



CONCRETE CASCADE IN PORTLAND

BY DONLYN LYNDON

The landmarks of Portland, Oregon's, first urban renewal project are three apartment towers which stand as firm and respectable objects against the hills south of downtown. Its focal point, however, is an extraordinarily evocative concrete plaza cleft by a roaring and bubbling cascade.

The project, called Portland Center, eventually will encompass 83.5 acres, and was planned by the local office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The plan calls for the transformation of the existing street pattern into a "green grid" of malls and spaces dividing the area into a series of superblocks, two of which comprise the initial stage (plan right).

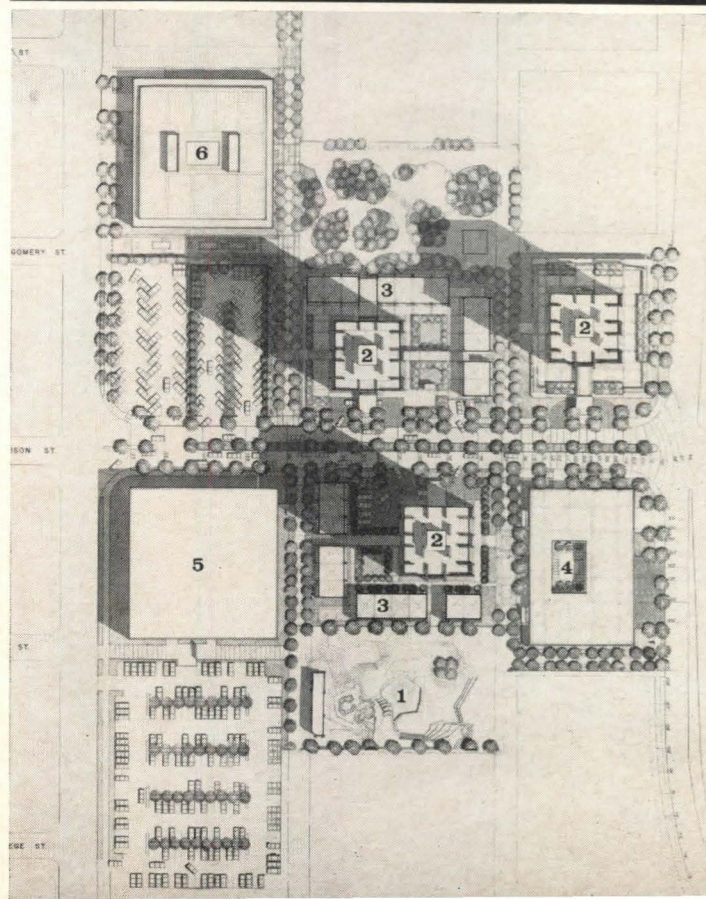
There are two parks in the laps of the first towers: to the north, a tilted mix of earth forms and asphalt; and to the south, the paved plaza with its cascading fountain.

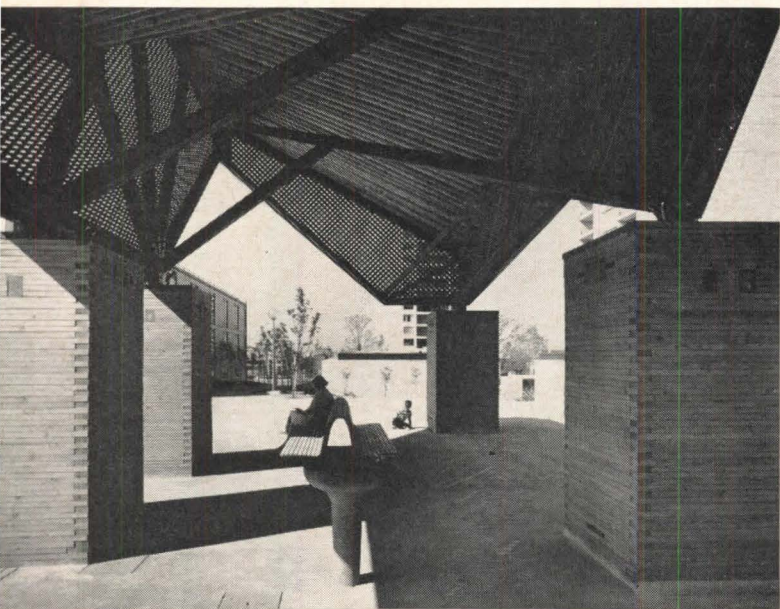
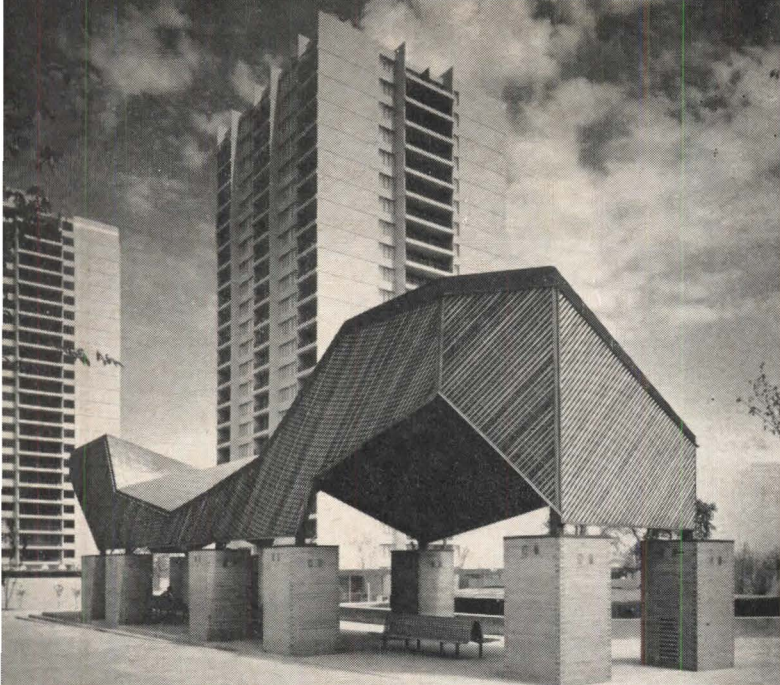
The effect of the fountain is instantaneously engaging: "When I first saw it I came on like a seven year old," reported one young lady. Its compelling impact is neither circumstantial nor simple; it is the result of long-term observations of natural water forms by Lawrence Halprin, responsible for all of the center's open spaces, and by Charles Moore and William Turnbull, his consultants on the plaza. Halprin has an imposing collection of photos and sketches he has made of cascades in the Sierras. Moore, for his part, did his PhD dissertation on the uses of water in architecture.

Mr. Lyndon is the Forum's West Coast correspondent and chairman of the University of Oregon's department of architecture.



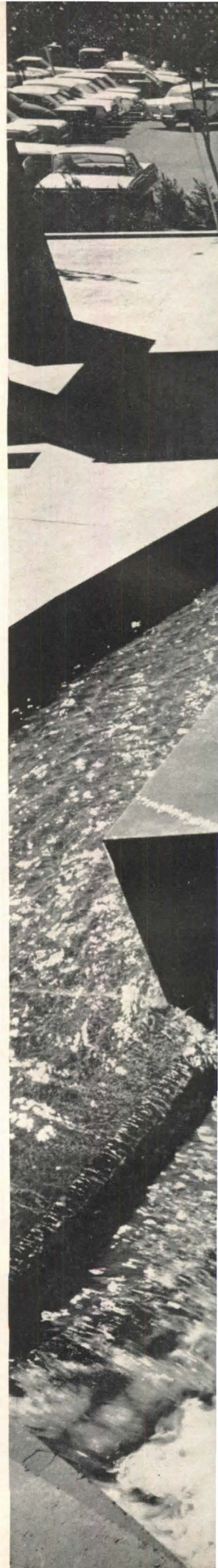
The first phase of Portland Center consists of the cascade-sprouting plaza (1 and photo opposite); three apartment towers (2 and above), two surrounded by townhouses (3) and a third sitting on a parking podium; a garage (4); and two office buildings (5 and 6). All buildings except the lower office block were designed by SOM.



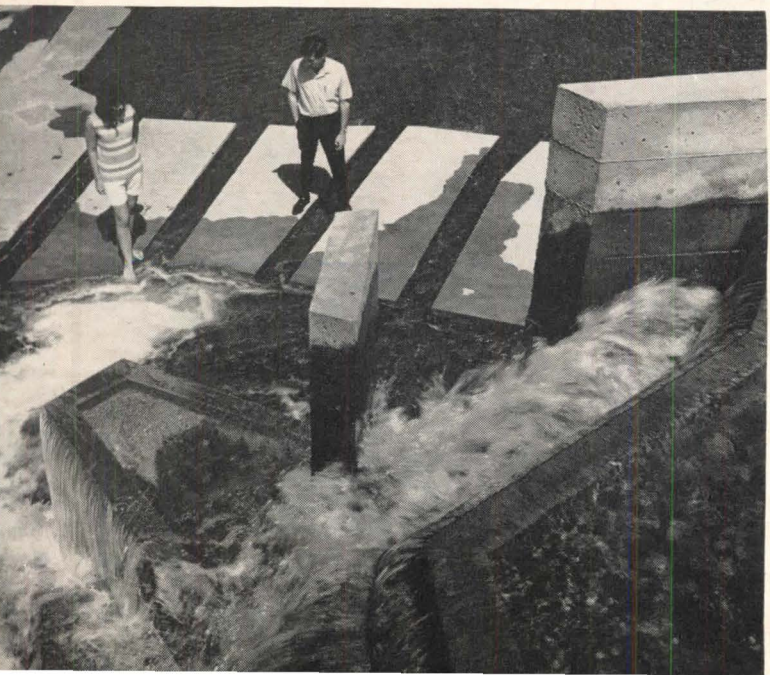
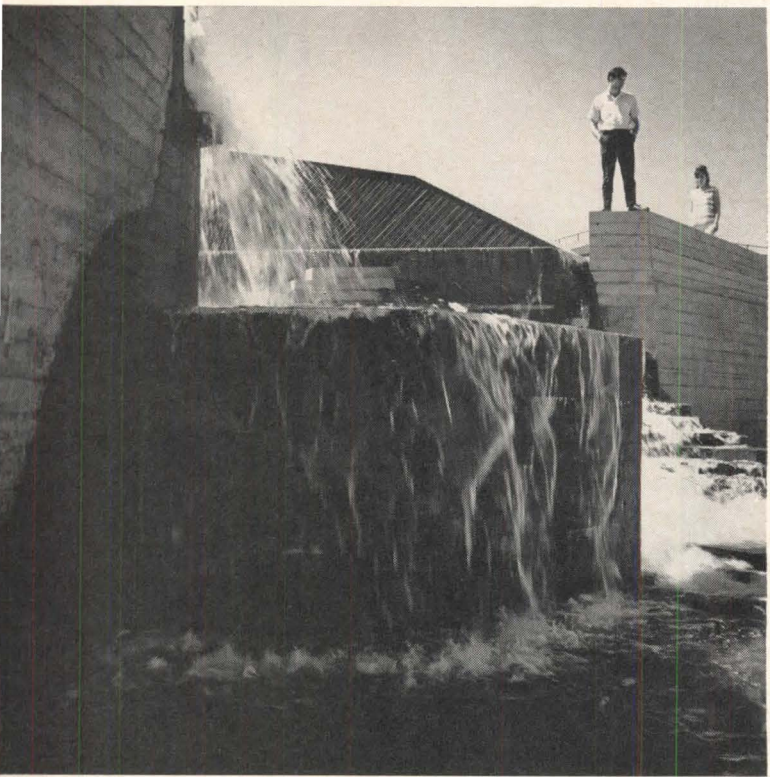


HOVERING above the widest pool, where water surges up to start its turbulent descent, is a writhing shelter of truss, lattice, and copper shingle (designed by Moore and Turnbull under contract to Halprin). The shelter's perplexing, active form is, like the fountain's, a potent contrast to the static forms of the adjacent buildings (left). Teasing the observer into spurious analogies, it remains an enigmatic shape, and thus evades the cuteness of most gazebo architecture.

THE PLAZA is constructed, like a contour model, in stepped increments to create a varied series of terrace and pools; the photo at left, taken from the closest apartment tower, diagrams their disposition around the main mass of tumbling water. The layers grow just gradually enough to suggest the erosive patterns of a natural landscape, yet their willful shapes pull just back from representation.







THE CASCADE, like Trevi Fountain, is carefully designed to exploit the many shapes that water can assume as it spills, falls, bounces, and swirls over a variety of forms. The water's turbulent descent takes it rushing over steps and around blocks piled up to obstruct the flow, becoming a torrent that has a small physical size but vast associative dimensions. It is finally guided into a pool dammed by giant stepping-stones, passing between them into another calmer pool before exiting in a whirl at the outlet. The most compelling evidence of the fountain's success is the gleeful participation that it provokes: few can resist the path to its pinnacle, and on a hot day there is usually someone to be found in a state of ecstatic immersion. No one will be very surprised by the first accident; indeed, a precipitous sense of possible danger is part of its extraordinary hold on the imagination. The fountain's presence offers hope that urban renewal in Portland can provide exhilaration as well as simple physical improvement.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Portland Center, Portland, Oregon. Owner: Portland Center Development Co. Architects: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Portland; David A. Pugh, partner in charge. Structural engineers: Cooper, Rose & Associates (residential buildings); Moffatt, Nichol & Taylor (commercial). General contractor: Portland Center Building Co. Building area, first phase: residential, 660,000 sq. ft.; service, commercial, and offices 40,000 sq. ft. Construction cost: \$12,200,000.

Portland Center parks and malls: Landscape architects and urban designers: Lawrence Halprin & Associates; Satoru Nishita, partner in charge; David Thompson, resident landscape architect. Architectural consultants: Charles Moore and William Turnbull. Engineers: Gilbert, Forsberg, Deikman & Schmidt (structural); Yanow & Bauer (mechanical). General contractor: Shrader Construction Co., Inc.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Morley Baer.

