

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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 Art's retrospective in 1986.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 pin-stripes 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. ■

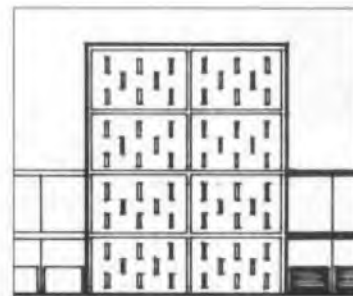
- 1 Frances Marcus, "Is Park Saved by Destroying a Part?" *New York Times*, 26 March 1991, p. A14; William Lake Douglas, "Hotel Plan to Destroy (or Save) Piazza d'Italia," *Progressive Architecture*, June 1991, p. 30.
- 2 Jennifer C. Toher, "Piazza d'Italia," in Tod A. Marder, ed., *The Critical Edge: 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*, *A+U* 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 Gumbo*, 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. Erlin, *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



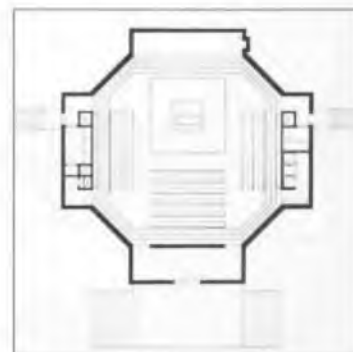
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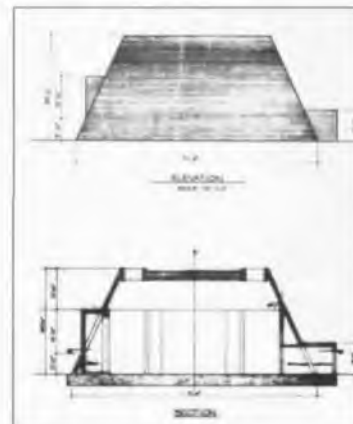
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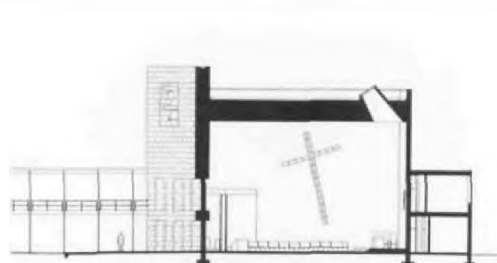


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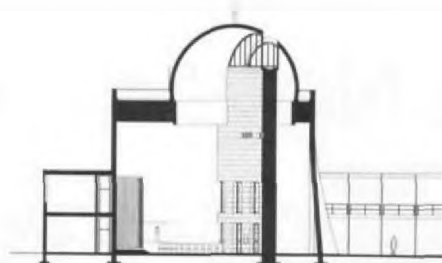


9

Mall



Section looking west.



Section looking east.



Section through mall looking north.

A Pilgrim's Progress

If historicism be, in the 20th century, an architectural sin . . . then Johnson is a frank and cheerful sinner.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock

The University of St. Thomas chapel first appeared on paper as part of a self-contained campus projected by Philip Johnson in 1957 (1,2,3). Rectangular in plan and stationed at the north end of a garden mall, it was a taller, fewer-bayed variation of the Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue (Port Chester, New York, 1956), which, with its velariumlike ceiling and patterned, multicolored fenestration, confirmed Johnson's intention to deviate from Miesian orthodoxy. By 1959, a square chapel outline had been substituted for the rectangle in the campus plan, marking what Henry-Russell Hitchcock in 1961 hinted was to be resolved as a "relatively large, richly shaped, and centrally planned object" (*Zodiac VIII*, p. 77). A subsequent campus plan showed a circular seating arrangement circumscribed within the square, similar to the plan of a core-Kneses church project.

In 1964, Dominique and John de Menil, Johnson's patrons for St. Thomas, commissioned Mark Rothko to undertake a series of paintings as part of a new project for the chapel. The progress of Johnson's designs thereafter for the chapel, the site of which had been shifted to the south end of the mall, is described in Susan J. Barnes's monograph, *The Rothko Chapel* (1989, distributed by the University of Texas Press). His first drawings of 1964 placed a tall, truncated pyramid atop a low, square box in a formation like that of Ledoux's *Workshop of the Charcoal Burners for the Ideal City of Chaux, 1780-1804* (4). Later in the year, the scheme was revised at Rothko's instigation to accommodate first an apse, then a Greek-cross octagon plan (5) suggested by the 11th- or 12th-century church of Santa Fosca, Torcello. The definitive version of this scheme — which was to rise to a height of more than 70 feet, be constructed of concrete, and be painted white — was presented as a model in 1965 (6), but neither it nor a more compressed treatment of the roof form gained Rothko's approval. The low, square, skylit brick mastaba that followed in 1967 (7) seems almost a nonbuilding by comparison — a flattened, more domesticated and penetrable analogue of H. H. Richardson's rock-faced *Ames Monument in Wyoming, 1879-82* (8). An octagonal brick berm with clerestory lighting (9,10) was also devised in 1967 without result before Johnson, conceding an impasse, relinquished the commission to terminate the mall. Now, 25 years later, with the site reestablished at the north end of the mall, Johnson's chapel is to be born yet again.

Drexel Turner

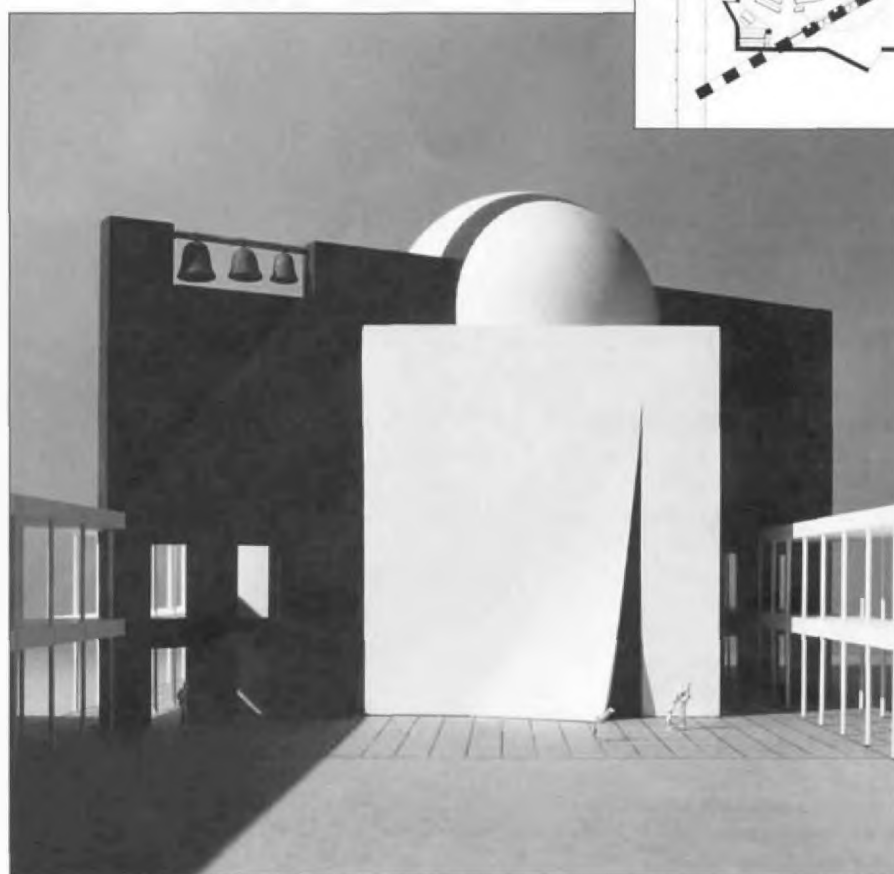
GERALD MOORHEAD

Philip Johnson's latest design for a chapel terminating the academic quadrangle of St. Thomas, a campus he initially planned in 1956, is an appropriate culmination for both the campus and his career (his third career, "on my own again," as the 85-year-old architect is fond of saying). Johnson sees the chapel as the "challenge of a lifetime," having already devised an earlier series of schemes for such a chapel.

Johnson's master plan for the University of St. Thomas is based on Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, with its series of pavilions lining a mall, linked by a continuous arcade, and focused on a domed rotunda. The St. Thomas arcade contains two levels and acts like a lacy steel screen or porch in front of the attached Miesian brick-and-steel buildings, reminiscent of the Illinois Institute of Technology campus. The three original buildings, Welder Hall, Jones Hall, and Strake Hall, of 1958, are by Johnson in association with Bolton & Barnstone. Later additions to the quadrangle are M. D. Anderson Hall (1966, Howard Barnstone & Eugene Aubry), the Doherty Library (1971, Eugene Aubry and Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson), and Cullen Hall (1978, S. I. Morris Associates). Unlike Jefferson's pavilions at the University of Virginia, however, the St. Thomas buildings do not penetrate the arcade with individual façades onto the quadrangle. They remain submissive behind the ambulatory; space is the dominant image, not architectural form.

The new chapel will change all that. Designed at a scale suitable to command the vista of the 700-foot-long procession, the chapel will be the focal point of the campus and the neighborhood beyond. The basic block will be a white cube, 60 feet square and 40 feet high, capped by a lead-coated-copper hemispheric dome rising to 70 feet above the grassy mall. These pure forms are sliced at an angle by a gray granite wall, which extends outward to engage the arcade system. By wrapping the arcade around the chapel, the space of the mall is closed, creating the image of "the university embracing the church," as Johnson explained in a press conference last May.

The chapel design is both referential and recombinant. The simple cubic volume capped with a dome is Byzantine and Near Eastern, as is the use of the bell wall,



South (front) elevation seen from within the mall.

while the granite wall, with its modulated openings and three doorways into the chapel, is a freestanding Renaissance-like façade. The entry is a slice in the cube that peels the wall aside, SITE-like, as a parted curtain and entry flap into the sanctuary. Off axis, the dark granite wall and slot contradict the architectural syntax of mass, volume, and symmetry.

In contrast to the Miesian steel-and-brick buildings lining the mall, the chapel will be sheathed in scaleless white stucco, both dominant as form and immaterial as light. The sliced form also suggests an awareness of Tadao Ando's church in Ibaraki, Japan (1989), the rectangular envelope of which is penetrated by an angled wall at the exact point of entry.

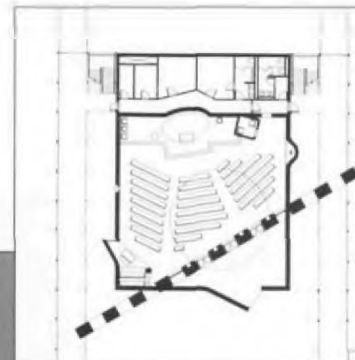
The unornamented, all-white interior will be indirectly lit with natural light from several sources. "The more you re-reflect light, the more you bathe, the more you luxuriate in a subaqueous atmosphere; that's what we've done here," Johnson explains. Overall illumination is reflected through the sliced dome, while more intense light from sculptural niches and deep skylights focuses on the altar and a

niche with a statue of the Virgin. "The Cistercians were the best" in the use of natural light, says Johnson, and he also acknowledges the influence of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp, "the most beautifully lighted chapel in the world."

A single source of intense light will come from the west wall, where the slender shape of a slanted cross is incised in the wall, a device also employed by Ando at Ibaraki but in perfect plumb. The slash of colored light will track across the floor and walls with the movement of the sun.

Johnson's chapel design is rich in metaphor without being narrowly historicist and is primarily concerned with spatial presence — both inside and out. "You've got to have a space that gives you a lift, that's better than anything," as he puts it.

The Houston firm of Hall/Merriman Architects is associating with Johnson on the chapel project and is designing an adjacent science building under his guidance. Future maintenance and improvements to the campus will follow a recently updated master plan prepared by Barry Moore and Tom Colbert. ■



Plan.