

## City Outdoes Itself in Redesign Of Lower Avenue of Americas

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

Something has happened to the lower blocks of the Avenue of the Americas that should have happened years ago, but didn't, and should be happening everywhere else

In the city, but probably won't

It is a complete re-appraisal of the avenue and as related amenities,

such as small parks and squares, from Canal Street to West Fourth Street, and it is so far above the usual standard of urban design in New York City that one is tempted to wonder if the city government had anything to do with it at all.

The fact is that the Department of Highways, under the guidance of its resident urban designer, Frank Rogers, put together the whole project, and it is a lesson in how, given the right circumstances, the city can produce work of quality.

What has been done is, first, a redirection of the street itself, eliminating some unnecessary spurs and side-alleys which have been turned into mini-parks. New "street furniture"—benches, lamp-posts, and so forth—have been added along the length of the project area. And the street has been re-paved, in part with conventional asphalt paving and in part with unusual concrete paving block, which denotes bus stops and crosswalks.

Results Achieved

None of this would be too extraordinary in itself—re-paving of multi-block areas was common, at least until the

fiscal crisis—but for the superior quality of this design.

For once, a group of city officials made a strong effort to do it differently, to rise above the mediocrity of bureaucratic practice, and they got results. There are several elements of the design that have, not been seen previously anywhere in the city. The crosswalks, for example, are not denoted with painted lines, but rather are paved with interlocking concrete block in alternate light and dark striping. They are delightful visually, but they serve a practical function as well:

The bold striped paving has the effect of encouraging cars and trucks to stop just inside of the crosswalk space, and it encourages pedestrians to stay within its boundaries.

And paving block requires no repainting, as do traditional crosswalks.

Just as thoughtful are the benches, which are of unpainted wooden slats in a comfortable contour shape, a deliberate attempt to break free from the concrete-bench stereotype. These new benches are detailed with a refined eye:

Their legs are anchored directly into the paving below, permitting them to appear to be standing on elegant thin spindles.

There are other details of equal quality: the decision to paint the light-posts brown to encourage them to recede into the visual background; the placement of benches facing the sidewalk as well as in groups to permit watching of

passers-by as well as private conversations; the marking of bus stops with special paving similar to the crosswalks.

All of this may seem trivial. But our perceptions of our urban surroundings are shaped by a myriad of small details. Sometimes a shop window or a signpost can affect us more than a skyscraper, and this is why the redesign of the Avenue of the Americas is important. It is a set of details which adds up to a thoughtful and intelligent improvement of the physical environment, both thoughtful and practical, and that, after all, is what urban design is supposed to be about.

How did this project come off so well? Although it has just now been completed it originated in the administration of former Mayor John V. Lindsay, whose transportation administrator, Manuel Carballo, wanted an urban designer and asked Frank Rogers, then of the City Planning Commission's Urban Design Group, to join the

highway department staff. Once it was hoped that the Urban Design Group would spin off architects to operating agencies throughout the city government, but the Highway Department is the only case in which the process actually worked.

Mr. Rogers noted in 1973 that funds were allocated for a repaving of the Avenue of the Americas, and he requested the chance to become involved. His small staff was given the right to redesign the entire project, and proposed dramatic changes from the

standard repaving scheme.

Several of the other city agencies whose cooperation was required, like the Traffic and Public Works Departments were less than happy about departing from the dull standard which has served them for too long. But the support of Highways Commissioner Anthony Amoreuso and Deputy Commissioner Daniel S. Garvey spurred the project ahead; it survived the change of administrations and started construction in 1974.

The project cost \$1.75 million, or \$400,000 more than a standard repaving job would have cost. There is such a standard job on the Avenue of the Americas just below Canal Street; it is a sea of concrete with dull, often rather oppressive, areas of open space, and it is the best justification of all that the blocks just uptown represent \$400,000 well spent.