

# The New York Times

## SCULPTURE GOES PUBLIC

McGill, Douglas C Douglas C. McGill is the art news reporter for The Times. [New York, N.Y.] 27 Apr 1986: A.42.

---

THEY ARE CALLED "sculptures," but they are unusual, hybrid works that more often resemble furniture, architectural structures, landscaped gardens or even electrical and plumbing systems. Yet, while the new public art defies easy categorization, city planners and developers are commissioning them with increasing frequency, and they have already transformed the look of many prominent parks, plazas, lobbies and public squares.

In Rosslyn, Va., for example, Nancy Holt has created "Dark Star Park," a small urban park of intricately interweaving walking paths, earth mounds, tunnels and large concrete spheres (shown at left). To be in the space is to climb up and down, to pass through shadow and light, to become part of shifting perspectives and optical illusions.

Earth berms create the feeling of a special enclosed place, and one morning each year visitors witness a special com-memoration. At approximately 9:30 A.M. on Aug. 1 - the day in 1860 when the land that became Rosslyn was purchased - the shadows cast by two of the spheres and four adjoining posts align perfectly with an inlaid asphalt pattern in the ground.

In the 12-story-high atrium in Washington's landmark Old Post Office building, Robert Irwin has created a "sleight of hand" work consisting of 48 squares of translucent fabric that hang in rows from the atrium's ceiling (shown on right). The fabric squares appear and disappear, depending on the angle of sunlight pouring in from the skylight, and they make the visitor look more intently - and perhaps even notice for the first time the building's original architectural details - by partially obscuring the view.

For the lobby and an outdoor plaza of the new Equitable Center in mid-Manhattan, Scott Burton has created a striking semicircular "settee" made of green marble, with four onyx cubes - lit from within - set into the high back. In the nearly completed plaza (another is still in the planning stage), he has designed planters and granite tables and stools.

Besides the works that are already built, several major projects now in the planning stages have stirred wide comment. The most ambitious is a 3 1/2-acre waterfront plaza at Battery Park City, a huge residential and commercial development in lower Manhattan, scheduled for completion in 1988. The plaza's design is a collaboration between the artists Siah Armajani and Scott Burton, the architect Cesar Pelli and the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg. Other major planned projects include Alan Sonfist's park in downtown St. Louis; Nancy Holt's "sculpted," 57-acre landfill in northern New Jersey, and a signature building top to a San Francisco skyscraper - resembling the exposed structural steel of a dome, a spire or a bridge, depending on the angle from which it is seen - by Pelli and Armajani.

WHAT IS THE NEW public art? Definitions differ from artist to artist, but they are held together by a single thread: It is art plus function, whether the function is to provide a place to sit for lunch, to provide water drainage, to mark an important historical date, or to enhance and direct a viewer's perceptions.

Scott Burton, like many of his fellow artists, considers much of the public art of the last 20 years shallow and egotistical. He respects the artistic integrity of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" - a 112-foot-long wall of steel that bisects a downtown Manhattan plaza, and that was the subject of heated public hearings last year after workers and residents in the neighborhood called for its removal. But, says Burton, such works reflect only a personal esthetic, while good public art has a practical as well as an esthetic function. "Art has become a cult," he says. "It is a private language that is learned by art lovers. The important thing is to make art that is intelligible to a non-art audience."

In his studio in downtown Minneapolis, Siah Armajani, another outspoken proponent of the new public art, reads from a thick notebook in which he has jotted down his manifesto: "The entire history of public art has been the working out of a certain set of false assumptions, conceptual confusions and subconscious distortion. We have to fight against that. If public art is beyond comprehension, then it's not part of life!"

"Art used to have a function, such as a religious function," says Nancy Holt. "Michelangelo's ceiling is an integral part of its environment, and it was made to be that way. But with modernism, art was stripped of its function. With the advent of museums, you have art being stripped of its context and its function. We are putting function back into art again."

One would expect those artists whose experimentations have already taken them outdoors - especially those who have engaged in "environmental art" and "earthworks" (the monumental outdoor sculptures often made from earth shaped by dynamite and bulldozers) - to be the first to collaborate with architects in designing the new public sculpture. Indeed, Nancy Holt, Richard Fleischner and Mary Miss are from this group. However, artists from nearly every quarter, from Abstract-Expressionist painters like Robert Irwin to post-minimalist sculptors like Scott Burton, have branched out from established careers in the gallery-art world to achieve a greater degree of success making public sculpture.

Very often, the switch from private to public art came about through the artist's increasing conviction that making art for private collectors, galleries and museums had become an arcane enterprise: an exercise in making art that spoke only about other art. In almost all instances, these artists are seeking to create an art that is more expressive of human life and human concerns.

Of his sculptural designs for the Equitable building, Scott Burton says that he does not feel the need to establish his work as art "as much as I feel the need to establish it as furniture. The social questions interest me more than the art ones. I hope that people will love to eat their lunch there."

Although public art is not new, what is new about today's public sculpture, says Vincent Scully, professor of art history at Yale University, "is that the artists are trying to sculpt a kind of architecture. They try to extend sculpture by making spaces that are architectural. But architecture is built for you, it surrounds you, protects you, you march through it. These spaces are made with a twist. It's not just an environment, it's a haunted environment. All of a sudden it stops you, turns you around, falls on your head. It becomes sculpture."

"It's part of the breakdown of conventional forms and definitions," notes the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable. "It's the movement away from the rigid formulas and reductive simplicity of modernism. There is a general opening up as the old philosophies break down, and approach to design has broadened unbelievably, which for want of a better word we call post-modernism."

SINCE ANCIENT times, the interplay between art and architecture has been constant. Sculpture has long adorned buildings and, frequently, architects who were sculptors sought to imbue their buildings with sculptural qualities. Greek temples were decorated with sculptural friezes of mythological scenes; Baroque plazas, such as the Piazza Navona, contain fountains bearing sculpture, and Renaissance churches often housed dramatic religious frescoes.

In the United States, following most of its major wars, the Government has commissioned numerous public sculptures to commemorate war heroes and the war dead. During the Depression, in the most extensive public support of the arts, the Works Projects Administration sponsored hundreds of artists to paint murals and create sculptures in public buildings across the nation.

In this century, the distinction between art and architecture has sometimes been blurred. That art and architecture cannot be clearly distinguished in the new public sculpture, says Vincent Scully, is an ambiguity of form and meaning that it shares with most pioneering 20th-century art.

But what caused the emergence, at this particular time, of this hybrid architectural art? It can be explained largely in terms of the convergence of three movements: one among architects, one among artists, and one among the governmental agencies and private institutions that have commissioned most of the significant public art built in recent years.

Over the last decade or so, modernism in architecture -based on a bold, elegant and spare machine esthetic and exemplified by the work of such architects as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe - has been giving way to "post-modernism." Convinced that modernism simply paved the way for monolithic "steel and glass box" skyscrapers and ugly modular housing projects, many architects, such as Robert Venturi, Michael Graves and Charles Moore, have called for a return to a more traditional and humanistic scale. The new post-modernism would not discard the past but embrace it as a source of inspiration. The architectural and artistic decoration of buildings is once again considered a legitimate and, at times, even an integral part of building design.

In the world of art, a similar development has occurred. Frustrated by the limited palette they felt was left to them by such artistic styles as Abstract Expressionism and minimalism, artists have spent the last decade exploring a multitude of materials and styles. Today, no single mode of expression rules the roost. Modes from the past, such as figurative art, are once again acceptable, and new ones have been invented: from conceptual, earth and environmental art to neo-expressionist, kinetic and performance art.

Throughout the 1970's and early 80's, there was also a marked increase in public funds for public art, the result of increasing criticism of the country's disregard for esthetics as it was busy building new cities and suburbs.

"Here we are, busily transforming the face of a nation with a torrent of buildings," said Michael von Moschzisker, the former chairman of the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia, in a 1958 speech. "The buildings are unlovely, uninspired, and unforgivable. . . . The Federal Government and the government of every state, city and political division should include the fine arts as integral parts of all public buildings. In this way, we can work toward architectural triumphs such as the noble colonnade constructed by Bernini at the Piazza of Saint Peter's in Rome, of which it has been said one hardly knows where architecture ends and sculpture begins."

In 1959, the Redevelopment Authority of Philadelphia, as well as the city itself, passed the nation's first "Percent for Art" resolutions, requiring that every new building constructed with redevelopment or municipal funds spend 1 percent of the building costs on art. In the ensuing years, dozens of cities, large and small, have passed such ordinances.

At the Federal level, similar programs were enacted. The Art-in-Architecture program of the General Services Administration, which began in 1962, has been active in commissioning artworks for every new Federal building. (Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" was commissioned under this program.) Another Federal program, Art in Public Places, was begun by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, and since then has provided matching funds to dozens of city governments, universities and nonprofit groups raising money to commission public art.

THE NEW PUBLIC art invariably requires the artist to collaborate with a diverse group of people, including architects, landscape architects, other artists and engineers. So far, most of the public artists have had few problems adjusting to the collaborative process; indeed, many have embraced it with enthusiasm.

Scott Burton, who calls himself a "public sculptor," is among the enthusiasts. An intense man of stocky build, with piercing eyes and close-cropped hair, Burton began his career as an artist in the early 1970's by making furniturelike pop sculpture, such as a Queen Anne chair cast in bronze. His work then evolved into sculpture that was intended to be used as furniture, such as the chunky granite "Club Chairs" of the late 1970's.

Today, working out of a studio in a dilapidated midtown Manhattan building, the 46-year-old artist devotes a good deal of his time to public work. His completed commissioned works include the landscaping, lighting and seating for an entire Baltimore park, the design of a Seattle park, and the stairway and seating arrangement for a new arts building at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology designed by the architect I. M. Pei.

The lobby of the Wiesner Building at M.I.T. is a prime example of the new public sculpture. Three artists collaborated with the architect in its design, and prominent in it are two gently curved concrete benches, resembling handsome minimalist stone arcs, by Burton (bottom picture, page 45).

Another portion of the lobby design, however, points up a problem with collaborative work. The wall of the lobby, adjacent to the stairway railing and seating designed by Burton, is decorated with a work by the artist Kenneth Noland, who works out of the same modernist tradition as I. M. Pei (Pei's design of an aluminum-panel exterior wall is shown on page 44). Burton's sculpted railing partially obstructs the view of Noland's wall - the unfortunate result, Burton concedes, of building codes that required the railing's panels to reach floor level.

What's more, once Burton's benches were designed, three upper-floor balconies, curving in a manner that reflected the benches, were added to the building design - a repetition that the artist says "de-Burtonized," or diluted, his own creation.

Yet, says Burton, he works from a wider perspective than that of a studio artist unwilling to accept any compromise in his work. Certain accommodations are acceptable, he says, since his creativity is enhanced, not hampered, by the collaborative process and by having to work within constraints.

"The idea of autonomy in isolation is meaningless," he says. "A sense of autonomy comes from solving problems, not avoiding them, as you do in the studio. I think if you meet the requirements and still have something that you feel is genuine, then you have increased your autonomy. If you can deal with the restrictions, you get a heightened sense of freedom and power."

Burton believes that the complete creative freedom of the artist is no longer of overriding importance. "I feel the world is now in such bad shape that the interior liberty of the artist is a pretty trivial area," he says. "Communal and social values are now more important. What office workers do in their lunch hour is more important than my pushing the limits of my self-expression."

RICHARD FLEISCHNER, who designed the courtyard of the new Wiesner Building at M.I.T., also sees the problems inherent in a collaboration.

"People say, 'I'll give up something if you do,' and everybody loses their edge," he notes. "It's important to maintain the eccentricities of the individual." However, Fleischner, whose studio is a few blocks from Brown University in Providence, R.I., also believes that some compromise is necessary. "If we think art is free of compromise . . . that's a myth," he says.

Fleischner's courtyard at M.I.T., which is about the size of two football fields, abuts three oddly shaped buildings. Fleischner has united this space through a series of walking paths made of dark and light granite slabs laid in various patterns, from checkerboard to a flurry of bow-tie designs that seem to flit about the center of the courtyard.

Fleischner, who has worked as an environmental artist and a sculptor, has no training in landscape architecture. Yet he designed almost every inch of the courtyard, from the placement of trees and landscaping, to the furniture and lighting, to the location, sizing and design of the steps and paving stones. (A detail of his granite cubes outside a wall designed by the architect I. M. Pei is on page 44.) His knowledge, says Fleischner, who is 41, comes from questioning and learning from craftsmen, from working and making mistakes, and from poring over pictures and visiting historical sites (Pompeian courtyards and Antonio Gaudi's Barcelona buildings, to name two examples). Fleischner was often at the M.I.T. site during the five years it took to build his courtyard. He conferred extensively with the stonemasons, sod layers and other craftsmen. While he did not depart from his original design, he made innumerable last-minute changes - in the details of the planting, for instance, or lighting or paving.

"Art is like cooking," says Fleischner. "If there are great tomatoes one day, you put in more tomatoes and less pepper. You don't just take a recipe and follow it, ironclad. . . . Art is, you keep tasting and seasoning and blending." THE WORK OF NANCY HOLT, who makes some of the most unusual of the new public sculptures, raises the question "Is it art?" in an especially provocative way. A soft-spoken, 48-year-old woman, Nancy Holt began her career in the mid-1960's as a New York sculptor, showing in various downtown galleries. She later became one of the first American artists to create critically acclaimed "earthworks" in the deserts of the Southwest. In the 1970's, she went on to make a number of outdoor sculptures that were closely tied, in their design, to the local landscape. While installing a reflecting pool in one such work, she became interested in a hidden but crucial part of the project: the drainage pipe. Since then, Nancy Holt has made many publicly commissioned sculptures that are functional heating, electrical and water systems. One of these sculptures, in St. James Park in Toronto, is a catch-basin (for a chronically flooded area), which consists of terra-cotta channels cut into the ground in a geometric pattern. The fact that a structure happens to be a drainage system, she insists, does not preclude it from being art. Vincent Scully agrees, pointing out that the design of an intricate system of water pipes underneath Versailles, created by the Mancini brothers, has a formal beauty as well as a functional purpose.

"I'm interested in externalizing the basic technologies that we all live by, but which are hidden away," says Nancy Holt. "We don't think about how necessary they are to our existence. I want to expose them, make people more aware of them."

Today, the Manhattan-based artist is working on one of the biggest public-art projects: a plan to transform a 57-acre landfill in northern New Jersey into "Sky Mound." Her design calls for earth mounds, walking paths, a bridge, a pond, as well as an array of spinning turbines and flares that cleverly camouflages the landfill's methane recovery system as the garbage below the surface decays.

THE SCULPTURE OF Robert Irwin raises questions about art in an entirely different way. Among the new public artists, Irwin most clearly carries on in the abstract tradition, albeit with a pronounced twist.

Irwin - who lives in a Las Vegas high-rise, where, he says, he is constantly inspired by the changing light of the Nevada desert - began as an Abstract-Expressionist painter in the 1950's, but his canvases grew increasingly spare in the mid-60's. In 1969, he gave up painting altogether, and the next year he began thinking about three-dimensional art. In 1977, a retrospective of his paintings and sculptures was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art. His goal was to make viewers experience their own perceptive processes, and not just admire an artist's perceptive powers.

Irwin's works are often made of sheets of scrim or other translucent material that act as visual barriers weaving in and out of gardens, parks, building lobbies and other public places. In a Seattle park, for instance, Irwin, who is 57, has designed a labyrinth of sky-blue chain-link fences that enclose trees and public seating for lunchers and passers-by. The see-through maze challenges each visitor to find a place or a line of sight that is pleasing to him or her.

Irwin's work for the Old Post Office building in Washington - consisting of panels of scrim hanging from the atrium ceiling - "was intended to influence how you look at the whole space," he explains. "The grid of planes is not the object of focus. . . . Because the planes are translucent, your eye does not hold on the grid, but moves back and forth, continuously referencing the architecture and, in effect, attending the whole phenomenon."

Similar concerns can be found in the work of Mary Miss. "Veiled Landscape," a work she built at the site of the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, N.Y., consisted of a wooden platform and a series of poles and gridlike structures. Reminiscent of a mountaintop viewing platform, charred tree trunks and the skeletal frameworks of houses, the sculptural pieces invited the viewer to see the entire work in the context of its surroundings.

"I meant it to be a gateway to the landscape," says Mary Miss. "I wanted to make people more aware of that beautiful place they were spending time in." The 41-year-old artist, whose studio is in lower Manhattan, recently collaborated with the architect Stanton Eckstut in the design of a landscaped cove to be built later this year at the Battery Park City development.

THE ATTEMPT TO embody the ideals of a democratic, pluralist society is the overriding purpose of Siah Armajani's art. Armajani immigrated to the United States from Iran in 1960, when he was 20. A conceptual artist whose work evolved into highly architectural sculpture in the 1970's, he became intensely interested in American architecture. In his sculptures called "Dictionary for Building," the subjects were closets, porches and landings. In recent years, he has switched to architecture that is sculptural. His designs include the Louis Kahn Lecture Room at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia (shown on page 45) and a bandstand in Mitchell, S.D.

A wiry man with penetrating eyes, Armajani explains that the most important artistic influences on his work have been the Russian constructivists, who believed that public art should serve higher social goals, such as education and democracy.

In the Louis Kahn Lecture Room, named for the noted architect, such strivings are evident. Armajani places the speaker's podium so close to the rows of benches that the speaker is practically a member of the audience. A quote by Walt Whitman is inlaid in the floor. Another, by Kahn, inlaid in the room's cornices, reads: "School began with a man under a tree, a man who did not know he was a teacher, discussing his realizations with a few others who did not know they were students."

"I used to think of myself as a sculptor, but no longer," says Armajani, who prefers to think of himself as a "public artist." "When you start to work in the public domain, you are suddenly not an outsider, no longer avant-garde. The agenda is set not by you, but by the community or other agency."

Strange words, to be sure, from an artist - whom we more commonly think of as the standard-bearer of untrammelled, even defiant, self-expression. Yet he is part of the paradox of an art that draws from architecture, furniture and landscape design, and employs materials as disparate as stone, earth, water, plumbing parts, shrubbery and trees.

"It certainly has potential," says the critic Ada Louise Huxtable of the new public sculpture. "Whether it's going to make a great contribution to the enrichment of public spaces, I wouldn't attempt to say. I have watched with great interest as the new developments come along, and the advocates passionately put down the preceding ones. But the son always tries to bury the father. It's all part of the eternal development of creativity, and it's all valid."