

Citesurveys

Puttin' Off the Ritz

Confirmed Reservations at the Piazza d'Italia

The best is none too good for one's own soil....If the best can only be found elsewhere the intelligent course is to import and adapt it rather than to put up with the third best and pretend it is just as good.

Lewis Mumford

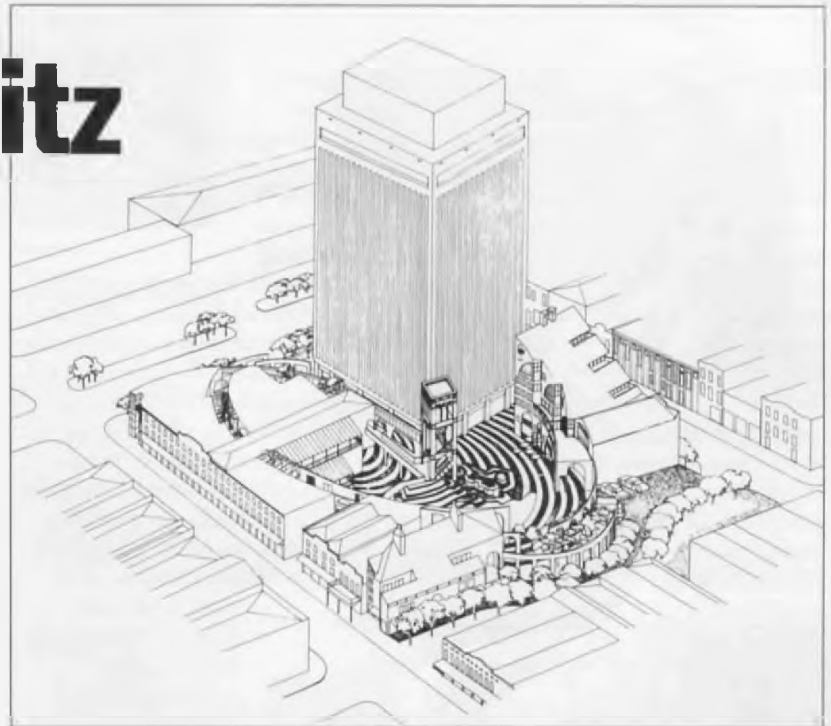


Aubry Architects with Perez Associates, Ritz-Carlton Hotel, New Orleans, 1990 revised scheme.

DREXEL TURNER

Recent maneuvering over the persistently problematic future of Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, one of the most celebrated (if shockingly ill kept) monuments of the postmodern persuasion anywhere, confirms the sometime wisdom of depending on the kindness of strangers rather than of those one knows. For the currently proposed scheme to develop a 400-room Ritz-Carlton Hotel adjoining the Piazza – a deal put forward by Joseph Canizaro, a real estate developer instrumental in the initial realization of the Piazza, and architect August Perez III, whose firm participated with Moore in the design of the Piazza – would reduce the Piazza to little more than a motor court with running water overshadowed by the 21-story bulk of a hotel to be constructed by Canizaro on city-owned land surrounding the Piazza.¹ Not since plans were advanced (and ultimately thwarted) in the 1960s to provide Jackson Square with a fourth wall in the form of an elevated highway has such an ill-founded assault been mounted against the city's public realm.

The Piazza itself is no stranger to the art of the deal or the vagaries of architectural preservation. Its awkward 1.7-acre L-shaped site, nestled at the base of an ungainly 22-story pinstriped office tower developed by Canizaro for the Lykes Shipping Company (Perez Associates, 1972), was obtained by the city of New Orleans from Canizaro expressly for the Piazza by a trade. In return Canizaro gained 3.7 acres of alleyways he needed to complete assembly of the site for Canal Place, an architecturally unexceptional but successful multi-use complex at the foot of Canal Street that includes a hotel and upscale shopping mall (RTKL, 1983-84) and office tower (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1986). At the time, Canizaro was also serving as a member of a committee appointed by Mayor Moon Landrieu in early 1973 to help realize the Piazza – a project conceived by Joe Maselli, Sr., in consultation with Landrieu, whose administration continued an enthusiasm for constituency-enhancing monuments to the ethnic diversity of New Orleans pioneered by a previous mayor in the Plaza de España and Place de France. The land deal was initially approved by the city council in November 1973, the same month that a preliminary design for the Piazza was completed by landscape architect Cashio-Cochran Incorporated that would have necessitated the demolition of a row of three 19th-century commercial buildings on one side of the block. Although the transaction was challenged within council as inequitable, the valuations were eventually accepted and the exchange consummated in April 1974.²



Charles W. Moore (Moore, Grover, Harper, and Chad Floyd), competition project, Piazza d'Italia, 1974. Aerial perspective.



Aerial view of Piazza d'Italia from Lykes Center.

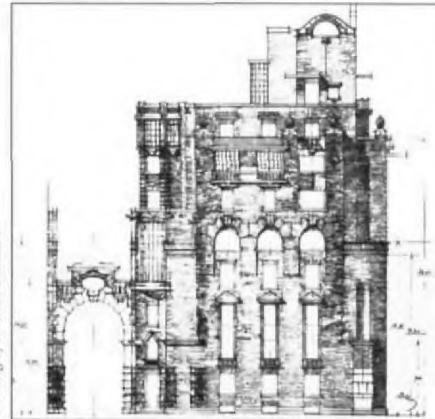
The proposed demolition of the commercial row aroused opposition among preservationists and planners, and in July 1974 the committee for the Piazza announced its intention to hold a limited competition for a new design that would preserve the 19th-century streetfront. The competition was to be judged by the mayor and his staff, an arrangement that met with disfavor from the architectural profession, causing it to be changed to an open one, sanctioned by the American Institute of Architects and judged in January 1975 by a jury consisting of five representatives of the Italian-American community, including Maselli and Canizaro. It was won by Allen Eskew and Malcolm Heard of Perez Associates, whose scheme had certain elements in common with the second-place entry prepared by Charles Moore, then dean of architecture at Yale, with Chad Floyd of Moore, Grover, Harper of Essex, Connecticut.³

The winning entry featured a circular open space with a fountain at the center of the block and a streetside campanile; Moore's was organized about an ellipse that stretched almost to the edges of the block, cutting a path through the warehouses to maximize retail frontage and culminating at its center in a campanile with one leg planted in an irregularly terraced (not yet boot-shaped) fountain. Moore's scheme

also included a seven-story ski-slope-roofed building that appeared poised to scale one side of the Lykes building, and which was anchored by an exedra screen skirting the back side of the block.⁴ The overall effect of the second-place entry was not unlike a looping version of Ghirardelli Square (which Moore had commended in the pages of *Architectural Forum* ten years before) and was especially appreciated by Jack Davis of the *New Orleans States-Item* for "expanding the local idea of what is compatible with old buildings [through its] imaginative connection between the city's past and the best of modern architecture."⁵ The scheme's gentle bravura also sufficiently impressed Landrieu that a representative of the mayor inquired whether the Perez office would be amenable to fashioning a joint design with Moore. The resulting collaboration, undertaken by Moore with Ron Filson of the Urban Innovations Group at UCLA (where Moore had just become head of the program in architecture) and by Eskew and Heard for Perez Associates, produced a scheme recognized even before it was built with a 1976 design award from *Progressive Architecture* magazine, despite the reservations of one panelist, Cesar Pelli, as to the advisability of the site.⁶



Charles W. Moore with Arthur Andersson and August Perez Associates. Fountain elevation, Piazza d'Italia Hotel (project), 1985.



Aldo Andreani, Palazzo Fidia, Milan, 1930.



Charles W. Moore (Urban Innovations Group and Ron Filson) and August Perez Associates (Malcolm Heard and Allen Eskew). St. Joseph Fountain, Piazza d'Italia, 1975-78.

The joint scheme, like its predecessors from the competition, not only preserved buildings already on site but proposed others of similar scale to fill out the block and to encourage everyday use of the Piazza as a center of community activity. Nevertheless, funds obtained for construction through matching grants from the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce and the state of Louisiana covered only \$1.65 million of the estimated \$8 to 10 million total cost of the project, deferring development of the commercial structures that were intended to surround the Piazza to the city and/or private interests. In the 14

years since the opening of the Piazza, neither has succeeded in producing the restaurants and shops originally envisioned nor the small hotel first promoted on the eve of the 1984 World's Fair. And although the rest of the warehouse district, just beyond the Piazza, has managed to effect a spontaneous and quite extensive revitalization of its own, the city has virtually ceased to maintain even the fountain. Its water is now turned on and off each day by the firm that manages the Lykes building, which, along with crews provided several times a month by Joe Maselli, Sr., also helps to keep the Piazza clean.⁷

Despite its more or less constant state of neglect, the ingenious charm of the Piazza still beckons—a prodigy contrived on a shoestring by a singular 20th-century master with serendipitously adept collaborators, so astonishing and unexpected that no serious account of recent architecture can ignore it; even John Pinto's sober treatise on the Trevi Fountain invokes it as an apt coda.⁸ The *joie de vivre* of the Piazza's spouting column screens, neon-lit thermal proscenium, and stepped map of Italy, creased with rivulets for the Po, Arno, and Tiber, is neither indecorous nor abstruse but curiously fused with the spirit of place, New Orleans as much as Italy.

Moore's nimble but knowing conflation of the Trevi Fountain, Hadrian's Maritime Theater, the Place des Victoires, Luna Park, and Mardi Gras is very much the product of his one-of-a-kind improvisational wizardry—no easy act to follow, yet clearly the one that has created most of the special value that resides in the site today.

The deal Canizaro is currently seeking with the city involves a lease with an option to purchase the land abutting the Piazza, now relieved by fire of two of the three 19th-century structures whose preservation had earlier precipitated the competition. Covenants are to be attached to the lease that would require Canizaro and the Ritz-Carlton to restore and maintain the Piazza and ensure public access thereto—although, remarkably, the city officials responsible for the negotiations, deputy city attorney Carol Hart and economic development director Wayne Collier, do not view the use of the Piazza for a motor court as inconsistent with a commitment not “to interfere with any of the architectural amenities of the Piazza,” a position that Maselli himself seems to accept.⁹ For proof they cite the traffic-riven piazzas of Italy, avoiding the critical distinction that the Piazza's name belies the reality of its diminutive, courtlike disposition in the middle of a block already buffeted by traffic. Jim Singleton, the councilman whose district includes the Piazza, has said that he is inclined to oppose “cars going through the Piazza” or “any situation which would dismantle the Piazza,” although he feels constrained “to reserve final judgment until I see some final plans.”¹⁰

So far, two sets of plans have been prepared for Canizaro by Aubry Architects of Sarasota, Florida, in association with Perez Associates, the first of which was revealed in July 1990 and followed by a revised, marginally more hospitable scheme in December 1990.¹¹ Even with revisions, Moore still finds the scheme unconvincing, characterizing the motor court as “the most heinous of acts against the Piazza” while also taking issue with the placement of a 21-story tower at the west corner of the site so as to “block out the sunset” and “turn the whole neighborhood into the back yard of a big hotel.” He also takes exception to plans to dismantle the tempietto, campanile, and arch.¹²

The protestations of Moore, last year's AIA Gold Medalist, joined by Eskew, Heard, and Filson, and similarly adverse reaction to the project in the New Orleans press and the *New York Times* have had little noticeable effect on the progress of the project. Nor is it possible to take much comfort from the solicitude of the New Orleans City Council, which voted in

March 1991 to remove the Piazza from the city's inventory of dedicated parkland, ostensibly to facilitate the project by curing a title defect discovered by deputy city attorney Carol Hart. At this point, the only relief in sight appears to be the difficulty Canizaro has experienced in obtaining financing for the \$82 million project, a dividend of sorts from the lingering economic malaise of the mid-1980s as well as the (miraculous?) ability of a more modest but competing 150-unit Hampton Inn to break ground first this fall on the site of the Vatican Pavilion of the 1984 World's Fair, which adjoins the expanded New Orleans Convention Center.¹⁵ As a consequence of the epic hotel overbuilding experienced nationwide in the 1980s, traditional sources of development financing are no longer available, and a group of Japanese investors Canizaro had been courting have evidently declined to commit to the project.¹⁶

A residual irony confronting the Ritz in its present form, underscored as much by Adam Smith's unseen hand as by the sensibilities of those who seek to preserve the integrity of Moore et al.'s precocious if not indestructible monument for its own sake, is that a smaller hotel would be at once better fitted both to the market and the Piazza and presumably still profitable enough to endow the maintenance and safety of the Piazza as a public inner sanctum. A further irony is that Moore himself designed such a hotel for the site in 1985 (with Arthur Andersson and August Perez Associates for the now defunct Lincoln Properties of Dallas), consisting of 12 stories and a penthouse for a quarter-block site — a project sufficiently esteemed to appear on the cover of Eugene Johnson's monograph of Moore's oeuvre, issued by Rizzoli on the occasion of the Williams College Museum of Arts' retrospective in 1986.¹⁵ The extramural consonance of Moore's hotel design, which shares a sophisticated affinity with Aldo Andreani's *novecento* Palazzo Fidia, Milan (1930), would do much to advance the sense of *tout ensemble* advocated for the Piazza from the very beginning but so far deferred.¹⁶ Close in size to the Pontchartrain Hotel (an eminently viable guardian of hospitality on St. Charles Avenue whose appeal, alas, does not extend outdoors), Moore's festive, staged arch-types would stand up to the lugubrious pinstripes of the Lykes Center without stiffness and without overwhelming the Piazza proper. Its complex, quasi-operatic façade is integrally assembled from top to bottom, unlike the Ritz-Carlton, which confines its CAD-extracted Italiana to base and roof levels, with 20 floors of business-as-usual gridlock sandwiched in between. Closer to the ground, the discrete palazzolike displacement of Moore's contrasts with the Ritz's claustrophobic embrace of the Piazza, evoking Blanche DuBois's eponymic description of another last resort, the "Tarantula Arms."

The tenuous longevity accorded even exceptional works of architecture is a well established fact of modern life. Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Gardens, a pleasure point of similar acumen, survived only 15 years before making way for a service station and garage midway through Prohibition. But unlike the Piazza d'Italia,

Wright's conception managed to gain a brief interval of fulfillment. The Piazza is still very much a fragment, however brilliant and widely known, waiting for equally fitting surroundings that would sustain public life rather than mere curiosity. Today it is more likely to be interpreted as a sham ruin with intermittently working plumbing, mired in the *verismo* of local politics and real estate economics, than as the spritely piece of community architecture it started out to be and still might become with the help of the right little hotel on the side. There is no reason to suppose that the city of New Orleans could not afford to moderate its expectations for profit in return for a Moore-faithful palazzo that might even attract financing as well as guests. ■

- 1 Frances Marcus, "Is Park Saved by Destroying a Part?" *New York Times*, 26 March 1991, p. A14; William Lake Douglas, "Hotel Plan to Destroy (or Save) Piazza d'Italia," *Progressive Architecture*, June 1991, p. 30.
- 2 Jennifer C. Toher, "Piazza d'Italia," in Tod A. Marder, ed., *The Critical Edge: Controversy in Recent American Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 149-61, provides the most comprehensive account of the Piazza's development. Another less scrupulously documented source, based in part on interviews with Maselli and Moore, is David Littlejohn, *Architect: The Life and Work of Charles W. Moore* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), pp. 250-61.
- 3 Eugene Johnson, ed., *Charles W. Moore: Buildings and Projects, 1949-1986* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), pp. 78-79, 184-91.
- 4 *The Work of Charles W. Moore*, *AsU* extra issue, May 1978, pp. 292-94.
- 5 Charles W. Moore, "Ghirardelli Square," *Architectural Forum*, June 1965, pp. 52-57; Jack Davis, "The Dazzling Piazza That Might Have Been," *New Orleans States-Item*, 29 January 1975.
- 6 *Progressive Architecture*, January 1976, pp. 82-83.
- 7 Clancy DuBos, "Rumors of the Piazza d'Italia's Death Are Premature, But Not Entirely Unfounded," *New Orleans Weekly Gambit*, 18 June 1991, pp. 11-13.
- 8 John A. Pinto, *The Trevi Fountain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 257-59.
- 9 DuBos, "Rumors."
- 10 *Ibid*
- 11 The two schemes are discussed and illustrated by Roger Green in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, "Hotel Plan Is a Sour Note in a Sweet Deal," 7 July 1990, and "Style, Function Trying to Meet Business Half Way," 22 December 1990.
- 12 Roger Green, "Charles Moore Says Turning Piazza Into Motor Court Is Like 'Murder,'" *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 16 February 1991.
- 13 Bruce Egger, "New Hotel First in City Since '84," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 10 September 1991.
- 14 DuBos, "Rumors."
- 15 Johnson, ed., *Charles W. Moore*. The Piazza d'Italia Hotel was also illustrated, alone among Moore's projects, in reviews of the Williams College Museum of Art's retrospective that appeared in the *New York Times* (16 November 1986) and the *Boston Globe* (25 November 1986).
- 16 The Palazzo Fidia is described in Richard A. Ertin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 198-99, as an example of "the decorative Novecento style . . . developed for buildings that were transforming Milan into a taller, more crowded, busier city." For a more extensive account of the palazzo, see Alberto Grimoldi, "Il folle Palazzo Fidia," *Ottagono*, September 1980, pp. 108-13.

Scenes From a

Philip Johnson's University of St. Thomas Chapel

