

Citesurvey

The Transco Fountain

Elizabeth McBride

Philip Johnson and John Burgee's fountains and buildings depend for their breathtaking effects upon the power of metaphor, the tension of contrast, and upon both subtle and obvious illusion.

At the Fort Worth Water Garden, for instance, each of five fountains employs a different kind of beguiling illusion which, in juxtaposition with all of the other fountains, creates tensions even more beguiling. One fountain consists of a sheet of water moving so thinly and smoothly over a vertical stone surface that it seems the wall is merely wet, that nothing is moving. On the opposite side of the garden, water falls over large rough blocks of stone which are tumbled into a pool, partially buried in the rush of constantly turbulent water. The effect of the broken blocks, the rushing water, and the resulting noise imitate nature, as the simple moving film of water does not. It seems that one has broken suddenly out of the forest and into a clearing, that one has been magically lifted into a primeval scene.

Some of Johnson and Burgee's fountains invite the viewer's participation, as this one does - it is all one can do to restrain oneself from climbing down into the pool, although the descent is dangerous and the fountain is guarded. Other Johnson/Burgee fountains appear to invite participation, but the invitation is only illusion.

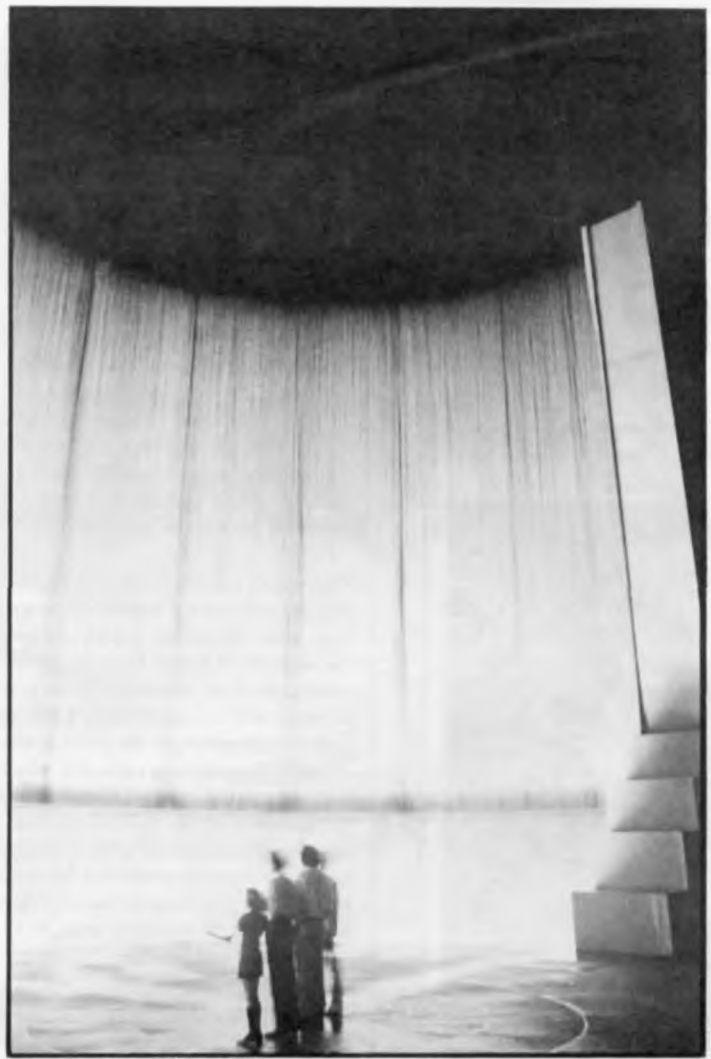
Philip Johnson's new Transco Fountain, lying at one end of a long greensward

across from the Transco Tower, extends just such an ambiguous invitation. Ambiguity, in fact, adheres in the manner in which the site is laid out. And ambiguity is finally what this fountain is about.

The fountain itself consists of a tall, curved, semicircular wall which faces the Transco Tower and which, when the water is on, might be described most simply as a wall of cascading water. The backside of the fountain is also a cascade, so in a sense the fountain's broken circle is completed by the water which sluices awesomely down the back. This is one of the most obvious and basic of many ambiguous readings this structure permits.

In front of the fountain and functioning as an entrance, both a barrier and a link between the fountain and the tower, is a freestanding triple-arched façade, neoclassical in style, what is technically called a *scenae frons*. This apparently straight-forward portal operates like a false front, a mock-up, calling forth visions of saloons in Western movies. With its three archways and brick facing - the shape seems to indicate that this is not a masonry bearing wall structure - the façade invites us into a world of questions.

This façade, or portal, is actually a threshold, marking a transition in the procession from the Transco Tower, in its exquisitely Postmodern costume, through the classical period, however neo, and into the mythical past which the fountain itself embodies. Turning around and looking back through the central arch, which is centered on the tower, this procession is



View from the arena, the Transco Fountain, 1985, Philip Johnson and John Burgee, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

doubly clear. This movement into the past is half of another disturbing, ambiguous statement, for the movement is also a movement into the present, into a fountain which, for all its mythic appeal, we cannot forget is cast in concrete, and which - to control the lights and pump the water - depends for its dramatic effects upon electricity and a wealth of technological inventions.

Although the Transco Fountain appears to invite participation, the invitation is an illusion, for the steps up the sides of the

fountain lead not into a pool but nowhere. What the fountain really invites is observation, and it is through observation that the viewer and fountain together create the illusion.

Let us look at the fountain as one might upon arriving, amazed, for the first time. We approach from the side, and ignoring the portal, walk instead into the area inscribed by the semi-circular wall. We see then, if we are more engaged by spectacle than by meaning, the most astonishing sight of all, the interior wall of water. The

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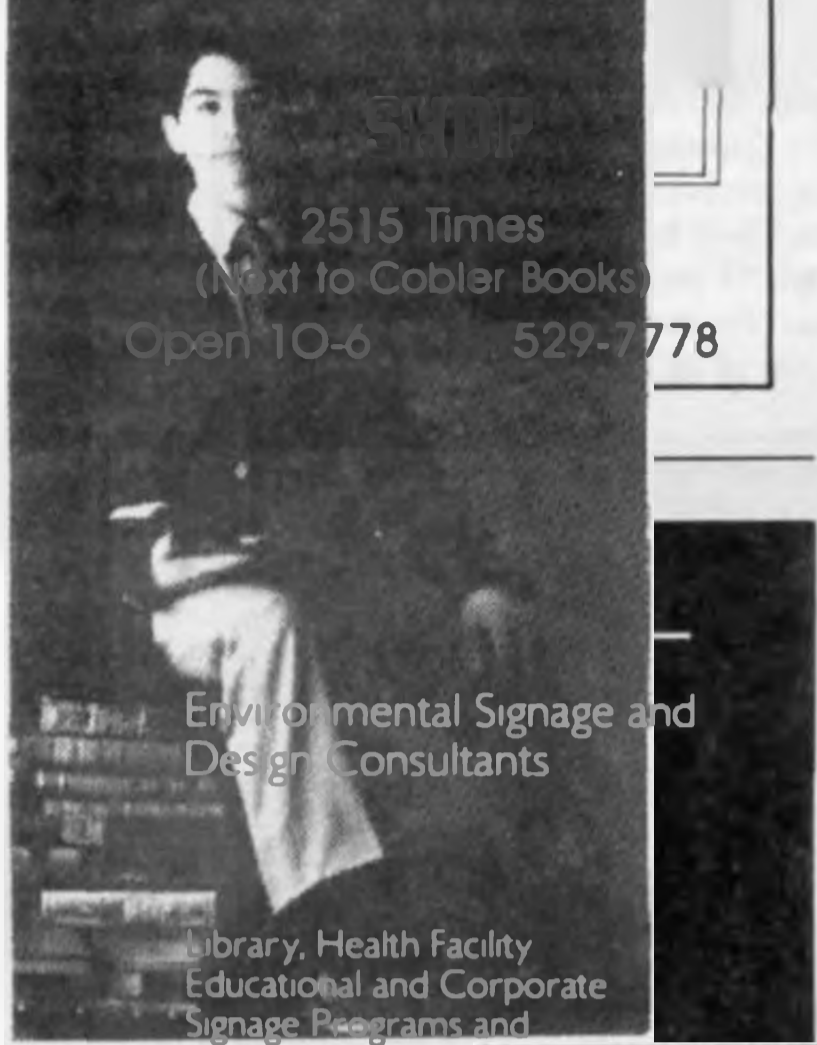
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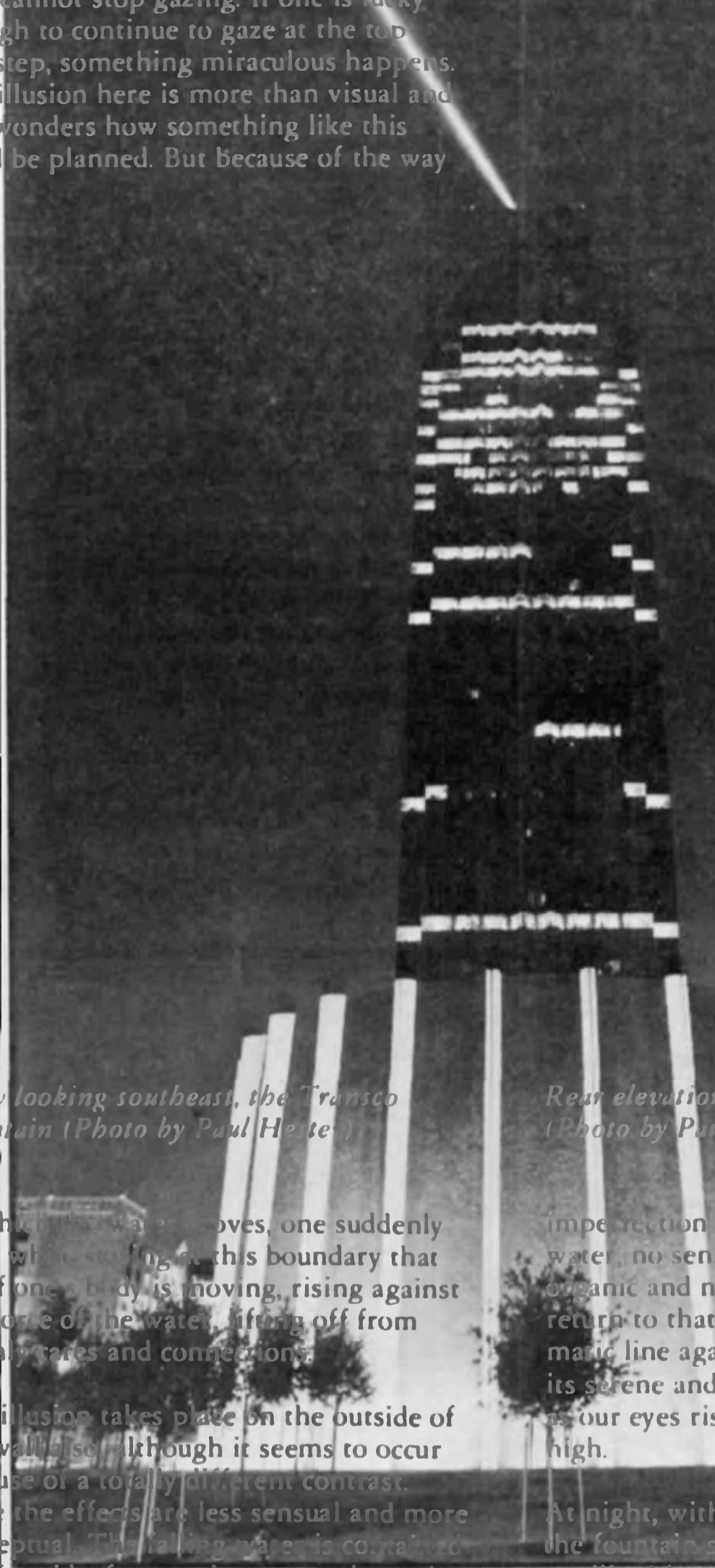
who cannot stop gazing. If one is lucky
enough to continue to gaze at the top
stairstep, something miraculous happens.
The illusion here is more than visual and
one wonders how something like this
could be planned. But because of the way

*View looking southeast, the Transco
Fountain (Photo by Paul Hester)*

in which the water moves, one suddenly
feels while standing at this boundary that
all of one's body is moving, rising against
the force of the water, lifting off from
earthly cares and connections.

The illusion takes place on the outside of
the wall also, although it seems to occur
because of a totally different contrast.
Here the effects are less sensual and more
conceptual. The falling water is contained
within wide, furrowed concrete channels,
somewhat like pre-stressed freeway tees
standing on edge (as if they could take us
somewhere) and it is impossible not to
feel, as well as to analyze, the illusory
effects. So it is with less surprise but with
equal delight that we give in to a percep-
tual invitation. As the water falls, our eyes
rise up the furrowed concrete surface.
Once again, we are pulled upward, but
having learned from the fountain's inter-
ior what perceptual mechanism is operat-
ing here, our eyes rise with a less spon-
taneous motion and a more conscious
awareness, as we give in knowingly and
willingly to a wish, a desire for the infi-
nite, the ideal.

In its curve, in the awesome power it has
to affect us, the wall of water forces us to



*Rear elevation
(Photo by Paul Hester)*

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