Bold Strokes: The Making of the New Orleans Fair

Malcolm Heard, Jr.

Detail of Wonderwall (Photo by Malcolm Heard, Jr.)

The view from the Ferris wheel at dusk is spectacular: 178 feet tall, the wheel stands perpendicular to the end of the Wonderwall which rises toward it, becoming nearly half as high. Enormous alligators (made using Mardi Gras float technology), their reptilian skin missing at the torso to reveal their steel skeletons, climb along the Wonderwall's scaffolding. Their paws and tails drape over its thin facades, in apparent pursuit of several stylized pelicans. Below, William Turnbull's Cajun Walk ambles serenely along the edge of a lagoon. It is the Wonderwall's finest moment - a triumph.

The Wonderwall is the linear centerpiece of the Louisiana World Exposition of 1984, going on in New Orleans through 11 November. The Exposition occupies a site of over 80 acres along the banks of the Mississippi River, extending roughly from Poydras Street to the Greater Mississippi River Bridge. The site is splendid but difficult. Linear barriers - levee, flood wall, a band of railroad tracks to service the wharves - that keep the city of New Orleans surprisingly separated from its river cut the site in two lengthwise. Some two dozen existing structures from the city's reviving warehouse district fall within the fair's fences, adding flavor and boosting the renewal of the area, but introducing the uncertainties of renovation and preservation to the already staggering tasks of the architects.

The New Orleans architectural firm of Perez Associates acted as master planners and chief architects of the fair, leading a group of some three dozen architectural and engineering firms which together designed or renovated the fair's buildings. The Perez firm designed the New Orleans Convention Center that occupies 15 acres of the site and accommodates a host of exhibits and concessions for the fair, its first tenant. The Perez effort, with the active involvement of principal August Perez III, was headed by R. Allen Eskew. Dennis Brady and Charles Sanders worked directly with Eskew from the beginning of the project, some 40 months ago, and 40 members of the Perez firm were involved.

Perez Associates invited Charles W. Moore to participate in the design of the fair, repeating an arrangement that has worked amicably several times since Moore's first collaboration with the firm on the St. Joseph Fountain of the Piazza d'Italia. Ultimately as involved in the fair as Moore was William Turnbull, his former partner and frequent collaborator. At Moore's suggestion, Perez hired Arthur Anderson and Leonard Salvato, two young architects who moved to New Orleans to work specifically on Moore's parts of the fair. Between them this group of seven - Eskew, Brady, Sanders, Moore, Turnbull, Anderson, and Salvato - made a body of decisions that determined the fair's architectural character. To reduce the scheme to its broadest strokes, one senses the underlying visual and organizational ideas of Moore and Turnbull, with Eskew as editor, strategist, and tactician.

When you talk to people in New Orleans, expect food analogies. People here speak a great deal about what they eat. "Gumbo, not soufflé," says Allen Eskew, describing the creative process of making a fair. The idea is that the process and ingredients cannot be predicted, and the results cannot be precious. During the course of the design, the participation of corporations and nations was in constant flux; budgets changed; the main entrances danced from one side of the site to the other. In the face of all this, a site was needed that had constant elements independent of the changing program. What emerged was a long loop of circulation defined on the land side by the Wonderwall, marching the length of the site, and on the other side by two levels of walkways standing along the edge of the Mississippi River. Three sets of bridges and ramps - two growing out of Centennial Plaza near the City Gate, the other taking off from the artfully sloped and covered perambulations of the Cajun Walk near the Bridge Gate - climb across the railroad tracks and the flood wall to complete the loop at the opposite ends of the site. At either end of the Wonderwall are the gates: the City Gate opens to Poydras Street, the Central Business District, and the French Quarter; the Bridge Gate opens onto an expanse of parking beneath and beyond the Greater Mississippi River Bridge.

The Wonderwall itself is a construction of concrete slabs and columns stacked high with steel scaffolding. A set of thin-plaster wall elements - arches, pediments, and domes of all sorts - hang from the structure in many permutations of sequence. They are broken, stacked, layered, and penetrated in dozens of ways along the wall's half-mile length. The wall breaks rank occasionally for an intersecting axis or for one of sculptor Kent Bloomer's spreading aluminum trees which, abstract but intricate, give needed relief. The kit of parts is a rich one. There are places along the way where invention flags, where the melody becomes repetitive or the rendition sounds tinny. But overall the Wonderwall is a fine stroke, successful in its multiplicity of roles: container of shops, performance stages and oases; marker of half the fair's principal circulation route; distractor from South Front Street's scraggly double row of power lines; and most importantly, a single integrated piece of design, essentially independent of program, long and strong enough to give a formal armature to the irregular site.

There may be an analogy between the Wonderwall and the fair as a whole. Both work because they attain a requisite richness, because they pass beyond a certain point. Excess is necessity. Could the Wonderwall make do with fewer domes or alligators? Does the fair *need* its nightly fireworks display from a barge

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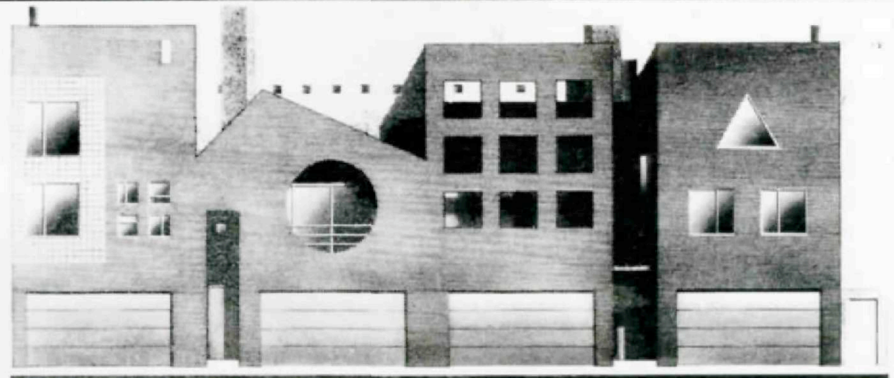

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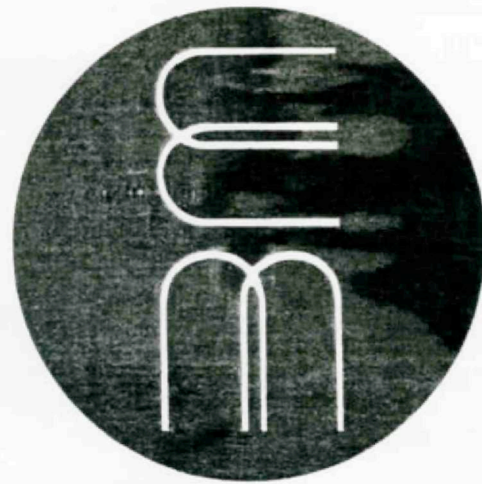

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Bold strokes: The Making of the New Orleans Fair

in the Mississippi? How much is enough? How little is too little? Can there be too much?

In the middle of the vast New Orleans Convention Center is a small concrete lagoon that is instructive to consider. Several fanciful "ships" float back and forth in it on straight, parallel tracks ("layered" paths one might say in the current jargon) designed so that the ship images can come together and pull apart in various ways. The ships themselves are of cunning design, quite varied in image and material. One is made of wood lattice, incorporating the shape of an elephant, and another is a handsome mass intended to suggest a floating magic mountain from which flow the rivers of the fair's theme. The lagoon and its ensemble are a vestige of an early idea of a stream that would flow the length of the site.

This lagoon sounds terrific, but visually it doesn't work; it is hard to say why. Being inside, the lagoon looks disturbingly artificial and lacks the play of natural light on its waters. Parts of the scheme were eliminated by budget cuts and time constraints. A minor failure amid outstanding successes, this lagoon deserves attention because it shows through the possibility of failure the imperative of going far enough, of attending to just enough details, and to attaining a critical mass of theatrical effects beyond which everything seems wonderful and without which things fall flat. The wonder, and the real design achievement of the fair, is that this incredibly demanding critical mass has been attained so much of the time. The Perez - Moore/Turnbull team has taken an admirably bold approach. To celebrate the fair's inherent vitality, but stop it short of chaos, they have not merely arranged a disparate set of exhibits, amusements, and concessions like so many ungainly flowers, they have instead actively intervened. The play they devised is not merely implicit; it is made explicit. A gate for this fair is not merely the absence of a wall; it is a built cartoon, a constructed vision imbued with wizardry sufficient to alter one's mood when passing through it. The fair's midway is not merely a wide path marked by the absence of buildings. The path, with a strong sense of paradox, is a wall that people can walk into and on either side of as they pursue the attractions of the fair. At the two opposite ends of the Wonderwall there are no idle formal plazas but real places where water, light, color, and structure appeal simultaneously to one's eyes and one's memory in making Centennial Plaza and Bayou Plaza.

At Centennial Plaza, just inside the fair's City Gate, there is no sign explaining that if you stand in the center of a certain aedicule you can look across a lagoon and see an elevation of the Main Hall of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition held at Audubon Park in New Orleans in 1884. The effect is serene; the water of the lagoon separates the image of the pavilion from the visual confusion of its surroundings. Those who have read the official guidebook know the trick. "From a designated spot on the lagoon's edge, a set of seven modules in an astonishing architectural configuration appear as a single structure." From any other vantage they appear as interesting but fragmentary Second Empire forms suggested by piling up scaffolding on a concrete base, applying plywood facades, inserting herms and other statuary, and draping the interiors with shifting clouds of gauze. Some are small, some are large, depending on their distance from the viewing point. Although some are islands, they are connected to the shore and one can walk among them, exploring their quite different scales and the views framed by their arches. At the edge of the lagoon is a covered promenade known as the Empress's Walk. It is lined with benches and is a popular place to sit. One can sometimes see small barges in the lagoon, fanciful shapes of fish or sea monsters, elegant in detail, designed and built by Michael Crosby's students at the Tulane University School of Architecture.

Centennial Plaza, its buildings and lagoons, are principally the work of Charles Moore and Arthur Anderson. It was Moore's favorite piece of the fair to describe in napkin sketches to his friends. Anderson also coordinated the design of the City Gate nearby, which had its genesis in drawings by Duke Reiter and owes much to the sculptural work of the Barth family who design and build the most beautiful of New Orleans's Mardi Gras floats. One wished for a camera during the last stage of the gate's construction: workmen in the sun, looking like they came from a *National Geographic* pictorial on the quarries at Carrara, would finish carving a rusticated piece of the gate's wall and then toss it lightly to a helper – the "stones" are stacked blocks of Styrofoam.

An interesting comparison of Mardi Gras technologies and styles is available in the fair's two gates. In contrast to the Barth Brothers' monochrome subtlety (relatively speaking) at the City Gate, Blaine Kern erected next to the Bridge Gate a sensuously sprawling goddess, half submerged in water, and a towering Neptune astride a couple of rearing alligators. Kern's wildly polychrome figures dwarf the tourists forever being photographed next to them. The goddess's langourous hand, if alive, could grab you as if you were a Lilliputian. Far less interesting artistically than those of the Barths, Kern's figures are nevertheless more compelling presences. Their size, color, and vigor succeed at the fair's scale. They force their surroundings into subservience and threaten Leonard Salvato's nicely conceived gate structure with its pelican-shaped brackets and giant, rotating disco ball. Nearby, beyond the Cajun Walk, is Dennis Brady's Aquacade, clear and lively with its twin diving towers and mobile stage.

Across the tracks and along the river's edge, the upper and lower concourses of the International Pavilion (also by Dennis Brady) extend for some 1,200 feet. They house, warehouse-like, installations of the participating countries. Ships of different nations dock at the wharves and are open for visiting. Cable-suspended benches carry tourists back and forth overhead. There is a sense here, however, that something is missing. Properly addressed, the Mississippi River could certainly hold its own against the Wonderwall, which enlivens a similar linear stretch on the other side of the site. But the architecture never embraces the river, and a plan for a linear aqueduct structure by Duke Reiter was scrapped in a budget cut. Adequate but anonymous, the International Pavilion shows what the whole fair might have been without sufficient infusions of invention.

Among local skeptics (whose number was legion before the fair opened) a standard question was, "Why would anybody who doesn't have to come to New Orleans in the summer?" The question underestimates the city's charms and overlooks a thriving summer tourist business, but it does have a point borne out, perhaps, by smaller-than-expected crowds and attendant financial difficulties. Typical New Orleans weather defines the word "muggy," and summer rains, far from clearing the air, saturate it with heavy vapor. Fair designers have responded to this situation with intelligence, an awareness of history, and some invention. Spaced periodically outdoors are a series of oases, shaded outdoor rooms with places to sit, some with tables, some without. The most successful are Duke Reiter's square pavilions covered with several layers of hipped metal roofs, stacked and spaced to allow air flow between them. In the airy and cool space below, a swarm of ceiling fans assists the natural air flow around a central fountain. Shade, air flow, and moving water – the historical cooling devices for hot climates – still provide a gentle alternative to the shock of air-conditioning. Water, the fair's theme ("The World of Rivers: Fresh Water as a Source of Life"), is celebrated in numerous fountains and particularly in Herb Rosenthal's playful Water-

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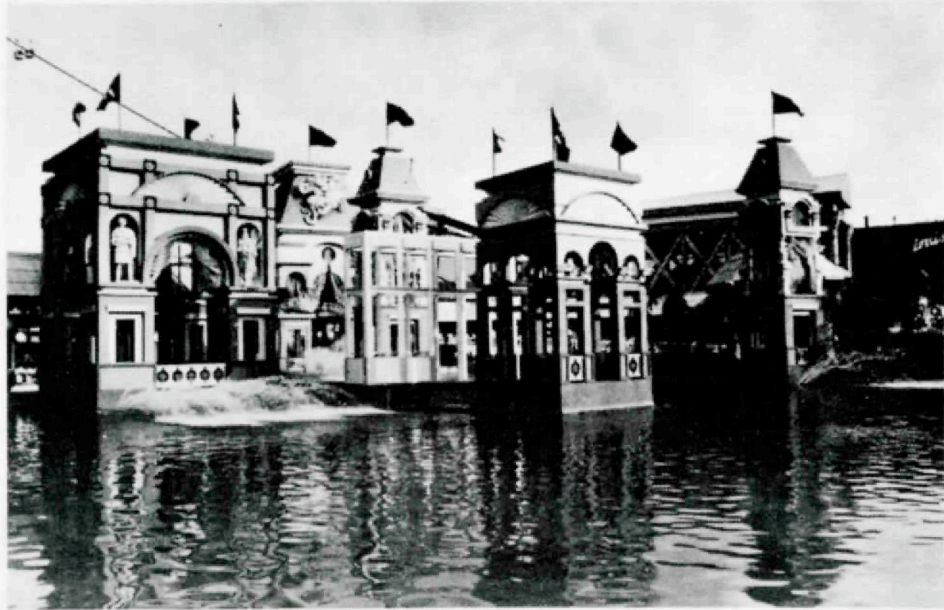
garden beside the Ferris wheel.

Capitalizing on the cooling effects of shade and air movement along the Mississippi River is one of several signal successes of the fair's amphitheater. Magnificently sited at the river's edge, it was initially designed by Frank Gehry of Los Angeles with Charles Sanders of Perez Associates. Gehry withdrew from the process rather early, and the structure as completed is largely the work of Sanders who also designed the clear, straightforward monorail stations. The amphitheater is also direct, with a jagged, almost undesigned, esthetic in a lucid combination of structure, function, and form. One large roof slopes to the river, and a series of flap-like planes deals with the southern and western sun coming from behind the audience. Fifty-five hundred people can sit in radiating rows of seats with unobstructed views and a surprising sense of intimacy with the performers. To either side is a well-framed view of the river – Algiers Point to the north and the Greater Mississippi River Bridge to the south. The stage's backdrop itself can open to the river, allowing for performances from docked ships or dramatic entrances of performers by boat.

The extensive landscaping at the fair is all leased – every leaf, bloom, branch, and root. After 11 November it will be carted up and carried off by its suppliers. The plants are beginning to look at home, recovering from their initial surprise ("shock" is the horticultural term) at finding themselves literally uprooted and set down on some 80 treeless acres, as if palms were as portable as the aluminum fronds of Kent Bloomer's Wonderwall trees. In some ways, the palms have been treated very much the same as have their prefabricated counterparts; young Chinese fan palms sit atop metal columns in the Wonderwall to lift them as nature in time might have done with a trunk. Nature has been assisted in numerous other ways, not the least of them in the process of selection. Fast-growing plants considered pests by some gardeners – kudzu vines and banana trees, for example – were sought out and planted by landscape architect Luis Guevara of Design Consortium in New Orleans. Morning glories grow happily and quickly up hardware cloth in places where a fast screen was needed. Moon vines are planted with them so that their nocturnal white flowers work the evening shift after the morning glories fade.

Guevara knows New Orleans plants. If the fair as a whole has worked to identify itself with the city's personality, the landscaping gives a special instance of the local connection. Notwithstanding the craziness of instant landscaping, something of the city outside the fair's gates creeps in with the mirliton vines on the Wonderwall.

In the final days before the fair opened, Richard Peters was everywhere on the site, especially at night, concerned with the individual and collective effect of hundreds of thousands of light bulbs. He wore a hard hat studded with twinkle lights lit by a power pack, all made for him as a present by the lighting contractors. Friends could spot him, he reported, from as far away as the Greater Mississippi River Bridge. Former chairman of the Department of Architecture at Berkeley, Peters has designed the lighting for many projects in which Charles Moore has been involved, including the Piazza d'Italia fountain a few blocks from the fair. Lighting at the Piazza combines neon with glowing light from hidden sources, whereas lines and masses of tiny bulbs dominate the fair. The effect is much the same. In both places there is a pervasive softness of illumination that entices one to look closer at the objects lit. At night at the fair, one is surprised that such an effect can be carried off. One would expect the quiet sparkle of the Wonderwall, towers, and arches etched in light to be overwhelmed by the sideshows around and in it. In fact, Peters has orchestrated this lighting – all of it – so that the fair's inherent cacophony turns into something smooth and episodic, like Dixieland jazz. This orchestration, missing in the daytime, transforms the fair when dusk approaches. The fair is most beautiful in the evening.



Pavilions in the lagoon at Centennial Plaza (Photo by Malcolm Heard, Jr.).

The lighting is seductive, the planting is artful, and there are places to rest and cool off. There is lively architectural design and some sensitive renovation (Tony Styant-Browne's interior spaces at the Federal Fiber Mills Building, for example). Although a host of details have been carefully tended to, the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition is no exercise in total design. Exhibition design ranges from excellent to terrible. The Popeye's Fried Chicken stands are no less offensive at the fair than outside. The architects' strategy has not been to ponder every display case and design every concession; that was not possible. But with admirable energy and skill they have selected and built a few essential pieces – two gates, two plazas with lagoons, an amphitheater, the Wonderwall – that are strong enough and beautiful enough to dominate one's perception of the scene. Their accomplishment sings.■

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