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Ethnic Design or Ethnic Slur?

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with Tom Aidala

There has been much talk of asserting and revitalizing ethnic identity through design. The issue arises in several different contexts: communities that obtain funds for a local design project—a park, a monument, a community center; communities that are being "upgraded"; and historic neighborhoods. Designers have taken dramatically different approaches towards designing in the context of ethnic communities. In some cases, the symbolism of a regional or national culture has been used to promote a commercial venture, creating the appearance of an "authentic" community, which may in reality no longer exist at all. Japantown in San Francisco has a pagoda and is filled with Japanese stores, but, in fact, much of the real Japanese community was displaced by the urban renewal that created the project. The town of Solvang in Southern California has evolved into a thriving commercial/tourist area on the basis of its Scandinavian design theme.

Other communities have taken a conservative approach in promoting ethnic identity, instituting historic districts and establishing strict design guidelines that require adherence to a historic or architectural style. Examples include Savannah, German Village in Columbus, and Santa Fe. Another approach is to establish more general design motifs as in the Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco where there are "Chinese style" buildings, phone booths with pagoda roofs, and a park with red benches and paper lanterns. And now there is the Piazza d'Italia, a dramatic pastiche of Italian symbols for the Italian neighborhood of New Orleans. The differences between these approaches raise fundamental issues for designers.

Should ethnic design be "authentic," and what makes it so? Are the design motifs and symbols valid rallying points for the community or simply stereotypes that insult the "authentic" traditions? Does such design encourage cultural identity, or is it kitsch? Is it offensive to use the ethnic symbols as a commercial, profitmaking technique?

Is the use of historical/cultural symbols/motifs of a particular ethnic group an appropriate response to a design project in such a community? There is a theory that, as a group becomes less secure about its identity, it comes under pressure to display that identity as a defensive mechanism. For example, Italian stores in San Francisco's North Beach are under invasion from the Chinese community and are increasing their displays of Italian-ness with flags, maps of Italy, etc. Are expressions of identity actually funeral rites rather than signs of a healthy identity? If a culture is dispersing, is it appropriate to try artificially to preserve it in design and symbols? Does identity naturally emerge or does it have to be created?

Who should design for ethnic communities? Is it appropriate to bring in well-known modern designers under the theory that truly honoring the community implies hiring the "best" for them? Should the designer be a member of the community's culture, the theory being that authentic and sensitive "Italian design," for example, is best achieved by a member of the Italian community? To what extent should the community itself be involved in the design?

The Piazza d'Italia provides a good example on which to focus a discussion of this issue. Tom Aidala, an urban designer from San Francisco, is one of those who have a profound dislike for the Piazza d'Italia—which he introduced by way of the following piece of curiously ignored American history:

On the morning of Saturday, March 14, 1891, eleven men were taken from the New Orleans City Prison and murdered. They were taken by a crowd ". . . composed of lawyers, doctors, bankers, and prominent citizens generally." (1) Two of the men were hanged, nine were shot to death. The motive was hate; the reason was that the eleven were Italian.

David C. Hennessy, the superintendent of police of New Orleans, was killed by five men in October 1890. Supposedly, his dying words accused Italians. In a climate already disposed to prejudice, the local press generated even more public hostility and animosity towards the immigrant Italians that New Orleans looked upon ". . . as so many reptiles." (2)

Nine Italians were brought to trial after the authorities had arrested over 100 suspects. Since there was simply no evidence that held up in court, the jury found six of the defendants innocent and voted no convictions for the other three. The verdict further enraged an already irrational public, and on the night of March 13, 1891, a committee of vigilance was formed. The next day, led by William Parkerson, fifty or so of that committee took the acquitted men from their cells as well as two other Italians who happened to be in jail.

Diplomatic relations were severed between Italy and the USA for a time. The

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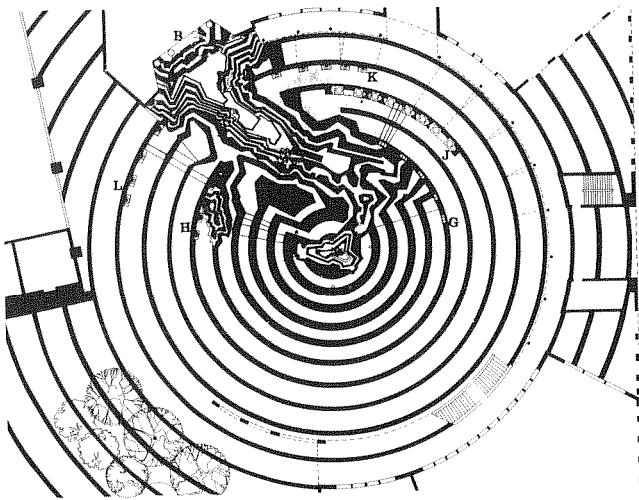
massacre was generally applauded by the public and press of this nation and served to further arouse public hostility towards Italians in all parts of the country. As far as I know, it was the single largest lynching in the country's history.

(1), (2) William Parkerson, from an interview in the *New York Illustrated American*, April 4, 1891.

To some, such a story may seem irrelevant to a critique of good urban form. Many would find the application of a note of moral outrage when judging a work of art a giant step backward into the nineteenth century. Yet, when artists, architects, and urban designers begin fooling around with imagery and symbols directly associated with ethnic identity, the point is very much that they are not necessarily being nice or even funny. As Aidala puts it, "It is best not to make public references to another person's mother, no matter how well-intentioned those references may be."

The so-called post-modern sensibility is pushing architecture toward a revival of metaphoric ornamentation. With literal allusions and reference to traditional cultural imagery, avant-garde buildings are becoming approximations of built language. Such approximations have appeal precisely because they

display imagery of a highly visual nature that belongs to a coherent system of symbols—a system which communicates, among other things, permanence and continuity. These symbol systems, however, have complicated histories and they bear meanings that are not always obvious. The architect who would exploit these symbols becomes responsible for hidden as well as intended significance.

Aidala would challenge even the use of such images as faddish, shortsighted, and, ultimately, antiurban. Great public places, in his opinion, should be neutral, like most Italian piazzas. Places like the Piazza d'Italia with their skin-deep specificity and stereotyped imagery may be appropriate for a World's Fair, but as permanent pieces of the urban fabric, they become profoundly insulting as a result of their cuteness—their shrewd, pretty appeal. Ethnicity can be celebrated as a pageant without being guilty of such an offense. The Columbus Day Parade and the Festival of San Gennaro in New York's Greenwich Village are wonderful events. However, the Piazza d'Italia in its permanence and its literalness would reduce being Italian to tarantella dances and spaghetti. For Aidala the Piazza is a full-scale monument to the same mentality that portrays Italians in movies as "happy children of the sun."

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Remembrances and a Look at Ethnicity

Ron Filson

Those designers who, in this new age of the built word, freely cast about for imagery that carries a stock of cultural associations and meanings to give a building or a place special identity, fully deserve to have history and tradition thrown at them in judgment. Built-of-a-piece design that attempts to forge some specific identity through references to national origin very easily becomes a form of self-parody. Aidala puts the question this way: "How would you design a park for a black community in Georgia—would you do a watermelon patch?" He insists that this example is analogous to the explicit Italian references in the Piazza.

The idea of asserting ethnic identity through design is shallow unless it recognizes the importance of authenticity. Authentic ethnic identity is the product of the ethos of a people. It grows as a collective effort over time, and the forms that characterize it belong to a language that is common to several generations.

Piazza d'Italia, in Aidala's opinion, deserves the same scorn that Texans reserve for urban cowboys. A few columns and a fountain, even when they are in the shape of the map of Italy, do not make a place a piazza any more than boots and a Stetson make a person a westerner. In a time when people yearn to make

connection with their own history, it becomes doubly important to guard that our cities do not become filled with kitsch mouments to various developers' theme-ridden marketing schemes. A list of such examples in the San Francisco Bay Area alone is long and includes the cuteness of exploitative places like Pier 39 in San Francisco, the often discussed Tivoli Gardens for YBC, the Japantown Trade Center, and the original Hong Kong USA project in Oakland.

The spirit of ethnic identity, Aidala would contend, is not to be found in the physical forms of the culture. The display of ethnic imagery in a place like the Piazza d'Italia can result in an initial expression of ethnic pride, especially on the part of people who are themselves only superficially related to their culture. Such places, however, soon become offensive. They are jokes that will not go away. They are extravagant toys or stage sets that have nothing to do with the permanent business of cities.

During the last eight years since the beginning of the process of designing the Piazza d'Italia, one of the most controversial aspects of that process has been the "ethnic" nature of its design. Many a detractor has gone beyond the normal criticism that pastiche is limited and that there is historical "gimmickry"—comments easily associated with what has been labeled the post-modern movement—and attacked the scheme for the Piazza d'Italia, and more specifically the scheme for St. Joseph's Fountain, the major part of the Piazza d'Italia project constructed so far, for its reliance upon "ethnic" images for some supposed sense of significance and importance.

In an accompanying article Tom Aidala commented on the supposed insensitivity of the scheme, contending that it fails to respond to the true emotions and images of the Italian-American and thereby invalidates itself as a receptacle for community involvement of spirit and participation.

I understand that Aidala's concern for ethnicity reflects a kind of protectionism for attitudes and beliefs that are not generally available to and definitely should not be tampered with by anybody other than a member of the particular ethnic group for which any specific work of architecture is designed. My thesis in this article is that this proposal is blatantly

absurd. Most erroneous, I believe, is the notion that ethnicity is the private domain of a reserved group and only those who belong to that group can understand and, therefore, participate in the significance of its *own* architecture. This position suggests that the ability to understand the relationship between formal imagery, architectural symbolism, and cultural values is limited by membership.

One of the more interesting paths taken in recent architectural thought is that which allows the analysis and understanding of the relationship between architectural form and cultural values. As an artistic and intellectual endeavor this encourages under-standing and interpretation of this relationship in numerous forms. To pretend that the *true* understanding of the significance of architectural form is only available to the initiated is antiintellectual and banal. The notion that the use of architectural elements with historic and/or cultural connotations implies complete ethnicity of any architectural proposal in the latter part of the twentieth century is, to say the least, a very shortsighted viewpoint. The independence, isolation, and fragmentation of ideas regarding interpretation and formal significance in music, literature, arts, and architecture since the late eighteenth century demands a viewpoint that would, it