

Citesurvey

The Transco Fountain

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Philip Johnson and John Burgee's fountains and buildings depend for their breathtaking effects upon the power of metaphor, the tension of contrast, and upon both subtle and obvious illusion.

At the Fort Worth Water Garden, for instance, each of five fountains employs a different kind of beguiling illusion which, in juxtaposition with all of the other fountains, creates tensions even more beguiling. One fountain consists of a sheet of water moving so thinly and smoothly over a vertical stone surface that it seems the wall is merely wet, that nothing is moving. On the opposite side of the garden, water falls over large rough blocks of stone which are tumbled into a pool, partially buried in the rush of constantly turbulent water. The effect of the broken blocks, the rushing water, and the resulting noise imitate nature, as the simple moving film of water does not. It seems that one has broken suddenly out of the forest and into a clearing, that one has been magically lifted into a primeval scene.

Some of Johnson and Burgee's fountains invite the viewer's participation, as this one does - it is all one can do to restrain oneself from climbing down into the pool, although the descent is dangerous and the fountain is guarded. Other Johnson/Burgee fountains appear to invite participation, but the invitation is only illusion.

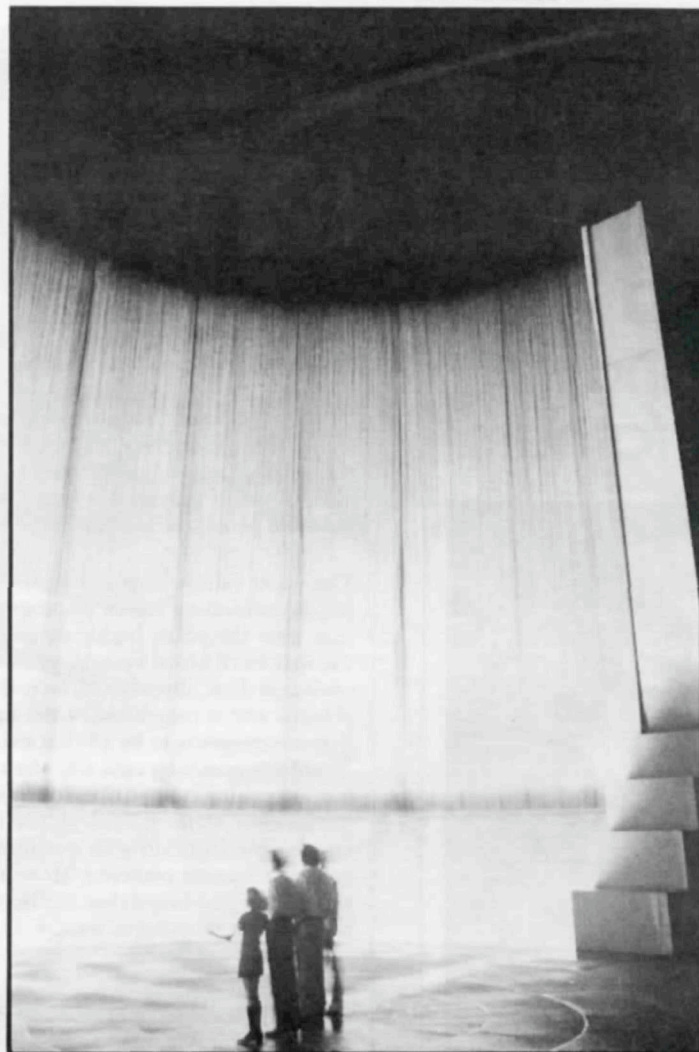
Philip Johnson's new Transco Fountain, lying at one end of a long greensward

across from the Transco Tower, extends just such an ambiguous invitation. Ambiguity, in fact, adheres in the manner in which the site is laid out. And ambiguity is finally what this fountain is about.

The fountain itself consists of a tall, curved, semicircular wall which faces the Transco Tower and which, when the water is on, might be described most simply as a wall of cascading water. The backside of the fountain is also a cascade, so in a sense the fountain's broken circle is completed by the water which sluices awesomely down the back. This is one of the most obvious and basic of many ambiguous readings this structure permits.

In front of the fountain and functioning as an entrance, both a barrier and a link between the fountain and the tower, is a freestanding triple-arched façade, neoclassical in style, what is technically called a *scenae frons*. This apparently straightforward portal operates like a false front, a mock-up, calling forth visions of saloons in Western movies. With its three archways and brick facing - the shape seems to indicate that this is not a masonry bearing wall structure - the façade invites us into a world of questions.

This façade, or portal, is actually a threshold, marking a transition in the procession from the Transco Tower, in its exquisitely Postmodern costume, through the classical period, however neo, and into the mythical past which the fountain itself embodies. Turning around and looking back through the central arch, which is centered on the tower, this procession is



View from the arena, the Transco Fountain, 1985, Philip Johnson and John Burgee, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

doubly clear. This movement into the past is half of another disturbing, ambiguous statement, for the movement is also a movement into the present, into a fountain which, for all its mythic appeal, we cannot forget is cast in concrete, and which - to control the lights and pump the water - depends for its dramatic effects upon electricity and a wealth of technological inventions.

Although the Transco Fountain appears to invite participation, the invitation is an illusion, for the steps up the sides of the

fountain lead not into a pool but nowhere. What the fountain really invites is observation, and it is through observation that the viewer and fountain together create the illusion.

Let us look at the fountain as one might upon arriving, amazed, for the first time. We approach from the side, and ignoring the portal, walk instead into the area inscribed by the semi-circular wall. We see then, if we are more engaged by spectacle than by meaning, the most astonishing sight of all, the interior wall of water. The

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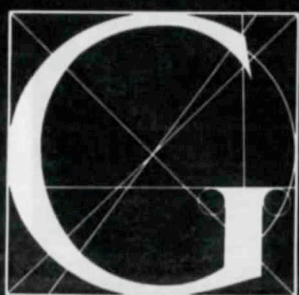
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top of the fountain cuts like the curve of a scythe through the sky, and from it the water falls, cascading over the rough, dark, obsidian aggregate which forms the invisible pebbly surface beneath.

The water falls in layers almost like petals, reminding one of photographs seen over the years, highly magnified, of the insides of blood vessels, of skin. Piped over that dark, invisible surface, the water glistens and is magnified by the light, so that water seems to be all that exists. There is something cold and alien here, but something human too, for in spite of illusion, the water is natural, and it endows the fountain with qualities analogous to a human presence. How many times have you heard that the human body is over 90 percent water?

This part of the fountain is so mysteriously formal, so restrained and patterned, that it is a relief to look down to the horizontal division. From the bottom half of the wall, the water springs exuberantly into the air, in small splashes, in lively stairsteps, approaching closer and closer to what I am tempted to call the ground - a narrow trough which is all that separates this magnificent apparition from its entranced audience, the people who cannot stop gazing. If one is lucky enough to continue to gaze at the top stairstep, something miraculous happens. The illusion here is more than visual and one wonders how something like this could be planned. But because of the way



View looking southeast, the Transco Fountain (Photo by Paul Hester)

in which the water moves, one suddenly feels while staring at this boundary that all of one's body is moving, rising against the force of the water, lifting off from earthly cares and connections.

The illusion takes place on the outside of the wall also, although it seems to occur because of a totally different contrast. Here the effects are less sensual and more conceptual. The falling water is contained within wide, furrowed concrete channels, somewhat like pre-stressed freeway tees standing on edge (as if they could take us somewhere) and it is impossible not to feel, as well as to analyze, the illusory effects. So it is with less surprise but with equal delight that we give in to a perceptual invitation. As the water falls, our eyes rise up the furrowed concrete surface. Once again, we are pulled upward, but having learned from the fountain's interior what perceptual mechanism is operating here, our eyes rise with a less spontaneous motion and a more conscious awareness, as we give in knowingly and willingly to a wish, a desire for the infinite, the ideal.

In its curve, in the awesome power it has to affect us, the wall of water forces us to

remember Niagara Falls. And of course, the simple fact is that water reminds us of nature. But if this fountain is reminiscent of nature, it is also reminiscent of nature subverted, nature made perfect and thus rendered no longer natural, deprived of that frightening, essential imbalance, the constant challenge which irregularities bring to us as inescapable parts of our lives. The impression finally is not like Niagara - that constantly changing natural structure, water in motion, rock breaking and falling over time. Here there is no

seems impossible that a strip only an inch wide could cut the wall of water mysteriously into discrete sections. But with the wall exposed, we can see that the separation occurs at the narrow, vertical lines of mortar. It seems a miracle, and it makes one wonder. The fountain is clearly a work of genius, but how much is accidental?

Below the line which divides the fountain horizontally into two sections, the wall breaks into narrow steps about four



Rear elevation, the Transco Fountain (Photo by Paul Hester)

imperfection and, in spite of the moving water, no sense of change. Nothing is organic and nothing is alive. And if we return to that curve at the top, that dramatic line against the sky, the structure in its serene and sterile wisdom reminds us, as our eyes rise, that we can go only so high.

At night, with the water turned off and the fountain still, the impression of hard sterility I have described is intensified, but the fountain becomes complex in a different way. In the dark, the structure looks and feels more like a temple - the huge slabs of concrete seem more hewn than cast and the powerful top line crosses the sky like a lintel at Stonehenge. But this is a temple at which nobody worships.

On the outside, the vertical lines of the concrete ribs assert themselves with a firmness that in the daytime is softened by the movement of water. In the darkness, without the water as contrast, the illusion created is lost.

Inside the hemicycle, the intricacies of the fountain's construction are clarified. When the water falls from the top, it falls into sections without apparent cause. It

inches deep which lead out and down, like a deserted amphitheater. Once deserted, the design of the floor is clear; it becomes both noticeable and important that the blocks are laid in a circle, a bull's-eye. The sense of victim leads to a sense of the sacrificial.