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Big Things for Big Cities

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Idea For Marconi Plaza

The *symbolic* purpose of this important urban project is to commemorate the Italian-American presence in Philadelphia and the contributions of this community to the City on the 500th Anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World.

Its *functional* purpose is to make a space that can accommodate grand civic celebrations on special occasions and diverse everyday activities at the scale of the neighborhood. These latter activities can enhance the amenity and vitality of the whole neighborhood.

Its *spatial* purpose is to promote a sense of identity in this important location which serves as the symbolic center of the Italian-American community in South Philadelphia and which terminates one of the great urban axes in the country — presently a rather amorphous space with little sense of place.

The initial design proposes to do three things:

1) Create an ornamentally paved central plaza bisected by Broad Street that encompasses the two existing statues on each side of the street and accommodates large crowds for civic festivities — particularly those of the Columbus Day parade. (Its ornamental paving pattern might reflect the design of the dome of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome.)

Marconi Plaza looking north.

2) Develop the landscaped lawn with picturesque clusters of trees surrounding the Plaza as a shady green area complementing the paved ''piazza'' and as a recreation area.

3) Erect two broad pylons, one on either side of Broad Street, each representing the facade of a famous Italian building — the Doge's Palace in Venice and a Palazzo Publico typical of Tuscany. These pylons might be about 60 ft. high and 5 ft. deep — their perfectly flat surfaces faced with a pattern of inset slabs of stone and marble of different colors and sizes depicting the architectural elements of the facade. In the back they would be ornamented by

incised inscriptions in Roman type on the stone face.

By framing the Philadelphia City Hall as one looks north, these pylons would act to connect this symbolic Italian Piazza with the city as a whole. By inflecting in their plan, which is slightly curved, they would suggest the spatial enclosure characteristic of the traditional piazza. They would tend also by these means to unify this big space. By representing Italian architecture they would symbolize the glory of this medium which is at once characteristic of Italy and universal. They would be both bold and decorative; children would like them as well as adults. More planar than three-

dimensional, they would have a maximum impact from Broad Street, yet tend not to overwhelm the important existing statues in the Plaza, which they would contrast with.

One of these ''buildings'' might certainly represent an example of southern Italian architecture such as a Baroque palace.

Times Square Plaza Design

The developer for the Times Square Center complex asked VRSB to create a design that would retain references to the popular, glittering, commercial-sign architecture associated with Times Square and that would contain at the same time qualities consistent with the proposed new high-rise buildings to surround it.

This design proposes a Big Apple for Times Square: a piece of representational sculpture which is bold in form yet rich in symbolism, realism with a diversity of associations. It is popular *and* esoteric — a Big Apple symbolizing New York City and a surrealistic object evoking Rene Magritte or a Pop-art monument in the manner of Claes Oldenburg. It is stark in its simplicity and monumental in scale; but it is also ambiguous in scale because of its very simplicity.

Contrasts and ambiguities in scale along with unusual juxtapositions are traditional means of creating surprise, tension and richness in urban architecture. Some New York examples are the Statue of Liberty, the Little Church around the Corner and Trinity Church on Wall Street.

The round form of the Big Apple provides an appropriate counterpoint to the bulk and angularity of the surrounding buildings. Despite its size, it promotes also a sense of openness and airiness in the space through its shape and "floating" quality. This 90 ft.-plus diameter apple is the modern equivalent of the Baroque obelisk that identifies the center of a plaza.
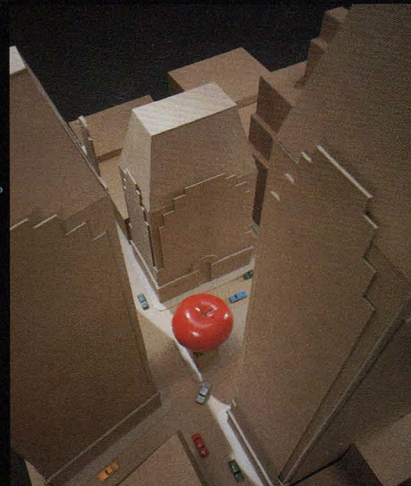
The base for the round sculptural apple would be angular and architectural, a replication in elevation and material of the bases of the surrounding buildings to promote the architectural unity of the complex. It will include the traditional element of nighttime and daytime glitter characteristic of the buildings along
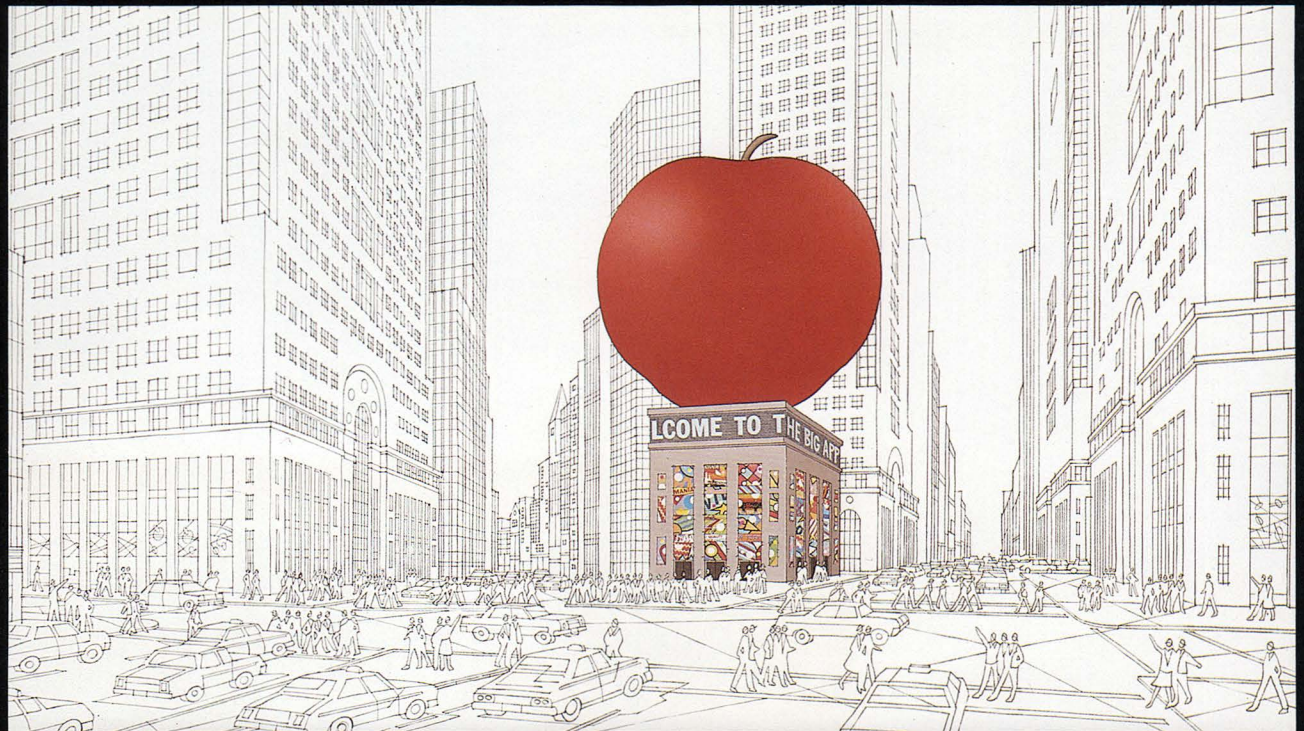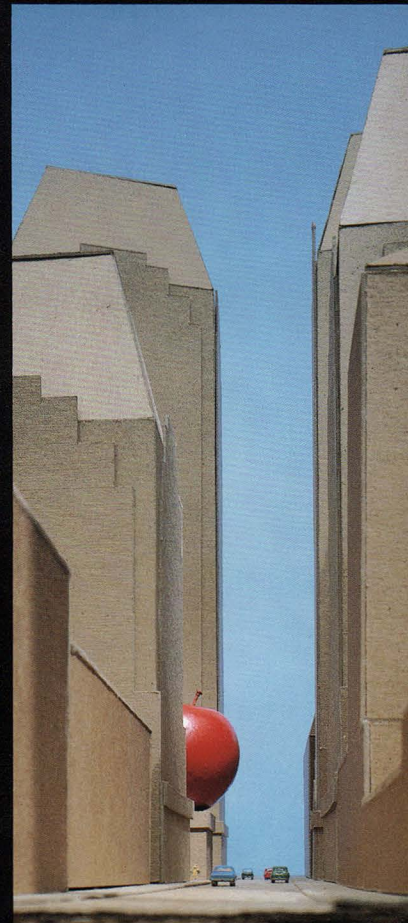

View looking north.
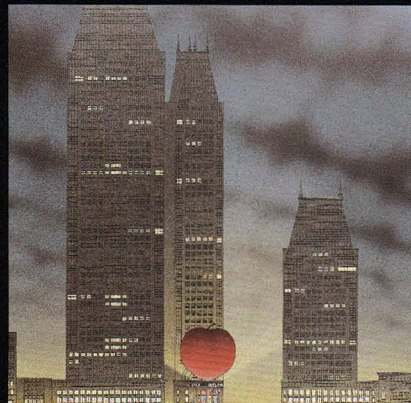
South elevation.

South Elevation.

Aerial view.

View from 42nd street looking east.

the sidewalks. A moving news sign that forms the architrave of the base structure will be reminiscent of the former New York Times sign. The interior uses of the base are open to future consideration but could be used for many purposes, for example, tourist information facilities, an international book store, the TKTS ticket outlet, or a panoramic museum of Manhattan.

CREDITS
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