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**C**HALK one up for City Hall for exhibiting appropriate backbone — assuming the Dinkins Administration continues to stand firm and not allow the Parker Meridien Hotel on W. 57th Street to eliminate a public amenity for which it was generously rewarded.

Eight extra floors given to the hotel in exchange for a creating a public space added millions of dollars to the building's value. Many considered it a meager exchange; the public was minimally accommodated and never made to feel welcome.

Now, with a judge's approval, the hotel has eliminated the public space, citing security — a familiar and questionable rationale. Security can always be an excuse to make a public space hostile with an obvious barrier, but aesthetic sterility and activity-free spaces are more subtle fences. In the name of safety, too many public spaces are being privatized and made inaccessible when creating truly inviting amenities with adequate security provisions — a modest exchange for financially generous bonuses — would be more appropriate.

Nibbling away at the social benefits that add richness to the city, limiting the number of hospitable places where people can sit and congregate and denying the reality that it is possible to

## Holding developers to their word

create and maintain sociable public spaces all means simply surrendering to crime.

Allowing property owners to back out of what they knowingly bargained for in the first place — after they've reaped lucrative benefits — encourages erosion. Why, then, won't other property owners follow suit? The precedent is more dangerous than is at first apparent.

The issue is the obligation a developer takes on by accepting such a "bonus." Too often, developers regard these obligations as just that — an obligation to be tolerated, rather than something which, if done right, can add both financial value to the property and social value to the public. The original Rockefeller Center or the more recent Crystal Court and World Financial Center are perfect examples of that principle at work.

Creating an inviting, well-used public space on private property is not merely a design issue. In fact, the Parker Meridien proves that even with strict design guidelines in place, sterility is easily achieved.

A good public space is not necessarily the most aesthetically appealing. Being user friendly is

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infinitely more critical to a successful social benefit than looking good. Such a site always will be changing, evolving and interesting, offering sociability, surprises and serendipitous as well as planned activity. Consequently, it will have an ever-changing, ever-interesting parade of people. Modification and alteration are to be expected — this is a creative process and should never be static.

The Parker Meridien has been sterile from the start. Its mock Roman Court with marble, mirrors and classical columns is not enough. The public "arcade" was uninviting at best and a secret at worst. But determined users — especially the brown bag lunch crowd who enliven most agreeable public sites — found it. In a neighborhood bereft of social spaces, they made good use of it, unperturbed by the so-called unpleasant and threatening visitors whom hotel management cites for having to remove the tables.

The most inviting private/public spaces around town have a cafe atmosphere, the opportunity to buy a cup of coffee, maybe a nibble, maybe even a meal. There are no prerequisites for leisurely lingering but subtle suggestions of what's expected. These are management issues which no property owner should shirk.

But when a property owner is encouraged to retrofit a failed public space by introducing food vendors or restaurants, as with Olympic Tower, or commercializing it completely with full scale stores constructed on the plaza space, as in the case of the ATT Building (now Sony headquarters), then the public should benefit from the new revenue. A large percentage of the rent should go to a fund, jointly managed by the city and some private foundation, designated for the improvement of derelict public spaces.

No one should simply be able to buy their way out of such an important public commitment.

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