Title
Being There  [Place Debate: Piazza d'Italia]

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learning how to orchestrate and be a participant in a group activity, and of learning the importance of flexibility and vulnerabilities. The making of the Piazza both as product and process, was at times exhilarating, scary, confusing, and, most of all, educational. The exhilaration stemmed from the sheer fun of making an unconventional space with an unconventional set of rules and design parameters. The scary side came from working for the first time with a fancy guy like Charles W. Moore. This situation always prevailed, because confusion is so much a part of Moore’s existence. He thrives on the edge of disaster yet can always turn this most confusing of signals into the most clever of solutions. It takes (which I was later to learn) a great amount of courage to hang on until the very last moment when, unknown to most of us, Charles would snatch order and meaning out of ever growing clouds of confusion. He thrived on this dance with disorder and, by his example, taught us all how to dance. Making the Piazza was educational because amid the searching, confusion, and “scarcity” we were always learning and exploring—never content with the dialogue established yesterday. Each day’s work was a jumping-off point for tomorrow’s explorations. Because design work was always done in a group situation, the

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It remains a little bit disconcerting, a surprisingly untrodden place in an unlikely position. But that is part of the price to be paid for a public space that was built first to attract investment later.

Much has been made of, and much disparaged about, the “Italianess” of the Piazza d’Italia. It was sponsored by members of the Italian community, its plan shape is based on the map of Italy, its walls are embellished with various freewheeling versions of the classical orders, its colors hover around tones named for Italian regions, and, surely, its most important predecessor is the Trevi Fountain.

But the back-biting professional arguments that this place has spawned remind us: the Onion among critics who have never visited the Piazza are curiously, the use of the map of Italy, a purported something to be an insult, the use of the orders is derived from—and because the Piazza contains full-blown, giant, grand, classical details, which offends some unconstructed modernists—or because these details are “incorrect” (if not outrageous) variations on the classical forms, which offends those recently reconstructions classicists who consider themselves guardians of the sacred trust. In either case the good-natured willful inventiveness of it seems to cause the most

offense. “Whimsy,” we are told slices since days, we could possibly need to be, “has no place in civic art” —a point that was lost, apparently, on several generations of baroque sculptors.

Being there, all that seems beside the point. The place itself is extraordinary, an evocative interweaving of form, color, and light that escapes categorization. It is, more than anything else, robustly present and paradoxically soothing. The layered carving screens offer an array of shifting views streaked with modulated sunlight; the terraced forms of the fountain mass invoke clambering around and in the water; the water itself leaks, surges, splashes, sprays, and drips around and among sparkling black and white land forms, reflective sheets of stainless steel, and glowing tinfock colors. It asks us to dream as we do there. Its significance lies in the experience—in the opportunities for engagement that it affords—engagement of the eye, of the body, and of the mind. It offers opportunities to know out one’s own capabilities by seeing them reflected in a place intensely invested with imagination.

The surroundings will come later—those that are not already there. For the Piazza d’Italia is only a part of a
larger complex that includes a singularly dreary, recent office tower that was already on the site, as well as remnants of earlier nineteenth-century buildings that have been kept intact as street frontage for the block. A large urban gateway has already been built, as has a passage through one of the adjoining, early brick commercial buildings. The rest of the project has floundered with the economy, so that as yet there is little activity in the Piazza except on festa days. But the adjoining properties are now being designed as a hotel, which should bring life and dollars to the area, albeit not for the community-based passaggio that may originally have been intended. The hotel will take responsibility for managing and maintaining the area, which will please the city hall budget-makers, but which also raises the worrisome possibility that the space will read more as a feature of the hotel than as a truly public place.