# The Magic of Thinking Big:

# The Architecture of John Portman

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Possibly more than any architect of recent history John Portman of Atlanta has changed the look of the urban environment. With a mixture of talent and timing John Portman has transformed the city into a series of functioning "coordinate units"--buildings within walking distance of one another with large, open exterior and interior spaces connected by bridges and filled with elements of nature including trees and water and, most importantly, has included the concept of motion into what was prior to his entrance mostly a static art form. The elements of motion include escalators, exposed glass elevators with pin lights inspired by the Tivoli Gardens, and revolving restaurants which have become his trademarks. Not only a gifted architect but an insightful businessman as well, John Portman has combined the foresight of a visionary artist with the shrewdness of a tycoon – a marriage of art and business in one person and has created an empire of buildings designed by him and his associates and owned by his company.

Of course, all work is inspired and influenced by past solutions and Mr. Portman's designs have their sources – he admits his admiration of Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe and his building arrangements such as in Peachtree Center are similar to those in Rockefeller Center in New York City. His atriums recall the large, open areas of St. Peter's basilica and the Pantheon in Rome, possibly the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the futuristic drawings of Hugh Ferris, the prison drawings of Piranesi with their bridges and balconies, the Brown Palace Hotel of Denver, Colorado in 1892 by architect Frank E. Edbrooke, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim museum in New York, the movie set of H.G. Wells' *Things to Come* and even comic book and science fiction drawings although movie sets and futuristic illustrations are rarely brought to life and in the large spaces of the past the public did not

physically participate in those spaces by walking around in their upper areas – only from the ground floor looking up. Innovative artists are able to extract inspiration from the most unlikely and traditionally “forbidden” sources and recombine them into new and workable solutions.

The precursor of his atrium hotels is the Regency Hyatt House in Atlanta. Before the Regency, all hotels, even the mammoth Conrad Hilton in Chicago, had essentially the same arrangement of rooms with seemingly endless maze-like corridors cramming as many rooms as possible within a given space. Portman's initial proposal was the traditional solution until he decided to take the vast leap and bring some of the space surrounding the hotel inside the hotel. His solution was, in his words, to "explode the traditional hotel design" solution and bring the exterior courtyard inside the hotel. Like the mathematics of topology, he turned the conventional building design inside out. The well-proportioned and alternatingly simple and complex geometric design of the adventurous Regency Hyatt House, a collection of inspired ideas utilizing the architectural principles of cantilever and post and lintel, was the first of its kind and influenced offspring of imitators all over the world.

The floor plan is traditionally geometric in plan being 120 feet in length on each side, however, now the halls, each with 10 or 12 rooms, are one-sided and stacked on top of each other for 22 stories with the open side facing the three million cubic foot atrium creating an immense shared spaced, stimulating and exhilarating, perhaps overwhelming and engulfing, to the adventurous although horrifying to those with an exaggerated fear of heights. In the words of Paul Goldberger (*Global Architecture* #57):

> Portman aspires to the making of space; his work seeks to take its place among the monumental public buildings of the past, in which grand space at large has been the crucial element in conveying a sense of nobility.

In the Hyatt Regency a new program was conceived: the program of bringing the urban experience of the city at large into the building itself. Portman transferred certain traditional functions of the outdoors--strolling, window-shopping, cafe-sitting, people-watching-- to the indoors.

To add to the visual excitement and architectural drama of the hotel, the elevators, rather than concealed in dark elevator shafts, are now brought out in the open and exposed as they ride up and down an off-center column. Additional theatricality is provided by pinlights placed on the outside of the bullet-shaped elevators which creates an impressive display of motion as they zoom up the track with surprising speed, one of which goes through the roof opening to the revolving domed restaurant above. The ceiling of this architectural archetypal masterpiece is composed of translucent panels which allow outdoor light to enter and illuminate the interior. Also, a circular canopy of about fifty feet in diameter made of black metal and glass is suspended dramatically from a domed skylight also about fifty feet in diameter to the bar twenty-two stories below creating an effect of visual tension. The basically square floor plan is asymmetrically composed, though dynamically balanced, of elevator shaft, the dining area--creating a side-walk café atmosphere, a raised circular bar area, a stairway to a lower level, floor for mingling guests, and on the four sides, shops, entrances, check-in counters and piano bar. The effect of the design is dramatic ; the concept was executed with a broad brush, with expensive detailing and refinements omitted for the sake of a reasonable budget, though the exposed rough, poured

concrete is part of its effectiveness and gives a masculine counterbalance to the elegant design solution.

His coordinate unit plan has been utilized in Detroit in Renaissance Square and in Atlanta at Peachtree Center. The buildings of Peachtree Center began with the Merchandise Mart and office buildings which created the need for more hotel rooms in Atlanta. Portman responded to the need with creative functional and aesthetic solutions in the form of his hotels which attracted people and brought in more business to the city and his company. The first hotel, the Regency Hyatt House, was followed by a glass cylindrical annex which was then followed by the grander version of that annex: the cylindrical Peachtree Plaza Hotel with its ponds, pads, moats, and trees (though the interior water was replaced by something that resembles a puppet show stage setting – specifically the amusement ride "It's a Small World" at Disney World – Portman's only design mistake in my opinion) (note: since this paper was written that design has again changed and replaced with a more traditional lobby solution with sofas and tables) and finally the Marriott Marquis which stretches the concepts first explored in the Regency Hyatt House to bizarre extremes. Also, more office buildings, a shopping gallery, and the Apparel Mart were added to Peachtree Center.

It is estimated that his buildings of his designs worldwide have combined construction costs of over 5 billion dollars and bring in much more revenue. One way of making money is to draw a crowd and charge admission as is done with entertainment, sports events, and educational institutions. With Portman's buildings, the buildings themselves are the stars engulfing celebrities and ordinary citizens alike, and attracting, like magnets, large numbers of conventioneers helping to make Atlanta the third largest convention center after New York and Chicago. The admission charged is the fee for staying in the hotel room. However, so accessible

is his populist architecture that absolutely anyone off the street can walk into one of his buildings and hop on one of the glass elevators and get the thrill of an amusement park ride for free. In the same article in *Global Architecture* (#57) Mr. Goldberger asserts:

> What Portman's hotels are people's palaces, buildings which are meant to entertain by virtue of their major spaces.

So satisfied are the conventioneers with their contained and protected, internal environment that they rarely venture forth from their hotel or Peachtree Center though if they choose to do so the subway is only a few footsteps away. One interesting point peculiar to Mr. Portman's architecture is the phenomenon of the "jumpers", as the employees in his buildings refer to them, or that strange minority of people who choose to end their lives by jumping from the uppermost floors of his immense structures as if they are sacrificing to some mysterious god. Though not publicized, the average suicide jump happens about once a year and the employees are trained as to what to do should one occur. What essence in his buildings makes a person so inclined choose one of his buildings to do his or her final deed rather than some other building? There *is* a sense of disorientation when standing on the top floor looking down at all the seemingly contented people bustling about and a feeling for a desire for weightlessness and a confusion as to what is up or down since, at this scale, our normal visual cues are distorted -- all of which may be just enough to precipitate the action of the unstable, alienated person. Also, one safety criticism is that objects, such as coffee cups or beer bottles, could accidentally fall or be intentionally thrown from the balconies above obtaining substantial momentum, enough to injure the innocent strollers below as has happened, again unpublicized, on several occasions.

His design assumes the optimistic trust of responsible and proper human behavior. Of course, to a capitalist, an occasional mishap is worth the immense capital gains derived from the hordes of tourists drawn to these structures part of whose appeal, in defiance of the laws of gravity, is the potential danger or drama or even disaster lurking around the future's corner while giving the tourist or conventioneer a false sense of momentary, though safe, adventure-just like an amusement park.

In his creation of Peachtree Center as well as his other developments, John Portman has been able to do what architects have wanted to do since civilization began, that is, to transform cities into coordinated, functional units of productivity. He has achieved the architect's dream as pictorially represented by the painting *The Architect's Dream* by Thomas Cole as commissioned by Ithial Town. In the past the client dictated his usually ordinary and uninspired desires based on previous precedents to the architect like a patient telling the surgeon how to operate; only kings, emperors, and presidents could command the necessary authority to plan cities. In order to circumvent the preconceived acquired tastes of an aristocratic patron John Portman became his own client (in an article in *Esquire* magazine Philip Johnson said, after designing the Crystal Cathedral for evangelist Robert Schuller, that he would design a building for the devil if he paid for it.) Mr. Portman, by becoming his own client, bypassed the necessity of repeating past solutions to be able to explore new architectural methods. More than buildings, his structures are more akin to the results of a contemporary emperor peacefully conquering cities. How was John Portman able to become his own client when no one before him was able to do realize the ultimate architect's ambition? At what other time in history has the artist been his own patron? Surely the element of genius enters in here. Architects and developers usually have contradictory, though potentially compatible, personality characteristics-- the architect generally

being contemplative and introverted while the developer is usually gregarious and extroverted. To find a person who can combine the characteristics of both is truly rare, in fact, practically non-existent. Since the word is so often misused, what is a genius? A genius is someone who says something of significance that has never been said before and recombines existing knowledge and culture into new patterns. Therefore, genius can not be discovered through the use of standardized testing which is the repeating of previously established facts usually through the efforts of previous geniuses. Also, another characteristic of geniuses is that they are practically never understood during their lifetime though they may be appreciated: their work can only be viewed and analyzed in retrospect as the result of an accumulation of a lifetime's career. Another point is that geniuses, though biologically similar, are not normal and are considered peculiar to people of ordinary constitutions even though results of their individualist visions eventually create communal benefit. They are guided by some unknown Muse or god that moves them forward. Geniuses create concepts like Thomas Jefferson's republic, the systems of religious leaders and prophets, Walt Disney's entertainment complex, and Picasso's visions and vast bureaucracies result from their efforts. Portman's organization need to have the precision of a beehive as his structures are considerably more complex. Since architecture is a social, functional art it requires the efforts of laboring subordinates, from draftsmen to construction workers, to realize the ideas of the conceptualizer and all architects are conceptualizers dependent on the labor of subordinates to realize their dreams. John Portman functions as the conceptual queen bee laying ideas like eggs for his worker bees to create and nourish. Concerning unfavorable criticism from other architects, as I had guessed, the negative reaction to his work may be professional jealousy. Philip Johnson, the premier American architect, suggested that architects are envious of Portman: " His analysis of what

people want and his ability to get it done are second to no one" (*The Critical Edge*. Tod A. Marder, ed., MIT Press, 1985).

He and his organization owns the buildings he designs, charges rent and builds more buildings with the profits they reap which, after all, is the American, capitalistic way. Not only did Mr. Portman develop the skill and nourish his talent to design inspired buildings-- he also learned how to swing a deal! Why should someone of aesthetic sensibilities be above the realities of the business world with its risky and dangerous shark-infested waters. If he can design buildings with understanding of people's needs *and* withstand the pressures of the economic world, then he deserves his position of self-appointed authority. Perhaps he employed Machiavellian means to achieve an end, but if princes can, why can't he?

John Portman has rocked the steady boat of architecture with his futuristic visions. Though purists don't like to admit it, perhaps the greatest critic is success, as history is a recounting previous successes. Roll over academia, you're going to have to make room in your textbooks for the architecture of John Portman. Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our House* commends Portman for bringing affordable glamour back into architecture: the minimalist, restrained international style of architecture was getting a bit dull. Portman (and even its originator Philip Johnson) responded to "Less is More" with "Less is a Bore". Paul Goldberger states: "The large-scale architecture of John Portman has represented an intersection of popular taste and serious design intentions of a sort that have rarely been seen in the United States: they are buildings that are liked, and as such they can offer genuine clues as to what public expectations for large-scale civic architecture are" (*GA* #57). His is an architecture that satisfies and excites the public and much of the jaded architectural elite, trying to please both the

"architecturally unsophisticated and the cognoscenti and coming close to achieving these almost contradictory goals" (*GA* #28).

Portman in his discussions concerning his philosophy of architecture involved in creating his exhilarating structures and his use of natural elements (trees and water) and light, sound, and movement says the following:

> Architects in the past have tended to concentrate their attention on the building as a static object. I believe dynamics are more important: the dynamics of people, their interaction with spaces and environmental conditions. Architects must learn to understand humanity better so that they can create an environment that is more beneficial to people, more rewarding, more pleasant to experience. I'm naturally interested in the latest structural techniques, in innovative building materials and the technology of my craft; but I am more interested in people. Buildings should serve people, not the other way around.
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> Movement is also interesting to watch. Movement in people, objects, and water, and even the sounds of movement are important. I've never met anyone who didn't like a log fire. After all, society started around a log fire. There seems to be some innate reaction between human beings and fire in a social context. People are fascinated by kinetics. One of the attractions of the log fire is the dancing flames. They are almost hypnotic. People are innately interested in movement, for movement means life, and human beings are kinetic creatures. You can incorporate kinetics in a

> building and strike a responsive human reaction. At the cafes in the hotels I have designed there are places where you can watch the movement of the elevator cabs, which become a huge kinetic sculpture.

Finally, to examine the design of the Marriott Marquis, even his most devoted admirers may think Howard Roark, I mean, Portman may have gone too far. But its extremeness is part of its virtuoso effect. Some people are astounded by the sheer boldness of execution of the Marquis, a technological tour de force – like the artist Cristo temporarily wrapping cliffs and islands and buildings, one wonders how Portman "got away with" such an architectural extravagance. The same elements are found in the Marquis as are in the Regency Hyatt House, its prototypal parent: there is the huge public atrium space and there are the private rooms that the guests can retreat to. The atrium soars upward 47 stories rather than the 22 stories of the Hyatt House and there are many more curvilinear lines – some people have the sensation of being swallowed, like Jonah was, by a giant whale. One enters the structure through several entrances on escalators which gradually reveal the interior drama to the spectator and which enter the main atrium lobby. The trademark rocket ship elevators are there though this time the building tapers toward the top of the building with its glass roof. The balconies, draped with overhanging plants, follow the curvilinear shape of building and there are Piranesian bridges galore. There is even a gallery of artwork on the tenth floor that resembles postage stamps as the elevator whizzes by.

A Freudian analysis of his buildings' appeal and Portman's "Edifice complex" may take the following form: On the unconscious level (maybe its consciously unspoken for the mysterious Mr. Portman) the Peachtree Plaza Hotel could represent a giant phallus (John

Portman's erection as one architect I met termed it) and the interiors could represent a giant mother's womb that everyone, including women and children, retreats to and feels subliminally comforted by (according to Carl Jung sexual intercourse is a male's temporary retreat into the womb – a symbolic re-entering of the security of the womb), especially the Marquis, with the elevator tracks corresponding to the spine and the balconies of the floors to the ribs circumscribing the body – even the bulging exterior of the hotel suggests a pregnant woman's torso.

In a response to the criticism of the entertaining and science fiction aspects of his building designs, Mr. Portman in an article in *Esquire* magazine said he "plead guilty" to being the Walt Disney of architecture because he gives people what they want – as if an architect or public servant is supposed to give people what they don't want. He says people like nature, beauty, and technology so they should have them. His structures are technologically impressive as well as aesthetically composed and, besides being immensely popular with the public, have their degree of difficulty to satisfy the intelligentsia (maybe intellectuals would like him more if he started wearing thick, round glasses a la Le Corbusier, I.M. Pei, and Philip Johnson). Concerning complaints of his blank walls on the street level, perhaps they could be considered a mysterious enticement to experience the inside of the building. His concept of the coordinate unit, such as Peachtree Center, is more in keeping with Walt Disney's original intentions for EPCOT (Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow) which was meant to be an ever changing and ever evolving city utilizing new and experimental technologies for people to live and work in. It is reputed that Mr. Portman has a secret design for apartments for the downtown area to complete the coordinate unit of Peachtree Center with permanent living quarters that he plans to build when his market research deems it feasible to do so. After designing hotels for transients

with disposable income perhaps he can turn his talents to design effective and productive living quarters for inner city transients without money – the homeless.

Historically, architecture, as functional sculpture, reveals the values of a society or what is most important to a particular society. Cathedrals received the most emphasis during the Renaissance, temples and stadiums in ancient Greece and Rome, the Pyramids during the Egyptian dynasties, palaces during European monarchies, government buildings in democratic countries, factories during the Industrial Age, train stations and airports when those forms of transportation were introduced, houses of wealthy capitalists, skyscrapers during the technological era, and stadiums and hotels in the beginning of the era of the Global Village as a result of the mobility of the general populace. In response to the criticism of his alledged disregard of human scale, any large structure from St. Peter's basilica to skyscrapers seem to disregard human dimensions and besides there are the guest and meeting rooms to retreat to for a sense of relatable scale. Also, the works of mankind, though impressive, pale in comparison to the works of nature: the largest building would be swallowed by the Grand Canyon and the largest interior would compare with Mammoth Caves. For immensity of scale, nature far surpasses the collective efforts of mankind. Also, nature has infinitely more dangers and art is mankind's meager attempt to imitate nature.

In his building projects around the world as represented in Peachtree Center and specifically the Regency Hyatt House, the Peachtree Plaza Hotel, and the Marriott Marquis, John Portman has spoken his architectural and gigantic poetic vision. Rather than repeating the past, though incorporating applicable traditions, John Portman has seen and built the future. He has built, and is continuing to build, a stage on which the urban human drama can unfold.

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