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## Places

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# Waiting for the Water

## David Littlejohn

My luck is such that in three visits to New Orleans between 1981 and 1983, I never once saw any water in St. Joseph's Fountain, and never more than two or three other derelicts, or architecture lovers, in the Piazza d'Italia. Moreover, the city of New Orleans has often refused to turn on the water and the lights, which are as essential a part of its architecture as marble, slate, and stucco. The local Italian-American Federation (original sponsors of the project) has them turned on whenever it can animate the Piazza with festivities—a total of three to four days a year. They have also persuaded the city to have the fountain operating and the Piazza occupied for other events, perhaps once every two or three months. (There is talk of using the Piazza as a setting for a production of Mascagni's Sicilian village opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*.) But that leaves a lot of empty days in between.

As originally designed, the circular Piazza and its Roman fantasy fountain were to be surrounded by new and reconverted buildings—shops, restaurants, cafés, offices—which would embrace the Piazza's bright and illusionistic walls with more solid architecture, and surround it by people who could look into and learn to love its world of free-classical forms. These shops and offices were to be the start (like those of



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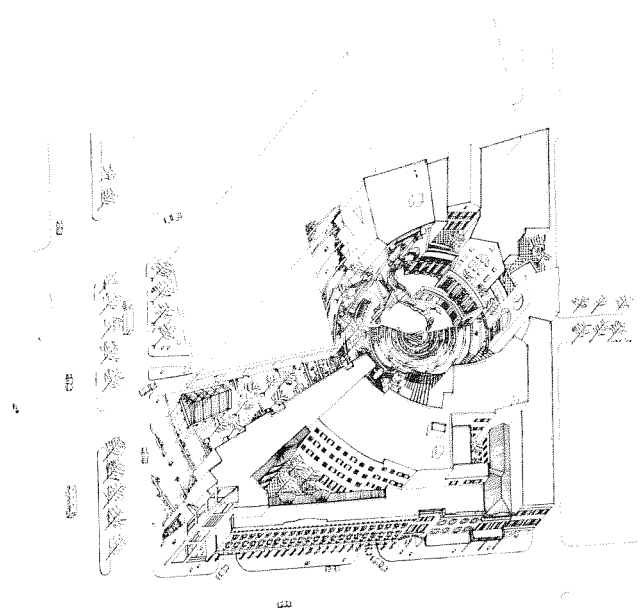
Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco) of a renaissance in the tawdry, half-abandoned warehouse district of the city. Had this occurred, the Piazza would have formed a welcome and colorful open space in a lively area between downtown and the waterfront, filled day and night with workers, shoppers, and tourists either passing through or relaxing, and restaurant patrons sitting at tables around its perimeter.

Instead, for much of 1978–1983, it lay quiet and alone behind the twenty-two story Lykes Building, its space frame “campanile” (without bells) and mock-temple entrance beckoning tourists in from the street to

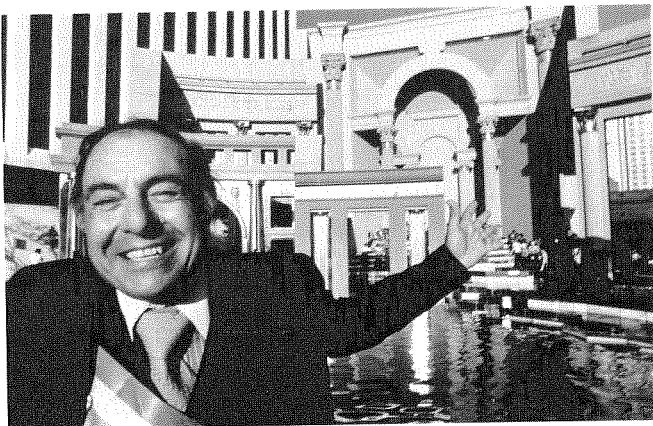
what looked like the leftover set of a long-finished movie. Without water or lights, a festive fountain makes little sense. Trees and vines meant to shade the Piazza (and form living “capitals” to some columns) were never maintained, so it can be unbearably hot during a New Orleans summer. Untended, the fountain saw green algae spread over its drained pools. With no real and occupied buildings behind it, the Piazza d'Italia seemed more thin and impermanent than it actually was. Made of steel frame and stucco, slate, marble, cobblestones, stainless steel, and tile, at a cost of \$1.7 million, the Piazza *isn't* a transient stage set. It just looks like one.

Originally, the city of New Orleans planned to lease out the surrounding rental offices, shops, and restaurants, which were designed by Perez Associates at the same time as the fountain and Piazza—many of them in restored old buildings—and then use this income to support revenue bonds to finance the construction of the project itself. When this proved to be unfeasible a private developer had to be found. It was presumed that the exuberant Piazza would have had private developers lining up for the chance to invest in the buildings around it. But costs mounted, recession set in, the area's reputation failed to improve; no developer showed up. The

(David Littlejohn's piece is a section from his forthcoming book, *Architect*, which Holt, Rinehart & Winston is publishing in June 1984.)



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2 Photograph by Marc Treib

3 Drawing by Perez Associates

4 Photograph by Alan Karchmer

Italian-American Federation, which had worked so long and so hard to make all this happen, raised more than \$1 million to construct an opulent renaissance palazzo (designed by Charles Moore) to fill one corner of the site. But inflation quadrupled the cost, and the palazzo had to be abandoned. (They now occupy one of the old buildings on the east side of the block.) Perez Associates came up with a scheme for a low-rise luxury hotel overlooking, and slightly spilling into the Piazza, which would guarantee it the life and attention it needs. Political delays made it impossible to complete the building in time for the Fair, which chilled the interest of a couple of hotel chains and developers.

All this, one hopes, will soon change. Love it or hate it, the Piazza d'Italia is simply too extraordinary a piece of urban design—now historic as well as “historicist”—to exist indefinitely as a ghost of its good intentions or decay into the self-mocking pretensions of a Venice, California.

What is one to make of all this? Professional architecture critics and theorists who have determined in advance that complexity and contradiction, or multiplicity of cultural reference, or literary wit are what matter most in post- (or anti-) modern architecture, seize

on the Piazza d'Italia as a perfect demonstration case for their ideas. Inevitably, they either ignore or exaggerate its function for the city of New Orleans, and what they imagine its “Italian community” to be.

Charles Jencks, the American/British critic who has set up shop as the definer of terms for architecture since 1960, sees the essence of “post-modernism” as what he calls “double coding”: one style or message for the masses, another for the knowing elite—the two deftly condensed into a single building. The Piazza d'Italia suits his definition perfectly. According to this theory, Italian tourists, or local mamas and papas, can enjoy the Piazza for its high colors, splashing waters, and vague recollections (or explicit celebrations) of *Italia* and traditional culture. The architectural cognoscenti, meanwhile, can smile at the punctured pomposity represented in the neon-edged Serliana and the visual puns on Vitruvius.

I venture three critical points. First, unless and until the Piazza d'Italia actually comes into service as a fully public place, it is irresponsible to judge its success. Since 1978, it has shocked and distressed more of the architectural world than it has pleased—including a few people who have actually visited it, and a



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5 Photograph by Marc Treib

very few who have seen it in use, water gushing, lights blinking, people swarming about—as well as the far greater number who know it only from impressive photographs in magazines and books. Very few of these people could possibly have been assessing the Piazza as anything more than a piece of theoretical, self-indulgent sculpture. It *is* in part that; but it was also intended to be an effective and evocative center of dynamic social activity, and it has not yet had the opportunity to prove either its success *or* failure in those terms.

Second, I find the concept of “double-coded” architecture—of private jokes or allusions in manifestly public works—to be questionable, even offensive. One may well and wisely mine the whole of the architectural past for ideas in a contemporary building. But to make the game of *spotting* those ideas a major part of one’s design intentions strikes me as decadent and trivial. Much too much of what has been written of the Piazza d’Italia (including some texts by Charles Moore) has concentrated on these arcane references and Society of Architectural Historians’ jests. If the Piazza d’Italia had to depend for its success on clever twistings of the tails of past masters, then I would declare it not only a public failure, but a patronizing insult. Unlike Hadrian’s Villa, or John

Soane’s house in Lincoln’s Inn Square—or for that matter Charles Moore’s houses—it was commissioned as a civic and public place, and it *must* succeed first on public, not private, terms.

Fortunately, and third, I think it does. (Or will. Or could.) It succeeds even now for me, *in potentia*, stripped of all these allusions and jests, and will succeed even more fully when it is complete. I take great pleasure in, and can imagine others taking pleasure in, the sheer exuberance of its colors and shapes, its illusions and allusions, its water games and steel games, and the grandeur, surprise, disposition, and finesse of its pieces—whether or not I or they know a triglyph from a tripod. The subtle color changes and the just-perceptible curve play against and modulate the proportions of these thin, Hollywood Roman-epic walls in ways I find exquisitely pleasing. The spaces between columns and openings in each wall, and the placings of the walls one against the other, are arranged with soul-settling tact and *mesure*. If it is a joke, it is a joke on a monumental scale, but in no way (as some have claimed) is it an insult to Italy or to our noble Western heritage. The immeasurably rich legacy of the region we now call Italy, and of the classic orders of architecture, are things so diverse and so

# Problems of Representation

## George Baird

powerful, have nourished so many centuries and regions of good art and good building, that they can easily embrace one Jovian jest.

But the Piazza is not just an Olympian joke. It is also—I speak of its potential, not its actual state—a quite beautifully organized and orchestrated public space. Proportions, details, materials, and colors are combined even more scrupulously and (to my eye) pleasingly than all the celebrated references and allusions. It does not depend for its success on semiotic transliterations of its shapes, or on the insider's familiarity with architectural history. It is *not*, in its heart, a cynical dig at the classics.

These elements are present, and they may well qualify or on occasion reduce the freedom and healthiness of the overall pleasure of one's experience. Charles Moore, when set free from adult collaborators or control, can be incorrigibly and excessively clever—like other child prodigies who never totally grow up. Some of the jokes here, detached from the context of the pleasurable whole, do indeed appear (as hostile critics have called them) as architectural one-liners, with a very short half-life—as embarrassingly silly as the spitting Charles Moore heads on the mock Doric wall.

I offer my sincerest best wishes to the Italian-American patriots and to New Orleans's investors, on whose good will and hard work the future of this place depends. If the Piazza d'Italia is a stage set, it is the supreme outdoor stage set of our time, and I hope it gets treated with proper respect. It is suited not so much for *Cavalleria Rusticana* as for the daily human comedy of thousands of happy Italian New Orleanians and their families.

In the course of recent architectural events, the Piazza d'Italia has been both a watershed and a caution. With his sure sense of timing and his penchant for congenial polemic, Charles W. Moore brought an important architectural argument to a climax with this controversial project.

I have not been an admirer of the project, and have been asked to use this forum to give expression to my concerns. At the outset, I should indicate that I support many aspects of the proposal. It constitutes a central component of an urban revitalization scheme; it seeks to give expression to history—and to do so in an ironical, rather than literally revivalist way. It boldly addresses the question of symbolic expression in architecture. All of these are commendable intentions, which in my view even form an essential component of architectural design in our time. What then do I object to? It seems to me that my concerns have to do with three more specifically architectonic problems.

### The Relationship of Background to Foreground Elements

Earlier works by Moore (such as the Faculty Club, Santa Barbara, CA; and Kresge College or the Burns House, Santa Monica, CA) all employ a vocabulary of rather austere and planar elements that connote

an almost vernacular architecture against which are set more elaborate and more expressive and/or more historical motifs. As a result, all these schemes embody a formal tension that results from the juxtaposition of these back- and foreground elements. At the Piazza d'Italia, on the other hand, the foreground elements modify and elaborate the background elements so extensively that the tension of the earlier schemes dissolves. As a result, both back- and foreground collapse into a single architectonic configuration, and one possible mode of dialectic is lost.

### The "Aura" of Historical Elements

At the Santa Barbara Faculty Club, part of the visual array in the foreground consists of "real" antique furniture. At the Burns House, Latin-American artifacts and exotic carpets articulate one's spatial perception. At the Piazza d'Italia, on the other hand, the historical elements that create the project's "foreground" are themselves fake. Despite the generally recognizable Roman-ness of the references, the frequent material rendition of the motifs in stainless steel and neon makes their fake-ness disconcertingly evident. Thus, the observer is driven to conclude that the background/foreground relationship cannot parallel those of the projects just