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A World's Fair Primer

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When the World's Fair opens on May 12, 1984, it will owe a great deal of thanks to the Piazza d'Italia not only as a significant architectural role model but also as a design-process teacher. The Piazza and the World's Fair have a number of things in common: the same city, the same historic neighborhood, and some of the same designers.

Along with Charles W. Moore, Ron Filson, and Malcolm Heard, I shared the design excitement of making the Piazza d'Italia. Now, nine years later, I find myself responsible for directing the master planning efforts of the World's Fair design team.

While the scale of the two projects is certainly different (one acre of tight fabric and occasional pedestrian visitors defining the Piazza versus 82 acres of open riverfront property and an expected 75,000 person-per-day attendance rate for the Fair), the two projects are almost identical in design concept and spirit.

While the debates surrounding the merits and/or indignities of the Piazza will certainly continue, I, for one, am very clear on the design lessons that the project extended. I doubt very seriously whether the World's Fair master plan, as currently being executed, would produce anywhere near the same kind of result if it were not for the first-hand experiences with the

Piazza d'Italia. That is not to say that there are not other ways to do this World's Fair—certainly the pluralistic view of World's Fair vocabulary is as legitimate as the pluralistic view of architecture. Yet, when I count the influences on the Fair's work to date, there is no question of the overwhelming role of the Piazza d'Italia. While the Piazza provided a wonderful opportunity to indulge in architectural gymnastics and free flights of fancy, there were two very important process issues that dominated the Piazza's development and subsequently shaped in a major way the characteristics of the World's Fair plan. The first was a claiming: the ability to make a set of physical spaces that not only encouraged but also demanded participation by the user. During the early design schemes for the Piazza, we discovered that opportunities existed not only for creating physical form through the expression of an elaborate fountain and a public plaza, but also for creating theater. Given the rather casual, functional requirements typically associated with the making of open, public space, we looked for every opportunity to invest the project with meaning and purpose. We were blessed with a very colorful user group in the Italian community of New Orleans. It was their ethnic heritage and love for the grand gesture that allowed

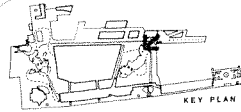
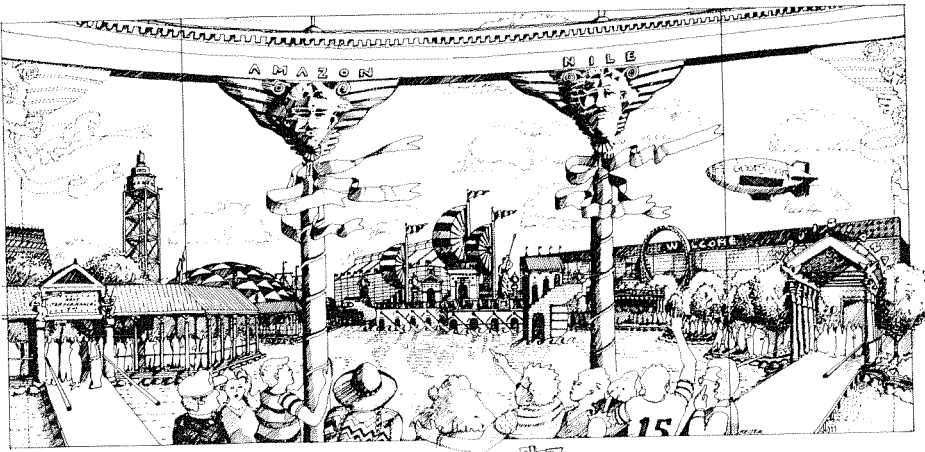
us to begin projecting some of the early concepts of public pageantry upon the physical layout of the fountain. The more we worked on the fountain as a participatory water toy, the more fascinated we became with the opportunities for performance embedded therein. However, we kept running into the problem of communications; how could we translate our design fantasies into actual user patterns? In an effort to bridge the gap between the design drawings and the Italian community's interest in using the space, we began a series of studies for the peopling of the Piazza. We began producing a series of possible scenarios for the fountain's use. Strangely enough, an interesting thing happened as these scenarios developed and were shared with the Italian community: the more scenarios we developed, the more we invented.

The five original scenarios acted as a catalyst for at least 20 casual possibilities. The scenarios became the tool to explain in laymen's terms how the space would be used in addition to how it would be viewed. They also helped as a communicating device in testing some early assumptions and including the user-group into the design process.

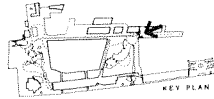
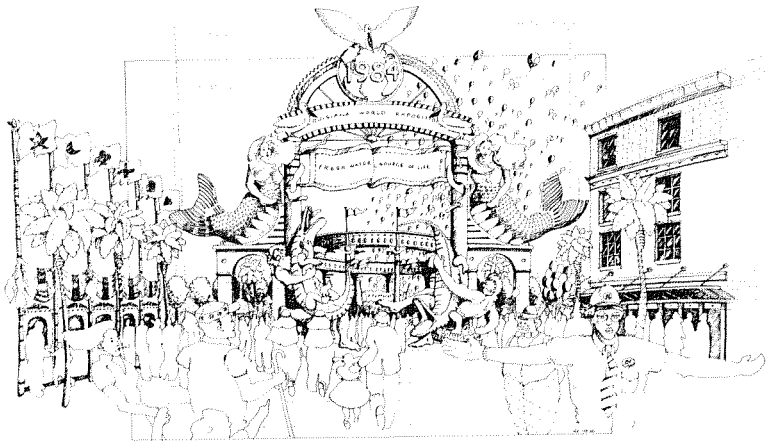
This process, when adapted to World's Fair work, took on the expanded role of site organizer. The scenario

techniques offer the opportunity to "game-out" various design options by studying architectural solutions as well as operational efficiency, entertainment venues, and pageantry possibilities. The scenarios were taken from cartoon-like diagrams of the Piazza version to fully rendered architectural images that were strung together into sets of drawings to portray walking tours through the Fair site. Only when we were able to string together a set of walking-tour images with the simplicity of hypothetical user scenarios were we able to communicate properly and forcefully the design intentions of the Fair's master planning. Prior to the use of these scenarios, the planning had been communicated as a stiff technical exercise in land use and utility infrastructure. The walking-tour scenarios became the most powerful tool for communicating design intentions. It now appears that we will also be able to test with the World's Fair some of the theoretical assumptions that we discovered and translated into those early Piazza scenarios. If the World's Fair is to be successful as a pedestrian event, the focus must be on the pageantry and parades and choreography.

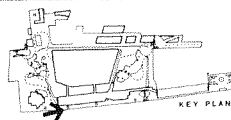
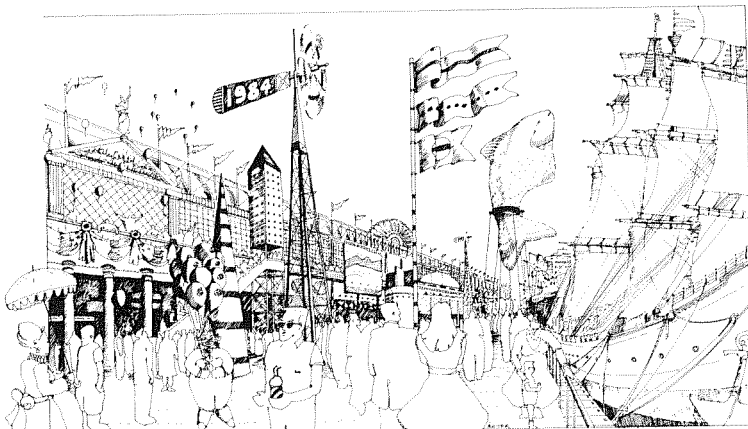
The second major contribution of the Piazza experience was instruction in the group-design process of



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17 Louisiana World Exposition
(Drawing by Perez Associates)

18 Louisiana World Exposition
(Drawing by Perez Associates)

19 Louisiana World Exposition
(Drawing by Perez Associates)

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Being There

Donlyn Lyndon

learning how to orchestrate and be a participant in a group activity, and of learning the importance of flexibility and vulnerability. The making of the Piazza both as product and process, was at times exhilarating, scary, confusing, and, most of all, educational. The exhilaration stemmed from the sheer fun of making an unconventional space with an unconventional set of rules and design parameters. The scary side came from working for the first time with a fancy guy like Charles W. Moore. This confusion always prevailed, because confusion is so much a part of Moore's existence. He thrives on the edge of disaster yet can always turn the most confusing of signals into the most clever of solutions. It takes (which I was later to learn) a great amount of courage to hang on until the very last moment when, unbeknown to most of us, Charles would snatch order and meaning out of ever growing clouds of confusion. He thrived on this dance with disorder and, by his example, taught us all how to dance. Making the Piazza was educational because amid the searching, confusion, and "scariness" we were always learning and exploring—never content with the direction established yesterday. Each day's work was a jumping-off point for tomorrow's explorations. Because design work was always done in a group situation, the

techniques for brainstorming and playing off each other's ideas became central to working together. The pooling of good thoughts and the sharing of bad ideas was a very liberating experience. Charles' self-confidence and his ever present ability to rescue and make wonderful even the most awkward of ideas helped everyone remain open and vulnerable.

I hope that such openness and vulnerability extends into the planning of the Fair. The ability to think and explore unconventional ideas and recognize the emergence of unconventional solutions has been invaluable. Whereas the Piazza process usually involved four or five individuals, the World's Fair planning involves the orchestration of 35 separate design and engineering firms. With so many people involved in design and with myriad philosophies available, carving out common ground for master planning and also allowing individual expression is crucial. The ability to orchestrate individuals, to allow them free reign to pursue their own intentions, requires constant high-wire balancing. While the potential for success is great, the risk of mediocrity is even greater.

It remains a little bit disconsolate, a surprisingly unattended place in an unlikely position. But that is part of the price to be paid for a public space that was built first to attract investment later.

Much has been made of, and much disputed about, the "Italianness" of the Piazza d'Italia. It was sponsored by members of the Italian community, its plan-shape is based on the map of Italy, its walls are embellished with various freewheeling versions of the classical orders, its colors hover around tones named for Italian regions, and, surely, its most important predecessor is the Trevi Fountain.

But the back-biting professional arguments that this place has spawned (mostly among critics who have never visited the Piazza) are curious. The use of the map of Italy is purported somehow to be an insult, the use of the orders is deemed a travesty—either because the Piazza contains full-blown, giant-order, classical details, which offends some unreconstructed modernists—or because these details are "incorrect" (if not outrageous) variations on the classical forms, which offends those recently reconstructed classicists who consider themselves guardians of the sacred trust. In either case the good-natured willful inventiveness of it seems to cause the most

offense. "Whimsy," we are told more often than we could possibly need to be, "has no place in civic art"—a point that was lost, apparently, on several generations of baroque sculptors.

Being there, all that seems beside the point. The place itself is extraordinary, an evocative interweaving of form, color, and light that escapes categorization. It is, more than anything else, robustly present and paradoxically soothing. The layered curving screens offer an array of shifting views streaked with modulated sunlight; the terraced forms of the fountain mass invite clambering around and in the water; the water itself leaks, surges, splashes, sprays, and drips around and among sparkling black and white land forms, reflective sheets of stainless steel, and glowing stucco colors. It asks to be lived in; it beckons for attention. The real meaning of Piazza d'Italia is that it matters whether you are there. Its significance lies in the experience—in the opportunities for engagement that it affords—engagement of the eye, of the body, and of the mind. It offers opportunities to know our own human capabilities by seeing them reflected in a place intensely invested with imagination.

The surroundings will come later—those that are not already there. For the Piazza d'Italia is only a part of a