

New Plaza in Downtown New Orleans Is a Wild and Mad Vision

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Special to The New York Times

NEW ORLEANS — The Piazza d'Italia is poised at the edge of this city's growing business district, between colorful old warehouses and banal glass skyscrapers, but even in this mixed environment it comes as something of a shock. For while downtown plazas in most cities are mere expanses of empty concrete, this new one has as its centerpiece a set of curving walls containing an array of classical columns and arches and entablatures and friezes, all painted brilliant rust and yellow and orange and awash with water spouting, flowing, rushing and gurgling around and about and above and below every part of it.

As if that were not enough, the structure is lit up with blue and orange neon ornamentation at night. And the fountains all empty into the central pool with an island of cobblestone and slate and marble that clearly and unquestionably turns out to be the shape of a map of Italy.

Full of Good Will

The whole thing is a wild, mad vision, as if the Roman Forum were re-erected in Las Vegas. One's first instinct is to say it is all a rather vulgar slap in the face of classicism — how could Corinthian columns painted yellow and lit up at night with neon be anything but vulgar?

But this place, which may be the most significant new urban plaza any American city has erected in years, is in fact so boundlessly good natured, so utterly full of good will and eagerness to please, that you soon realize that it is not a mockery of classicism at all. It is a laughing, almost hysterically joyous embrace of the classical tradition.

The architects for this most extraordinary exclamation point in the center of New Orleans were August Perez and Associates, a large, corporate firm that heretofore has not done unusually well in the area of imaginative design. The firm did better here because of an unusual partnership arrangement with Charles W. Moore, the Los Angeles architect whose exuberant houses and public buildings have been among the most important small-scale architectural works of the last decade.

Best of Both Worlds

The fountain was Mr. Moore's design, and it came about in a strange way. When the city of New Orleans decided a few years back that it wanted to honor its Italian citizens with a \$1.65 million plaza, it opened the project to an architectural competition.

Mr. Moore entered with a proposal containing a wild adventure of a classical fountain; the Perez firm offered a design that concentrated on renovating the old buildings around the Plaza instead of dealing with the center. Perez won, but public pressure led to the Perez firm's agreeing to merge its plan with Mr. Moore's. The result is that New Orleans is getting the best of both worlds: the extraordinary Moore fountain and the Perez renovations and surrounding structures, most of which remain to be built.

Charles Moore has talked for years about his fascination with water and the way it was used in classical fountains. With the Piazza d'Italia, he

shows that he at once understands historical precedent and is able to go beyond it.

The fountain not only spurts water up and washes it down; it also uses water as a sculptural element. There is one section that drops tiny streams of water in a circular pattern that turns the water into a fluted Doric column, and another section with specially designed fountain jets that sculpture water into something resembling the egg-and-dart classical moldings of old.

Spirit of Exuberance

This spirit of exuberance pervades the entire structure. It is a wonderful spatial experience — one can slip in and out of arcades of columns, in between walls, up and down over the stone islands of Italy in the central pool, making this a participatory plaza in the best sense. It is also a fine composition. The structure has a high central arch as its anchor, with arcades curving out from it like welcoming arms.

And there is splendid wit here. One section contains a pair of heads of Charles Moore spouting water. They were designed without the architect's knowledge by his associate Ed Perez as a surprise tribute.

Still, for all the joy of this place, questions remain. The Piazza d'Italia has a serious lack of seating space. There are just a handful of benches at the edge, far from the fountain. And the city of New Orleans has done a miserable job of maintenance. The fountain is only a few months old, and already lights are out and some water jets malfunction.

There is, of course, a more serious question. What differentiates something like this from the cheap classical columns in front of a place like Caesars Palace in Las Vegas? Both take classical forms and play with them, turning them into something easy and entertaining. The Piazza d'Italia was designed by a famous architect and is considered worthy of our attention. Caesars Palace is considered kitsch. Why?

Part of the answer lies in intent. In the New Orleans fountain, Charles Moore was operating on the level of exploring the meaning of classical elements; he wanted to make us think about what a classical column is and how it does its job, as well as entertain us. To do so, he created an intricate, subtle composition, full of wit and inventiveness.

Caesars Palace, on the other hand, is just a simple, quick-and-easy rip-off of classical elements in the belief that their very use, no matter how simplistic, connotes class. The Piazza d'Italia has no such naïve aspirations toward "class." It is itself, its own thing, its own creation — like all real works of art

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Water flows in many parts of the Piazza d'Italia, new plaza near the business district in New Orleans. Part of fountain, right, was made in the image of Charles W. Moore, the architect.