

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Being There [Place Debate: Piazza d'Italia]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9jf3q5sd>

### Journal

Places, 1(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Lyndon, Donlyn

### Publication Date

1983-10-01

Peer reviewed

# 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.

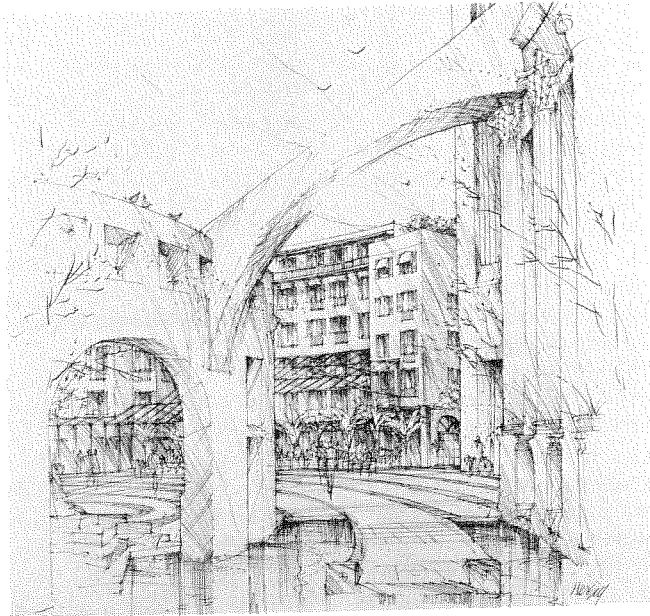
But the back-biting professional arguments that this place has spawned (mostly among critics who have never visited the Piazza) are curious. The use of the map of Italy is purported somehow to be an insult, the use of the orders is deemed a travesty—either because the Piazza contains full-blown, giant-order, 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.

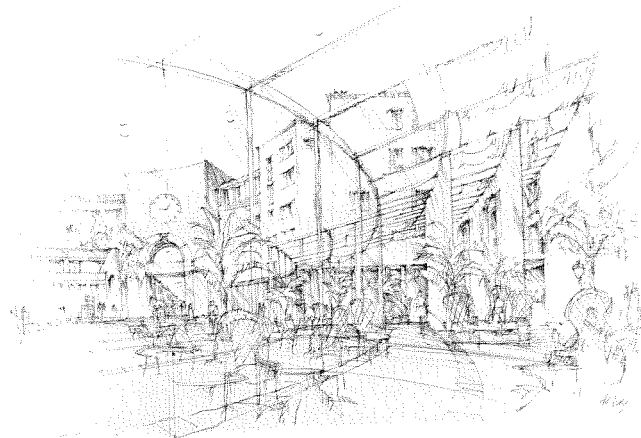
Being there, all that seems beside the point. The place itself is extraordinary, an evocative interweaving of form, color, and light that escapes categorization. It is, more than anything else, robustly present and paradoxically soothing. The layered curving screens offer an array of shifting views streaked 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

larger complex that includes a singularly dreary, recent office-tower that was already on the site, as well as remnants of earlier nineteenth-century buildings that have been kept intact as street frontage for the block. A large urban gateway has already been built, as has a passage through one of the adjoining, early brick commercial buildings. The rest of the project has floundered with the economy, so that as yet there is little activity in the Piazza except on fiesta days. But the adjoining properties are now being designed as a hotel, which should bring life and dollars to the area, albeit not for the community-based passaggio that may originally have been intended. The hotel will take responsibility for managing and maintaining the area, which will please the city hall budget-makers, but which also raises the worrisome possibility that the space will read more as a feature of the hotel than as a truly public place.



20



21

20 Drawing by William Hersey

21 Drawing by William Hersey