

Architecture and the Artist

An alliance with architecture offers the artist a chance to work as an artist. As he goes through the frustrating succession of bread-and-butter jobs that rob his creative stores, the artist comes to regard this opportunity as something sacred.

Moreover, architecture offers the hope of doing creative work in media of lasting permanence and in grand scale. Experiment in materials not only is allowed but often is necessary. And there is the chance to make a personal statement.

This last is of prime importance. Art's own attributes are enough to explain art's existence. It need not sell to establish its worth. It need not appear as part of another object in order to have use and human meaning. But if these things do not establish the worth of art, neither must they detract from it.

Easel painting and studio sculpture, declared dead or dying many times in recent years, go right on in even greater profusion. Nevertheless, the great age of easel painting is past; it no longer exerts such overwhelming influence on other visual art forms. The belief that easel art is the only "real" art is being abandoned, and false distinctions between fine and applied art are being erased.

The way is thus being opened wide to the production of first-rate art for architecture and the planned landscape. Sometimes the art work may be an extension of the architecture or landscape as a consonant element; sometimes it enriches the architecture with a note of distinctive but unrelated emphasis. In either case, the essential element is the conception and creation of art as a part of its setting.

The architectural artist from the first has the intent of making his work serve a function in particular spaces. He has always the setting in mind: lighting, weather, traffic, masses and forms which influence the viewer, length and angle of vision, and the tonality, timbre and dynamics of the piece in relation to all of these.

Scale is an important consideration. Many a promising effort has failed to achieve meaning through its lack of size in relation to its environment. Button-like sculptures stuck on the faces of great buildings succeed in being only insignificant variations in wall texture when seen from any distance. David Tollerton's fountain sculpture in the plaza of the Crown-Zellerbach building, on the other hand, is not large, but its size is

adequate to guarantee it a hearing in this particular setting.

One could question the overpowering scale of some of the art in Mexico's University City, where the buildings seem to exist in great part to support the art. But as an artist I wish this impulse were more widely felt among American architects. We in the United States have few opportunities to work at a truly monumental scale, perhaps because of the cost of hand work in a machine culture and the reluctance of some architects to give over so much space to artists.

The architectural artist must also be aware of the structural implications of his work. The first step here is the simple realization that any alteration of space can change the structural meaning of that space. Floating forms on a load-bearing wall can visually belie the wall's function, causing the viewer to fear for its adequacy. An area given drama though absence of structural support suffers if it bears a work of art which implies heaviness through color or form. The artist can augment or diminish various structural impressions through the visual elements he employs.

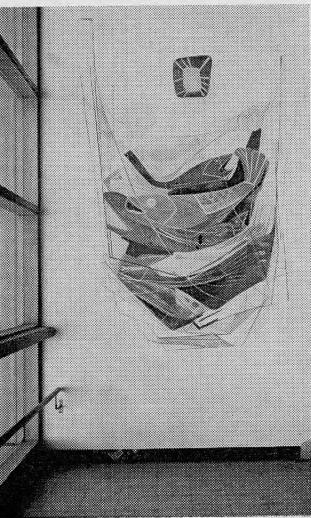
Thought must also be given to materials: it might be a mistake, for example, to apply an enamel mural on a stone wall (but in some cases it might not; this is an esthetic consideration). The use of the right materials in a given situation calls upon the architectural artist to know some of the so-called hard media such as concrete, enamels, mosaic or ceramics. In addition, materials should be appropriate to the climate, if the art work is to be exposed, and to considerations of wear in day-to-day use of the building.

Finally, the artist should have some knowledge of construction methods. Handling and installation of an art work can become an irritating last-minute problem if not thought out beforehand. Familiarity with building procedures also will breed a healthy respect for meeting schedules.

Scale, structure, materials, construction methods — how does an architect find an artist with knowledge of all these factors plus talent to produce a work of significance? It is no simple matter; sometimes, in fact, the architect must take the lead in introducing such considerations to the artist of his choice. And the problem is complicated by the fact that artists as a group have been slow to take up the possibilities offered by architecture.



RAYMOND RICE, sculptor and mosaicist, has performed a wide variety of notable architectural commissions, most in the Bay Area. Three are shown below: a mural for a church by Mario Ciampi; a mosaic for architect Steve Heller's home; a pipe construction in Kruzi Park, Alameda.



There are many reasons for this reluctance, but I feel the most significant is that art is largely done by lone workers. While most artists will not refuse an architectural commission if it is offered, they find it difficult to envision themselves working with others—especially in an initiative-taking role.

The architect also often has questions about the extent and kind of commitment he is taking on in bringing art to his buildings. He may be even slower than the artist to try. But by now, experience has shown some fairly well regularized procedures that can be followed:

In selecting artists for a large project, use of a consultant—himself an artist—can be helpful. The consultant, who should be experienced in architectural work, can provide general guidance and initial estimates of costs without any necessary further involvement of the architect.

Whatever the method, selection should be made early. So much art comes to architecture as an afterthought—and looks that way. The ideal is for artist and architect to collaborate during the design process, although this is sometimes precluded by the facts of architectural practice.

Preliminary discussions and decisions about general direction may be followed by a written proposal from the artist through the architect to the client, outlining estimated costs and the method of payment. Normally the artist asks a retainer fee to cover costs of rough sketches, perhaps about 5% of the estimated cost of the piece, perhaps a large percentage for smaller work.

The first regular payment becomes due upon acceptance of a design. Like the architect, the artist should be paid for work completed at certain designated stages—perhaps halfway through completion of the piece, again upon completion and finally the balance on installation. The artist should take the same risks and be given the same protection as others involved in design and construction of the building.

The artist's responsibility does not end with plans, sketches or models. In visual fields, presentation material is too often regarded as the terminus of creative thought. Every step until the end is a creative one, even though the design may have been determined early. And every step of the work's execution, if not done by the artist, must be under his control.

If this creative execution of a work is part of being an artist, a greater part is the attempt at personal expression. Architectural art does not consist in filling a space with something visually pleasing and respectful of the building; it consists in attempting to fill that space with something of enduring significance. One need not define art to make this distinction, for it is one of intent rather than realization.