

Arts & LEISURE

Passengers May Now Pirouette To Gate 3

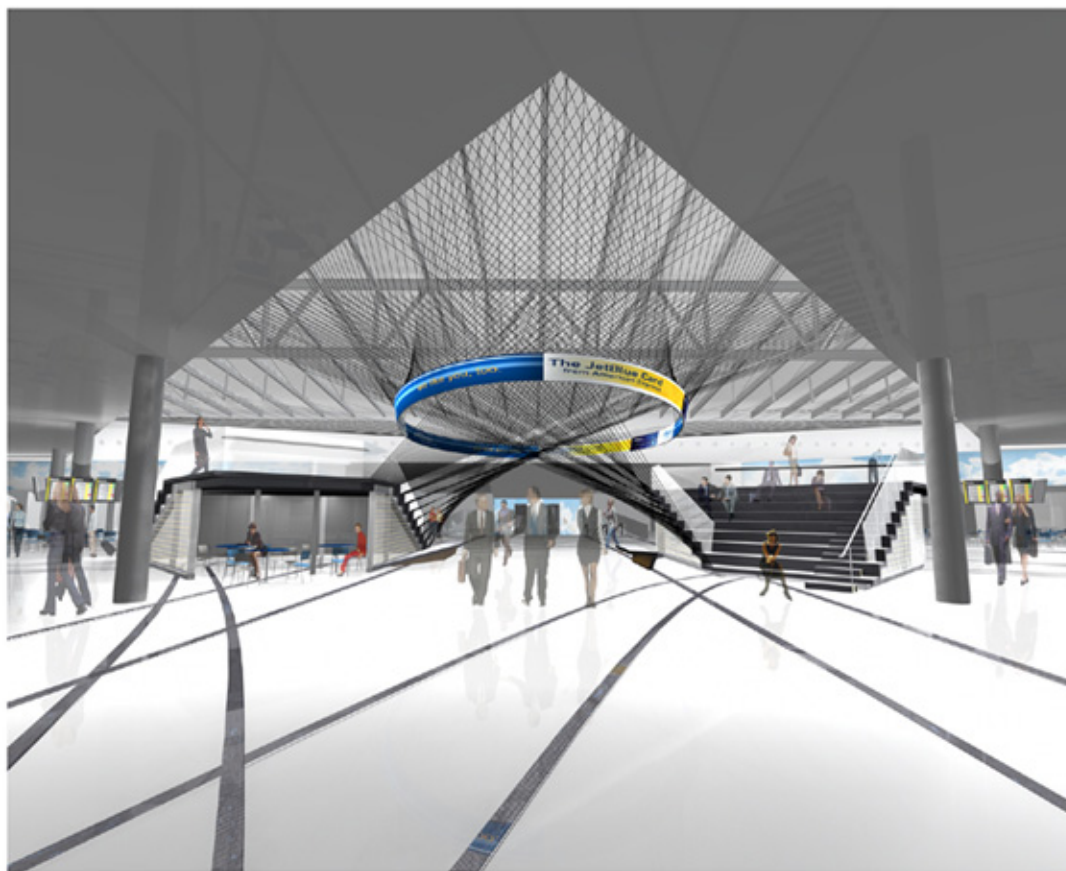
By JESSE GREEN

THE Grand Foyer at Radio City Music Hall has been described as many things: a tour de force, a people's palace, even an Art Deco masterpiece. But it has not typically been described in the language of dance, as it recently was by the architect and set designer David Rockwell. The commanding room, he said, functioned as a kind of ballet master: a magnetic presence that forced people to move well and look good. "I have a vivid memory of the first time I walked up that stairway," he said, referring to the huge yet perfectly proportioned flight of steps to the mezzanine. "I had bad posture, but just being on it made my posture improve."

Individual behavior is only part of the story; the Grand Foyer also alters the behavior of crowds, who instinctively know how to use it. Much as a dancer doing pirouettes keeps her eyes focused on a reference point so she won't get dizzy, visitors, without even realizing it, use the room's precisely deployed architectural signposts — stairway, chandelier, mirrors, doorframes — to align themselves and stay on track. As a result, Radio City can pull 5,900 people through its lobby without confusion or confusion; more than that, it does so with the theatricality and orderliness that you might imagine at a formal ball.

For Mr. Rockwell — whose mother, once a vaudeville dancer, had hoped to be a Rockette — the dance of people in public space is not so much a matter of inborn grace or hours spent at the barre, as of how the built environment pushes us around and how we push back. His designs

An architect and a choreographer collaborate on an airline terminal.



Rockwell Group with Gensler & Associates

A rendering of the JetBlue terminal at Kennedy International Airport.

have explored these dynamics in a variety of settings, from upscale hotels and res-

THEATER/DANCE

taurants to the viewing platform at ground zero.

But his latest project involves one of the most notoriously pushy environments there is: an airport terminal. Last year his firm was hired to design the "interior experience" (arrival, departure, retail space) of the new JetBlue Airways terminal being built at Kennedy International Airport. And in what may be a first for architectural collaboration, Mr. Rockwell hired a choreographer — his Broadway colleague Jerry Mitchell — to help him.

The two men thought a lot about which public spaces in New York were well "choreographed" — that is, which shaped people's movement successfully — and which were not.

Mr. Rockwell had been pondering the general subject for decades. Even while a student at Syracuse University, he would stand on the roof of the architecture building and study the patterns carved in the snow by a sort of unspoken group will, patterns he would later connect to those described by the urbanist William H. Whyte in his classic studies of public space. What caused them? It wasn't just expedience, because the paths were often curved, where a straight line would be more direct. People moved as they did, Whyte believed,

You May Now Pirouette

The elements that allow pedestrians to negotiate Union Square Park, top, and Grand Central Terminal, left, as noted by David Rockwell.

at least in part because they sought out pleasing experiences; they voted with their feet.

If Whyte was right, then why are so many public spaces so deeply unpleasurable — and sometimes almost dangerous — to move through? How could the exquisite choreography of Grand Central Terminal, with its powerful beams of natural light making what Mr. Rockwell called a "gateway inviting people into the city," coexist with the claustrophobic purgatory of Penn Station? (Penn Station seems to sneer and say, "Get lost!") How could the Grand Foyer at Radio City have the same function as the bewildering entry to the Marquis Theater on Broadway, which is cruel enough to suggest that the place was named for the Marquis de Sade?

With their traffic-stopping lady-or-the-tiger mystery corridors, their dizzying hairpin escalators, their misproportioned steps that send people tumbling, such places actually seem intended to enhance human clumsiness. Whyte certainly thought so.

"It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people," he wrote. "What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished." In New York, if you want to feel like an oaf with two left feet, there are many places that will gladly assist you. Quite often these will be places that



Illustrations by David Rockwell; photographs by Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

people cannot choose to avoid. Jury pens, Social Security offices and ticket lobbies of hit shows, facing no competition, are usually disasters, to say nothing of emergency rooms, which only a corpse on a gurney could love.

But even those seem like successful designs compared with most airport terminals. With people and vehicles and luggage going every which way, these have always been difficult spaces to organize. A few architects have managed elegant, even poetic solutions, like Eero Saarinen's 1962 TWA terminal at Kennedy, whose soaring gull-shaped roof and swooping interiors invited travelers to imagine that they were flying even before they left the ground. But prosaic concerns like increased ridership and heightened security have turned the old buildings into dinosaurs and left what Mr. Rockwell calls their "generic and soulless" successors fac-

ing an apparently unsolvable puzzle. How do you move so many people, safely and logically and with a feeling of freedom, around a huge space that cannot in fact be free?

Mr. Rockwell's job at the JetBlue terminal — which is being built next to the Saarinen building, now empty — required him to think both inside the box (Gensler & Associates was responsible for most of the architecture) and outside it, given JetBlue's reputation for stylish practicality. "We began with the idea of using movement to personalize the experience and deal with the emotions of travel." Or as Richard Smythe, the JetBlue executive in charge of redevelopment at the airport, put it, the job was to make the customer's movement through the terminal feel "sexy."

Making movement feel sexy (or at least not random and leadfooted) is one possible definition of dance, which is why Mr. Rockwell brought Mr. Mitchell aboard. In the musicals they had already worked on together — “The Rocky Horror Show,” “Hairspray” and “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels” — Mr. Rockwell’s sets had seemed not only to shape some of the dancing but also at times to participate in it. That the two men were about to collaborate on the musical adaptation of “Catch Me If You Can,” a tribute to the innocence of flight in the Jet Set ’60s, seemed like another positive omen.

Even so, a choreographer is about as typical in an architectural design process as a dentist or a woodchuck, and the idea of the highly theatrical Mr. Mitchell presenting his ideas to structural engineers and efficiency experts probably raised a few eyebrows. But Mr. Rockwell likes unusual collaborations; he enlisted Todd Oldham, the fashion designer, to help develop the color scheme for the Kodak Theater in Hollywood and had the underground cartoonist Gary Panter working with him on a Disney cruise ship project.

In any case, Mr. Mitchell took one look at the JetBlue terminal flow simulations and started dancing around the conference table at the Rockwell Group office on Union Square. “The original design made it hard to understand where you were supposed to go, either entering or leaving,” Mr. Mitchell said. “Traffic diagrams showed a huge amount of path-crossing. I started to think it would be fabulous to eliminate all this crisscrossing and straight edges, which cause anxiety when they go on too long. David asked me what dance patterns I would use, and I said, ‘People move easiest in circles: off and on the merry-go-round.’”

From his many “nightmare” hours spent at O’Hare International en route to or from his family, Mr. Mitchell recognized another problem: The design did not account for what he called the “different emotional experiences” of arrival and departure.

“Coming into an airport when you’re leaving on a trip you have to slow down,” he said. “You’ve got to arrive two hours early, and you’ve got security, luggage, kids, older people to deal with. That experience has to be made more leisurely. Coming back, to New York at least, you want to get out of the airport as fast as possible. You want a little Hot Wheels acceleration as you’re coming off the plane and heading to the exit.”

Mr. Mitchell was talking about feelings, but for a choreographer, feelings are what get expressed through pattern and rhythm. So he and the architects looked for ways to alter the shape and pace of passenger movement within the terminal, drawing less on transportation hubs (which are patronized of necessity) and more on urban spaces that people actually choose and enjoy. At Union Square, as Mr. Rockwell explained on a recent tour through some of those sites, the paths are wide enough for pedestrians to move along them in both directions at once, allowing for the pleasure of proximity without discouraging eye contact. (Squeeze people too close, as on a rush-hour subway train, and they won’t look at one another.) The paths are also gently curved, allowing some surprise about what’s around the next bend. And those curves seem to stretch time; as we circulated slowly, we were always aware of how we were deviating from the Manhattan grid, which nevertheless persisted as a faint impression, like a distant drumbeat.

“Friction is crucial for creating successful movement,” Mr. Rockwell said. At Union Square — a green platform raised like a stage between



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

streets that bustle with normal urban activity — that friction causes pedestrians to slow down, even if they don’t mean to stop. At Times Square, where the streets do not recede but instead seem to multiply, the ambient rhythm accelerates. If a tourist unfamiliar with the beat stops to gawk, he is inevitably shoved along. (Successful movement doesn’t always mean leisurely movement; Whyte liked a “nice bustle” of up to seven people per foot of walkway a minute.) At the Channel Gardens arcade leading down to the ice rink in front of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the contrast between the mass of the buildings on either side and the void in between sucks passers-by down toward the rink with an accelerating force that feels almost gravitational.

But an even more fundamental rule of human movement was in operation at all these spots: People will not generally walk into large objects. So if you want the foot traffic to turn left, put an obstacle — a statue, a row of planters, a large building — on the right.

“It’s like they tell you in white-water rafting,” Mr. Rockwell said. “Follow the water because it avoids the rocks.”

Out of such thoughts, and Mr. Mitchell’s choreographic insights, came the Rockwell Group’s solution for the JetBlue terminal. Various obstructions (principally two large bleacherlike seating areas rising up like icebergs after the security checkpoints) would subtly lead outbound travelers toward the periphery of the space — the longer, more circular route — while inbound travelers would be directed straight between them, down a level and swiftly out. The periphery walls would be curved like the paths at Union Square to slow down the outbound experience and, not incidentally, enhance the likelihood of lingering over merchandise. And the bleacherlike seating areas, improving on the usual pods of wee chairs and tables at floor level, would encourage people to get above the action and watch the shapes of the promenade that they were recently part of.

Mr. Rockwell calls that kind of alternation, which he had pointed out in all the successful urban places we visited, “public theater”: “Are we the actors? Or are the actors the other people we’re looking at? What’s thrilling is that it keeps flipping back and forth. The ambiguity allows people to be whatever they want.”

Mr. Mitchell expressed it less abstractly: “Is it an airport? Is it a Broadway show? What’s

the difference?”

It will take a while to find out; the terminal isn’t expected to open until 2008. But for Mr. Rockwell the interplay of architecture and choreography has already begun to inform his purely theatrical work. In its evocation of a biomorphic 1960’s urban “eventorium,” “Hairspray” contains a direct reference to Saarinen, and the show’s blinking jewel-tone backdrop owes a debt, Mr. Rockwell said, to the 20-foot waterfall at the back of Paley Park on East 53rd Street. Both the waterfall and the backdrop act as unifying focal points that drag the viewer through the fourth wall, whether literally at Paley Park — it’s hard not to walk in — or figuratively at the Neil Simon Theater.

Whyte was a big fan of Paley Park; in his documentary film “City Spaces, Human Places,” he showed how its architecture altered people’s movement (and mood) in specific, predictable ways. That’s what dance does too — to the dancers at least — and why the connection between choreographers and architects is not so far-fetched.

The urbanist Jane Jacobs referred to the dynamics of her Greenwich Village block as the “ballet of Hudson Street,” a phrase often interpreted as a tribute to the randomness of people’s unpredictable daily choices. That’s surely part of it, but given Jacobs’s aesthetic and political convictions, it must also be a reference to the thousand quite nonrandom decisions about scale and setback and zoning that shape people’s randomness. Successful public spaces invite you to join the dance of city life by first helping you to see it; without the rhythm of the street grid there could be no languorous fox trots like Union Square, no elegant struts like Bryant Park, no jitterbugs like Times Square, with everyone hopping around the traffic and bending off at Fosse angles. The city is more choreographed than we may like to think, and for better or worse, we’re all hoofers within it.