

# URBAN PALIMPSESTS

## GRAFFITI AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE PIAZZA D'ITALIA

LUZ ELENA RAMIREZ

University of Texas at Austin

*"Civic art is both a dramaturgical as well as a territorial act"*

- Christine Boyer,  
The City of Collective Memory

### Introduction

Twenty years ago, Charles Moore designed the Piazza d'Italia (1975-1978) using neo-Roman motifs and modern technologies to celebrate the Italian-American community of New Orleans. In program and design, the Piazza embodies Western monumental architecture, presenting itself as a site of cultural performance and ritual, a *res publica*. Moore's work was destined to become one touchstone of popular culture and the darling of postmodern critics. In the 1980s, its cultural currency was guarded in part by civic authorities of New Orleans, and in part by academics who celebrated it in their discourses of postmodernism. Architectural rhetoric and postmodern studies now keep the Piazza "alive."<sup>1</sup> But the fact that the Piazza stands today — and that it has the dubious distinction of being the "first post-modern ruin" — is also a result of two decades of civic apathy.<sup>2</sup> To date, no one has torn it down; neither has any one renovated the decaying and vandalized structures.

What can we learn from the Piazza's design and "development?" Do architects foresee the problems of honoring one cultural group in a heterogeneous environment such as New Orleans? If so, should architects be accountable for inherently controversial designs? The Piazza's history may offer insights to these questions. The Piazza d'Italia is, I argue, a disputed political landscape: the domain of graffiti artists and transient populations competing for room with city developers. Various contestants for the Piazza's domestic, rhetorical, and commercial space constantly vie for power in an unlikely nook of the Warehouse District. The outcome of this competition is likely to be the construction of a skyscraping Ritz Carlton Hotel, or the unconventionally public space the Piazza is now.<sup>3</sup> Charles Moore set an odd, yet surprisingly archetypal, stage for local battles.

### Context

The Piazza d'Italia borders the unremarkable avenues of the Central Business District (CBD) and the recently gentrified Warehouse District of New Orleans. In its human scale and warm tones, the Piazza corresponds to

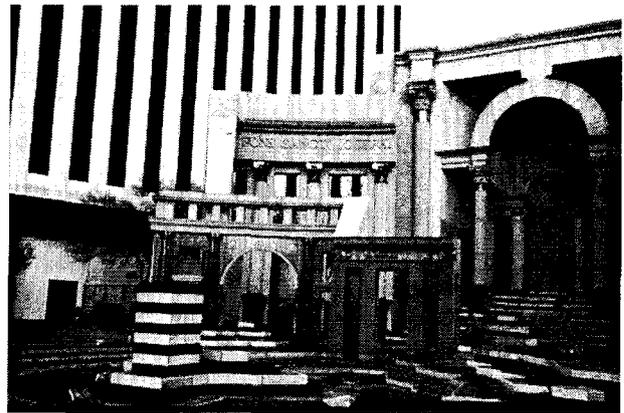


Fig. 1. Moore's reference to Modernist Lykes Building.

19th century brick buildings nearby, as well as to the modern technologies (neon, metal, concrete) which characterize the American city. By referencing the black and white patterning of the Lykes Canizaro Tower with his own arrangement of marble, slate and cobblestones, Moore attempted to be both "neighborly" and "urban" in his design.

Although Moore addressed stylistic and scale issues, he relied more on a general rather than local sense of history to guide the project. He conceived the Piazza primarily from Los Angeles without sufficient knowledge of pedestrian, street and neighborhood flow patterns of the Warehouse District. Even though Italian Americans initially embraced the monument as their own, the cultural anchor they provided for its development was tenuous. For, while the Warehouse District had once been populated Irish and Italian American immigrants, it had long ceased to be a combination of these communities. Ironically, paying tribute to Italian Americans for their civic contributions meant creating a monument for a community who had socio-economically moved up the scale and out of the city to Kenner and Metairie. While the American Italian Renaissance Foundation is located directly behind the Piazza, it now maintains a limited interest in the architecture — literally and figuratively turning its back to Moore's work.

Also central to the Piazza's abandonment was the "white flight" of New Orleans which took place in the 1980s— not only of Italian Americans, but of middle-class groups who had once lived in the city. This flight was



Fig. 2. Medallions with Charles Moore's face.

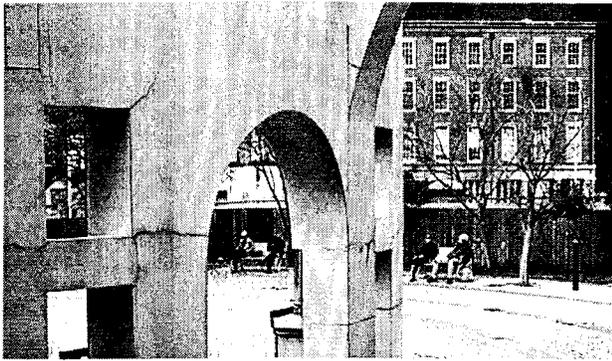


Fig. 3. Monumental Space as Domestic Space.



Fig. 4. Budweiser blimp passes over the Piazza and Hilton Hotel.

unfortunate because it corresponded exactly to the time the Piazza was scheduled for development. Funded with \$1.7 million in state and federal moneys, the Piazza was conceived as a base for future commercial ventures—a place around which restaurants and cafes could be built.<sup>4</sup> But when investors failed to materialize, and when a nearby building that would have been renovated burnt down in 1986, the Piazza stood alone. Alone is how it stands now. Few businesses exist around the site to actively support Moore's program and people now living in the Warehouse District (New Orleans young elite), hesitate to explore or assemble in this postmodern park. Instead, this group tends to seek the predictability and comfort of the mall culture of the Riverwalk, or the

upscale galleries of the nearby Arts district.

Taken together, the "white flight" of the 1980s, the Piazza's under-development, and Moore's shallow references to the Italian American community are factors that make the Piazza an unconventionally public place. The Piazza, with its medallions of Charles Moore, may serve more as a "tribute" to the architect, his theories and his cultural capital than to anything or anyone else.

### Appropriation of an "Ethnic Monument"

Moore's self-indulgent design and the absence of a relevant cultural and commercial context have opened the Piazza to appropriation by a number of politically, economically, and ethnically competing groups. Transients occupy its otherwise empty benches and transform this monumental space into a domestic one.

Moving, by necessity, from one empty lot or building to another, the homeless are adept at reading the warning signs of "economic development." Graffiti artists and taggers have also seized space. In an ironic answer to Moore's eclectic and pretentious architecture, taggers and street muralists use the Piazza as a canvas, a piece of turf, and a place to leave their own trademark inscriptions and self-indulgences.

### Local Battles over the Piazza: Images of the West

Can writing, drawing, and assembling in this otherwise deserted site be considered forms of proprietorship? To what message are graffiti artists and homeless responding in Moore's work? Of course, the most pervasive theme in the Piazza is the West. We see it in the five orders of columns, St. Joseph's Arch, the campanile, temple, and fountain. Moore also employs modern materials and iconography made popular by American corporate culture.

So too does the Latin dedication represent the West, but a West of another language, age and place. The dedication, which is largely incomprehensible to then public, can be translated as: "This fountain was given by the citizens of New Orleans as a gift to all the people." Ironically, critics of the present state of the Piazza view the space as *too* accessible. Joseph Canizaro, who has developed the site, proclaims: "I do not believe it serves any public purpose when the Piazza, most days, serves as a bench for transients and the homeless."<sup>5</sup>

### Homeless

Central to the issue of using urban space is a common belief that, one, the homeless are outside of the public realm; two, the well-being they derive from abandoned architecture is inconsequential; three, they ought not interfere with economic activity. The homeless have no "purpose" in occupying valuable real estate located in an authorized sphere of production (hotel) and consumption (tourism). In *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau uses the term "tactics" to discuss how ordinary activities, in this case sleeping on a bench or eating, can be considered critical responses to authoritative, capitalist culture because they do not produce anything *obvious* within the established economic grid. The Piazza's homeless, according to Certeau's theory, would be a



Fig. 5. Red-winged Fly alighting on Piazza's fountain (1997).



Fig. 6. Wrathful Portrait of Charles Moore (1995).

liability to commercial activity, for such activity is matrix of capitalist and spatial relationships. The homeless deter tourists, visitation by other local communities, and potential consumers.

But can the criteria for success include unauthorized use of public space? Moore's design is clever and its use is multivalent, but the Piazza's design is subverted, and has become a space utterly different than what he imagined. In 1980, the presence of homeless and transient individuals compelled Charles Moore to reassess his work.<sup>6</sup>

These days the Piazza is in a fully Latin state of disrepair, apparently ignored by the city's maintenance people, but recently I received a heartening report from a friend who was walking there at 7 a.m. It seems that the benches, as usual at that hour, were covered with the sleeping figures of the vagrants who constitute the place's only regular inhabitants. Then one of the sleepers awoke and rang a little bell. Everyone got up, picked up all the trash, put it in the receptacles, and went back to hanging around. This is, I choose to think, welcome confirmation that this public space is not just flexible, but special, and able (I think) to support the particular needs of groups with very different needs.

The above reads like a patrician fantasy; Moore serendipitously incorporates vagrants (a criminal term) as janitors of his architecture. As Edward Said contends, the "rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting" (1993).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, what could be more imperial than building a neo-Roman forum in New Orleans? Furthermore, the architectural claim that the Piazza is "flexible," while a valid one, is euphemistic. It denies the reality of everyday practices in the cityscape.

The homeless presence also undermines authoritative policies aimed at urban beautification. In response to the increase of transient individuals, the city periodically "invites" the Orleans Parish Prison Program (OPPP) and its offshoot, the Parish Art Program, to clean and beautify the Piazza and its environs. The outfitting and publicizing of OPPP activities are supposed to work as both a corrective and a warning. Wearing bright yellow uniforms, the OPPP cleans before St. Joseph's Day when the Piazza makes its yearly debut. In turn, the Parish Art Program paints authorized murals in nearby sites.<sup>8</sup> These programs

are pedagogical in that they teach inmates a public service within a monitored environment. However these measures, themselves a kind of civic posturing which attempt to patch up unanalyzed problems, tend to provide a cleaner home for the homeless and a new slate for graffiti artists.

### Graffiti Writers and Artists

Whether considered deviance, art, or resistance those who study graffiti (art historians, sociologists, linguists, and cultural critics) generally agree that it is a male-dominated activity and that the relationship between graffiti and architecture is based on symbolic and social codes read by select groups, especially gangs. The drive behind tagging is name recognition. In my photo-documentation of the Piazza from 1993 to 1997, I find that graffiti artists employ specialized images and scripts to address diverse audiences and that they use language and art in a self-conscious and dialectical manner.

Like many abandoned urban projects, the Piazza has its share of mundane graffiti but many of the images are provocative. The only one still visible is the delicate red-winged fly spray-painted on the altar.

Two other murals, a portrait of Charles Moore and a tagger's rhetorical challenge to him, have been erased. In 1995, a muralist created an unmistakable correspondence between the medallions of Charles Moore, with their fanciful, and self-referential spouting mouths, and his own sardonic and wrathful portrait of the architect.

This is only one example of graffiti's dialectic between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" artistic forms. In 1993, a graffiti artist parodied Moore's work by drawing phalli over another commissioned mural that celebrated his architecture.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to assess which graffiti is the most engaging, especially since the first two critical works have been painted over, but the fly is likely to be the most powerful. It symbolizes the decay and organic destruction of the Piazza, and yet its own beauty suggests that decay is in a natural urban order.

### Deconstructing Deconstruction

Over the past twenty years, the Piazza has become absurdly deconstructive as locals rhetorically and literally tear down and uproot its architectural icons. While

Moore and his collaborators envisioned and even welcomed some decay, the deterioration and tragic-comedy enacted within the space surpasses their ironic self-gesturing. The Piazza's concentric black and white rings lead the pedestrian to one emblem of Italian identity: a marble fountain that is a topographical map of Sicily and Italy, and marked by the Po, Arno, and Tiber Rivers. When the Piazza's jet mechanisms were operational, these "rivers" would flow into the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas and suggest the radiation of Italy's influence beyond its borders. Thus, religious, civic, and commercial currents were intended to merge in Moore's architecture.

Now, however, the sacred and monumental in the Piazza assume carnivalesque qualities, a Mardi Gras almost every day of the year. Some individuals use the fountain, which was officially turned off in 1981 (only three years after the Piazza's dedication), as a urinal. And many of the names etched in the marble have been obliterated; Moore's is one of those. As no attempt has been made to replace Moore's name, nor those of patrons, the implicit message stated is that the Piazza is theirs until city officials decide otherwise. And the City is slow to act.

Many of the Piazza's components have deteriorated due to city neglect, faulty design, poor construction, as well as severe climactic conditions (heavy rains, high humidity). From Commerce Street, one passes through the garishly painted Lafayette Arch which is supported by two columns, and whose exposed steel innards dangle precariously. From Poydras Street a sparse temple and ridiculously bell-less campanile introduce the pedestrian to the site. Due to cracking masonry, a potential hazard, the campanile has been deliberately stripped, leaving a metal skeleton. Therefore, the academic claim that the Piazza is a monument, and this claim is pervasive in reviews of the Piazza, seems relevant only in terms of its ruinous form. The campanile, like the defunct medallions and ruined arch, shows that even postmodernist design can be further reified.

To be sure, by 1988 the Piazza had become "the world's first post-modern architectural ruin" (Green, *ibid*). This cavalier assessment not only pointed quite early to the fate of postmodern design, but also justified the city council's decision to change the Piazza's zoning status. By 1990, the Piazza had been short on development funds for over a decade and, as stated, a warehouse adjacent to the site had burned down in 1986. The architecture was crumbling and the homeless and graffiti artists' had made their indelible mark. In 1991 the city council, without formal notification to the public and without regard for its state and federal financing, voted and resolved to designate the Piazza a *public space*. Now stripped of its status as a *public park*, which has more stringent zoning regulations, the Piazza became open to hotel development. When built, the hotel will envelop the site and complicate the issue of public accessibility.

## Conclusion

My point is not to argue that the Piazza is a failed urban space. Instead, I have tried to reveal the many and often contrary uses for architecture that is public. In this case architecture intended to honor Italian Americans, and targeted for use by a consumer class, has been

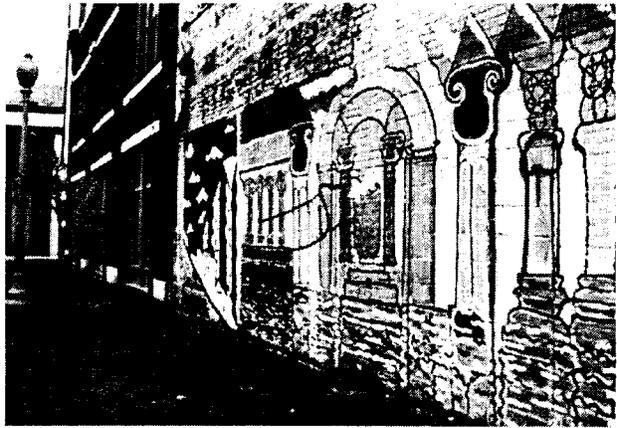


Fig. 7. Lafayette Arch in background; Phalli superimposed over authorized mural (1993).

appropriated by graffiti artists and homeless. To some degree, the Piazza might have fared better in a neighborhood linked to the commercial paths of New Orleans in the same way urban planners are now designing a Mexican-American plaza in the East side of Austin where such a population exists, and where this community would have a sense of proprietorship. But no such residential framework existed. The Piazza might have also fared better in a climate controlled, socio-economically regulated, resistance-free environment, a place where people desire the commodification of history, i.e. Disney World and other theme parks. But as the city itself is a heterotopia with overlapping genealogies and discourses, and as the architecture is repository of Western forms, legal codes, and a site of contested space, the Piazza was destined to be controversial. The broken clock looming over the Piazza's site suggests that Western symbols have destabilized themselves. The defunct Piazza counters its own discourse of historicity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Architectural historians Charles Jencks and Heinrich Klotz both celebrate Moore's work. The cover of Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* showcases the Piazza in neon splendor (1981). Heinrich Klotz reviews it in both *History of Postmodern Architecture* (1984) and *Post-Modern Visions* (1985). But Klotz assesses the Piazza as it was in 1978 and refers to a more extended architectural model for the area that was never, and most likely will never, be built (1985). These studies, in turn, feed general accounts of postmodernism.

Cultural critics, whose task it is to explain this movement in its many forms, misinterpret the actuality of the Piazza because of their heavy reliance on quotation, deliberately ambiguous language, and lack of site specificity. For example, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon sees Moore's intention as parodic, but she fails to recognize that his intention has been supplanted by the graffiti artists and the homeless (1988; 1989). This oversight is particularly glaring because the introduction to *Politics* claims to discuss power and forms of its representation (1989). Unlike Hutcheon, who attempts to grapple with the problems of representation in the city, David Kolb's *Postmodern Sophistications* offers shallow and misconstrued information. He writes, "Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans can ironically overload and multiply references to its own assertions of Italian identity and

festive character and still be a successful public space" (1990). Kolb then refers to a photo that utterly misrepresents the present state of the Piazza, highlighting instead its potential commercial context of two-storey buildings. Finally, albeit briefly, Fredric Jameson perpetrates the architectural myth circulating that the Piazza represents something fanciful, diverse, and relevant to the people of New Orleans in *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

- <sup>2</sup> Roger Green. "Once-proud Piazza d'Italia falls in to Decay: Architectural breakthrough of the '70s has met a tragic fate." *The Times Picayune*, 1988.
- <sup>3</sup> Egger, Bruce. "Planners add conditions to Ritz hotel Plan." *The Times Picayune Metro*: 12 Sept. 1992. In 1991, city officials endorsed the construction of the Ritz Carlton Hotel and the material reconfiguration of the Piazza under the banner of the Piazza d'Italia Development Corporation. Joseph Canizaro, the developer for the Piazza, made a lease agreement with Loutel, (an Atlanta-based Ritz-Carlton company), to run 99 years. Under Loutel's auspices, the Hotel will include approximately 400 rooms, rise 31 stories, and require 61,000 square feet surrounding the Piazza. Although planners asked to *re-designate* the Piazza as a park, this prospect seems unlikely. Once the hotel is built, it will envelop the Piazza, physically as well as socio-economically dominating the site. This was not the original plan. Architects maintained that the Piazza would be a public park, and if tourists came, that was fine, but it was not intended for their exclusive use
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Moore, along with a team of other architects, planned

the Piazza in three phases. Phase I resulted in the construction of the Piazza proper and Lafayette Arch. Phase II renovated offices for the Italian American-Cultural Center on South Peters Street (backing St. Joseph's Arch). The first two phases were more or less complete by the Piazza's opening on St. Joseph's Day, March 19, 1978. Phase III, however, remains unfinished. Funds from investors failed to materialize following construction of the Piazza; these moneys would have restored adjoining buildings and integrated Moore's work into a cultural and commercial complex.

- <sup>5</sup> Canizaro, Joseph. Letter to the Editor. "Developer Raps Critics of Hotel-Piazza Plan." *The Times Picayune* (25 Oct. 1990).
- <sup>6</sup> Moore, Charles. "Piazza d'Italia" *Architectural Design* (1980), pp. 20-25.
- <sup>7</sup> Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. xvii.
- <sup>8</sup> Roger Green. "Prisoners and Piazzas." *ARTnews* 88:3 (1989), pp. 38-39.
- <sup>9</sup> Jana Napoli, Founder of Young Aspirations, Young Artists (YA/YA) and organizer of the authorized mural. Interview 1994.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mia Carter, Tony Hilfer, Joseph McNicholas, Daniel Sullivan, and Madhu Phillips for their reading of this work.