of a new era in skyscraper architecture, the box that was starkly different from the “set backs” and “decorations” of the earlier periods.

THE INFLUENCE OF SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRIL AND MIES VAN DER ROHE

As much as the influence of the United Nations building over the design of the skyscraper for the next twenty years, the architectural practice of one firm was to exert a tremendous influence in this area. The office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. In 1952 SOM constructed its first major skyscraper the Lever House (New York, Gordon Bunshaft/SOM, 1952) “Lever changed the prevailing notions of what a skyscraper could be - it went beyond even the United Nations in making pure abstraction a virtue, and it celebrated light and openness in a way that must have seemed stunning to a city accustomed to blocks and blocks of limestone granite”. The Lever House Plaza marks the development of the first public open space associated with the office tower, a reflection of sociological and urbanistic thoughts that were influencing the realm of design and planning in the 50s. But it was the Chase Manhattan
Bank building (New York, Gordon Bunshaft/SOM, 1952), built a decade later, that truly propagated the idea of a plaza as a public open space to be developed with the office tower—“a plaza embellished with a stone garden by Isamu Noguchi and a large sculpture initiated a chain of plazas in the area”. The Inland Steel House (New York, 1957), The Crown Zellerbach Building (San Francisco, 1959) and The Pepsico building (New York, 1960) were other significant works of the firm.

If Skidmore, Owings & Merrill could be considered as a firm that was most influential in the design of the new skyscrapers, Mies Van Der Rohe would be the architect that did it. “...Mies set a tone of moral authority and intellectual rigor that was to permeate Chicago architecture through the 1960’s and 1970’s; there was a sense, whether in his own practice at the Skidmore office or elsewhere, that the austere glass-and-steel boxes of the International Style were the only really appropriate architectural path to follow in the postwar years.” (Goldberg, 1981, p.108). Mies’ first major skyscraper, the Seagram building was noted not only for its exquisite proportions but also its open plaza, “which changed the city’s zoning laws to encourage more towers massed as Seagram had been”. But Seagram is one of those few glass boxes that managed to stand out from the rest. Not only were they similar by virtue of their form, the box, but also because of the material that was used so extensively, glass. The similarity of these glass boxes resulted in the skyscrapers losing their significance as icons and landmarks and undermined the recognizability of these buildings.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE END OF THE BOX

The first attempts to move away, not completely though, from the glass box can be seen in the Knights of Columbus Tower (1967), New Haven. The form of the building was the result of additive massing where 4 cylinders have been added to the corners of what is essentially a box. Two other buildings that Roche had designed, the Worcester, the Worcester County National Bank, Worcester, MA and the United Nations Plaza hotel had a strong sculptural quality that provided a sense of uniqueness. This trend “to stand alone” began as a reaction to the proliferation of glass boxes. The John Hancock tower, built during this period was a prime example. “Pei and Cobb created here an abstraction in glass that by its shape took into
account the lines and forces of the surrounding buildings and open spaces”. But the Hancock tower was the subject of severe criticism for standing in stark contrast to its context. The Building shares Copley Square with some of the most revered historic buildings of Boston. The Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library. But nevertheless it is considered as one of Boston’s significant landmarks.

PUBLIC SPACE MOVES INDOORS

One of the significant aspects in the evolution of the relationship between the office tower and the public space happened in the late 1960s. Architect and developer John Portman initiated two projects, The Peachtree Center in Atlanta, and the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco. Although his intention was to provide well thought out public spaces, the indoor public spaces that he created for these buildings, are in stark contrast to the spirit of true public, open spaces -“designed only for inhabitants of a fast moving flashy world, world of airports and expense accounts, not for the citizens who lived in these cities and used the neighboring buildings everyday”.

The Idea of an indoor public space had affected the designs of a firm that was considered to be most influential during this period- Johnson and Burgee (Philip Johnson and John Burgee). Two of their significant works during this period, the IDS center (Minneapolis) and Pennzoil Place (Houston) were provided with indoor public spaces.

IMAGEABLE SKYSCRAPERS

One of the most significant skyscrapers of this period that influenced the way in which corporations perceived the skyscraper was the TransAmerica building in San Francisco. “…One of the best examples of the skyscraper as image maker since the Woolworth building - The TransAmerica corporation uses the building as a symbol in its advertising and has made it an internationally known icon”.

The firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill was also making its contribution to the movement away from the box with its two landmark buildings in Chicago- The John Hancock
Tower built in 1969 and the Sears Tower in 1974. The Hancock center was essentially a box but the sides were narrowing towards the top. “The Tower seemed like a looming giant, a great cowboy stalking the town” (Goldberg, 1981, p.132). The Sears Tower was comparatively bolder in approach. Essentially a glass box made up of 9 cuboidal tubes bundled together and stopping at various heights creating a distinctive top reminiscent of the older skyscrapers with their setbacks. These two buildings suggest the evolution of one of the most influential firms in skyscraper architecture, since the days of Mies Van Der Rohe.

One of the significant skyscrapers that was built before the onset of the Postmodern works of the 80s was the Citicorp center by Hugh Stubbins & Associates, the 45-degree angle top making it one of the most easily recognizable buildings on the New York skyline. The use of white aluminum with its soft glow adds to the visual strengths of its presence. The Citicorp center, like the TransAmerica building is a good example of how the office tower had become a publicity device.

THE POSTMODERN MOVEMENT AND THE IMAGEABLE SKYSCRAPER

By 1980 the idea of a box as a skyscraper was dead. The success of buildings such as the TransAmerica building and the Citicorp center meant that the clients were willing to accept forms other than glass box. But not all of these “reactionary” buildings were successful. Frequently these “late modern” towers, were forms sculpted purely for the sake of variety- and while this may go a long way toward relieving the boredom of international style, it seems to be nowhere near the compositional skill of the great skyscrapers of the 1920s.

This period also witnessed some good works by firms such as Kohn, Pedersen, Fox. Most notable of their projects during this period is 333 Wacker drive in Chicago. Shifting the focus back to New York was the Trump Tower designed by Swanke, Hayden and Connell. The Trump Tower is a glass tower with a series of setbacks at its base, creating a cascading effect. Yet another building that was to make an architectural statement against the box in New York was the IBM building by Edward Larrabee Barnes. This structure has 5 sides, with gray-green coating. This building serves as an indicator of the desire to use materials other than glass for
the skin of the building. Also noteworthy is the 4-story greenhouse like public park at the base of the tower. The idea of distinguishing a skyscraper by interesting treatment of the skin is best exemplified by Caesar Pelli’s design for the skin of the addition and condominium tower for the museum of Modern Art in New York - a pleasing composition of sections of glass in varying shades of brown.

Although such projects have been a part of the changes that were taking place, primarily three architects brought on some dramatic changes in the design vocabulary of skyscrapers - Philip Johnson of Johnson and Burgee, Helmut Jahn of Jahn and Murphy and Michael Graves. The form of their skyscrapers can be described as collages of images from the past (mostly), present and future. Although it is hardly of any surprise that almost all of their projects have raised controversies, one of the most controversial works has been the AT&T building by Philip Johnson, only 37 stories tall, but achieving a height of 500 feet. The high point of the tower is the broken pediment at the top and at the base is an arcade and connecting these two elements is a regular vertical block. Another of Johnson and Burgee’s work is the PPG tower in Pittsburgh, a building that is best described as a Gothic tower with a glass skin. The Portland Public Services building is another controversial project. Incidentally Michael Graves won the competition whose jury was headed by Philip Johnson. “The Graves building looks like nothing else in the history of tall buildings. It is heavy and boxy, shaped almost like a cube, and its exterior is a mix of vast over scaled classical elements and simple punched in windows. The stucco facade is polychromed in shades of rust orange and gray, and the overall sense is of classical elements out of context”

The above buildings are considered to be of the post modern style of architecture, a style that has been heavily criticized and even disowned by most of its practitioners.
From the mid-70’s onwards there has been a tendency to stay away from the box as the form of the skyscraper. A strong shift in the treatment of form and skin considerably changed the physical image of the skyscraper.
THE IMPACT OF THE IMAGE OF THE BUILDING

Two buildings that are considered as predecessors of the Post-Modern skyscraper, the Citicorp center, New York and Pennzoil Place, Houston, are good examples of how the image of the skyscraper helps the corporation. “The Pennzoil Place’s dazzling form succeeded in increasing the real estate value of the skyscraper and in creating an image of success for the Pennzoil corporation which registered a significant increase in applications for employment after the skyscrapers construction...The enormous oblique top of Citicorp, which stands out as an eminently recognizable feature of the manhattan skyline, has not only resulted in an increase of the building’s real estate value but has also created a winning image for its client, Citibank. In almost every single advertisement for this important financial institution (not only in newspapers but in leaflets distributed to thousands of the banks branches throughout America), Stubbins' skyscraper appears as the company’s hallmark” (Scuri, 1990, p.15). The interesting forms of these buildings are not truly a result of the corporation’s desire to create a publicity device but the architects’s early attempts to move away from the glass box vocabulary of skyscrapers. But the effect of these skyscrapers on the image and real estate value was duly noted by the corporations. As Goldberg points out “the success of a few notable skyscrapers of the previous decade, buildings like IDS and Pennzoil Place and Citicorp Center and John Hancock tower, had led clients to become increasingly receptive to alternatives to the austere glass box.” (1981, p.139).

POST-MODERN STYLE AND BEYOND

The Post-modern style, with its desire for visual stimulation, the use of collage technique in incorporating various historic elements, and attention to exterior details served as a convenient vehicle for the corporation’s desire for a publicity device. Scuri’s statements in the preface to his book indicates the “hunt for new ways to capture the attention of an increasingly indifferent public” and how the “postmodern style” has been realized as a means to this end (1990, p.IX).

Any reference to a particular style, due to its temporal nature, leads to an inevitable
question “What Next?”. Does the end of Post-Modern style mean the end of skyscrapers with a unique and strong image? The answer depends on various factors, factors that determine how architecture and various facets of society that impact architecture evolve. But having said that, it is easier to understand the evolution of the ‘image’ of skyscrapers if the ‘motive’ behind these images are understood.

**IMAGE AND THE MOTIVE BEHIND IT**

The process of architectural design is essentially the realization of the idea of a designer in response to a specific set of requirements. The final manifestation of the design process, the or built structure, is an expression of the clients requirement. From the perspective of the image of the skyscrapers, the corporations motive plays an undeniable role as the clients major requirement. This existence of the corporation’s motive : to create a strong publicity device, will transcend any style and influence the design of the skyscraper. As Scuri points out. “The Post-modern Style may already have reached the end of the road (to everyone’s relief), but as the underlying motives and causes that produced it remain, it follows that these motives will simply and predictably find other ways of manifesting themselves.” (Scuri, 1990, p. IX-X)

*The strong physical image of the skyscraper is not the result of a trend (Post-Modern?) but an expression of the corporation’s desire for an attention drawing device, a publicity exercise and this is bound to transcend any changes in architectural trends and thus here to stay.*
Literature review

Within the context of a site, the skyscraper exists as a highly recognizable object. How does this influence our perception of the site, or getting more specific, what part does this recognizable quality of the skyscraper play in the perception of the site. Although there is not much research to fall back on in terms of the perception of a site and its components, there is definitely a good amount of literature that is parallel to this issue of perception, but only at a larger scale, the scale of the city. Certainly, the most influential work in this regard is the “Image of the City”, by Lynch. Lynch considers the image to be made up of three components: Identity, Structure, Meaning. From his definitions of these terms it is apparent that these three elements can be divided into two groups. The Identity and Structure being the tangible, physical component and the Meaning being the intangible, abstract component.

Pertaining to the above equation, what does the skyscraper as an object bring to the image of a site? As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the potential of the skyscraper as publicity device has resulted in the design and development of skyscrapers with a high degree of imageability. Thus of the two components of ‘image’ of a place, the physical component is more than adequately provided by the skyscraper, but the abstract component of meaning is not.

Scuri feels that Post-Modern skyscrapers do not contribute to the individualistic “identity” of the city itself, though architectural critics may have thought otherwise.

“The term “identity” recurs frequently in discussions of Post-Modern skyscrapers and this demonstrates, if nothing else, the uniformity of linguistic usage... The diversity and peculiarity of Post-Modern forms make them very distinct from the parallelepipedal forms of the Modern style skyscraper. The issue of identity is thus confused with distinctiveness, with recognizability, with standing out from the rest. And all these terms, it should be noted, have to do with external, superficial appearances, while for human beings identity is a problem with much deeper roots.”

Scuri feels that Post-Modern skyscrapers do not contribute to the individualistic “identity” of the city itself, though architectural critics may have thought otherwise. From Scuri’s statement that “for human beings identity is a problem with much deeper roots” we see
that Scuri’s definition of identity is not similar to Lynch’s definition of identity, but is in fact similar to Lynch’s definition of meaning. Substituting ‘meaning’ for ‘identity’ in the above lines, it becomes apparent that Scuri is asserting, with reason, that the skyscraper fails to provide a sense of meaning to itself/site/place/city.

The strength of the skyscraper is its strong physical image, but it fails to provide a sense of ‘meaning’ for itself or the site/place.
Fritz Steele, in his book, The Sense of Place (1989) talks about “the way the sense of place affects our lives, and the ways in which we create our own (sense of place)”. Steele presents his notion of factors that contribute towards the development of a sense of place. In defining “the sense of a place” he writes:

“A sense of place is the pattern of reactions that a setting stimulates for a person. These reactions are a product of both features of the setting and aspects the person brings to it. Sense of place is an interactional concept: a person comes into contact with a setting, which produces reactions. These include feelings, perceptions, behaviors, and outcomes associated with one’s being in that location. (pg. 12) (Steele, 1981, p.12)”

This idea is diagrammatically represented as:

Thus it can be inferred that the most important factor that is required for the development of a “sense of place” is “setting + person”. In order for a sense of place to develop at the Plaza people have to be present in the plaza.

Are people present in the plaza? Is the plaza a preferred destination? The answer depends on the quality of the plaza itself and various other factors that contribute to the satisfactory use of the plaza space. The following paragraphs assess the usage of plaza space in downtowns across the United States.
Corporate plazas have become one of the most significant types of public open space in American downtowns despite the fact that they may not be truly public (quasi-public spaces?). Tridib Banerjee and Ananstasia Loukaitou-sideris in their work, Urban Design Downtown (1998, pg. 86-87) have clearly stated the significance of corporate plazas as public spaces in American downtowns. “A distinctive feature of the new downtown is the variety of open spaces created through private enterprise: plazas, paseos, gallerias, roof gardens, and arcades... In response to some of the incentives... And other perceived benefits, developers increasingly have complemented their projects with open spaces. Today the supply of such spaces by the private sector represents a fundamental change in the creation and consumption of public space in downtown”.

Not only are such spaces created in large numbers but there is also a corresponding desire among the public to use such outdoor spaces.

“The enthusiastic use of such spaces as Faneuil Hall market place in Boston and Harbor place in Baltimore are indications of a lively interest in public life (see for example. Crowhurst-Lennard, Lennard, 1987)... The office-district plaza is certainly not the hub of city life that the piazza once was, but does that make it any less important to contemporary life? As Los Angeles city councilman Michael Fever observes, “In a far flung city like Los Angeles, too frequently we lead anonymous lives, isolated, confined to our cars... There's a hunger for pedestrian life. People are looking for ways to get out of their cars and live on a human level in an urban center” (Morgan, 1996, 59). This fact is further supported by “studies of street life in the US which indicate that more and more people are recreating in downtown outdoor space. Whyte found a 30 percent increase between 1972 and 1973 in the number of people sitting in plazas and small parks in Manhattan; he found between 1973 and 1974 an additional 20 percent increase. He concluded that more people are getting into the habit of sitting in plazas and that with each new plaza the clientele grows... studies of the U.S. West coast confirm the same trends in San Francisco and Seattle. Enhancing these trends are the economic situation, encouraging more people to bring lunches from home; the demographic trend of more people living alone and perhaps seeking relaxed conversations and companionship during the lunch hour; and the stress of office environments” (Marcus, Francis, 1998, p.1)

This apparently high degree of usage of the corporate plazas make it a likely space for the development of a “sense of place” as suggested by Steele. So now within a site there are
two components, the office tower and the corporate plaza. The office tower, as we have seen, provides the physical component of identity and structure and the plaza provides the abstract meaning component. But if both these elements are disjuncted and are not seen as parts of a whole, then there is a wonderful opportunity that is missed, an opportunity for the site to have a wholesome image drawing from these components, the plaza and the office tower.

A meaning for the place/site can develop at the plaza level, since the plaza space is ‘used’ and ‘experienced’ by the people and not just ‘seen’. In order for this meaning, that is developed at the plaza, to be associated with the skyscraper, the skyscraper and the plaza should have a sense of continuity and appear as parts of a whole.
The “sense of continuity” or the relationship between the open space and the building can take place at three levels, pragmatic, semantic and syntactic. The pragmatic level of continuity connects the open space and the building at the functional level. An obvious example is the primary school and its playground. The Semantic level of continuity connects the open space and the building at the level of meaning such as a spiritual thread that may connect the church and its garden. The syntactic level of continuity is the connection that is established at the physical and tangible level.

This thesis shall restrict itself to this physical level of continuity. Lynch defines this sense of continuity thus “...similarity, analogy, or harmony of surface, form, or use (as in a common building material, repetitive pattern of bay windows, similarity of market activity, use of common signs). These are the qualities that facilitate the perception of a complex physical reality as one or as interrelated, the qualities which suggest the bestowing of single identity.” (1960, p.105). In the case of the office tower and the corporate plaza, as we have seen earlier, the office tower has a strong physical image. But this strong image of the skyscraper is best appreciated from a distance, in the skyline. Furthermore, this imageable quality, as we have seen earlier is further reinforced as the image of the building in the skyline is projected repeatedly, in the media, in advertisements. Once you are in the plaza space, using it and experiencing it, there is no reference to this strong image of the office tower. When a person experiences the place at the plaza level, the strong image of the skyscrapers cannot be appreciated. This Temporal discontinuity between the perceptual experience of the image of the skyscraper and the image of the plaza needs to be bridged.

Memories and settings can serve as a bridge between such temporal discontinuities in perception; “Memories and Settings: The term “memories” refers to a whole class of images, thoughts and feelings, which when we experience them, have the quality of coming back to us from the past. We sense that their source is within us, that we are suddenly connected to previous times and settings; and that our minds contain images that have been stored and are now retrieved” (Steele, 1981, p.125-126). It would be worthy to take note of work done by Stan...
Denniston, a Toronto Photographer, in this regard. Stan “has developed a type of photographic work he calls a “reminder”: two photographs are mounted side by side, one of a spot that reminded him of somewhere else he had been, and the second of that “somewhere else he had been”, to which he returned and photographed after being reminded of it. This is a perfect example of the power of a settings’ visual cues.” (Steele, 1981, pg. 128 referring to John Bentley May, “Denniston’s Double-takes illustrate visual memory”, The Toronto Globe and Mail, Tuesday, April 22, 1980, pg.12)"

The above ideas can be summarised thus. In order for the meaning, that is developed at the plaza, to be associated with the skyscraper, the skyscraper and the plaza should have a sense of continuity and appear as parts of a whole. **To achieve this sense of continuity, the design of the plaza space needs to reflect/incorporate the elements that contribute to the strong physical image of the skyscraper as a means of reinforcing the image of the skyscraper that is stored in the memory.** This statement forms the backbone of the thesis.
Analysis

The remainder of this thesis tests this statement/idea in a design solution. The first step in this direction is the analysis of existing plazas against the thesis statement.

Three of the 4 plazas that were chosen as case studies are part of an office tower that was built after the mid-1970s, the time period that saw the rebirth of the imageable office tower. These are the Citicorp plaza, The Fountain Plaza and The South Coast Plaza. The Federal Plaza was redesigned in 1996 by the firm Della valle and Bernheimer in an international competition and the building itself was built in the 1960's.

An attempt was made to analyze the case studies through a filter of three main questions

1) Does the design of the plaza reflect the imageable character of the building?

2) If yes then how?

3) Does the design of the plaza facilitate the use and experience of the space?
Case studies

In only one of the plazas, the South Coast plaza was there a conscious attempt in the design to reflect the imageable character of the building, the convex façade and the steel bands. The website of Peter Walker & Partners, the landscape Architect of the plaza describes the space thus:

“In response to the work of architects Cesar Pelli and Associates and C.R.S. Sirrine, Walker proposed a landscape that would extend the forms, materials, and expression of the new Plaza Tower. Fronting Plaza Tower—a bold bow-fronted building clad in stainless steel—is the equally bold parterre of stainless steel and water geometries. A series of four-inch bands of steel, stretched across the surface of the entry court, visually connect the tower with the parking structure. Framing the court are twin fountains displaying concentric rings, also of stainless steel, that form a series of alternating weirs and pools. Bollards with lights provide a vertical counterpoint to this planar composition. To complement this play of reflective and seamless surfaces, a site-specific sculpture by Aiko Miyawaki, Utsurohi, traces moving curves of stainless steel against the sky. The leaves of poplar and purple-leaf plum rustle; the slick elements of steel, like the reflective pools, mirror the variations in daylight and the movement of clouds across the skies. When the bow-fronted tower increases the velocity of the wind, visitors may marvel at the smooth surface of the fountains, the water quietly gliding into dark circles. The court, animated by the passage of pedestrians and cars, is a taut plane; simple, but not simplistic, it allows for both wonder and mystery.”

But this plaza did not have any amenities that would encourage people to use the plaza.
The Fountain plaza on the other hand is a preferred destination and is very well used, as was the intention of the designer. Half of the site is set aside as a two-acre downtown water garden and fountain plaza, a wet and very shady destination for pedestrians in a city of automobiles. The plaza has 172 bubbler fountains, waterfalls, and a central court fountain with 360 computer-driven jets. But the plaza fails to acknowledge the strong geometry that makes the building, the Fountain Place, one of the most recognizable in the skyline. "Geometry pursued with rigor" is the way Henry Cobb of I.M. Pei & Partners summarizes his design for the 1986 building. Based on the diagonal of a double square, it is a subtractive form, he says: "what's left after carving into a square prism." Yet the plaza space seems to operate on its own sense geometry which is neither sympathetic nor contradictory to that of the tower.
Case studies

The Citicorp plaza again does not truly acknowledge the strong geometry of the building, there seems to be an unintentional reference to the slanted top in the 45 degree angle of the steps. And the color of the granite paving reflects the gray aluminum skin of the building. The design of the plaza does not facilitate the use and experience of the space. But it is fairly crowded and that is more due to its location, rather than good design.
The Federal plaza does not directly relate to this thesis, in that it does not have an imageable building as its anchor. But the study of the plaza did yield some interesting possibilities for the design process. Firstly although the plaza does not relate to the physical image of the building, it attempts to relate to the semantics of the building. The “Federal” building with its emphasis on security seems to deserve a concrete plaza that creates a fortress like image. The strong use of the diagonal boldly contrasts with the plain box of the federal building, thus acknowledging the image of the building only by contradicting the image.
The case studies reinforce a few aspects that need to be addressed in the design of the plaza:

1) Reference to the imageable character can be made through the use of materials as much as shape and forms (and there might be other possibilities based on the character of the building).

2) The functional aspect of the plaza is critical for the successful use of the plaza, an assumption that supports this thesis.

3) The plaza can make semantic and pragmatic references to the building, apart from the syntactic reference that this thesis restricts itself to.

4) The Urban context influences the use of the plaza.
The site chosen for the thesis is the PPG Place in Pittsburgh. The PPG Place, a complex of 6 buildings, exemplifies the postmodern movement and was designed by one of the chief proponents of the movement, Philip Johnson. The once stark and desolate plaza was refurbished recently with the addition of fountains around the obelisk in the center. A skating rink is operated in the plaza during the winter months.

The analysis preceding the design phase consists of three layers.

- **Analysis of imageable qualities of the building**:
  - Citicorp Center & PPG Building

- **Analysis of issues pertaining to the usability of the plaza**: 
  - PPG Building

- **Analysis of the urban context**: 
  - Downtown Pittsburgh