powerful, have nourished so many centuries and regions of good art and good building, that they can easily embrace one Jovian jest.

But the Piazza is not just an Olympian joke. It is also—I speak of its potential, not its actual state—a quite beautifully organized and orchestrated public space. Proportions, details, materials, and colors are combined even more scrupulously and (to my eye) pleasingly than all the celebrated references and allusions. It does not depend for its success on semiotic transliterations of its shapes, or on the insider's familiarity with architectural history. It is *not*, in its heart, a cynical dig at the classics.

These elements are present, and they may well qualify or on occasion reduce the freedom and healthiness of the overall pleasure of one's experience. Charles Moore, when set free from adult collaborators or control, can be incorrigibly and excessively clever—like other child prodigies who never totally grow up. Some of the jokes here, detached from the context of the pleasurable whole, do indeed appear (as hostile critics have called them) as architectural one-liners, with a very short half-life—as embarrassingly silly as the spitting Charles Moore heads on the mock Doric wall.

I offer my sincerest best wishes to the Italian-American patriots and to New Orleans's investors, on whose good will and hard work the future of this place depends. If the Piazza d'Italia *is* a stage set, it is the supreme outdoor stage set of our time, and I hope it gets treated with proper respect. It is suited not so much for *Cavalleria Rusticana* as for the daily human comedy of thousands of happy Italian New Orleanians and their families.

Problems of Representation

George Baird

In the course of recent architectural events, the Piazza d'Italia has been both a watershed and a caution. With his sure sense of timing and his penchant for congenial polemic, Charles W. Moore brought an important architectural argument to a climax with this controversial project.

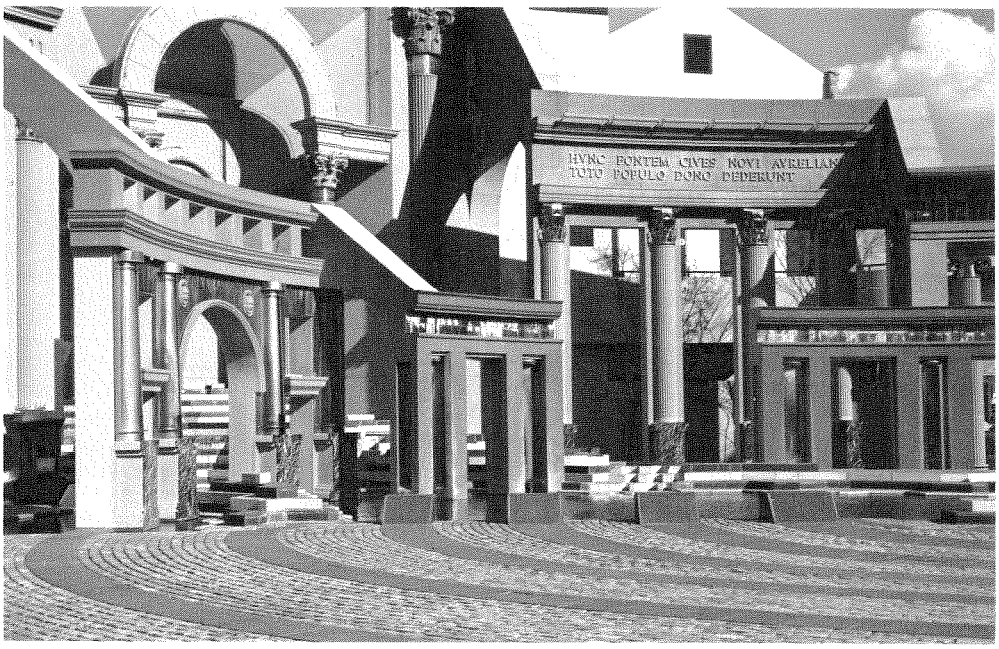
I have not been an admirer of the project, and have been asked to use this forum to give expression to my concerns. At the outset, I should indicate that I support many aspects of the proposal. It constitutes a central component of an urban revitalization scheme; it seeks to give expression to history—and to do so in an ironical, rather than literally revivalist way. It boldly addresses the question of symbolic expression in architecture. All of these are commendable intentions, which in my view even form an essential component of architectural design in our time. What then do I object to? It seems to me that my concerns have to do with three more specifically architectonic problems.

The Relationship of Background to Foreground Elements

Earlier works by Moore (such as the Faculty Club, Santa Barbara, CA; and Kresge College or the Burns House, Santa Monica, CA) all employ a vocabulary of rather austere and planar elements that connote an almost vernacular architecture against which are set more elaborate and more expressive and/or more historical motifs. As a result, all these schemes embody a formal tension that results from the juxtaposition of these back- and foreground elements. At the Piazza d'Italia, on the other hand, the foreground elements modify and elaborate the background elements so extensively that the tension of the earlier schemes dissolves. As a result, both back- and foreground collapse into a single architectonic configuration, and one possible mode of dialectic is lost.

The "Aura" of Historical Elements

At the Santa Barbara Faculty Club, part of the visual array in the foreground consists of "real" antique furniture. At the Burns House, Latin-American artifacts and exotic carpets articulate one's spatial perception. At the Piazza d'Italia, on the other hand, the historical elements that create the project's "foreground" are themselves fake. Despite the generally recognizable Roman-ness of the references, the frequent material rendition of the motifs in stainless steel and neon makes their fake-ness disconcertingly evident. Thus, the observer is driven to conclude that the background/foreground relationship cannot parallel those of the projects just



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cited. Yet while this much is evident, it is not clear what alternative reading is intended or implied. The Piazza d'Italia does not even simulate the cozy iconography of Disneyland, although it skirts it. Ironical, fake, and self-mocking on all levels at once, the Piazza d'Italia loses iconographic control, so to speak. It possesses no "aura," and its putative meaning floats worrisomely free.

Distortions of Scale and Proportion

Frank Furness's Pennsylvania Academy recently struck me as a masterful example of distortion of scales and proportions of the elements of a previously known architectural vocabulary. Furness takes the columns, pilasters, arches, etc., that we associate with an Italianate Gothic and subjects them to extraordinary distortions, sustaining at the same time a material expression of great power. It seems to me that this complex relationship of scale distortion to materiality gives Furness's work its strength. At the Piazza d'Italia, on the other hand, Moore subverts any sure sense of materiality while maintaining the scale and proportions of the historical elements mentioned with quite surprising fidelity. While the project iconography is uncontrollably ironical, its manipulations of scale are too cautious.

In summary, it seems to me that the Piazza d'Italia fails—despite its commendable ambitions. In the gap created by its problematic relationships of picture plane, scale, and iconography, it is hardly surprising that distressing imputations of cultural condescension have arisen.

6 Photograph by Marc Treib