

PARKYN'S PIECES

Art for our sake – a lesson from Neil Parkyn in art and architecture



RIGHT: Henry Moore screen - Time & Life Building Bond Street/Conduit Street by architect Michael Rosenauer

Put an architect and an artist on the same desert island. Get through Sue Lawley's records before sundown, mix a brace of well-designed tropical brews and await results.

This may sound a perfect recipe for one of those dense psychodramas requiring two characters, three planks, and plenty of patience from the captive audience, but here is actually the meat of genuine debate ranging around the prickly subject: just how do you bring buildings and art together?

The matter is certainly topical, what with the Arts Council and its one percent for art scheme, and more pronouncements from those such as Pentagram's Theo Crosby who seem to have been pegging out positions on the subject for several hundred years. It might even surface on the next GCSE question paper, alongside all the usual comparisons of cathedrals and book covers. Like all these trite lecturettes, everyone is there with a shout - practising architects who have had good or bad times in the commissioning of artworks for their buildings, artists who concluded that the only artistic licence they were allowed was the honour of fitting into a strong-minded architecture and patrons that somehow ended up with the right blend of art and building.

As a topic for the post-crudite moments in the office's favoured wine bar ("More of the red bottle for our friend Vincent here...") it does have the merit of bringing any number of historical and holiday examples together, as the argument deepens into a search for hard examples of where the artist and architect got it right.

If you listen carefully amid the crunch of celery, you will hear the familiar references to Scandinavia - how the pension banks give X% or Y% of their profits to commission artworks, how there must be at least 1.5 standard statues per 10 000 population, how the State supports its favourite pens and brushes.

Or someone will roll out the Great Corporations and their record of enlightened patronage - Olivetti, IBM, Cummins -

which have crowned their buildings with artworks of the highest order. Better than many a public art collection. There is even a certain style of architecture which came into being with the express purpose of providing a foil for the classy artwork, with courts crying out for the Brancusi, Moore or Frink and the lobbies longing for the grand presence of a Rothko or de Kooning. It was as if to say money can buy machines, but as a mature corporation we've moved on to higher things, to patronage no less princely than any medic could muster.

Coming up fast on the rails however were architects who considered that their buildings were quite rich enough not to require any further embellishment by men from the A-Z of Art. The record of architects in commissioning art for their buildings is not impressive. Dire in fact. There are as always some very honourable exceptions, but more typical it the costume jewellery approach, where shopping precinct, cathedral or conference centre cannot escape without its dose of applied art, hoisted up, rag-bolted and rainwashed like some giant, grubby butterfly. Before we are all much older there will be a thriving industry in the refurbishment of this section of the British Artistic Heritage. If the block themselves are facelifted, why stop there? This stockpile of good intentions, cast concrete and twisted metal is a reminder that you can't spice up poor architecture by wheeling in the art. Or superglue something large and colourful onto the flank wall where shopping floorspace rules within and hope that your civic duty is done.

The only approach which produces lasting quality - and is taken to heart by the public - is one in which the artist/architect takes up the whole problem, not just tinkers with the left-overs. If this sounds vague and academic there are good, hard examples of the process working out. If you have a taste for history, a gentle survey of the Fountains of Rome, with Respigi in the headphones and an eye for how the locals use the seats, public space

and water. There isn't any dotted line showing where the art begins and the pavement ends. Modernists will find as delightful a result in the fountains and squares of Lawrence Halprin, the American landscape architect, who uses water, levels, routes and surfaces with such panache that it can make the lunchtime sandwich a feast. You don't stick a plate, a name and an artist, or even a price, onto such an ensemble. It's a stage, a setting for public life, and great fun into the bargain. We all have our favourite examples from Europe of high-quality urban artworks, pieces of city, which can't be put into any gallery. Bernini, Michaelangelo and the gang would salute them all.

Where did we go wrong? It would be easy to blame the mercantile mentality in which art becomes a priced item in a BQ, something that can come or go according to the latest cost plan, although it is amusing to write a clause requiring 25m⁰ of Henry Moore or similar approved. It misses Thanks, the spirit of enthusiasm, quirkiness and passion which informs the great collectors and patrons of art, leading to such amazing assemblies as the Burrell in Glasgow, a marvellous building stimulated by a merchant magpie's taste for so many things that took his fancy. Not something you can plan for, specify or tie down in a cobweb of clauses.

You could clobber the client instead with the accusation that he has collected artworks according to the status of their artist, so that his building becomes a walk between sites for the famous names. But this is unjust; there is proper pride in ownership, and

the pleasure for him in working with a living artist to develop a scheme which is custom-designed in the true sense of the word. Take away the building and the artwork is diminished, and vice versa.

What we get wrong is the thinking. It may date back from the old student days when as architects in training we would be thrown such assignments as design a house for a famous artist. Today it might be replaced by the task of planning a pad for a famous futures broker or an institute for procurement studies.

Artists as far as we knew then, were that lot up on the top floor of the next studio block, given to undisciplined behaviour and coloured IS le shoelaces. We indulged in soft pencil work at life drawing classes, affected sky washes and a controlled Bohemian style in some grant-aided garret. Even wrote essays that pulled in the right names and dates. Joint projects with the art mob were rare, even rarer once the academics started Y, clipping degree status onto the art courses. Hardly surprising that once in practice we could not work comfortably with artists. They must have found us in turn rigid and bossy.

When you remember the phrase, making a niche, you get closer to the right spirit. Instead of literally forming spaces for statues as the Renaissance architects would have done, we can interpret the term as creating opportunities for the artist to flower. Perhaps the prime site in Docklands, more competitions, more phone calls. Art for our sake. ■

Neil Parkyn was an architect/planner for YRM Partnership Ltd. This from his archive of impressive writings



Neil Parkyn is a retired architect and urban planner living in central France



LEFT: The Burrell, drawing by architect Barry Gasson of the North Gallery, known as 'The Walk in the Woods' at The Burrell Collection, Glasgow, Scotland.

Designed by Barry Gasson, John Meunier and Brit Andresen, was described by Historic Scotland as: "An outstanding bespoke museum commission of international importance, and an important example of Structuralist Tendency in architecture in the second half of the 20th century, emphasising the users' experience and the sense of place, and, in particular, making the most of the interior and exterior interface with the surrounding landscape."