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At Lincoln Center, Information Is Architecture

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

Elizabeth Diller would seem to have her hands full. Even as work winds down on its redesign of [Lincoln Center](#), the architecture firm in which she is a partner, Diller Scofidio & Renfro, has just won two major commissions — a new museum in downtown Los Angeles for the financier [Eli Broad](#) and a new Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive for the [University of California](#). The firm is also designing a major structure for the new Governors Island park and an inflatable meeting hall for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington that is due to open in 2012.

Yet the other day Ms. Diller was scrutinizing L.E.D. modules in a sign at Lincoln Center.

Such small details are commanding Ms. Diller's attention because what she refers to as Lincoln Center's electronic infoscape — the final elements of which are being installed this week — amounts to a great deal more than just signs. As Ms. Diller and her partners see it, the media elements are not just finishing touches: they are an extension, and in many ways the ultimate expression, of a wholesale reimagining of the complex as more porous, inviting and immediate.

This electronic component of the project includes — in addition to the words that have been adorning the risers of the new grand entrance stair on Columbus Avenue for the last few months — five screens at the back of the new bleachers facing Alice Tully Hall, scrolling text on the West 65th Street staircase to the north plaza, and 13 new vertical 4-by-8-foot L.E.D. screens, or blades, lined up along the south side of West 65th Street between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues.

On top of the information they will provide about performances, the blades — 50 feet apart and facing east toward Columbus — will combine text and video images and are meant to enliven the street and convey the vitality and accessibility of the center.

“New Yorkers are notorious for passing anything,” said [Reynold Levy](#), Lincoln Center’s president. “We think this will cause them to stop in their tracks and really take a look. We are endeavoring to create a feeling, engender a mood, provide a sense of the drama and the beauty of what goes on in our halls. We want to attract passers-by, but we also want to surprise Upper West Siders.”

From the start, Ms. Diller said, the infoscape was integral to the architects’ efforts to turn Lincoln Center inside out, so that it would no longer be, in her words, “just something carved out of stone.”

“The monumentality of the scale of the buildings really needed to be softened up by a different, pedestrian scale,” she added. “The media is really part of the architectural expression of that.”

The grand main staircase on Columbus Avenue, for example, with its informational text, is “an electronic welcome mat,” Ms. Diller said, “or a marquee that you step on.”

The architects also designed the content for the 24-hour blades, trying to make them informative, visually arresting and at times whimsical. The point is to make these screens “much more atmospheric and gestural and impressionistic” than mere posters, Ms. Diller said. There are 37 blade templates — video sequences of 20 to 90 seconds with different themes; they use both Lincoln Center performers and outside actors.

One of them provides a series of evocative single images — a conductor’s hands, a violin bow, someone applauding. Another features life-size pedestrians suddenly breaking out into dance on the sidewalk in their street clothes. Sometimes an image passes across all the blades sequentially, like one of hands moving up and down piano keys.

There is also backstage footage of performers getting ready — strings being tuned, toe shoes tied, makeup applied. And sometimes there are simply rundowns of the evening’s performances. The density of the information varies with the time of day. It is at its most concentrated in the pre-curtain hours. Later the blades revert to night mode, with quieter images, like one of someone sitting by the central fountain in silhouette, her feet dangling as the water bubbles up in the background. In another sequence a stagehand hauls a trunk off the stage, signaling the end of the work day.

The infoscape is among the final elements of the center’s redevelopment, which has included a new fountain, a new plaza, a refurbished Alice Tully Hall and a transformation of the West 65th Street block (including a narrowed street and a widened sidewalk). A few

more projects still remain. These include a black-box stage for [Lincoln Center Theater](#) atop the Vivian Beaumont Theater, a new cinema for the [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#), a glass bridge across West 65th Street that will connect the [Juilliard School](#) with the rest of the campus, and a new restaurant with a lawn for a roof on the north plaza, which is to open this month.

The Lincoln Center project has markedly raised the profile of Diller Scofidio & Renfro and has contributed to its recent flurry of large cultural commissions. Mr. Levy said that he took pride in the firm's growing prominence.

"In a way Diller Scofidio & Renfro is a metaphor for what Lincoln Center tries to do with its performing artists," he said. "Sometimes they're discovered brand new, sometimes they're promising but not wholly proven. We picked Diller Scofidio & Renfro when it was a surprise." The firm's growing success in the cultural realm, he added, is something "we like to think of as an affirmation and an appreciation of what they've done here."