Title
Inquiry, Essence, Awkwardness [Place Debate: Piazza d'Italia]

Journal
Places, 1(2)

ISSN
0731-0455

Author
Harris, Robert S.

Publication Date
1983-10-01

Peer reviewed

Inquiry, Essence, Awkwardness

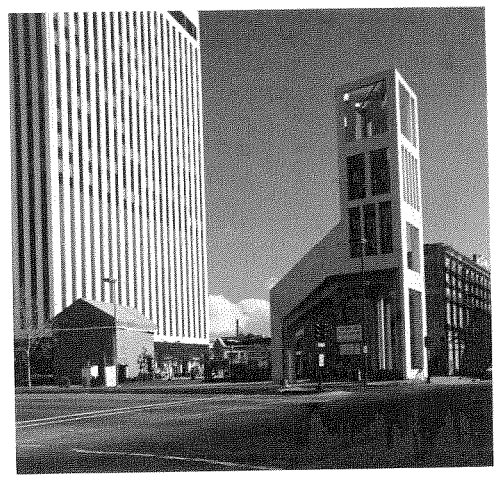
Robert S. Harris

Any commentary on the Piazza d'Italia might well begin by imagining the designer's inquiry: What is worth doing at a somewhat nondescript site, adjacent to a new and seemingly implacable office tower, but in New Orleans and related to the rich and complex ideas and values that are so easily associated with Italian communities? The problem for skillful designers is not so much whether things will come out all right, but rather, what is worth doing. The design of plazas and other public open spaces especially requires attention to such a question.

An obvious precedent for the Piazza d'Italia is Portland's Lovejoy Fountain, which was designed in 1963 by Charles W. Moore with William Turnbull and Larry Halprin. It also is in an urban setting that was incomplete at the time of the Fountain's design and construction. Now into its second decade, it has been well loved and has become even more successful through time as its urban surround has developed. It began as a fragment whose clear center and focus was strong enough and evocative enough to have significant presence while remaining rather open and incomplete at its periphery. The Fountain and its plaza can be very directly enjoyed in many ways. One can participate fully in the water play or observe quietly from a proper distance. And it is possible to be on top, below, in the sun, in the shade, with others, alone, to be there in many ways. Yet, beyond such immediate participation, the Fountain also strongly evokes memories and associations. It is a kind of urban brook, easily associated by northwesterners with not only the waterways of forests, but also the sparkling light seen through canopies of wet leaves. There is no trite reference here as might have been present through rough stones, rustic beams, and a kind of "as-found" pretense. Rather the construction and materials are urban and contemporary, deliberately made and shaped of concrete and lead and wood. The Portland Fountain is a Northwest fountain. Perhaps it would remain appropriate as far south as San Francisco, but not in Los Angeles or St. Louis or Chicago. Maybe Minneapolis. Both in its laying out of opportunites for direct experience, and in its provision of possibilities for association, it belongs to its place and helps us to remember more profoundly where we are and how good it is to be here.

The fountain and plaza for New Orleans closely follows the Portland precedent. It is a fragment in its incomplete urban setting. It can be enjoyed in many ways quite directly and is sufficient without any reference to ideas or to distant places or to history. Yet it does readily

8



7

7 Photograph by Marc Treib

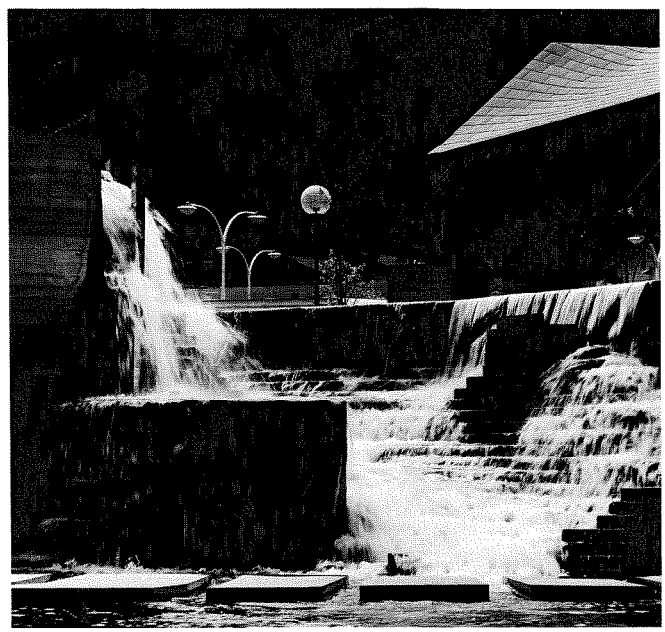
8 Photograph by Marc Treib

evoke and accept a wide range of cultural associations.

The Piazza d'Italia is particularly "of New Orleans." It offers the direct experience of color and light and water and sound of this city. It provides shade and comfort on a hot and humid day and sun pockets in the winter. It includes places for gathering, and for couples alone. And it includes the familiar architectural elements of the South. Its classical pieces are as much continuous with the South's neo-classical traditions as with any thoughts of Italy itself.

Moore continues Jean Labatut's encouragement to provide "something for the senses and something for the mind." The columns and arcades, the capitals shaped for water splashing and light reflecting, the highly stimulating contrasts and surfaces, and, as in Portland, the waterways to explore and to take minor risks jumping over or stepping through, all make the place that directly holds our attention and enlivens our existence. As a grandfather, one could enjoy an afternoon here with grandchildren without any reference to Italian heritage or origin. And yet, one could also show the children where on the water map grandfather was born, or where relatives still lived. Few persons recognize the central columns as remnants saved from a now-destroyed building. But those who did know that building are helped to remember it. The opportunities for reference and association are not essential to the most fundamental pleasures of being in this place, yet they augment such pleasures and deepen experience. The references are both local and present, distant and historical, and culturally continuous across time. Not only can one make connections to New Orleans's own past, but also with memories of the Trevi Fountain and its colors and shapes, or with ruins of the Forums and their columns and arches.

The Piazza d'Italia is not just nostalgic. The temple-like portico is made of sonotube-formed columns and aluminum conduit. Like its antecedent in Portland it participates in the present in its direct existence. We supply the past, if we wish, from our own resources. Its heraldic tower owes very little to the past except, perhaps, by being a tower. Its shapes and openings not only catch our attention in the competition of the urban scene, but also attempt connections to the newest elements of New Orleans, its large office and hotel blocks. It winks at its neighbors, a miniature version of Italian temples that includes in its own fabric proportions and rhythmic openings of the buildings. On Poydras Street this gateway made by temple and tower thus makes its strong connections both to the present and also to the traditions and memories of Italian culture.



9

Like the Lovejoy Fountain in Portland, the Piazza d'Italia belongs to New Orleans. In Houston or Miami it would be merely the latest fashion. In San Antonio the cultural references would be confusing. In New Orleans it struggles to be essential and "worth building." In its incomplete setting it does have its awkward moments. Moore quite uniquely manages to use the strong rhythm of dark and light vertical stripes of the adjacent office building to advantage as it makes a surprisingly effective background for colorful arcades and columns. Yet, the alley-like space left between the arcades and the

9 **Lovejoy Fountain,** Portland, Oregon (Photograph by Morley Baer)

Free Plan and Open Form

Christian Norberg-Schultz

building is less convincing. The tower makes its homage to its grown-up neighbors, but struggles to be big enough at ground level to make an effective gate. The Piazza fragment, unlike Lovejoy, is perhaps too incomplete and has not yet made a whole center and a strong "inside." Perhaps it depends *too much* on what happens next around it. And the materials are not really surviving well. Marble ears have broken off column bases and stucco surfaces have not gotten the attention they need either to remain clean and fresh or old and comfortable.

The Piazza d'Italia ought not so much to be judged as to be studied. A generous and useful attitude would be to see it as an event in our "archaic" period: strong, vigorous, evocative, and awkward. In the near future it will undoubtedly be partly restored as it serves as one of the entrances to the New Orleans World Fair and to the river front. It may then survive and be increasingly satisfactory like the Portland example. Meanwhile, whether awkward and incomplete or not, it deserves our attention for its inclusiveness about direct experience and memory, about local and distant reference, and about both spatial and cultural continuity. It is not so good or bad, as it is simply very much worth having been done.

Surviving late-modernists tend to consider the Piazza d'Italia a case of reactionary historicism, and thus a confirmation of the tenet that post-modernism represents a break with the modern tradition.

In my opinion this interpretation is superficial and wrong. If one looks more attentively at the solution, the Piazza d'Italia reveals itself as a work of *modern* architecture, although it certainly embodies a content that goes beyond the relatively narrow limits of early modernism (not to speak of the limits of degenerate late-modernism).

Modern architecture was from the beginning based on two fundamental principles: the "free plan" and the "open form." The free plan serves the purpose of making us experience the "simultaneity of places" that is characteristic of the new "open world." Physically we are, of course, in one place at a time, but existentially we may be in several places simultaneously. The free plan makes this experience possible through a "virtual openness," that is, a spatial organization that implies interaction rather than self-sufficiency. The open form serves a similar purpose by admitting the juxtaposition of qualitatively diverse elements to constitute a collage-like totality. Thus, modern architecture became capable of embodying a more complex and contradictory world than the "closed" stylistic systems of the past.

The Piazza d'Italia is based on the concepts of free plan and open form. The spatial organization takes a series of concentric rings as its point of departure. Within these rings different space-defining elements are placed. These elements, whether floor-patterns or "walls," do not, however, form static rooms, but rather articulate an open spatial continuum. Well-known modern means, such as overlapping and transparency, are employed to obtain this result. Symmetries also appear, but are immediately broken to counteract any closed effect. The overall centralized organization, however, creates a strong sense of urban node. Spatially, thus, the Piazza d'Italia is simultaneously a defined place and part of an open world. (I recall Paolo Portoghesi's analogous interpretation of the free plan during the 1960s when he based his layouts on interacting, centralized "fields.") The formal solution of the Piazza is evidently a case of "open form." Historical motifs indeed appear, but they are not composed in a traditional way. Rather they form a large, tridimensional collage that is truly modern. Thus, the motifs are characterized as "memories" that evoke a certain "world." It must be emphasized that the open form makes this use of memories possible, and the solution, thereby, proves the capacity of modern architecture for self-renewal.

Before the advent of post-modernism, the free plan and the open form were used to create a kind of empty stage for human action. The stage allowed for modern life to take place, but since it was "empty," it did not offer many possibilities of identification. In post-modern architecture the stage has become populated by memories. Freedom and openness still exist, but, in addition, we find those *images* that give us a sense of belonging and identity. The open world is thereby visualized not only as a structure, but also as a universe of meanings. Genuine post-modernism hence represents a development of modern architecture.

The Piazza d'Italia offers a major example of this development. Although spatially and formally it is modern, it also significantly widens the limits of architectural symbolization. I do not have to repeat its well-known references to the Italian world, but might add that it also gives a new interpretation of the colorful character of the city of New Orleans. The world that is "gathered" by the Piazza d'Italia is, therefore, local as well as general, and the solution represents a most important contribution to the post-modern reconquest of an authentic urban environment.