

PROFILES

OPEN, AVAILABLE, USEFUL

UNTIL the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge actually went up, a lot of people in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul did not seem to understand that it was going to be a real, functioning bridge. The man who had conceived and designed it was an artist, for one thing, and who had ever heard of a bridge designed by an artist? One end of the structure, moreover, was to be situated in the brand-new sculpture garden of the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, and this led some citizens to assume that it was going to be one of those "environmental" sculptures which city-dwellers have to cope with from time to time. According to Siah Armajani, the artist in charge of the project, "It did not become a bridge until the first person walked across it."

Since its formal opening, in September, 1988, however, the bridge, a three-hundred-and-seventy-five-foot pedestrian walkway that spans sixteen lanes of traffic and reconnects two areas of Minneapolis which were sundered nearly twenty years ago by Interstate Highway 94, has become a huge hit with the public. Joggers, cyclists, mothers with strollers, school kids, lovers, tourists, museumgoers, office workers on their way to work—everyone uses the bridge. Even in the dead of the Minneapolis winter, when the thermometer seems permanently stuck below zero, and you hesitate to invite guests for dinner because their cars may not start when they try to go home and you will have them for the night as well, the walkway is rarely deserted. I walked across it for the first time last spring, with Armajani as my guide, and what struck me most euphorically was its color scheme. From the Walker Art Center to its midpoint, the bridge is painted a pale, luminous yellow; the other half, which leads to a grassy swale called Loring Park, is light blue—Armajani calls it baby blue. Where the yellow stops and the blue



Siah Armajani

begins, you feel as though you were moving from one pleasant room into another, which is just what the artist had in mind. "The yellow is from Monticello," he told me. "Jefferson called it the color of wheat, of the harvest, but it is also the color of happiness. The blue is just—well, the sky. Minneapolis has these long, gray winters, so I felt the colors should be light."

The Minnesota Department of Transportation, which owns the bridge, and put up half the million six hundred thousand dollars required to build it (the rest came from the Wheelock Whitney family, in Minneapolis), notified Armajani at one point prior to construction that baby blue and Jefferson yellow did not figure in its regulation palette of colors. The department was not making an issue of this; it just thought Armajani ought to know. Nobody tried to make him change his color choice, or questioned any of his aesthetic decisions, and he found this truly remarkable. Armajani, whose natural reticence is at odds with his appearance—he has dark curly hair, a full mustache, a broken

nose, and a piratical grin—is enormously pleased to report that he was treated as a fully qualified professional by the engineers, the steelworkers, and everyone else who worked on the project. He treated them with equal respect, and he was willing to alter his plans when the situation required it. He had at first opposed the addition of access ramps for the handicapped; he wanted, instead, hydraulic elevators at either end of the bridge. But when he was told that the elevators would probably freeze up in subzero weather he went ahead and designed access ramps, and he now agrees that they have enhanced the look of the bridge—curving, ascending ramps that play off against the cool right-angled geometry of the structure and the reverse curve of its two great catenary arches, one convex and the other concave. The substitution

of pressure-treated unpainted pine boards for the steel flooring that Armajani had intended originally (it, too, would have iced up in cold weather) turned out to be another bonus. The sound and feel of sturdy wooden beams underfoot increase the pleasure of walking the bridge. Other pleasures abound: benches made in the same clean style as the rest of the bridge; places where the walkway widens and strollers can pause to take in the passing scene; superb views of the Walker's new sculpture garden, which was designed by the architect Edward Larrabee Barnes. Armajani commissioned the poet John Ashbery, whose work he admires, to write a text for the bridge; the hundred-and-thirty-five-word text is set into the wooden floor, in individual bronze letters.

Siah Armajani is an American citizen, naturalized in 1967, but he was born and raised in Teheran, and, like many Iranians, he often makes his points by telling stories. When the painting contractors were getting ready to put the final colors on the bridge, he told me, the chief inspector,

a man named Dave, climbed up the scaffolding to make sure that the undercoat had been applied correctly. He climbed down again shaking his head, and said it wasn't good enough. "What are you talking about?" the head painter demanded. He and his men had been painting bridges for twenty years, he said; they knew their trade. "This is different," Dave said. "This is a work of art." The painter said, "Just what the hell does that mean?"

This is a question that Armajani has been asking himself for years. As one of the leading practitioners and theorists of a new form of public art that has emerged during the last decade in this country, Armajani has given a lot of thought to the redefinition of art in late-twentieth-century American society. He has little or no interest in producing high-priced objects for wealthy buyers. Armajani and a number of other, like-minded artists—the list includes Robert Irwin, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, Richard Fleischner, George Trakas, Jackie Ferrara, Athena Tacha, Elyn Zimmerman, and the late Scott Burton—have devoted themselves almost exclusively to working on projects in public spaces, usually in collaboration with architects, city planners, real-estate developers, landscape architects, engineers, and city officials. These artists have had a hand in the designing or the redesigning of parks, playgrounds, gardens, indoor and outdoor plazas, traffic interchanges, sidewalks, bus stops, drainage basins, and other spaces that are in the public domain. "I am interested in the nobility of usefulness," Armajani has written. "My intention is to build open, available, useful, common, public gathering places. Gathering places that are neighborly. They are not conceived in terms of wood and steel but in terms of their nature as places at hand, ready to be used."

For Armajani and his colleagues, art is, or should be, a public matter, much as it was in Quattrocento Florence, and the artist should have an integral connection to society. This approach more or less rules out the concept of heroic individualism that has attached itself to artists throughout the modern period. It also pretty much rules out a career in the highly publicized art world of galleries, museums, and private collections. The fact that so many

women have come to prominence in public art is no coincidence. Some of them turned to the public arena in the nineteen-seventies because they felt that the gallery scene was weighted so heavily against them; others say that, as women, they feel more naturally inclined than men do to put ego aside and to collaborate with others. Armajani is represented in New York by the Max Protetch Gallery; his work is in many museums and corporate collections; and he had a retrospective, in 1985, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, but in spite of this he is practically unknown within the New York art world. As a public artist who is also an intensely private man, he prefers it this way. He lives more or less anonymously in St. Paul, and he works in a nondescript commercial loft in Minneapolis. Until the opening of the Whitney Bridge, he was not nearly as well known in the Twin Cities as his wife, Barbara, a successful businesswoman; in 1983, she left her position as president of Powers, a large department store, to start a chain of specialty clothing shops, which she recently sold to Sears. The publicity that attended the bridge opening blew Armajani's cover; strangers speak to him on the street now, and this embarrasses him a good deal. "In public art, there is no room for a focus on the ego," he has said. "You have to get lost in the context of the work."

More than any of the other new public artists, Armajani sees his role in political and social terms, and in a context that is specifically American. He has great admiration for the Russian Constructivist artists, whose efforts to create a socially relevant art in the wake of the Russian Revolution were crushed by the emerging Stalinist regime, but he has always insisted that public art in America has to reflect

America's particular mixture of democratic ideals. The notion of monumentality does not interest him at all. He has never gone in for large and assertive sculptural "statements"—the kind of sculpture that has appeared in front of so many governmental and corporate office buildings as a result of the per-cent-for-art public commissions of the last twenty years. He likes to describe his work as "low, common, and near to the people." Since 1968, Armajani has designed and built houses, offices, newsstands, picnic gardens, reading rooms (both indoor and outdoor), a lecture hall, a hospital waiting room, and, in Mitchell, South Dakota, a bandstand. He collaborated with Scott Burton and the architect Cesar Pelli on a large waterfront plaza in lower Manhattan, and, also with Pelli, he has designed two elevated walkways in Minneapolis and the top section of an as yet unbuilt office tower in San Francisco. (The last project, which is neither low nor common, hints at the loftier ambitions that coexist with his Midwestern populist ideals.)

From the start of his public-art career, Armajani has also built bridges. The bridge is a fine symbol of what he wants to achieve, as an artist and as a citizen. It links two separate points in space, but it is a sort of neighborhood, too—a locality with a particular character and ambience. As a work of art, moreover, a bridge invites the active participation of the onlooker; it is, in fact, incomplete until the onlooker becomes a participant. "All of Siah's permanent pieces deal with the question of the non-art audience," Burton said last year. "His work is explicitly democratic. I think an untrained audience can understand what it's about, because he adapts the genre of the garden, or the log cabin, or the covered bridge. Siah has really brought about a significant mutation in what art is, and he's been hugely influential on a lot of other artists and a lot of architects as well. It's profoundly American, what he's done, and, of course, he probably couldn't have done it if he'd been born here."

ONE summer evening in 1960, when Siah Armajani was in his last year at the Presbyterian missionary school in Teheran, he came home and was told that he would be going to college in America that fall. This was





“Care for a sleazeball?”

quite a surprise. He had spent the afternoon writing “Yankee Go Home” and “Death to Franco” on the walls of buildings, using an onion-and-wax medium that would be invisible until the sun hit it the next morning. He and his politically engaged friends were not especially anti-American, and Armajani concedes that he was not exactly sure at that time who Franco was; they were passionately opposed to the Shah, however, and his corrupt and repressive regime, whose power depended so largely on United States support. At any rate, it did not occur to him to question or oppose a decision handed down by his father.

The Armajanis belonged to the small but thriving Christian minority in Iran. Siah’s father, Aga Khan Armajani, had been educated at a Presbyterian missionary school in northern Iran, where the family lived then; most of his teachers had been Americans, and he had come away with a lifelong admiration for the United States. In time, Aga Khan had moved to Teheran, married, and become a successful merchant, an importer of silks from Europe. He sent all four of his children

to the Presbyterian missionary school in Teheran, and all four of them eventually went to live in the United States.

Siah’s memories of his childhood are mostly happy ones. He was the third in line of birth (there was an older sister, an older brother, and a younger brother), and he grew up in a large house full of books and traditional comforts, with some Western additions. His mother yearned to replace the ancestral furniture in the main sitting room with the kind of modern furniture that she saw in American magazines, and at length she engaged a carpenter to come and make some for her. He worked for several months in the basement of their house, copying from magazine photographs a fourteen-foot sofa with attached end tables. When he had finished, the piece was too large to get up the stairs. Mrs. Armajani was furious. “She told the carpenter that he was stupid,” Armajani recalls, “and the man said, with great dignity, that he was not going to talk with her anymore about it, that he would wait until her husband came home. When our father returned, the carpenter explained to

him that it was all a matter of luck. It had nothing to do with measurement, it was just his own bad luck—‘If I had been lucky, I would not be a poor carpenter working in your basement.’ Our father understood perfectly. He paid the man, and then he paid another carpenter to come and cut the sofa in half so he could move it upstairs and put it together again. My younger brother and I just could not stop laughing over this.”

For all his pro-American bias, Siah’s father did not approve of the forced Westernization of Iran under the Shah. “Like most of his class, he became increasingly disheartened by all that,” Armajani told me. “The old, oral ways of doing business were being replaced by written contracts and legalism, and eventually he just stopped, withdrew from business. What people have never understood is that the Iranian revolution was supported by the merchants and shopkeepers as well as by the peasants.” Christianity did not prevent the Armajanis from being deeply immersed in the Islamic culture of Iran, which differs from its Middle Eastern neighbors in being predominantly Shiite. Every Iranian child learns the story of the seventy-two Shiites who stood firm against an army of ten thousand Sunni Muslims: they could have escaped, but they chose to stand and be killed. “The story is told over and over, and the people weep every time,” Armajani explains. “The seventy-two represent the ideal, which lives on. This is the genesis of Shiite Islam. In Iran, defeat is always seen as the first step toward eventual victory. Shiism is not a happy religion. But on the periphery of Shiism there was always Sufism, tempering its severities. All educated people in Iran consider themselves Sufis. All Persian art, all Persian poetry come out of Sufism, which is not a sect but an alternative strategy. It is a civilizing and humanizing influence that works very quietly and without calling attention to itself. There is very little of the pronoun ‘I’ in Iran; it is considered bad form. People say ‘we,’ or they tell stories, to take away the personal edge.”

When Siah was still a young child, he decided he was going to be an artist. He has no idea why—there were no artists in the family. His father, a man of deep culture, who used to read Persian poems to the children every eve-

ning, arranged for him to study with a master painter and calligrapher. "He was terrifying," Armajani recalls. "The first day, he produced a couple of semi-rotten apples in a dish, gave me ink and brushes, and told me to paint them. He told me that I had no talent whatsoever and that he was taking me only as a favor to my father, and he used to strike me on the hands with a long ruler when I made a mistake. I studied with him only for six months—I couldn't stand it any longer—but in the end I really could draw."

During his last two years at the missionary school, Siah became interested in Western philosophy. Although ninety per cent of the students were not Christians, the school had a special course on the major Western philosophers, from Socrates to the German school of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. "There was very little discussion," Armajani remembers. "Mostly we just memorized texts." His attention was captured nevertheless. German philosophy and Islamic culture (humanized by Sufism) combined to develop in his young mind a persistent streak of idealism and a sense of ob-


ligation to others. In Iran, of course, loyalty to the family was the primary social duty. "I come from a very rigid, hierarchical culture," Armajani told me. "Every father there is a king, with the immediate family as his kingdom, and some fathers behave with great brutality." Aga Khan Armajani was never brutal, but since he was the eldest son of his father his authority extended beyond the household. His younger brother Yahya, Siah's uncle, would certainly have preferred to get his higher education in France, as most well-to-do Iranians did in those days, but he went to an American college instead, at Aga Khan's urging. Yahya graduated from Princeton with a degree in history, and he returned there a year later to get a master's degree in theology. On a subsequent lecture tour in the United States, he was invited to speak at Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and his talk there so impressed the staff and the administration that he was asked to stay on as a member of the faculty. Yahya accepted. He taught history at Macalester for the next thirty years, and his presence there explains why Siah was sent to a

medium-sized liberal-arts college in the American Middle West.

THERE is some uncertainty about Armajani's age when he arrived in this country. He usually cites 1939 as the year he was born, but birthdays are not celebrated in Iran, he says, and, chronology notwithstanding, he thinks he was nineteen when he got here, in the fall of 1960. A uniformed guard saw him racing with his bags through the terminal at Kennedy Airport, trying to make his connecting flight to Minneapolis-St. Paul. "Slow down, sonny," the man said, in a friendly voice. Armajani was so impressed that he did so. "I slowed down," he said. "I missed my flight. That sort of casual friendliness was the first thing that struck me here. Of course, I felt lost for a while, because of the language, and also because of the differences in behavior. In Persia, you never reveal yourself to a stranger, but here when you travel you reveal everything to the person in the next seat. It is impossible to be an exile in this country. I acquired friends, got involved in college life. I missed all that political activity I

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had been part of in Iran, but eventually I joined an Iranian students' organization called Friends of the Middle East. Later, we found out that the C.I.A. was paying the costs of our newspaper." At Macalester, he majored in philosophy, with a specific goal in mind. He wanted to find a framework for his social and political ideas. Macalester was then and still is a fount of Midwestern populist thinking, which appealed immediately and deeply to Armajani. Hubert Humphrey, who had taught at Macalester and was a friend of his Uncle Yahya's, became one of his heroes. It bothered him, though, that populism was so often misinterpreted as a movement geared to the lowest common denominator; to his mind, it was committed to making the highest achievements available to everyone—available, but not accessible. The distinction was important: what you achieved was up to you.

Even more important than populism, though, was his discovery, or, rather, rediscovery, of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In an effort to break away from European literary conventions, Emerson, working from German translations,

had at one time translated Persian poetry into English. Armajani had read the English translations as a child. Now, at Macalester, he found in Emerson's essays many of the ideas that had influenced Hegel and Nietzsche. "Emerson underlined the excitement, the unpredictable madness of America in terms of daily life," he told me. "Unpredictable because the past is forgotten intentionally. Emerson wanted to break away from Europe intellectually, and to develop a truly American context. This led to pragmatism rather than metaphysics, to anthropology rather than philosophy—to John Dewey's insistence that all ideas be tested according to their applicability to life."

One day in 1961, at the start of the fall term, Armajani wandered into a classroom where some students were sitting in groups and talking. His unobtrusive entrance was noticed by a student named Barbara Bauer, a young woman of Scandinavian and German descent, who had grown up in a small town near St. Paul. As she explains it, she had a sudden feeling that she must find a way to silence the fellow-

student who was chattering away on her right, so that she could concentrate on this decidedly un-Midwestern-looking stranger, because he was the person she was going to marry. She found out his name somehow, then went to the registrar's office and looked up his course schedule. After that, she managed it so that their paths crossed at least once a day. Eventually, he said hello, they started to talk, and that was that. "Siah never had a chance," Barbara jokes. They went together from then on, and they were married in 1967.

All through school in Iran and college in America, Armajani never deviated from his decision to be an artist. He was a relentless self-critic, though, and the only student works of his that survive are a few large black-and-white calligraphic paintings that he did at Macalester. They were made by inscribing lines of Persian poetry (in Persian) on every inch of the canvas, lines going in all directions and sometimes on top of other lines, impossible to read except in fragments. It was an attempt, perhaps, to hold on to his Middle Eastern roots in the heart of the American Middle West. Armajani

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had a hard time with European art history. He flunked the basic art-history course at Macalester six times, because he couldn't pass the tests in which slides of paintings were shown on a screen and students had to identify the artists. "At the end of each semester, I would ask if I could write a paper on Persian miniatures as a makeup exam," he said, "and the answer was always no. Finally, after six tries, I asked if I could write a paper on the Russian Constructivists and they said yes, and I passed. I was interested in the Constructivists because they were political, because there was no separation between the citizen and the artist—what we're trying to do now in public art. They are really our paradigm, Tatlin and Rodchenko and Malevich and the rest."

When Armajani graduated from college, in the spring of 1963, he found a cheap loft in downtown Minneapolis and started right in being an artist. "Siah always knew where he was going," Barbara Armajani told me. "He had no doubts at all, even in the beginning, and he never needed encouragement or recognition."

Since Armajani knew no other artists at the time, he was not aware that in order to be one you were supposed to go to New York. "By the time I found that out, it was too late—I was al-

ready established here," he recalls. He worked entirely on his own for several years, testing out ideas, reading philosophy, and shaking off what he had learned in college. He continued to work on black-and-white calligraphy paintings. The Walker Art Center had shown one of them in its biennial exhibition in 1962, and subsequently bought it for the permanent collection.

Minneapolis has a reputation for being exceptionally hospitable to the arts. Years of sustained patronage have enabled the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to build an impressive historical collection, and in the nineteen-sixties the Walker Art Center, under the imaginative direction of Martin Friedman, was turning into one of the best modern-art museums in the country. The Walker, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, and the Minneapolis Symphony are all generously funded, and several local foundations give grants to resident and non-resident artists. There is also the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, a hundred-and-three-year-old school that attracts art students from all over the country. Armajani was hired to teach there in 1968, along with another young artist, Barry Le Va. Arnold Herstand, the school's president at the time (he later became an art dealer in New York), hired Armajani and Le Va because he

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thought, on the basis of seeing their work and talking to them, that they would challenge and invigorate the students, and they more than fulfilled his hopes.

Le Va, who had recently graduated from the Otis Art Institute, in Los Angeles, took the job because Minneapolis was on the way to New York, where he wanted to be. He knew a lot more about the contemporary art world than Armajani did, and he really introduced him to conceptual art, which Armajani had been dabbling in without knowing that there was such a thing. Having graduated from Macalester with a major in philosophy and a minor in mathematics, Armajani had been spending some of his time in the computer lab at the University of Minnesota, experimenting with number progressions. Le Va filled him in on the work of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and other New York artists for whom ideas, concepts, and simulations had become not only the most important but virtually the sole aspect of their art work. Armajani and Le Va became close friends almost immediately, and, as first-year teachers teaching first-year art students, they called on one another for support both inside and outside the classroom. "I'd get him to lecture to my students, and I'd lecture to his students," Le Va recalls. "We both emphasized ideas over products, and tried to give the students other options." The options that Armajani presented to his students were mainly philosophical and political. He was in the process of developing his ideas about public art as a means of involving himself in American society, and his lectures helped him to sharpen his thinking. The students were responsive. Armajani took anti-authority positions on most of the political issues of the late sixties, and he told Sufi stories. Everybody laughed a lot in his classes. In one of the college yearbooks, there is a picture of Armajani on skates, being held up at the elbows by two giant Minnesota lads in hockey pads; they had talked him into being coach of the hockey team, mainly because he knew absolutely nothing about the game.

MINIMAL and conceptual art, the dominant aesthetic strategies of the late nineteen-sixties, appealed to Armajani's philosophical bent. He read the critical tracts that sometimes

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threatened to sink both movements in an avalanche of words, and he contributed a few works of his own to the conceptualist inventory. In 1968, he computed the height and diameter of a tower that would cast a three-hundred-and-sixty-mile shadow across the entire state of North Dakota, from one border to the other. (It would be eighteen miles high, and its tip would be two miles in diameter.) One of his mathematical projections was included in the "Information" show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, the first big museum exhibition of conceptual art. There was a note of absurdist humor in the North Dakota tower and other Armajani concepts—a note seldom detectable in the solemn cogitations of most of the other conceptualists. It was as though he could not take quite seriously an art whose content was the artist's thinking process. It had always been clear to him that his own art would require a social content, and by the late sixties he had come to feel that it must deal specifically with American life and American society. "Around that time, a new group of Iranian students had appeared over here, talking about Islam," he told me. "That was really something to behold. My generation had been trying to find salvation through a synthesis of Eastern and Western civilization, but the new generation rejected all that, and they were very self-assured about it. That's when I decided to become an American citizen." To get a firmer conceptual grip on what America was and how it had developed, he had also begun to teach himself about early American building methods and structures, from log cabins and wooden bridges to Jefferson's designs for Monticello. "I decided to cast my lot with architecture, which by its very nature is social," he said. This did not mean that he had decided to become an architect, or even that he wanted his work to be primarily functional. His idea was to use architecture—pragmatic, vernacular, American architecture—as a frame of reference for an art that would be relevant to his adopted society.

That art was obviously going to be sculpture. One of the earliest examples of it was "First Bridge," which he built in 1968, on an open field he had bought for the purpose in the town of White Bear Lake, some twenty miles north of St. Paul. "First Bridge" was a hundred-and-twenty-five-foot-long

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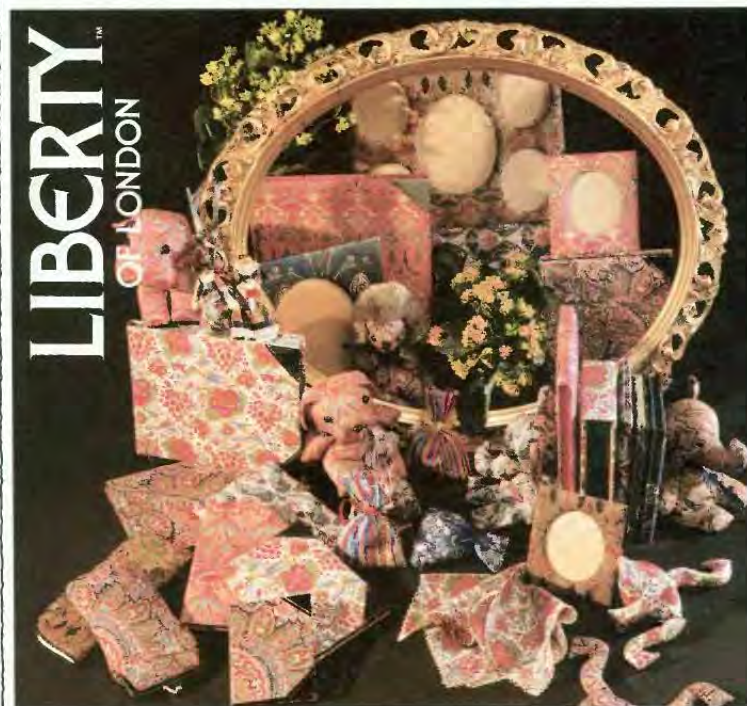


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covered wooden bridge whose height diminished progressively from ten feet at one end to four feet at the other. Its function was conceptual: to make an apparent visual experience a real one. When we start across a covered bridge, the far end of it always looks smaller than the end we enter. The far end of "First Bridge" actually was smaller, but that did not become evident until the viewer was halfway across. "I was just trying to investigate bridge structure physically, perceptually, and conceptually," Armajani explained to me. He had never seen a covered bridge at that time, only photographs of covered bridges. This one looked very much like the real thing (except for the foreshortening); it was made of weathered boards nailed together in practical-carpentry style.

Two years later, an Armajani bridge was part of an exhibition at the Walker Art Center. This singularly ill-fated show, called "9 Artists/9 Spaces," was the brainchild of a young curator named Richard Koshalek, who is now the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "The idea was to get artists to do things in vacant lots, dark alleys, and dead places around town, and bring them to life," Koshalek recalls. "What you have to remember, though, is that in those days, the late sixties and early seventies, there was practically no audience for contemporary art in Minneapolis. People in the major corporations would tell you they wanted nothing to do with it. It was also a very volatile period, with a lot of anti-establishment demonstrations going on." The first of the nine art works to be unveiled was Ron Brodigan's "Untitled," a quarter-mile length of galvanized-steel tubing that snaked and burrowed its way through sizable chunks of a Minneapolis park that happened to be the gathering place for a tribe of local hippies. Within a few hours, the hippies had stamped it flat, and then they demolished it. Misfortune next descended upon a neon-and-asphalt assemblage by Fred Escher, in a black neighborhood in St. Paul; this one ran afoul of the local Model Cities program office, which denounced it as "irrelevant to the black community" and brought about its removal.

William Wegman's thirty-five-foot-long billboard painting of the Foshay Tower (a Minneapolis landmark), looking highly realistic but lying on its side, disappeared overnight from its site on the University of Minnesota campus; some days later, it was learned that agents of the F.B.I., who apparently saw in the work an incitement to bombing, had removed and confiscated it. (A bomb had gone off in the mathematics lab at the University of Wisconsin that summer, killing a research student.) Inside the Walker, museum staffers doctored a poster



to read "7 ARTISTS/7 SPACES" and then "6 ARTISTS/6 SPACES." Next, Richard Treiber's "Elevated Brush Pile," a wooden platform with a huge pile of brush on top, which had been installed on the Court of Honor in front of the state capitol, in St. Paul, was denounced by one of the legislators as an insult to the war dead; the Fire Department declared it a fire hazard and carted it away.

Siah Armajani's contribution to the show miraculously failed to offend anyone, although its installation was fraught with difficulties. Installed on a field near the Walker Art Center (a site that is now part of the sculpture garden), it was a "Covered Foot Bridge," eighty-five feet long, that rose up sharply at its midpoint to go over a six-foot pine tree. The tree had been planted first, while the bridge was under construction elsewhere. The night before the bridge was moved to the site, Koshalek noticed that the pine tree had turned brown. He went out after dark and sprayed it with green paint. Then, the next day, while Armajani, Koshalek, and several other people stood by waiting for a work crew to unload the bridge from a flat-bed truck, the whole thing suddenly slid off and fell to the ground. "Everybody looked with horror at Siah, who seemed completely unfazed," Koshalek recalls. "He said, 'It was supposed to do that.'" Luckily, the damage was slight, and "Bridge Over a Tree," as it has been referred to ever since, amused and perplexed viewers for the duration of the show, after which it was dismantled and taken away.

Armajani was also building houses then—models of houses, half scale or

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smaller, in which he continued his conceptual investigation of structure and meaning. He built them out of cheap lumber, using the practical, rough-and-ready methods of early American carpenters, but they did not look very practical. Walls, ceilings, windows, floors, and other elements, although recognizable as such, did not relate to each other in the ways that one would expect, and the interior spaces were highly eccentric. What he was really doing was deconstructing the idea of a house. "I was trying to take apart and decipher each separate element, and then put the elements back together according to a larger context," he said. "There are always two historical patterns at work—the past that once was present, and the past that still conditions the present. Folk art versus the vernacular. By deconstructing, we suppress the priority of the past." According to Armajani, the American understanding of history is pragmatic and is oriented toward the present. In trying to get at what was truly and actively American in American vernacular architecture, though, he seemed to be moving in a strange direction. For all its homely materials and straightforward carpentry, the work was becoming increasingly hermetic, private, and indecipherable. There was nothing open, available, or useful about his wooden house models. When I asked him about this, his reply, as usual, was succinct. "It is always through the idea of the usefulness of an object that I become acquainted with it," he said. "This usefulness can be functional, or perceptual, or spiritual. It can provoke ideas without being functional."

Ideas were what mattered. Armajani's mind was so taken up with ideas that he had trouble driving a car. He had a number of accidents, none of them very serious because he never drove fast. He sideswiped other cars, and went through red lights. Once, while he was driving back from the airport, his attention was caught by a billboard put up by a religious group: "It showed Christ, Pontius Pilate, and a crowd of people behind them, and underneath it said in big letters 'What Would You Do?' My God, what a question!" The next moment, Armajani felt a substantial impact, and, looking out to the side, he found that his car had gone right up the back of the car in front of him, which had stopped for a light. "I was actually on top of that



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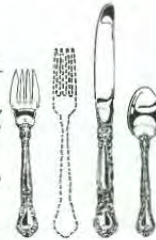
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car," he said. The woman driving the other car got out, unhurt. The police assumed that Armajani was drunk, but they were proved wrong. He got off with a stiff fine.

"Because I was in so many accidents, I had an attorney, Mr. Byrne," Armajani told me. "One day when we were having lunch together, somebody telephoned him from Jackson, Minnesota, to say that they wanted to bring their town into the twentieth century, and did he have any ideas? Mr. Byrne said, 'I have just the right person sitting next to me.' We flew over there a day or so later in a small plane." Jackson, a rural town of about thirty-five hundred people, wanted help in saving its eight-block central business district, which was losing all its business to highway shopping centers. Armajani became deeply involved in the problem, and he ended up working with the townspeople, off and on, for the next four years. He conferred with the local citizens' committee and with the store owners, he put high-school students and teachers to work doing research on how the street used to look, and he drew up plans for restoring the buildings to their nineteenth-century purity. (The way to enter the twentieth century, apparently, was to bring back the nineteenth.) Each store owner assumed the cost of his building's restorations, and because the work was considered maintenance, not capital improvement, there was no increase in property taxes. It was a wonderful experience for Armajani: "I learned that in order to do something like that you had to get right in and deal with the tax structure, with the businesspeople, and with the politicians."

ARMAJANI was getting more and more invitations to lecture at colleges and universities outside Minneapolis. He could be a mesmerizing talker when he warmed to his subject, and his subject, much of the

time, was the need for a new approach to public art. Surprisingly little thought had been given to this question, or to the contradiction that lay at the heart of it. In the past, public art works commemorated real people or real events, or else they provided a symbolic reminder of shared, communal values. Most modern art, however, was self-contained; it had jettisoned the age-old task of representation in order to become a thing-in-itself, and, if it referred to the world outside, it often did so in ways that were not easily apparent to the layman. To be sure, a good deal of quasi-public art had been produced in the years since the Second World War; the most familiar examples of it were large-scale sculptures by Alexander Calder and Henry Moore, commissioned by corporate clients and set down in front of the high-rise steel-and-glass office towers that were making the business districts of so many American cities look so much alike. A big, semi-abstract Henry Moore worked against uniformity. It helped to soften the hard edges of the International Style, and it also served to suggest that the corporation was mindful

of culture and of human values—or so the client hoped. But could such works really be called public? The public, for the most part, seemed to accept them with an equanimity that was barely distinguishable from indifference. The public seemed to accept anything that the corporation chose to enhance its image with, even totally abstract and anti-formal sculptures by artists who were far less gifted than Calder or Moore—all those bent tubes in plazas—but there was always the suspicion that such works meant little or nothing to the people who passed by them every day on their way to and from work.

A great many more artists began doing public art in the late sixties and the early seventies, when the federal government, after years of providing no direct support for the arts, discovered that there was a significant arts constituency in this country. The National Endowment for the Arts, established in 1965, began in 1967 to make grants to public-art projects initiated at the state and local level. The General Services Administration, the huge bureaucracy whose functions include contracting for all new government

buildings throughout the country, activated in 1973 a dormant per-cent-for-art program, which commissioned art works for hundreds of new federal buildings. A number of state governments followed suit, and artists of all kinds—sculptors, painters, printmakers, ceramicists, weavers—began getting commissions for work in public places. All this involved public money, of course, and there were a few cases where the public, whose tax dollars were paying for it, took issue with the results. The citizens of Grand Rapids, Michigan, rose up in anger when their elected authorities applied for N.E.A. funds and commissioned a large Calder stabile for the main square. That was the first N.E.A. grant for public art, in 1967, and much has been made of the fact that popular sentiment in



"Of course, if you feel you must pick up the tab..."

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Grand Rapids eventually turned in favor of the Calder work, "La Grande Vitesse," to such a degree that its image is now used on the mayor's stationery, on the sides of the city's garbage trucks, and on every downtown street sign. The sculpture apparently came to stand for something, then, but what? Civic pride? The conquest of Babbitt? The importance of a logo in a world where image is everything?

Large sculptures like "La Grande Vitesse" raise the question of monumentality, which was an important aspect of earlier public art. The public monument, larger than life-size and raised above eye level, used to convey a heroic or an otherworldly message. Today, such messages are out of fashion; they embarrass us. Some of the Abstract Expressionists in the nineteen-forties and fifties tried to hit the note of heroism in their paintings, and it was this aspect of their work that the next generation, the Pop-art generation, reacted against with such derisive élan. Claes Oldenburg's drawings of proposed colossal monuments, such as the vast toilet float for the Thames in London or the giant Teddy bear for Central Park, were viewed as great jokes; to the surprise of many people, though, several of his proposals were subsequently commissioned, and built to monumental scale—a hundred-foot-high steel baseball bat in Chicago, for example, and a forty-five-foot-high clothespin in Philadelphia. Oldenburg's anti-monuments are in tune with late-twentieth-century America, but this may be another way of saying that monumentality itself is no longer valid. The most successful monument in recent years is Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Washington, D.C.—a polished, V-shaped black granite slab bearing the name of every American serviceman killed in Vietnam. It is set into the earth on the Mall and is virtually invisible until you walk right up to it—the antithesis of the vertical man-on-horseback or the triumphal arch. "I think in a real democracy you should not look up at anything," Armajani has said. "Everything should be at eye level. And in this particular democracy you don't need heroes."

At some point during the nineteen-seventies, the term "site-specific" came into vogue as a justification for art works in public places. The term had



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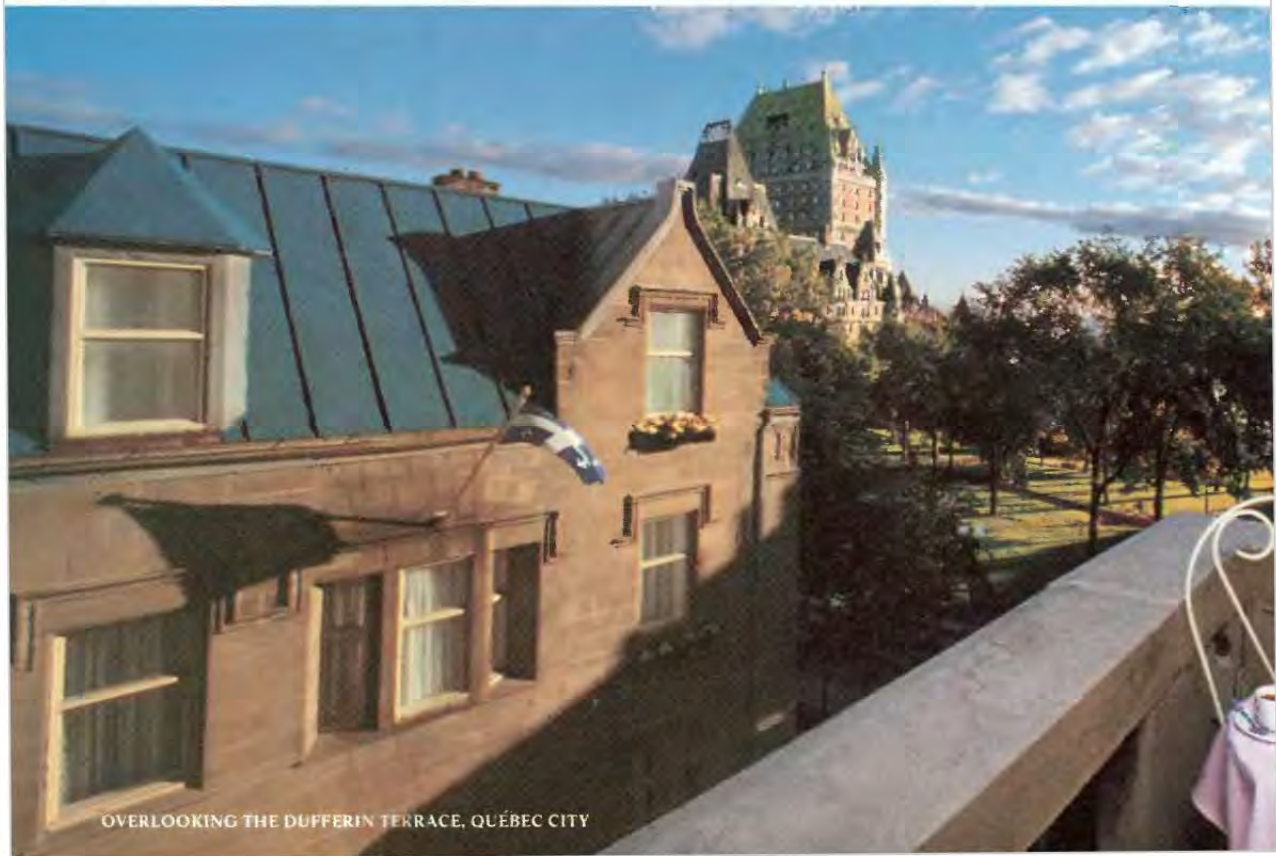
been used originally by the earth artists, whose work was by no means public; financed by their dealers or by private sponsors, they used bulldozers and other heavy-duty equipment to alter the landscape in areas remote from human habitation. (The best-known earthwork was Robert Smithson's earth-and-rock "Spiral Jetty," in Utah's Great Salt Lake.) Other artists liked the term, however, and soon nearly every new sculpture or wall hanging in a public place was being referred to as site-specific. This meant, presumably, that the artist had studied every aspect of the site and then had made a work that related to it directly, either in harmony or in opposition. All too often, though, what those works seemed to relate to most specifically was the artist's previous work. Another term, "plop art," was coined to describe a studio sculpture that had simply been blown up in scale and plopped down in a public setting. Some of the architecturally related sculpture of the last fifteen years has been brilliantly successful in its own terms—works such as Jean Dubuffet's "Group of Four Trees," in Chase Manhattan

Plaza, in Manhattan, and Isamu Noguchi's sculpture garden for the Beinecke Library, at Yale. (Noguchi was making proposals as early as the nineteen-thirties for projects that anticipated both earth art and the most recent public art; not many of his designs were realized, but the ones that were—for example, the UNESCO Garden in Paris and "Two Bridges" in Hiroshima—establish him as the most significant public artist of his time.) There is no doubt, though, that a great deal of mediocre public art has come into existence here since 1970. This in itself is not so surprising. Many of the equestrian statues and portrait busts that were put up in parks and town squares in the last century were mediocre, too, though at least the public could (and maybe still can) feel some sort of personal relationship to them. What is surprising is that so few artists and so few government or corporate sponsors felt the need to rethink or redefine the nature of public art in contemporary terms, or to ask themselves how contemporary painting and sculpture, which are essentially private in their appeal, and refer principally to

other art, could operate effectively in a non-art setting.

MARCH 19, 1990

ARMAJANI's bridge and house models appeared in a number of group exhibitions in the nineteen-seventies, including one at the Clocktower in New York. In 1974, he started to work on a series of architectural objects which he called his "Dictionary of Building." Each of these was a study of a particular element in domestic architecture—a door, a window, a piece of furniture—presented sometimes in isolation and sometimes in relation to another element. From 1974 to 1978, he made hundreds of these in small scale, out of cardboard, and after 1978 he made them in larger scale, of more durable materials. "What I was trying to do was put together an index of art and architectural possibilities," he told me. "All the physical properties of doors, windows, and so forth, such as a chair against a wall, or a chair by a window." At the same time, he was designing structures based on Jefferson's plan for Monticello. Armajani wanted to absorb Jefferson's political thinking



OVERLOOKING THE DUFFERIN TERRACE, QUÉBEC CITY

architecturally, by immersing himself in what he considered Jefferson's attempt to define and develop an American architectural style in which a building was based on the equality of its parts. In Armajani's versions of Monticello, though, the architectural ideas are dissected and reassembled in such a way that walls meet ceilings at strange angles, and every proportion is askew. In 1978, when Armajani was invited to participate in the new-talent show at the Guggenheim Museum, in New York, he commandeered the museum's entire ground floor for an architectural piece called "Lissitsky's Neighborhood, Center House." A sprawling, chaotic-looking wooden structure on many levels, it paid homage to the Constructivist artist El Lissitsky while employing the methods and materials of early American builders. Linda Shearer, the Guggenheim curator who selected the artists for the show, said later that she had been surprised by Armajani's sculpture. "It struck me that this very unaggressive man had made a very aggressive piece," she said. "But in an odd way it was accessible to the ordinary viewer,

who could go inside and climb around and wonder what made it art."

Up to this point, none of Armajani's work had been functional. Its main purpose had been to test or refine certain ideas—a legitimate function in his terms but hardly the open, available, useful sort of art that he eventually came to envisage. Toward the end of the seventies, though, he began to design a series of "reading rooms" and "reading gardens" that show him moving in the direction of art-for-use. Reading, of course, is the key to the democratic experiment, the essential first step on the road to responsible citizenship. The spaces that Armajani conceived for this purpose were neither comfortable nor particularly inviting, as they might have been if he had addressed reading primarily as a form of pleasure. The furniture consisted of tables and hard wooden benches, and the fragmented, odd-angled geometry of the surrounding elements did not offer much privacy. What he was doing, once again, was largely conceptual: the *idea* of reading made manifest through architecture. Most of the reading spaces were done as temporary

installations, but one has become permanent. Having been commissioned to do a work for the "Art at the Olympics" program in 1979, Armajani went to Lake Placid, the Winter Olympics site, found a vacant lot on a quiet residential street, brought in some benches and tables and placed them where they would get the best light during the day, and proceeded to build a wood-frame house around them. This odd-shaped "Reading House" is still there ten years later, although nobody uses it for reading.

Written texts became an element in Armajani's work in 1980. Persian architecture often has quotations from the Koran worked into its decorative scheme, and Armajani, whose calligraphy paintings showed a reverence for the combination of word and image, had been thinking for some time about using written texts in his architectural pieces. He did so for the first time in a "Meeting Garden" that he constructed for the annual invitational show at Artpark, in Lewiston, New York. He was very uneasy about doing it; he had made a space for a quotation, but he hesitated to put it in until the last



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moment. "I'd been feeling that my pieces didn't provoke people enough," he explained to me. "It seemed that a written text could be the catalyst I was looking for, to make a connection and bring people together, but I was afraid that people might think the whole project was designed for the quotation. I wanted it to be one part of the experience but not the whole point."

The quotation he chose was from John Dewey's "Art as Experience," and it appeared in stencilled capitals high on the wall of a shedlike structure at the far end of the garden: "AS LONG AS ART IS THE BEAUTY PARLOR OF CIVILIZATION, NEITHER ART NOR CIVILIZATION IS SECURE."

He must have felt that this text worked the way he wanted it to, because he has used quotations in his work ever since: Emerson in an "Office for Four," commissioned by the Hudson River Museum in 1981; Walt Whitman for an "Employee Lounge," at the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C., in 1981; Robert Frost for a "Poetry Lounge," at the California Institute of Technology, in Pasadena, in 1982; Whitman again for a "Louis Kahn Lecture Room," in Philadelphia, in 1982. These spaces were more readily available for human use than the earlier reading rooms had been. Although their furniture was rudimentary and their amenities were Spartan—the "Office for Four" consisted of four wood-frame cubicles, each of which contained a bench, a table, and a coatrack, and had a naked forty-watt light bulb in the ceiling—they could be, and actually were, used for the purposes intended, more or less. (A writer and a seamstress worked in two of the four "offices" at the Hudson River Museum for the run of the show.) The "Louis Kahn Lecture Room," which had been commissioned as a permanent installation by the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, is used today as a meeting room, a small lecture hall, and a gallery for changing exhibitions of Louis Kahn's architectural drawings. The Kahn room is a wonderfully clear evocation of Armajani's democratic thinking. The speaker's platform is low and understated, and the seating—straight-backed wooden benches set diagonally against one wall—leaves most of the floor space free for the display of a quotation from "Leaves of Grass," which is inlaid in the form of a rectan-

gle. Armajani had discovered in his research for the commission that Louis Kahn once studied art at the Fleisher; his decision to dedicate the room to Kahn so touched the architect's widow that she donated one of his drawings to the school, and she has continued to lend others to the changing exhibitions of Kahn's work.

THE questions about contemporary public art that were largely ignored in the nineteen-sixties and seventies came to the fore with considerable urgency in the eighties. Artists and patrons alike, it appeared, were troubled by the proliferation of self-referential abstract sculptures in plazas and in front of new buildings. Many artists came to feel that their work was being used to pretty up bad buildings, which was often the case. Quite a few architects objected to the commissioning of art works that they felt were inappropriate for the spaces they had designed. The public, meanwhile—the formerly docile and largely accepting public—was beginning to show its teeth. A great many office workers in lower Manhattan objected violently to Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," a massive sculpture in the form of a leaning steel wall, twelve feet high and a hundred and twenty feet long, which bisected the pedestrian plaza in front of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building, on Foley Square. The public dispute over "Tilted Arc" dragged on for eight years, and ended acrimoniously, last March, with the sculpture's removal by the General Services Administration, which had commissioned it. Serra fought tenaciously against its removal, claiming breach of contract and impairment of his rights to freedom of speech and expression. "Tilted Arc" was site-specific, he insisted; to remove it from the site was to destroy it. (Nobody seemed to notice that there was a strikingly similar curved steel wall by Serra, the "St. Johns Rotary Arc," installed across town at the Holland Tunnel exit, a site differing in almost every respect from Foley Square.) He and his partisans warned that the G.S.A. could never again expect an artist to sign a contract with the government, and he cited Nazi book burnings and other grim precedents. None of those arguments deterred the local G.S.A. administrator, William Diamond—who had said even before the public hearings on "Tilted Arc" that

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he favored "relocating" the piece—from recommending and accomplishing its eventual removal, and the wrath of the art world lies heavy on his head.

Behind all the rhetoric, though, some interesting questions were raised. Should a work of art that is intended for a public space be judged by the same criteria as a work of art that is intended for a private collector or a museum? Should the public—or, anyway, that part of the public which is in immediate, everyday contact with the work—have a voice in its selection, and, if so, how much of a voice? (People can choose whether or not to look at works of art in museums, but with public art no such choice is possible.) What is to be done if a work of public art, after a sufficient period in situ, is perceived to have been a mistake—perceived not only by the layman but by what the champions of "Tilted Arc" kept referring to as "qualified observers"? Museums make mistakes of this kind, and so do private collectors; the results are then sold or put in storage. Some of Serra's most fervent art-world supporters thought that "Tilted Arc" was a mistake, in the sense that it did not "work" successfully in the architectural context of Foley Square.

One of the effects of the "Tilted Arc" fiasco was to throw into sharper relief the new kind of public art that was evolving in the work of Armajani and certain other artists. Most of these artists admired Serra, and some of them were his friends, but the truth was that their approach to work in public spaces was virtually the antithesis of his. "It is not the business of art to deal with human needs," Serra has said. Serra perceives himself as an artist in the early-modern, "heroic" mold, an artist who wants to impose his monumental sculptural forms upon a society that probably will not understand them for years to come; the audience for his work, he often says, is a limited one. Serra's work was in many museums throughout the world, and his reputation as a major artist was secure. For Armajani and others, though, art in public places was not the same as the great modern art in museums. They were not interested in creating unique, individual works of art, no matter how site-specific; what they wanted was a chance to work with public spaces in their entirety—to articulate them in ways that were useful, exhilarating, and aesthetically pleasing. Scott Bur-



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ton said that in a public space it might not even be possible to point to a specific "work" by the artist; the work would be the space itself, and its effect on the people in it. All this would require a certain abandonment of ego on the artist's part. It would require a willingness to collaborate with others—architects, engineers, municipal authorities, local community groups—and an ability to deal with political and social realities. The danger was that those pressures from the outside, non-art sphere would neutralize the artist's vision and keep it from operating effectively, but that seemed a risk worth taking. Armajani was under no illusions that the sort of work he wanted to do would appeal to everybody. "Public art is not popular art," he told me. "It is public because it is out there, but the lowest common denominator is not what rules. I feel we need a dialogue with the public, but that doesn't mean accepting a lot of restrictive conditions. It does mean some interplay with the public, and some shared assumptions."



What those shared assumptions might be has not yet become clear, to Armajani or to anyone else. In the early nineteen-eighties, though, a few farsighted sponsors were casting about for new approaches to public art. One of the most imaginative patrons was the City of Seattle, which in 1973 had set aside one per cent of its capital-improvement funds for spending on the arts. Seattle came up with an innovative program to involve local artists in all kinds of municipal projects, from sidewalks to electrical substations. In 1981, the Seattle Arts Commission initiated and coordinated an ambitious, federally funded project involving five artists—Armajani, Burton, Martin Puryear, George Trakas, and Douglas Hollis—on the grounds of the Western Regional Center of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. The site was a broad strip of land that lay between the NOAA complex and Lake Washington; it had been owned for fifty years by the United States Navy, which had kept it off limits to the public. The five artists came to Seattle to survey the site, and they came back a number of times after that to meet and talk with NOAA officials and employees and to attend meetings of local citizens who wanted to know what was being done with the land. It became a real public-art pro-

cess. Armajani tried to persuade the four other artists to work together with him on a single, over-all plan for the site; three agreed, but the fourth did not, so each one chose his own spot and did something different. The five environmental works, spread out over the site and connected by footpaths, did end up complementing one another in various ways, though, and not one of them looked like a piece of sculpture. Puryear's concrete-and-glass mound resembled the top of a large, spherical rock buried in the earth. Burton, the most function-oriented of the new public artists, dredged up glacial rocks from the lake and shaped them into rough-hewn chairs and benches. Trakas built a wood-and-steel platform at the shoreline, a place where you could get close to the water and view the wildflowers that grew there. Hollis built a "sound garden" of tall steel poles that produced muted sounds when the wind blew. Armajani's contributions were two chunky, concrete bridges, spanning low spots in the terrain and bearing, on their railings and their arched walkways, an extended quotation from "Moby Dick." One of the NOAA scientists, in describing his research to the five artists, had quoted from "Moby Dick" on the proliferation of ocean fishes, and this had given Armajani the idea. At the last of the public meetings in Seattle, after an eloquent and stirring statement by Burton on public art, Armajani got up and said simply that people could like or dislike his bridges but they couldn't say anything against Melville. Then he sat down, to sustained applause.

AT about the same time that Armajani and Burton were asked to take part in the NOAA project, they were also invited to enter a competition for a major public commission in New York City. The site was a three-and-a-half-acre waterfront plaza in Battery Park City, the huge (ninety-two-acre) addition to lower Manhattan which had been created in large part by taking the earth and rock excavated to build the World Trade Center and using them as landfill in the Hudson River. Conceived in 1968 as a mixed commercial and residential district, Battery Park City had become a municipal nightmare. The project had run out of funds and had lain dormant from 1974 to 1979, when the state's Urban Devel-

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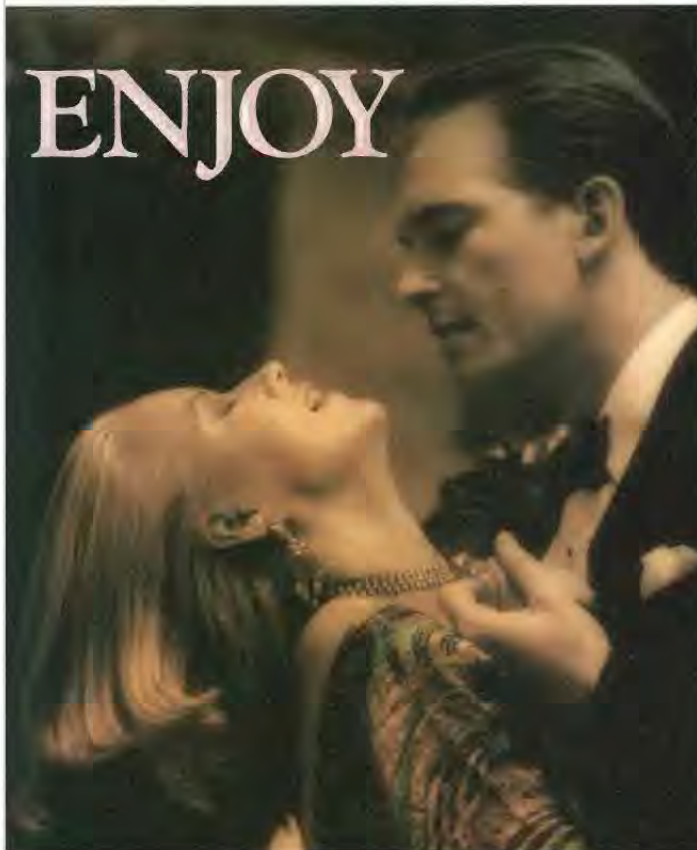
opment Corporation took it over and drew up a new master plan, under which forty-two per cent of the area would be residential, nine per cent would be commercial, and thirty per cent would be open public space. (The remaining nineteen per cent was needed for streets and sidewalks.) Richard Kahan, the first chairman of a revamped Battery Park City Authority, pushed through a novel provision under which real-estate developers involved in the project had to set aside a small percentage of their total budget to commission works of art in the public spaces, and a Fine Arts Committee was appointed to advise the authority on art and artists. The chairman of this committee was Victor Ganz, a well-known collector and a trustee of the Whitney Museum. Ganz had done a good deal of thinking about public art. He had spent a summer refreshing his memories of the Piazza Navona, in Rome, the Place des Vosges, in Paris, and other great public spaces in Europe, and one of his conclusions had been that Battery Park City could do without "plop art." It turned out that most of the members of

his committee, which included several museum curators and art historians, felt the same way. There was, in addition, a nearly unanimous consensus on the committee that instead of asking artists to make something for a space that was already a *fait accompli* the artists should be brought in at the earliest stages of the design process, so that their thinking could become part of that process.

The first public space scheduled for completion under the master plan was the large waterfront plaza. It embraced a rectangular indentation in the waterfront called the North Cove, and it was going to be bounded on the east side by the World Financial Center, a complex of four high-rise office buildings being designed by Cesar Pelli. Architecturally speaking, it was a difficult site, with a wide, asymmetrical center section and two wings enclosing the North Cove. It was estimated that between eighty thousand and a hundred thousand office workers were going to pass through it every day. The waterfront plaza would be one of the main orientation points in Battery Park City, and, in view of its importance,

Ganz's committee decided to sponsor a competition among a selected group of artists, who would be asked to visit the site and come up with a plan for its development. After months of deliberation, the list was narrowed down to seven candidates: Robert Irwin, Athena Tacha, Robert Morris, Richard Fleischner, Harriet Feigenbaum, and Siah Armajani and Scott Burton, who were asked to work together as a team. (The team suggestion came from Linda Shearer, the former Guggenheim curator, who was at that time the executive director of the nonprofit organization Artists Space. Shearer knew Burton and Armajani well, and she thought their ideas would complement each other, a notion with which both artists immediately concurred.) When the committee voted subsequently to award the commission to Armajani and Burton, one of the deciding elements was a sense that they would be able to keep their own artistic egos in check, and collaborate not only with each other but with all the players in the high-stakes game of urban development.

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Pelli. A brilliantly successful architect with an international reputation, he had been horrified to learn that he was going to have to collaborate with an artist (or artists) on the design for the plaza. Unable to head off this unpleasant intrusion into what he considered his own design responsibility, he had insisted on adding two artists of his choosing, Fleischner and Feigenbaum, to the list of finalists. He attended the daylong meeting during which the artists, one after another, presented their ideas and their scale models to the Fine Arts Committee. "Naturally, I had my own ideas about the plaza," Pelli told me last spring. "The plaza was an integral part of the design of the buildings: it not only had to be beautiful on its own, it had to be right for the buildings. My fears were compounded by several of the artists' proposals, which may have been very good in themselves but certainly would not have been good for the buildings. There was also another reason for my concern. I did not look forward to being saddled with the task of controlling people who might turn out to be capricious, erratic, and uncontrollable." After the artists had made their

presentations at the meeting, the committee asked Pelli for his reactions. Robert Irwin's proposal had been by far the most impressively thought-out in terms of the site and the architecture of the World Financial Center, he said, but it had left little or no room for adjustment and collaboration. The artists he would feel most comfortable working with, he said, were Armajani and Burton. Pelli's statement carried considerable weight with some committee members, but it irritated others. In the end, the committee members voted for Armajani and Burton because they liked their plan, but they also thought that Armajani and Burton could hold their own in dealing with Pelli.

By some miracle of personality and self-restraint, the collaboration turned out to be a real one. Pelli, who was born in Argentina, is a courtly and considerate man and also a highly intelligent one. In his early meetings with Armajani and Burton, he had the grace to set aside his own thoughts about the plaza and to focus exclusively on theirs. The two artists had made a detailed scale model that divided the plaza into three main areas. The north

as underground plumbing and wiring, and, as a result, one design element after another had to be scrapped or scaled down. There were also some difficulties in communication. Armajani and Burton would talk about using water in a certain area—thinking of water as a material, like stone or foliage—and Pelli's architectural staff would translate that into "fountain," which the artists hadn't meant at all. After several weeks of meetings and discussions, though, the three men understood each other a lot better, and a feeling of mutual trust developed. A similar process unfolded in their subsequent association with M. Paul Friedberg, the landscape architect who had been assigned by Olympia & York, the developer, as a fourth member of the design team. "Siah's philosophical view gave me another perspective on the work I've been engaged in for the last thirty years," Friedberg said later.

At the end of four months, however, so many problems had emerged in relation to the Armajani-Burton design that the two artists decided to put it aside and start again from scratch. "Pelli allowed us to tear our own scheme apart," Burton said afterward.

MARCH 19, 1990

end, which would get full sun year-round, was to be a sort of winter garden, with shelter from the wind, and tables and chairs, and a feeling of warm brick and stone. The south end would be mostly gardens—a formal garden and an informal garden—with running water and lots of shade to help people stay cool on hot days. The central section was to remain mostly open space, but the inner wall of the cove, on the water, would be built out in the form of a large arc, to provide a point of focus for the entire waterfront plaza.

From the start, the main problems were financial. The budget for the plaza itself had been set at thirteen million dollars, but hidden costs kept cropping up, for such necessities

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"It was a very generous act on their part," Pelli said. "An extraordinary demonstration of maturity."

As Armajani saw it, "the great thing was that Cesar was willing to listen, and so were we."

Their true collaboration began at this point. It involved a constant effort to reconcile the differences between an architect's need for careful planning and strict cost accounting and an artist's need for an experimental, trial-and-error approach. "We spent many hours discussing what working in the public arena really meant," Pelli says, "and we found that, by and large, we all thought alike—the main goals were shared. But in smaller matters there were as many differences between Scott and Siah as there were between them and me!"

Burton was more committed to functionalism than Armajani was. A mercurial, effervescent man who began as a painter, spent ten years as a writer, and then was drawn back into the visual area as a conceptualist and performance artist, he had found his real direction in the early seventies, as a maker of sculpture that functions as furniture—rock chairs, onyx tables with interior light sources, wood and metal and glass pieces that are powerfully sculptural but can also be used. Burton died last December, of AIDS, at the age of fifty. None of his many friends mourned him more deeply than Armajani did. During the initial stages of their work together on the Battery Park City competition model, Burton had gone out to stay with Barbara and Siah in St. Paul. The Armajanis, who have no children, live comfortably and quite conventionally in a Victorian house that they have restored to its original, 1903 condition. Both of them work very hard, and Burton, whose New York life used to take place mainly at night, discovered during his stay with them the discreet charm of regular hours. He got up at six every morning, had a big breakfast, spent all day working in the Minneapolis studio, came back to a large, hot dinner (Barbara is an accomplished cook), and went to bed early, and in the process he came to admire Armajani even more than he had before. "I've never known anyone else who is so spontaneously a good person," Burton told me afterward. "There's something Tolstoyan about Siah, although he's not a moralizer. He can be fierce and unyielding



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when he disagrees, but he projects an extraordinary aura of kindness. He accepts me, although my life couldn't be more different from his. We do argue, of course. We often argue about functionalism—he keeps urging me not to forget the nonfunctional elements in functional works. Siah and I had our only serious fight in one of those meetings with Pelli, over the issue of monumentality. Siah was very much against putting a vertical element in the middle of the plaza. I wanted something in that particular spot, a sort of centering device, but he was against it. His philosophy is not ever to be impressive or authoritarian. I have a perverse fascination with those elements. I'd had the idea that we could get a lot of nineteenth-century bronze sculptures from other parts of the city, things that were in bad repair, maybe, and group them there. And then I'd had the notion of getting a cast of Bartholdi's half-size model for the Statue of Liberty—it's in Paris, I think. Cesar loved that idea, but Siah hated it; he thought it was cynical. Maybe he was right. Anyway, the question of the vertical element in the plaza was finally resolved. We noticed that the arcade of Cesar's building had rather squat columns, and we decided to take those as sort of 'found' dimensions for a central column, or torchère, with a light on top. Siah could agree with this when we took it from the arcade—there was a rationale."

The waterfront plaza was opened to the public in the spring of 1989. A few of the artists' original design elements are there, including the formal and informal gardens, at the south end, and the wide, sweeping arc that extends the plaza out over the water in the North Cove. (The cove itself is now being leased as an anchorage for oceangoing yachts, a development that nobody on the design team had anticipated.) Scott Burton's handiwork shows in the simple, elegant stone tables and seats at the north end; the railing that divides the central section, with quotations from poems by Walt Whitman and Frank O'Hara worked into the design in large individual bronze letters, is clearly Armajani's. But the unified design of the plaza is a true collaboration, and most of the features that were not part of the Armajani-Burton competition model came about as a result of the collaborative process. A lot of good ideas fell victim to the budgetary axe

along the way. The arc almost did. Both the Battery Park City Authority and Olympia & York tried again and again to delete the arc, because it was going to cost so much, but the artists would not give an inch on that issue. For both of them, the experience was a harrowing one but on the whole a good one; they learned a lot, and, if the end result was something less than they had hoped for, it was still an impressive demonstration of what artists could do in the public arena. Pelli has said that the completed plaza is better than the original Armajani-Burton design and better than anything he would have designed on his own, and the reactions of other architects and of architecture critics and the public have so far been highly enthusiastic.

Pelli was so stimulated by the collaboration, in fact, that he asked Armajani to work with him on the design for the top of the Yerba Buena Tower, a high-rise office building in San Francisco. "The building top is an element of the architecture, like the colonnade at the base, but much more so," Pelli says. "Here the functional requirements are slight and the formal opportunities are great, so this is a very good area for collaboration, where the architect can stretch the natural boundaries of architecture and the public artist can stretch the natural boundaries of public art." In design sessions that took place over a period of several months, Pelli and Armajani moved from a relatively simple concept of a mast within a tower to an immense sculptural array of vertical and diagonal forms—a building top that is nearly a third as tall as the building itself. (Construction has been delayed, for financial reasons, but is expected to start soon.) Pelli's firm was also doing two office buildings in Minneapolis at the time, and Pelli got Armajani to help him design two of the elevated pedestrian causeways that connect many of the downtown buildings in that winter-dreading city. Armajani managed to get one of them built as a true, self-supporting bridge; it lends an arched, Florentine look to a fairly drab street.

IN spite of the pleasure that these collaborations have brought him, Armajani no longer sees his future in terms of working with architects. He doubts whether the kind of relationship he has built up with Pelli could be duplicated with anyone else, and his

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experience suggests to him that architects and artists are incompatible by nature. "Our point of view, our historical heritage are so different," he said to me recently. "We have different sensibilities and values, and we speak different languages. The way I look at a project is totally different from the way an architect looks at it. Artists are for open-ended design; we have to leave things open to question, to contemplation. No, it is more accidental than normal that Cesar and I have been able to work together."

A year or so ago, Armajani went through a stage of feeling profoundly disillusioned about public art. The movement had succeeded too well and too quickly, he felt. The idea of getting artists to work on urban and suburban projects of all kinds had proved to be so popular throughout the country during the previous few years that nearly every state had set up its own public-art program, and so many artists were trying to get on design teams that the original incentive was becoming vitiated and bureaucratized. "Public art was a promise that became a nightmare," Armajani said last spring. "Our revolution has been stolen from us, and now it is our job to get it back. In the first place, the idea of a design team just doesn't work. Cesar and Scotty and I went through a lot together, and we came to understand each other very well, but the kind of design team that just gets together around a table is like a situation comedy. It is cynical and unproductive. Genuine debate can't take place around a table that way. You get what the real-estate developer and the arts administrator want, because they control the money. The whole emphasis in most of those projects is on who can get along best with the others involved—at the expense of vision and fresh thinking. It is like that story about the two thieves who hole up in an abandoned restaurant to plan their next job. While they are plotting in the basement kitchen, the dumbwaiter comes down, and there is an order for fried chicken, Southern style. 'What shall we do?' asks one. 'Quick, fill the order,' says the other, 'or they'll come and find us.' So they send up some fried chicken, Southern style. But then another order comes down, and another, and another,

and they keep filling them and sending them up. This is what has happened to our revolution."

Having tried collaboration, Armajani has decided that public artists should go it alone. The fact that he was able to do this on the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge has been immensely encouraging to him. Armajani had no collaborators on that project: the Department of Transportation contracted with him to design the bridge, and he hired the structural engineers. He had the same sort of design control over a "Covered Walkway" that he recently completed for General Mills in Minneapolis—a striking, six-hundred-and-ninety-five-foot-long steel-and-glass structure that is the largest commissioned work in the firm's developing sculpture garden, as well as



a shelter for employees on their way from the parking lot to the office building. There are a great many projects of this kind that could be taken over by artists, he says—projects that are usually directed by technicians who give little thought to the aesthetics of design. "We are in the second stage of our revolution," Armajani says. "Artists can now begin to reject projects that call for collaboration. We have really been talking about public art only since 1967 or so, and that is no long history, after all. Now we are adjusting and reevaluating. We need to annex more territory for sculpture. Of course, we also have to recognize that art has its limits. Art by itself cannot bring about social changes. But art in concert with other forces can make a difference. We can be citizens with something to offer besides self-analysis. We can be part of society, and not just a small elite supported by a wealthy minority."

Armajani's future work could very well move in directions that nobody foresees at the moment. A series of beautifully crafted "Elements" that have come from his studio since 1985 are architecturally oriented but more mysterious and even less functional-looking than the "Dictionary for Building" pieces he was doing before. Function may be an important aspect of his work, but there has always been something strange and obdurately non-functional at the heart of it. The new pieces do not sell very easily. "Some

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museums and corporations have bought them, but there's no real market for Siah among the big collectors," Max Protetch, his dealer, says. "There's an uncertainty about what he does and whether it's art or not. Not that he cares. He won't go to parties or schmooze with clients. A dinner after his show opens at my gallery? Forget it. The other day, he called me up from Minneapolis and said, 'Max, jack up the prices.' I said, 'Siah, what's come over you?' He said, 'That's an expression I just heard. Did I use it right?'" The danger of his being tempted to join the art world, at any rate, is about as remote as the danger of his withdrawing into some form of ivory tower.

When we were having lunch together in New York recently, Armani told me a Sufi story. "A man orders his servant to go to the market and buy a pound of sugar and a pound of salt, each of the purest, whitest quality. He gives the servant a platter, and says to him, 'Remember, the key word is "separation."' The servant goes to the market, and eventually he returns, carrying the platter. He says to the master, 'Here is the salt, the purest and whitest available.' Then he turns the platter over, saying, 'And there was the sugar.' In public art, you see, the key word is not 'separation.'"

—CALVIN TOMKINS

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