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“THE EXCLUSION OF SCULPTURE AND PAINTING
FROM BUILDINGS”

THE EXCLUSION OF SCULPTURE AND PAINTING FROM BUILDINGS

by Kent Bloomer

Mr. Bloomer, who co-authored *Body, Memory, and Architecture* with Charles Moore, is a professor of architectural design at Yale University where he is director of the undergraduate studies. His article is a detailed argument concerning the reintegration of “ornament” into the architectural design process.

The Seventies have witnessed enormous strides in the architectural concern with issues of human scale, public expression, and neighborliness in our cityscape. This writer has been surprised by the speed with which recent architectural thought has responded to the appeals of historians, neighborhood representatives, and scholars of the urban scene for both the preservation and the development of more habitable social environments.

Yet, during the same decade, another constituency has been largely ignored. Sculptors, painters, and artisans, whose works have historically contributed to the architectural wealth and cultural content of great buildings, have become virtually cut-off from substantive inclusion in the design of buildings. Just imagine the western pediment of the Parthenon without the hand of the sculptor Phidias, the Halls of the Palazzo del Te without the paintings of Giulio Romano, or the massive volume over the library of the University of Mexico without the mosaics of Juan O’Gorman. Why, during that socially self-conscious decade of the Seventies, did we almost totally separate sculpture and painting from architecture? Or, more precisely, what are the specific beliefs and practices that have promoted this separation?

The exclusion

Certainly the growth of professional specialization in the twentieth century has contributed to the separation and eventual competition between art and architecture. If the architect perceives himself as responsible for providing certain services, such as solving problems of shelter, safety, room partitioning, building-type, etc., those services will naturally take design precedence over others. Furthermore, if the architect promotes the belief that his solutions will produce a finished product which is esthetically and culturally sufficient, then the need for additional artistic expression through sculpture and painting is precluded. Indeed, the very suggestion that sculpture and painting is that which is “added” to architecture assigns art a low priority in the architectural design process and this assignment leads to the pre-empting of artistic territory when it is not specifically included in the architectural program.

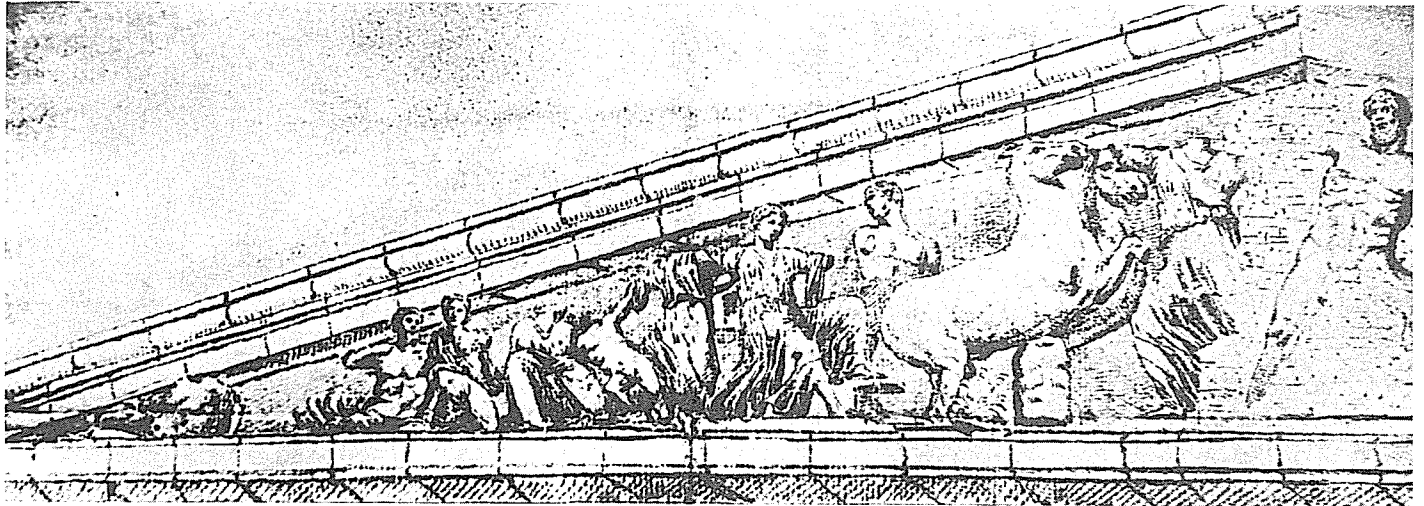
The ultimate and most “ex-clusive” expression of architectural specialization may be found in the concept of “pure architecture” (especially if you consider purification as an action which removes a foreign substance or contamination). While the ideal of pure architecture seems to be positive in spirit, it must also be seen as operationally hostile to other forms of artistic expression.*

*When we favor the notion of purity in regard to the ethnic identity and behavior of human beings, for example, it comes off sounding rather like provincialism at best, and racism at worst.

Perhaps the most revealing article of purity in the canons of mid-twentieth century architecture has been the ideological ban on ornament. The predominant attitude during this period has been that ornament is redundant, arbitrary, and even conceptually repulsive. So much so, in fact, that the word isn’t even used to describe the compositional properties or design values of modern buildings. Yet we can barely imagine the total form of the Parthenon or the Palazzo del Te or O’Gorman’s library without acknowledging the essential function of ornament. In these historic buildings there is a very thin line between what we have come to regard as “ornament” and that which we call “art”. We might be content to refer to the Parthenon as a wedding of pure sculpture and pure architecture by observing that the masonry column and lintel belong to architecture and the figures in the frieze belong to sculpture, but those observations are limited when we consider the building as a whole. The capitals, entablature moldings, and the metopes which we generally characterize as “ornament”, as distinguished from “art”, are indispensable to the compositional treatment of the temple as a totality. Indeed, without that ornament neither the “architecture” nor the “sculpture” could find so complete an expression. If we recognize that the ideological ban on ornament also poses a threat to the possibility of including sculpture and painting within the fabric of buildings.

It can be argued, of course, that it was culturally feasible and appropriate to deploy art and ornament on the monumental architecture of ancient Greece, on the Palazzos of the Renaissance, or in the University of Mexico in the early Fifties. Each of these institutions had a story to tell to a somewhat homogeneous audience which was not disposed to disagree with the artistic intentions. The Parthenon embodied the state of Athens, was a testimony to its religious and civic life, and occupied the most sacred site in the city. The Palazzo del Te was a pleasure villa designed by a painter-architect who was experimenting with the current science of perspective painting, visual illusion, and a local theatrical sense of humor. The mural paintings on Mexican government buildings during the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties emerged from a fervent and intellectual spirit of revolution in which the class struggle and heroism of a mestizo culture was dramatized. The content of Mexican “public art” was therefore generally believed, recognized, and emotionally accepted by the people.

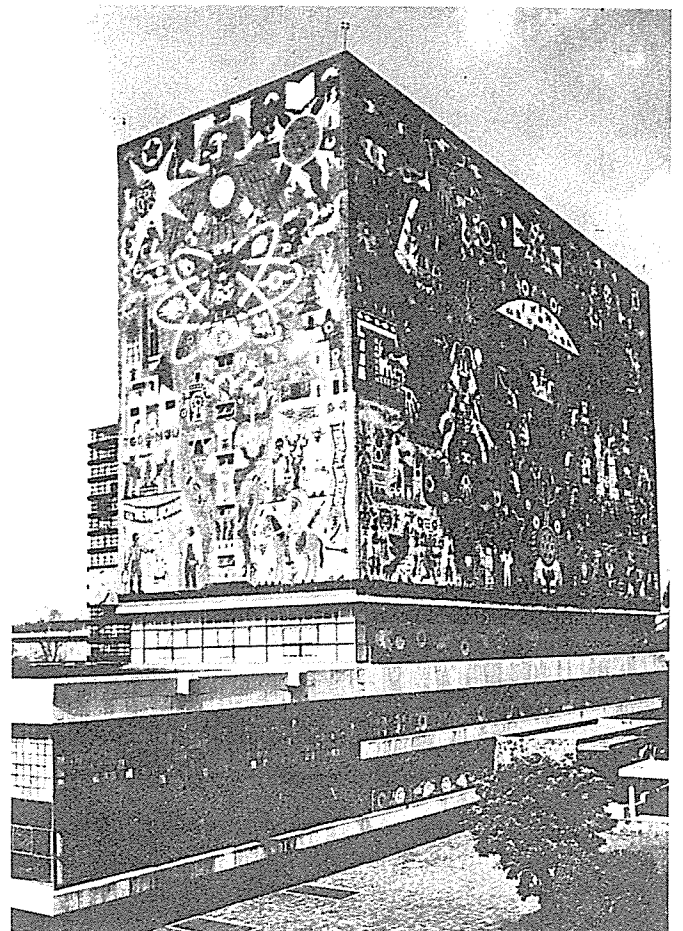
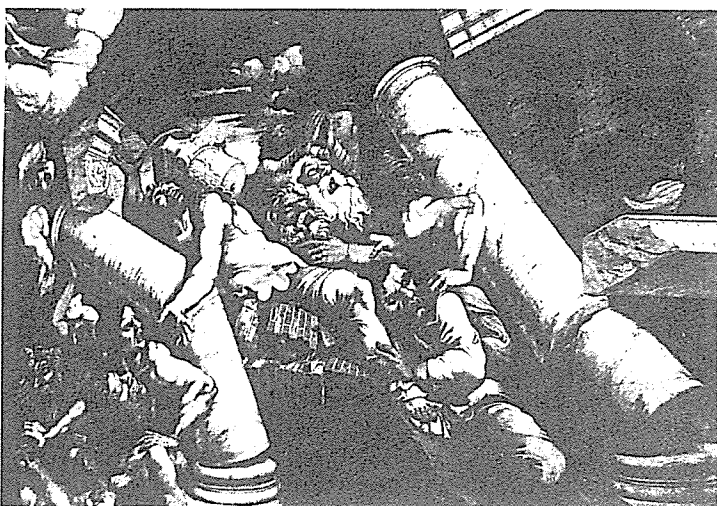
The problems of not delivering emotionally acceptable “content” today, however, are not simply a result of cultural disagreement or public non-recognition. The artists themselves present obstacles. The long divorce of art from architecture has left the modern artist both bitter in his exclusion as well as intoxicated by an illusion of freedom from responsibility to architectural form. Some artists would refuse to cooperate with architects and clients in the discussion of specific artists form or “content”. After all, the salvation of the artist



(6) Detail of the western pediment of the Parthenon by the sculptor Phidias. (Above)

(7) Mural from the Plaza del Te, 1532-34. An experiment in the science of perspective and visual illusion. (Right)

(8) Central Library of the University of Mexico by Juan O'Gorman. (Below)



throughout this century of isolation has been to become a specialist himself in the practice of “pure” painting or “pure” sculpture. Thus, the artist often functions as an antagonist and often sets his work not with, but apart from architecture in a world of its own.

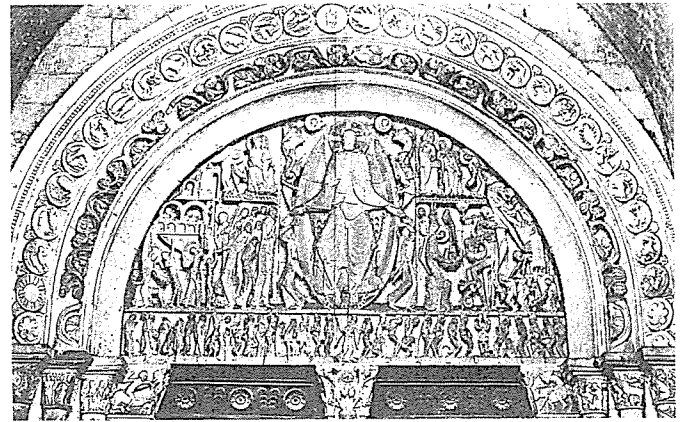
Considering all of this, who is expected to promote the wedding of art and architecture in modern life? If we talk about ornament on buildings and suggest also that sculpture and painting ought to be integral with the building, we can expect cautious response from the client who has by now become accustomed to their long separation and today’s functional purity. He will most likely request “efficient” architecture, and if he is interested in art he may elect on a separate basis to purchase objects of art. Not unlike the architect and the artist, he also suspects that “ornament” would be excessive and unnecessary.

It has become apparent to me in investigating the exclusion of art from architecture that all the participants in the design process are inclined towards practices of specialization. Certainly this inclination is not simply the mischievous invention of the architect, but is actually a primary characteristic of late twentieth century American culture. Complex division of labor, professionalization, and bureaucratization of the design process has divided the traditional constituency of artist, architect, craftsman, and client into separate territories which tend to insulate themselves from one another. How, in this light, can we develop the means to orchestrate this increasingly disjointed parade of soloists in the design of public buildings?

The place of sculpture and painting in buildings

The answer, it seems to me, can be developed first as a theoretical principle of architecture and finally as a design principle. A review of great architecture from the past reveals that sculpture and painting flourished in the fabric of buildings when they were assigned a place within the spatial and physical hierarchy of the building itself. For the purpose of this article let us assume that primary spatial hierarchies of a building include its vertical divisions of bottom, middle, and top, the boundaries between inside and out, the public and private fronts and backs, the principal passageways, and the major central places. Unlike the ordering of space, the primary physical hierarchies of a building arise from the formal properties of structural engineering and often find expression in the joints between physical elements, i.e., between column and lintel, column grid and slab, floor levels, vertical partitions, entrance structure, etc.

Let us look, for example, at the sculpture of Gislebertus and the twelfth century church at Autun. The wonderful stone carvings of mythic figures and demonic events occur principally at the entrance and precisely within the dynamic framework of structural segments. Christ occupies the center of the



(9) The main tympanum at Autun by Gislebertus.

tympanum, the oppressed figures below are “compressed” within the rectangular geometry of the lintel, and the more liberated angels on the capitals below the lintel are in flight, an attitude compatible with their lofty position as the vertical culmination of the columns from which the entrance arch springs.

Returning to the Parthenon, we see the magnificent frieze of Phidias located on the tympanum of the triangular pediment. This is the loftiest spatial domain on the elevation of the temple. It is not a domain for human traffic but for the activities of Athenian gods and heroes whose place is above the people. Unlike the masonry porch below, which merely sits on the ground, the pediment is physically held aloft and elevated spatially by the row of enormous columns which form the boundary around the Temple.

The Bavarian church of Die Wies provides us with a superb example of a seventeenth century hierarchy of painting (as spiritual illusion) to architecture (as physical reality) rendered in the vertical spaces and physical structure of the architectural interior. On the lower ambulatory, in the realm of the parishioners, the walls are relatively plain. In the upper ambulatory, the columns become more ornate, but they are precisely columnar and appear as principal supports of the “physical” building. But observe the transition between those columns and the arched ceiling. The physical reality of architecture gives way to the seemingly contradictory ornament or rocaille of the plasterer (note the upside-down arches) and finally to the illusionary skyscape of the painted ceiling. From this heavenly realm the parishioners below are judged.

One could characterize the lower region of the church of Die Wies as “purely” architectural, the middle zone as predominantly ornamental, and the ceilingscape as “purely” illusionary painting but this characterization might be misleading. The philosopher Karsten Harries argues that the concept of purity has no place in describing the hierarchal layers of the Bavarian rococo church because the church demands understanding as a single artistic entity. It is a house in which the sacrament is celebrated and thus a house in which the miraculous connection, not disconnection, between heaven and earth is manifest in a total indivisible and inclusive work of architecture.

In modern Mexico during the Thirties a ceilingscape is used at Guadalajara University as a surface for Orozco’s expression of man’s search for knowledge. Here again a region above the pedestrian level is reserved for the dreams and aspirations of the University although there is not the concern towards developing an ornamental boundary between the upper and lower regions found in the Bavarian rocaille. However, physical elements of the structure are articulated to act as transitions between the painting and space below. The cupola above marks the center of the sky and the band of windows adjacent to the molding at the base of the dome acts both to illuminate and thrust the dome into the heavens. Thus the theme depicting the phases of man in his search for knowledge is celebrated by the content of the painting, but it is also dramatized by its



special location at the pinnacle of the architectural space in which it resides.

Traditional monuments throughout the United States provide us with many examples of locating sculpture within the fabric of architectural elements. The equestrian figure of Buffalo Bill in the monument to Buffalo Bill in Cody, Wyoming points to the sky at the terminal of a helical “ziggurat” of stones. It seems to me this is an emotionally more gratifying place than the pure spiral jetty of Smithson in Great Salt Lake, Utah (1970), which in its starkness ultimately takes you nowhere. Imagine, in this respect, the Alamo Cenotaph in San Antonio, Texas without the heroic figure plastered on the base of the obelisk. Certainly both the sculpture and the architectural expression of the obelisk benefit from their hierarchal and material juxtaposition.

There is a token material juxtaposition in the “Study for Sculpture in Relation to Architecture” by George Sugarman exhibited this winter at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York City. But the need for purity, the unreal architecture, and the absence of ornament at the boundaries generate a feeling of loss and a primitive antagonism between the figures and the building, the combination of which does not deliver to the world a new place generated magically by its constituent parts. While the sculpture may be charming, the architecture becomes the blunt end of a joke.



(10) Ceilingscape from Guadalajara University. (Left)

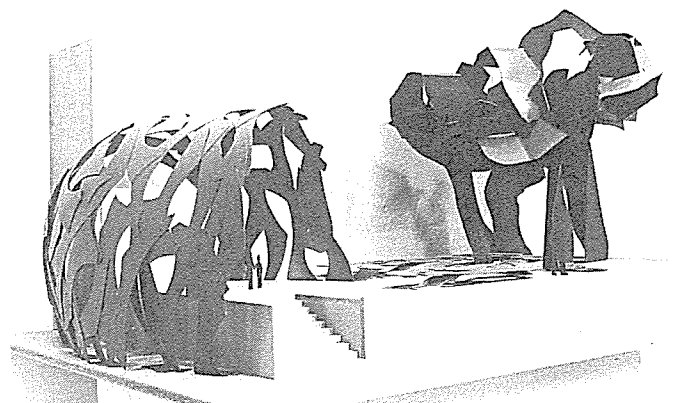
(11) The Scout, Buffalo Bill, Wyoming. (Above)



(12) *The Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson.



(13) *The Alamo Cenotaph*, San Antonio, Texas.



(14) "Study for Sculpture in Relation to Architecture."

Summary

In summary, it appears that historic sculpture and painting, together with ornament, benefited from a profound architectural context, just as people in modern cities require a profound urban context in order to flourish. It is true that today the provision of minimally articulated open spaces for independent works of art has occasionally promoted exciting results. Chicago's Picasso or Chase Manhattan Plaza's Dubuffet are evidence of that excitement. Indeed, these works conform to the grand tradition of placing monuments in the center of open public spaces.

But where are the frescoes, bas-reliefs, heroic gestures, mythic creatures, and themes of celebration that have occupied great buildings since the origins of architecture? Their expulsion from their historic places directly *within* the physical and hierarchal fabric of buildings has contributed the same feeling of loss and alienation often associated with the dreary and unpopulated urban spaces of the last quarter century. Perhaps those of us who see in sculpture and painting evidence of human vitality cannot be content with today's architectural and sociological "solutions" to public habitation, but require also the rich tapestry of sculpture, painting, and ornament as well. Works of art, after all, constitute the most memorable furnishings of a culture over time.

The current challenge to the purity of modernism and the new inquiry into the design values and history of architecture are destined to reveal the formal links between sculpture, painting, ornament, and building that once flourished. It should become evident that the historic linkages were not *ad hoc* or left to chance, but instead were fundamental to the idea

of the building itself. Indeed, when great sculpture and painting were incorporated into the spatial and physical hierarchies of a building, the architecture also benefited in ways which are precluded by the exclusionary and competitive inclinations of pure architecture, pure sculpture, and pure painting.

A look at the past also reveals that the sculpture and painting in the Parthenon, Autun, Palazzo del Te, Die Wies, and the University of Mexico were as daring and contemporary to their time as the buildings themselves! The artists' experiments were bordering on the extreme. The sculpture of Phidias is about to leap off the pediment and the sculpture of Autun is, according to St. Bernard, more demonic than the Church intended. Giulio Romano in his optical manipulation of space eliminated the corner of the room, and the Zimmerman brothers at Die Wies sought to "de-materialize" the building geometrically and visually. The Mexican muralists were trying to create a political art form in the spirit of revolution and nationalism which at once combined elements of modern painting with themes of archaic Mexico. No potentially independent art form seems to have been substantially inhibited by its inclusion in the fabric of the building itself. In fact, the "compromises" that arose from the juxtapositions of figures and architectural geometry, e.g., the reclining figures in the acute corners of the Parthenon's pediment, or the flattened and stretched figure at the base of the Alamo Cenotaph, or the centering of Giulio Romano's painting of the giants at the corner of the ceiling in the Palazzo del Te, act to clarify and punctuate both architectural and sculptural intentions, or, more significantly, to express the meanings, emotions, and conflicts which are the human properties of great public places. □