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Ten Years Later

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We had a party—a little festival—on August 18, 1983, in the Piazza d'Italia to celebrate issuing a poster for the 1984 World's Fair. It was very hot, and threatened to rain, most of the neon was broken, and most of the jets did not work, and the mayor did not show up, but there were tables set up with linen and luminaria and a 400-pound cake, and it seemed a fine party. These days the Piazza is in a fully Latin state of disrepair, apparently ignored by the city's maintenance people, but recently I received a heartening report from a friend who was walking there at 7 a.m. It seems that the benches, as usual at that hour, were covered with the sleeping figures of the vagrants who constitute the place's only regular inhabitants. Then one of the sleepers awoke and rang a little bell. Everyone got up, picked up all the trash, put it in the receptacles, and went back to hanging around.

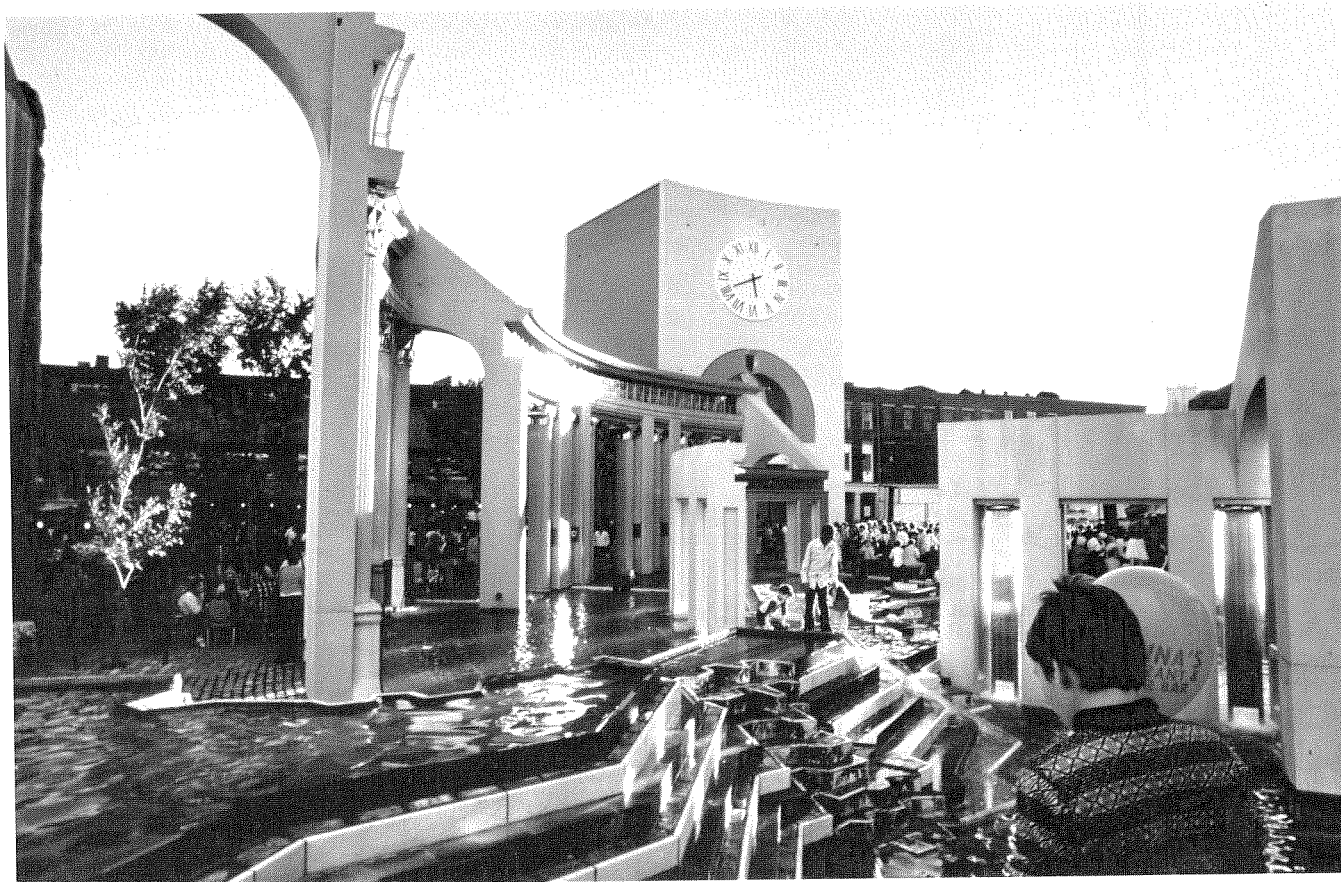
This is, I choose to think, welcome confirmation that this public space is not just flexible, but special, and able (I think) to support the particular needs of groups with very different needs. In addition, it is built around a fountain, Surely, making a fountain is one of the most exciting chances to make a place. A fountain makes a place by manipulating the most richly evocative of all locations, where land and water meet, where a source of water has the uncanny

capacity to suggest all the water in the world. Fountains, being made of water, have the capacity (and have had since the beginnings of civilization) to suggest life, and death, and the creators of life and death; but they do not serve so well as satire or nursery rhymes do to develop political themes, or to reinforce insights into the stock market or the vicissitudes of, say, the Shah of Iran.

I was surprised, therefore, when an article about the Piazza d'Italia, published in *Progressive Architecture* with a very supportive critique by Martin Filler, brought an avalanche of mail (architects' avalanches of mail are of a size that would depress a rock star), much of it criticizing the Piazza d'Italia for failing to produce adequate political insights. A couple of the correspondents, indeed, blamed us, or me, for the excesses of the Shah of Iran, on the one hand, and his upcoming demise, on the other. There was, I was told, more mail about the Piazza d'Italia than about any other project report published by *Progressive Architecture* during that decade. I was pleased, of course, and my pride in the project was amplified by the vigor of the responses. I had noticed long before that what I regarded as the best works I was involved in had drawn the heaviest fire; that makes the Piazza our best effort to



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22 **Louisiana World Exposition**
(Photograph by Alan Karchmer)

23 Photograph by Alan Karchmer

date, with the Sea Ranch condominiums a close second.

What is for me a much more interesting phenomenon is a shift (which involves more than just us, and is neither good nor bad) from a high degree of abstraction in, let us say, Lovejoy Fountain in Portland (1964), to more literal references at the Piazza, to some veils of abstraction again in the Wonder Wall for the 1984 New Orleans Fair. When Lawrence Halprin, William Turnbull, and I were working on the Lovejoy Plaza, though we all had images of waterfalls in the High Sierra, we had no doubt that a built object should abstract those images: therefore, a set of 5½-inch steps, readily formed of concrete behind 2-inch by 6-inch board edges became our format, with the water itself splashing over the steps providing the family of fluid forms we thought a fountain needed. Ten years later it seemed appropriate, bolder, and stronger for Allen Eskew, Malcolm Heard, Ron Filson, and me to be more straightforward and less abstract at the Piazza: What could be a more Italian shape than Italy? And what more direct, and therefore effective, cultural reference in a piazza dedicated to the Italian community could there be than the architectural orders—Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite—which the

Italian civilization had developed after heavy initial assistance from the Greeks? Making the orders out of water seemed an adequate abstraction to keep us out of the lifeless blind alley of “correct” copying. Now almost 10 years later, most of us, plus Bill Turnbull, Leonard Salvato, and Arthur Anderson, are working on the Wonder Wall for the 1984 New Orleans Fair, which is only a few blocks from the Piazza, but is, I think, far bolder still, and has far more unbridled architectural fantasies.

In boldness there is almost bound to be a modicum of naughtiness, and I will not deny that I felt a tinge of excitement at having my Vignola out on my desk (the book open to Doric) at U.I.G., the practice arm of the UCLA architecture school, where the work was being done when the school’s accreditation team came by. (I had been educated at the right moment to regard the written-down orders as wicked sorts of bootlegged notes standing directly in the path of originality and innovation.) So maybe it *was* naughty (I am sure I hoped so) in 1976 to have those classical orders. I would not have liked, then or now, to have been pretentious or condescending with them: I was relieved a few years ago when a friend reported that he had seen a man with two small children at the Piazza, pointing at the fountain, carefully explaining the

differences between the Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, and other orders. Surely the orders give pleasure to more than just architects, even as someone who is not a musician might enjoy noting the difference between a sonata and a tone poem.

Perhaps it is in the same spirit that I am enjoying the shift (I will not call it progression nor retrogression) from our attitudes toward the givens (nature, the past) in work on the Lovejoy Fountain in 1964, to the Piazza after 1974, to the work on the New Orleans Fair of 1984. One of my favorite pieces of the 1984 World’s Fair is a set of seven Centennial Pavilions, gazebos of varying sizes apparently randomly disposed in and around a lagoon—that, from just one spot, snap into place to resemble (with considerable abstraction) the great main pavilion of the 1884 World’s Fair in New Orleans. It seems an appropriate comment on history to say that you have to choose your point of view very carefully to make any sense of the past.

Our three projects seem to demonstrate an increasing easiness and more casual familiarity in dealing with what is, in fact, in our minds (nature, the past, fantasy), and an increasing freedom from a reliance on abstraction to distance ourselves from a messy reality. How much

abstraction is needed? How much is enough? How much is too much? I do not know. Is a lack of abstraction an automatic ethnic slur? I really doubt it.