

Piazza d'Italia

The **Piazza d'Italia** is an urban public plaza in downtown New Orleans, Louisiana controlled by the Piazza d'Italia Development Corporation, a subdivision of New Orleans city government. Completed in 1978 according to a design by noted post-modernist Charles Moore and Perez Architects[1] of New Orleans, the Piazza d'Italia debuted to widespread acclaim on the part of artists and architects. Deemed an architectural masterpiece even prior to its completion, the Piazza in fact began to rapidly deteriorate as the development



Piazza d'Italia by Charles Moore (with Perez Architects), New Orleans.

surrounding it was never realized. By the turn of the new millennium, the Piazza d'Italia was largely unfrequented by and unknown to New Orleanians, and was sometimes referred to as the first "postmodern ruin". The conversion of the adjacent Lykes Center to the Loews Hotel, New Orleans, completed in 2003, was accompanied by the full restoration of the Piazza d'Italia (accomplished by 2004).

Early History and Design

Though New Orleans received tens of thousands of Italian immigrants in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, that ethnic group's role in the city's cultural mix went largely unacknowledged, typically overshadowed by the seminal contributions of French and Spanish culture. In the early 1970s, leaders of New Orleans' Italian-American community conceived of a permanent public commemoration of the Italian immigrant experience in the city. New Orleans' downtown, despite receiving some prominent new investment (e.g., One Shell Square, the Superdome) was by this time suffering from many of the same ills infecting most American downtowns in the post-World War II era of suburbanization, white flight and urban disinvestment. New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu was committed to the improvement and revitalization of the city's struggling downtown and greeted with approval suggestions that the project be sited to encourage investment in the city center.

In 1974, Charles Moore, a prominent contemporary architect, former dean of the Yale School of Architecture and a proponent of a witty, exuberant design language later termed postmodern architecture was approached to help realize the vision of New Orleans' Italian-American community. In close collaboration with three young architects then practicing with the Perez firm in New Orleans - Malcolm Heard, Ronald Filson and Allen Eskew - Moore conceived of a public fountain in the shape of the Italian peninsula, surrounded by multiple hemicyclic colonnades, a clock tower, and a campanile and Roman temple - the latter two expressed in abstract, minimalist, space frame fashion. The central fountain, located in the middle of a city block, was accessed in two directions: via a tapering, keyhole-shaped passage extending from Poydras Street, or through an arched opening in the clock tower sited where Commerce Street terminates at Lafayette Street. The fountain and its surrounding colonnades playfully appropriated classical forms and orders, executing them in modern materials (e.g., stainless steel, neon) or kinetically (e.g., suggesting the acanthus leaves of traditional Corinthian capitals through the use of water jets).

The location ultimately chosen for the Piazza d'Italia was a city block sited in the semi-derelict upriver edge of downtown, four blocks from Canal Street and the edge of the French Quarter and three blocks from the Mississippi River. By the mid-1970s, this area had already endured several decades of disfavor and was littered with abandoned or barely-utilized mid-19th commercial row houses, early-20th century industrial architecture and obsolete port

infrastructure. Talking a cue from Boston, Baltimore and other aging port cities who had, starting in the late-1960s, moved to redevelop their historic waterfronts, by the 1970s New Orleans sought to spur investment in what later became known as the **Warehouse District**. The Piazza d'Italia, it was hoped, would trigger a wave of investment in the Warehouse District and along New Orleans' downtown riverfront, and more generally ignite interest in downtown.

Essential to the Piazza's design was the full realization of its intended surroundings, which were to have included a rehabilitated historic row of 19th century buildings facing Tchoupitoulas Street (buildings whose rear abutted the edge of the Piazza). The Perez team designed infill buildings to complement this anticipated historic restoration. The mixture of restored architecture and new construction was to have fully brought into being the context envisioned for the Piazza, such that it would function as a "surprise plaza" in the mode of the urban Mediterranean, wherein the pedestrian is proceeding unawares along a narrow passage or alley, only to suddenly emerge into a sunlit plaza ringed by cafes and shops. This intended effect was responsible for the placement of the Piazza d'Italia at the heart of a city block, set back from the surrounding streets.

Decline

The Piazza d'Italia struggled as an urban space almost from the moment of its completion in 1978. Neither public nor private funding was secured to pay for the further redevelopment of the block - the Lykes Center having preceded the Piazza's construction by several years - leaving the Piazza mostly invisible from the street and wedged between blight and the blank modernist facade of Lykes Steamship's headquarters. Without commercial tenants to subsidize maintenance, and with dwindling city budgets increasingly constrained - first by the incremental phase out of federal government revenue sharing, then due to the regional **Oil Bust** of the mid- to late-1980s - the plaza rapidly deteriorated, with the fountain rarely in operation and the fanciful neon and incandescent lighting accents going unreplaced and unrepaired. In 1987, the vacant historic row along Tchoupitoulas Street was heavily damaged by a fire and was demolished, resulting in the installation of a large surface parking lot adjacent to the Piazza. By 2000, the Piazza d'Italia was routinely cited as a "postmodern ruin", ironically echoing its far older classical antecedents.

Restoration

In 2002 plans were announced to convert the by-then vacant Lykes Center adjacent to the Piazza into a Loews Hotel. The hotel's developers pledged \$1 million to restore the Piazza to working order, and Perez Architects was hired to ensure a faithful restoration^[2]. In 2004, the fountain was restored to operation, though the badly deteriorated campanile on the site's extreme periphery was removed. The owners of the Loews Hotel currently lease the surface parking lot next to the Piazza and intend to one day realize the



Piazza d'Italia at night, May, 2010

Piazza d'Italia's design vision of an urban "surprise plaza", perhaps by constructing another hotel. Nothing is imminent, however - given the state of the national economy (2009) - and though the fountain has been restored, the Piazza's design remains only partially fulfilled.

References

[1] <http://www.e-perez.com/>

[2] Freeman, Allen. "That '70s Show: In New Orleans, the third act begins on a famous outdoor stage", *Landscape Architecture*, May 2004.

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