

## **[Script] HORTON (HEARS A WHO) PLAZA**

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Apostasy often springs from hopes disappointed. So, as one of the many urban planners who had long yearned to see the emergence of a lively, attractive, and urbane center city in San Diego I am somewhat uneasy at recording a dissident opinion against the chorus of praise which has greeted downtown's commercial centerpiece, the Horton Plaza.

I was out of the country when the long-awaited Horton Plaza project made its debut in the Summer of 1985. My first encounter with it came shortly after a European trip, during which I was fortunate to have enjoyed the high urbanism of plazas like San Marco in Venice and Piazza Navona in Rome. Hence it was not lost on me that comparisons between these time-tempered, illustrious urban spaces and Horton Plaza risked being invidious. Still, Horton Plaza had been touted as taking its urban design and architectural cues from southern European counterparts, so, to some extent, it invites some comparison.

I arrived at Horton Plaza by way of its 4th Avenue parking garage entrance, parked on the "avacado" level, and made my way past several confused shoppers who apparently could not remember their fruit. Only later did I discover that the garage is a double helix of entwined ramps--one of fruits, the other vegetables--that can confuse someone with a homing pigeon's navigational instincts.

This blending of a salad approach to directions with a DNA molecule, I soon learned, is an apt preparation for the plaza itself. Here one encounters multiple levels—a fine idea to start with—crisscrossed over the central concourse with staircases, ramps, and escalators. But these changes in elevation, while inviting exploration and creating multiple views and perspectives, do so at the sacrifice of a sense of orientation and legibility, which seem to me a requisite of any great urban space. The sensation is of being trapped in an M.C. Escher drawing, of having to go down to go up, or vice versa. Its seemingly gratuitous circulation system may have had an original commercial intent to drag the shopper past each and every establishment; yet it results in encounters with the same shops. Getting to others requires an interpretation of three-dimensional Lucite "maps" that indicate "you are here" and challenge you to try to get "there".

Architecturally, one is barraged with a bewildering paste-up of clichés: post-modern, Spanish, Geco-Roman neo-classical, mock second Empire—which, in a seeming manic effort to give individuality to each and every commercial tenant, unwittingly sums to a conformity of cuteness. Moreover, such furious architectural busy-ness, and tight design give the plaza an atmosphere of being "over-planned" with, ironically, the very elements that are intended to communicate serendipity and surprise.

These remarks are, to be sure, matters of taste. But perhaps the matter of larger concern is the manner in which Horton Plaza appears to turn its back to the rest of

downtown. Rather than blending into the streets and spaces of its immediate environs, it offers little more than pastelled walls and garage entrances on three sides--a commercial Bastille, rather haughtily insulated from its neighborhood.

Whether Horton Plaza will remain rather like an illegal alien shopping mall from suburbia or evolve into a genuine urban space that compliments and enhances its surroundings like the European counterparts which are claimed to have inspired it, only time will tell. In the meantime, it must be conceded that it appears to be delivering on its commercial promise.

And for other observers, perhaps those whose judgments are most countable (and therefore count most), it is already a rousing success. When I tested some of my opinions on a class of beginning planning students this past summer, they suggested that we conduct a survey to determine what shoppers there thought of it. So off we went, parked at our favorite fruit or vegetable and surveyed the patronage of the plaza. While the results showed that my feelings about the parking garage are shared by some, our survey clearly demonstrated that the overwhelming number of patrons and visitors have high praise and pride for downtown's new kid on the block.

In the final analysis, as it is with the Nielsen Ratings for television programming, it is usually the marketplace--the consumers--who end up as the final arbiters of taste. Perhaps this is the basis of the adage that people get the architecture and urban development that they deserve. Still, the existence of plazas like San Marco and Navona is a testament to the corollary that the people can deserve better.

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