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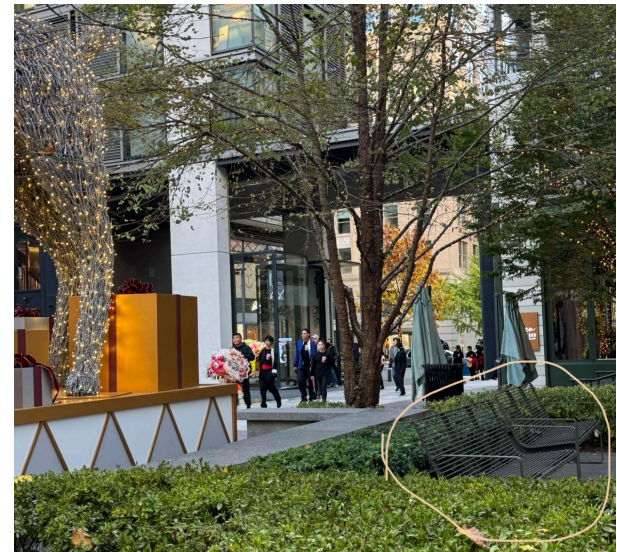
Site Analysis of CityCenterDC

Being one of the key landmarks of Washington D.C., CityCenterDC stands as a luxury shopping mall adjacent to Chinatown. Originally intended to fulfill a need for public spaces, CityCenter evolved to contribute to the ongoing gentrification of D.C. neighborhoods. According to the New York Times, construction of CityCenterDC began in March 2011, and most of the project was completed by 2013 (Pristin). Hines and Archstone, real estate development companies, developed CityCenterDC; meanwhile, Foster + Partners, a British architecture firm, led its architectural design (Pristin).

CityCenterDC has developed over time from initially emphasizing public access and engagement to now being characterized by a controlled and exclusive environment. Early proposals for the site focused on a civic-minded approach, with a new central library as the centerpiece and housing as a key component (O'Connell). This vision aimed to attract new residents and enhance the cultural and intellectual life of downtown Washington. However, the project's direction shifted dramatically, influenced by factors like opposition to moving the central library and a perceived need to compete with suburban luxury retail (O'Connell). The final plan for CityCenterDC prioritized high-end retail, office spaces, and luxury residences, attracting brands like Hermès, Bulgari, and Dior that were previously absent from downtown D.C. (O'Connell).

CityCenterDC spans 10 acres in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C (Pristin). The site includes two condominium buildings with 216 units and two office buildings (totalling 520,000 square feet) (Pristin). Washington city in the District of Columbia has a total population of 689, 545, with 68.2% of the population being employed and 65.9% holding a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census). To add more background, the median household income in Washington city is \$108,210 (United States Census).

I arrived at CityCenterDC by walking 30 minutes east from Foggy Bottom, and taking the metro would take about 16 minutes. Upon entering the site, I walked into the middle of CityCenterDC from the McPherson route. My initial impression was that CityCenterDC was a secured shopping mall despite being outdoors, and that there were many high-end restaurants and shops. As seen in the image¹ to the right, I made my observation in the center of the plaza, sitting on a spacious public bench among Christmas decorations like reindeer statues (Yeh).



A "fortress" urban landscape, a concept explored by Mike Davis in his analysis of Los Angeles, refers to the transformation of cities into environments that prioritize security and exclusivity for affluent populations while marginalizing and excluding the urban poor (Sorkin and Davis 155-171). Physical barriers, surveillance systems, and architectural designs that create a sense of separation between differing socioeconomic groups characterize this concept (Sorkin and Davis 155-171). Based on various observations, CityCenterDC includes characteristics of a "fortress" urban landscape. While CityCenterDC aims to present a welcoming public space, certain design elements and its exclusivity toward certain populations

¹ Image taken by Sabrina Yeh on November 16, 2024

contribute to a controlled environment. CityCenterDC is an urban space designed to cater to affluent populations while implementing different strategies to exclude the presence of “less desirable” groups.

Security measures are one of the several characteristics of CityCenterDC that align with Mike Davis’ concept of a “fortress” urban landscape. CityCenterDC is a secured shopping mall despite being outdoors, with visible security guards in almost every corner. The presence of hired security officers and security cameras, as depicted in the photograph² to the right, along with the well-lit environment, make a deliberate effort to



control the space and potentially prevent unwanted activities (Yeh). This surveillance aligns with Davis's description of “fortress cities” utilizing various security measures like video cameras and police patrols to physically insulate themselves from nearby properties and individuals (Sorkin and Davis 171). CityCenterDC and other “fortress urban landscapes” create a sense of safety and exclusivity for residents and visitors, while provoking fear in those who do not follow the rules (Sorkin and Davis 155). The implementation of private security forces and advanced surveillance systems in “fortress” areas like CityCenterDC creates a secured environment that prioritizes the safety of wealthy residents over the accessibility of public space.

While some benches provide comfortable seating, others (like the one in image³ on the right) feature a design that is



² Image taken by Sabrina Yeh on November 16, 2024

³ Image taken by Sabrina Yeh on November 16, 2024

considered "hostile architecture" to prevent people from lying down (Yeh). This strategy aims to manage public space and potentially exclude certain groups such as homeless individuals.

“Hostile architecture” reinforces the concept of a controlled environment depicted in “fortress” urban landscapes because the designs limit how the public can interact with the space. Davis argues that public amenities like “bus benches” aim to discourage homeless and other undesirable populations from interacting with “fortress cities” (Sorkin and Davis 161). The mere presence of “hostile architecture” in CityCenterDC is designed to be uncomfortable to prevent the homeless from using them, effectively controlling who can and cannot comfortably occupy public spaces. Moreover, CityCenterDC lacks another public amenity featured in many urban spaces: public restrooms. The only observed restrooms required visitors to enter luxury restaurants, shops, or apartments and potentially buy a service or product from that company. Similar to “hostile architecture,” this lack of basic amenities might discourage certain individuals, particularly those experiencing homelessness, from entering CityCenterDC. Therefore, CityCenterDC exemplifies the "fortress" urban landscape's controlled environment because its designers purposefully omitted public amenities such as restrooms and comfortable seating.

As depicted in the image⁴ to the right, the abundance of high-end brands (like Kate Spade and Hugo Boss) and restaurants at CityCenterDC caters to a



⁴ Image taken by Sabrina Yeh on November 16, 2024

specific demographic with a large spending power (Yeh). This exclusivity exemplifies a “fortress” urban space because the site prioritizes the needs and desires of affluent consumers while neglecting the needs of less privileged groups (Sorkin and Davis 155-171). The financial restraints imposed on visitors create an environment that implicitly excludes those who cannot afford to engage in the luxury consumer culture, supporting the "fortress city" concept of economic segregation.

While there was racial and gender diversity among visitors during the observation at CityCenterDC, there was also a lack of financial diversity, including few perceived low-income visitors. Though this is difficult to confirm with certainty, several visitors were dressed in luxury or designer clothes. Meanwhile, there was a notable lack of unhoused people, which is not representative of typical D.C. public spaces. This lack of financial diversity suggests that economic barriers remain a significant factor in shaping how certain groups of people feel welcome and included in the space. In conclusion, CityCenterDC exhibits many characteristics from Mike Davis's concept of the "fortress city." The site's emphasis on security, control, luxury consumption, and a lack of public amenities serves to discourage certain populations from interacting with CityCenterDC. This purposeful exclusivity creates an environment that exemplifies Davis's concept of a “fortress” urban landscape that is designed to protect the interests and lifestyles of affluent residents at the expense of broader inclusivity (Sorkin and Davis 155-171).

While CityCenterDC is an example of Davis’s concept of a “fortress” urban landscape, the site has characteristics that distinctly contrast with Jane Jacobs’s vision of successful public spaces. In her influential book called *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs supported diverse, mixed-use urban environments where a sense of community engagement and

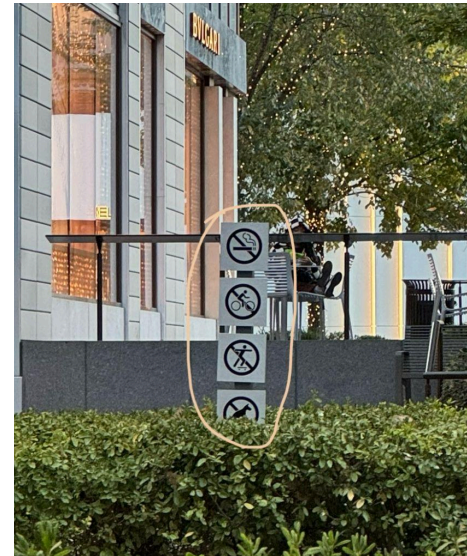
organic order create safe and vibrant public spaces (Jacobs 30-259). Previous observations describe CityCenterDC as a space that, while presented as public, incorporates exclusivity and control that challenges Jane Jacobs's arguments for successful public spaces. While CityCenterDC offers a mix of uses with retail, office, and residential spaces, the curated nature of the environment and the emphasis on high-end consumption limit the diversity of experiences and interactions that Jacobs supported.

CityCenterDC's focus on high-end retail and its carefully controlled environment contradict Jacobs's vision of diverse and organic public spaces. Specifically, Jacobs advocated for public spaces to have a variety of uses that cater to various backgrounds and foster interactions among diverse individuals (Jacobs 259). However, CityCenterDC prioritizes luxury consumption and presents a homogenous environment that caters to a specific demographic of affluent individuals. While there is racial and gender diversity among visitors, there is a distinct lack of financial diversity, suggesting that the space implicitly excludes those who cannot afford to engage in its consumerist environment.

Moreover, Jacobs stressed the importance of "eyes on the street," meaning that a constant flow of pedestrians and residents observing their surroundings creates a natural form of surveillance and prevention against crime (Jacobs 32-43). CityCenterDC, however, relies on formal mechanisms of control, with security cameras and security guards being everywhere. Specifically, security guards strictly enforce the rules at CityCenterDC, with one security guard even walking over to teenagers who were making loud noises and telling them to quiet down. This reliance on formal security measures contrasts with Jacobs's vision of public safety working best due to the "casual," watchful presence of a diverse community (Jacobs 36). Therefore,

CityCenterDC's formal surveillance challenges Jacobs' argument that people, not police, primarily maintain the safety of city streets (Jacobs 32).

In addition, Jacobs believed that successful public spaces should cater to the needs of a diverse population, which CityCenterDC does not provide because of its numerous regulations and lack of public amenities (Jacobs 14). CityCenterDC deliberately excludes public restrooms to discourage engagement with people deemed undesirable, such as the homeless. This exclusionary approach contradicts Jacobs's vision of inclusive and accessible public spaces (Jacobs 238). Furthermore, CityCenterDC offers a clean, aesthetically pleasing, and highly controlled environment. As depicted in the image⁵ to the right taken from an observation, there were signs around the central area that signified no smoking, no biking, no skateboarding, and no pets allowed (Yeh). These regulations at CityCenterDC may attract visitors seeking a predictable and comfortable experience. However, this curated environment contrasts with Jacobs's vision of public spaces as messy, unpredictable, and shaped by the organic interactions of diverse individuals, as Jacobs believes that cities are created "by everybody" and should offer "something for everybody" (Jacobs 238). Therefore, Jacobs's inclusive view celebrates the messy, unpredictable nature of city life that reflects diverse individuals as opposed to the regulated and inaccessible nature of CityCenterDC.



While CityCenterDC showed a diverse crowd in terms of race and gender, the lack of financial diversity and overall sense of exclusivity suggest that the site fails to function as a successful public space in a way Jacobs would have expected. Rather than fostering a sense of community and inclusivity, the site prioritizes a controlled and curated environment that caters to

⁵ Image taken by Sabrina Yeh on November 16, 2024

a specific, affluent demographic. The site's reliance on formal control, curated exclusivity, and consumerist appeal creates an environment that contradicts Jacobs's vision of organic diversity, informal surveillance, and inclusive accessibility.

Essentially, the lack of financial diversity in visitors at CityCenterDC contradicts Jacobs's vision of public spaces while supporting Davis's concept of a "fortress" urban landscape. The site's emphasis on formal control, luxury consumption, and a lack of public amenities serves to prevent certain populations from interacting with CityCenterDC. This purposeful exclusivity makes CityCenterDC an example of a "fortress" city and marks it as a failure under Jacobs' interpretation of the ideal public space.

To enhance CityCenterDC's success as an urban space, designers and policymakers should implement various design, layout, and public policy modifications inspired by Jane Jacobs' principles of urban design. CityCenterDC could benefit from design and programming choices that attract people from different backgrounds. Because there is currently a lack of financial diversity in CityCenterDC, incorporating more affordable retail options and public amenities like a dog park could help foster a more inclusive environment. Instead of prioritizing luxury brands that cater primarily to affluent clients, CityCenterDC could implement a mix of local businesses and services that cater to the needs of a diverse population. These expanded services could involve providing incentives for small businesses to locate within the development or creating spaces for pop-up shops and community events. In consideration of sellers, reform to CityCenterDC can be gradual. Over time, this would also include deregulation (minimizing current rules) and taking away security guards to promote more organic interactions. Together, these long-term goals can improve the success of CityCenterDC in terms of urban design, layout, and public policy.

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