

Food

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One of the big contributors to Seagram plaza's success is Gus, the vendor who can be found day after day, year after year at the corner of Park Avenue and 52nd Street.

If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food. In New York, at every plaza or set of steps with a lively social life, you will almost invariably find a food vendor at the corner and a knot of people around him—eating, shmoozing, or just standing.

Vendors have a good nose for spaces that work. They have to. They are constantly testing the market, and if business picks up in one spot, there will soon be a cluster of vendors there. This will draw more people, and yet more vendors, and sometimes so many converge that pedestrian traffic slows to a crawl. In front of Rockefeller Plaza during the Christmas holidays, we've counted some 15 vendors in a 40-foot stretch (most of them selling hot pretzels).

The civic establishment deplores all this. There are enough ordinances to make it illegal for vendors, licensed or not, to do business at any spot where business is good. Merchants always get on the backs of the police to enforce the ordinances. In midtown and downtown the most frequently observed police activity is giving summonses to food vendors. Sometimes there are sweeps, the police arriving with trucks to haul the vendors away. The confrontations usually draw big crowds who are clearly on the side of the vendors.

And well they should be. By default, the vendors have become the caterers of the city's outdoor life. They flourish because they're servicing a demand not being met by the regular commercial establishment.



Basic food facilities—a snack bar, tables, chairs—seed a place with activity.

Plazas are particularly parasitic in this respect. Hardly a one has been constructed that did not involve the demolition of luncheonettes and restaurants. The vendor thus fills a void, and this can become quite clear when he is shooed away. A lot of the life of the space goes with him.

New York City is less puritanical than some other places. Many cities have ordinances that not only prevent purveying food outdoors, but eating there as well. If you ask officials about this, they tell you of the dreadful things that would happen were the restrictions lifted—the dangers



of unhealthful food, terrible litter problems, and so on. Partly because of these restrictions, most of the plaza and building complexes constructed during the past 10 years have no provision of any kind for outdoor eating. The few that do have had to do some pioneering. The First National Bank of Chicago, for example, found that even to provide such minimum facilities as a popcorn cart they had to get special dispensation from the city.

Food attracts people who attract more people. We had an excellent opportunity to observe this shill effect through some semicontrolled experiments at a new plaza. At first there was no food. A moderate number of people used the place. At our suggestion, the management put in a food cart. It was an immediate success (a

flower cart was not). More people came. A pushcart vendor set up shop on the sidewalk; then another. Business continued to pick up, for all three vendors. Next, the management got the restaurant in the building to open a small outdoor cafe. More people came and yet more—over and above the number who used the cafe.

The optical leverage in these things is tremendous. For basic props, nothing more is needed than several stacks of folding chairs and tables. Spread them out, put up the colored umbrellas, bring on the waitresses, and the customers and visual effect can be stunning. If the cafe makes money, which most do, all the better. But it can be justified for its shill effect alone. The wonder is that there are not more of them.

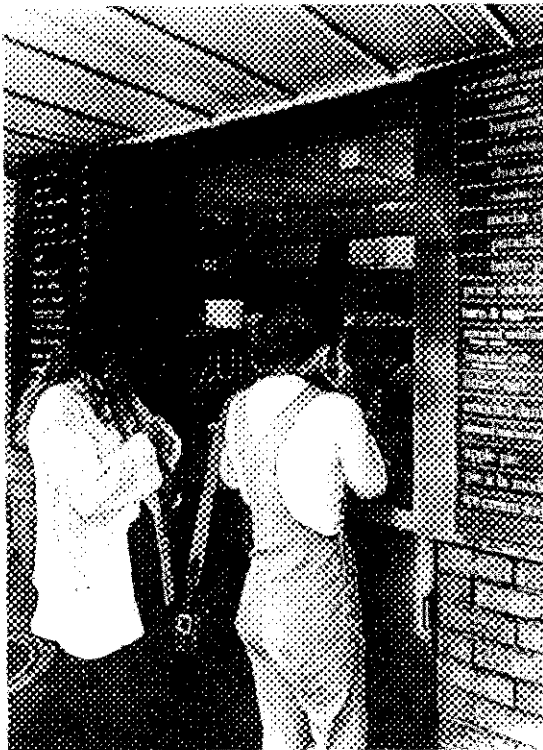
New buildings and plazas along the Avenue of the Americas displaced many delis and restaurants. This vacuum has now been taken up by a phalanx of food vendors.



The most basic facility is a snackbar. Paley and Greenacre parks both have pass-through counters featuring good food at reasonable prices, and making a moderate profit. Plenty of tables are provided, and people are welcome to bring their own food—wine, too, if they wish. From the street it sometimes looks like a great big party, and if the line of people for the snackbar gets long, the sight will induce passersby to join. Food, to repeat, draws people, and they draw more people.

We proposed that New York's new zoning law make provision of basic food facilities a requirement for all new plazas and parks. The Planning Commission thought this a bit too much, and the final proposals lack the requirement. But food kiosks and other structures that previously would have been counted as obstructions

The built-in snack bar at Greenacre Park.



are specifically encouraged. So are outdoor cafes: up to 20 percent of the open area can be used for such operations. The provisions were also made retroactive to promote the installation of cafes and facilities on existing plazas.

A happy vindication of our recommendations was provided by the city government. It started a cafe. Next to the municipal building there was a big space, St. Andrews Plaza, and the then Deputy Borough President of Manhattan, Jolie Hammer, conceived the idea of an outdoor cafe with ethnic food. She badgered several organizations into donating tables and chairs and got cafes and bakeries from nearby Little Italy to set up booths. Later, she brought in Chinese and soul-food concessions. The operation was a hit from the beginning, with some 500 to 600 people at the peak of the lunch period.

Ms. Hammer also provided a lesson in space use. Instead of distributing the facilities over the large space, she bunched them and, with the tyrant's hand of a good hostess, grouped the tables closely together. As a consequence, people were compressed into meeting one another; waiting in line or weaving their way through the tables, it was difficult not to. Very quickly, the plaza became a great interchange for city government people, and by any index it is one of the most sociable of places. I've never seen so many people striking up conversations, introducing people, saying hellos and good-byes. If a check is ever made, it would probably show many marriages and children can be traced back to a summer day at St. Andrews Plaza.