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Environmental Sculptural Furniture and Furnishings

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Title: Environmental Sculptural Furniture and Furnishings

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Personal Philosophy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Construction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Concept of the Artist-Craftsman</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art into Industry</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contemporary Melieu</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All the plates follow page seven, and are listed below in order.

1. Plate 1: Complete Grouping
2. Plate 2: Lamp (7')
3. Plate 3: Two-seater (35"x33"x18")
4. Plate 4: One Unit Grouping
5. Plate 5: Cabinet (6')
6. Plate 6: Tall Table (45")
7. Plate 7: Low Table (17"x58"x36")
8. Plate 8: Three Chairs (one unit grouping)
9. Plate 9: Chair (46")
10. Plate 10: Chair (48")
11. Plate 11: Chair (46")
12. Plate 12: Floor Plan (complete grouping)
PURPOSE AND PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the potential for creating a self-contained environment through the use of sculptural furniture and furnishings. I will state in this thesis report my personal philosophy pertaining to environmental furniture and furnishings. Also included is historical information, and present advances that have been influential in the development of my philosophy.

In order to understand the meaning of environmental sculptural furniture and furnishings, it will be helpful perhaps, to begin by defining some layman terms. Normally, when one hears the word "environment," one thinks of one's surroundings or the conditions or influences which affect development. "Sculptural," in the conventional sense, is the adjective which describes the act of carving, modelling, or otherwise producing a piece of art in three dimensions. "Furniture" is the moveable article—a chair, a table, etc.—that is commonly required for decorative use within the home, or wherever its function is needed. "Furnishings" may be described as any fitting articles for use in a given environment.

However, it is my belief that furniture and furnishings may be sculpturally integrated into a single composition that depends only on itself, not on other
elements outside its compositional frame. Therefore, it becomes an environmental sculptural grouping of furniture and furnishings. It has been my intention to design and construct a functional assembly of sculptural furnishings, that will establish its own frame of reference within any given environment. That is, both its functional and aesthetic values will not depend on other furnishings within a contained environment, like a room. A large piece of sculpture usually establishes its own frame of reference; it demands the space within which it is placed. That is, a piece of sculpture requires nothing outside itself to define itself as a meaningful form. It requires only a viewer who walks about the work in order to see the different areas that define and present the total form to the viewer. This in turn depends upon the work itself. If it is a relief, one can only view it from the front and sides; if in the round, one can then walk about it; if it is a large environmental piece, it is then possible for the viewer to walk into it, to become a part of it by reacting physically with the work.

A contained environment, like a room, will usually have two or three pieces of one designer's work, rather than single pieces from different sources. The intent is to move away from a mass collection of varied items, which may give a confused composition for the user as
well as the viewer. It is also common practice for a decorator to push many of the furnishings against the wall to allow more open floor space. The viewer then sees only the fronts and sides of the works. This type of room decoration has an obvious functional value, but the danger is that we become conditioned to regarding furniture from this point of view only. Industry, for example, is both a product and a perpetrator of this condition because it designs most of its' furniture to fit into corners or against walls.

We have been conditioned too in our attitudes toward furnishings. The practice is to add "art objects" like paintings, weaving, ceramics and sculpture that gives a splash of color, or fills space in an "interesting" way. The room is then a collage of furnishings and furniture which we have been conditioned to accept as both aesthetically pleasing and functional. It should be apparent, however, that this kind of decoration is arbitrary.

Furniture and furnishings do have to be defined in terms of the shape and dimensions of the contained environment. It has been my aim however, to design and construct a composition of forms that will fit into various contained spaces of different shapes and dimensions. I suggest then, that it is possible to have a visual combination of sculptural forms which will act as a single composition and, most important, which will
define its own environment. One might then stand within it, sit upon it, or walk around it.
PROJECT CONSTRUCTION

My thesis is a construction of an environmental grouping comprised of two one-piece units and two three-piece units. The lamp and two-seater were constructed as single units. The three individual chairs are designed to be composed in a single seating unit; the other unit is made up of two tables and a cabinet.

To construct the pieces I laminated mahogany wood in pre-cut layers, keeping all the grain of the wood in the same direction, so that I would be able to develop the desired form without a great deal of carving. This type of construction is necessary in order to achieve a sculptural form. That is, you can carve into a lamination or glue line to obtain a flowing form, but you cannot carve into a joint like a dove-tail, with different grain directions and square corners. However, at different points in my construction I did use mortis and tendon joints; an example would be the connection of the chair seat to the back support.

The plates will show that the individual pieces are laminated in the same manner. The wood is glued in thin layers with the grain traveling in the same direction. This allows for continuity between the pieces, because although each piece has a different
stripe pattern, the overall coloration is similar. This technique causes less variation between individual pieces than the laminating of each furnishing in a different manner. Thus, I am able to develop a stronger relationship between the individual forms within the composition. In Plate # 1 I have pictured the entire grouping. One can see that there is a great difference in the various heights of the pieces. If one begins with the low table in the center of the composition, one can move easily from there to the other forms, ending with the high-point at the top of the lamp.

It was my intent that the viewer be able to look to any point within the composition, and then, by visual movement along the lines of the individual works, be able to spiral back to the point he began with. The forms are alike in transitional flow and construction. This is most obvious in the bases of the grouping. They evolve one from the other, to the point where the base of the coffee table, at the center of the composition, becomes the end product. It is no more than a large base itself, with a round, flat spot for a top.

Also alike are the supports of the chairs and the two-seater, with the same transitional movement from the base into the seat and back. Both the lamp and high table have very slim supports for their tops, in which there is little happening other than a very straight
movement. I felt that this was necessary in order to cut down the confusion between the bases and tops, still relating the two parts and keeping a simple line, consistent with the other forms. The cabinet, too, is constructed on a similar base with the same transitional flow from the base to the rectangular top. This top relates more to the shapes of the backs of the three chairs, since they too have straight lines.

The grouping is arranged from the point of view of the "user" as "viewer." Thus, I considered what parts of the composition would be seen as the user became part of it. In the illustrated floor-plan, which follows the plates, one can better understand what the user may view at different points in the composition. And too, the plan allows for a more concrete idea for the ways one would enter it, stand within it, walk around it, and sit upon it.
PLATE 1: Complete Grouping
PLATE 3: Two-seater (35"x33"x18")
PLATE 5: Cabinet (6')
PLATE 9: Chair (46")
PLATE 10: Chair (48")
THE CONCEPT OF THE ARTIST-CRAFTSMAN

Who produces the forms of an environment? It would seem that the source is two-fold: the "artist" and the "maker." Originally, the artist was a maker; that is, he was a creator. But the two have split, so that today we try to distinguish between the artist and the maker. H.W. Janson, a noted art historian, commented on this distinction at length.

Clearly, then, the maker of a work of art has little in common with what we ordinarily mean by "making." It is a strange and risky business in which the maker never quite knows what he is making until he has actually made it; or, to put it another way, it is a game of find-and-seek in which the seeker is not sure what he is looking for until he has found it. ...To the non-artist, it seems hard to believe that this uncertainty, this-need-to-take-a-chance, should be the essence of the artist's work. For we all tend to think of "making" in terms of the craftsman or manufacturer who knows exactly what he wants to produce from the outset, picks the tools best suited to his task, and is sure of what he is doing at every step. Such "making" is a two-phase affair: first the craftsman makes a plan, then he acts on it. And because he or his customer has made all the important decisions in advance, he has to worry only about means, rather than ends, while he carries out his plan. There is thus little risk, but also little adventure, in his handiwork, which as the consequence tends to become routine. It may even be replaced by the mechanical labor of the machine. No machine, on the other hand, can replace the artist, for with him conception and execution go hand in hand and are so completely interdependent that he cannot separate the one from the other. Whereas a craftsman only attempts what he knows to be the possible, the artist is always driven to attempt the impossible—or at least the improbable or unimaginable.
Obviously, the distinction is not always clear. To some extent the two are complementary. Indeed, the ideal might be a combination of the qualities Janson ascribes to the two. But from the point of view of this thesis, we can say that the craftsman works within the forms his environment has given him, while the artist explores and expands those forms—in a sense, creates new forms—in an attempt to change and bring vitality to his environment.

But the artist can never escape his environment. The forms he uses or creates—whether it be painting, music, architecture or literature—are an extension and an expression of man within a particular environment. Ideas of form and stylization, then, can grow only out of an existence within the living patterns of a specific environment or culture.
Historically, there is evidence of attempts to inject the artistic vitality into the public consciousness: to bring it out of the narrowness of small groups and into the general culture. The Bauhaus, William Morris, and Henry Cole seem to have made the most notable efforts in this area.

The Bauhaus, founded in 1919, was a group of designers led by Walter Gropius. It was their idea to train, in Gropius' words, "a new generation of architects and designers to accept and anticipate the demands of the twentieth century—and to use all its resources, technical, scientific, intellectual, and aesthetic, to create an environment that would satisfy man's spiritual as well as material needs."²

We can see that the foundation of the Bauhaus was only a brief beginning in the history of man's efforts to come to terms with technology; "for in spite of its inconsistencies, both ideological and practical, the Bauhaus did more than any other organization, either in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, to reconcile man and his man-made environment."³

During the brief existence of the Bauhaus it changed itself many times; as Gropius pointed out: "ideas of cultural import cannot spread and develop
any faster than the society which they seek to serve. The establishment of a valid curriculum for a school that was to restore the idea of the fundamental unity underlying all branches of design and create type forms that would meet all technical, aesthetic and commercial demands was a long and sometimes painful process.\(^4\) Included in Gropius' following were such people as Klee, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and Joseph Albers; it was their influence that developed the Bauhaus' approach to shape, color, space and form.

In the beginning Gropius stated: "Let us create a new guild of craftsman, without the class distinction which raises an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist. Together, let us embrace architecture, sculpture, and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers, like crystal symbols of a new faith."\(^5\)

William Morris voiced somewhat the same idea some fifty years earlier in 1884, when he established the "Art Workers Guild." It was his idea to return to the golden past, because of the ugliness that the machine age had created.\(^6\) Morris believed in the artist's responsibility to society. He believed that if you improved the environment, you improved the ones living within it.

Art and beauty, according to Morris, need not be confined to painting and sculpture;
all men should be able to furnish their homes with products created by a 'decorative, noble, popular art,' and he envisioned a time when in no private dwelling will there be any sign of waste, pomp or insolence, and every man will have a share of the best.7

Morris felt that the "best" could only be produced by the craftsman working directly with his materials. He thought that nothing of value could come from the machine, since mass production brought about mass degradation: "Men living among such ugliness cannot conceive of beauty, and therefore cannot express it."8

Morris' rejection of the machine on social and aesthetic grounds was consistent with the art-nouveau style. This style was a compromise between the pressures of materialistic and technical development on the one hand, and, on the other, the artist's aesthetic approach, and escape into trends whose problems are the concerns only of the elect. Thus architecture, painting, sculpture, and decorative art were again fused along similar lines. Even though, there was a likeness in idea, the British craftsman tended to hold themselves apart from what they considered a purely decorative style.9

Before 1850, there were a few who attempted to inject art into industry. One such man was Henry Cole, who had founded a firm called "Summerlys Art Manufactures" in an attempt to persuade painters and sculptures to
produce designs for manufactured goods. In 1849, he and a group of his associates began publishing a *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, with the aim of creating standards that industry could follow. Cole was not heard by his countrymen, for the voice of William Morris was too great to overcome.\textsuperscript{10}

But Cole's ideas did not go unheard because he had many associates from other countries. For example, two Germans, Gottfried Semper and Hermann Munthesius, spread his idea in Germany, thus broadening the potential for support of the Bauhaus movement to come.
Moving from the Bauhaus period to the present, we can see that the word "environment" is being defined in various ways, depending on the artist's or designer's intent. One example would be sculptor George Segal, whose plaster figures are often composed in a common-place configuration which, because it is a part of our immediate environment, we all quickly identify with. His grouping of figures on a bus ride, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a good example. The viewer cannot actually walk around the figures, but it is not really necessary to do so, in order to participate in Segal's "environment." The image is so close to the viewer's own experience that he "participates" automatically.

In the applied arts we find designers like Paul Friedberg who designs playgrounds as continuous environmental concepts, which allow children to go within, and be surrounded by, the continuing forms. Of late, Friedberg's work consists of low-cost, prefabricated modular units that can be arranged in limitless compositions. 11

On the other hand, architecture, the most common structure in our constant environment, shows many examples of sculpture as well as architecture. We can
say that architecture is the one thing that establishes a definite contained environment that people become a necessary part of.

Frank Lloyd Wright and Frederick J. Kiesler were outstanding contributors to architecture as sculpture. The Guggenheim Museum of New York, constructed in 1959, is considered Wright's masterpiece of architecture and sculpture. The interior of the Guggenheim reveals Wright's attempt to construct a continuous space with balconies. An upward-spiraling ramp, containing paintings and sculptures, comes to life as people move at different speeds around the ramp.¹²

Frederick J. Kiesler, architect and sculptor, worked with the concept of "continuing space" before Wright. He designed his first Endless House in 1924. His developing concept was to design and construct houses which were to be continuing space. Because of this idea, Kiesler was one of the first to break entirely with the cube-prism tradition. He wanted to liberate space into galaxies of disclosed space for living, to invent a special construction system, the shell in continuous tension, to eliminate the sharp division between floor, wall and ceiling of the box, and to inject into the whole concept of a dwelling the psychological and emotional import of the unexpected heights and widths of all living area within a singular or multiple dwelling. The floor-plan and the sections were neither squarish nor rectangular nor circular, but the expression of a flow of life-forces, intensified to the point of intrinsic expansion.... What was necessary was a through
investigation of the basic needs of man, his family, and community..., to investigate the function of life-forces at their roots and not just modify or modernize old habits of living.13

Kiesler believed that the study of "life-forces" was of more importance for schools of architecture than studies of past or present styles of design. He was interested in man's needs concerning the family and necessities of life, as well as communion with one's self.14 "Space in the Endless House is continuous. All living areas can be unified into a 'single continuum'."15

The idea of the Endless House has caught on since 1924, and many more have been built since. The Michael Lax Association, designers, a part of a group of architects known as the Projections, designed and exhibited an endless form. The form was constructed by blowing synthetic resin into forms which harden within a short time. This type of construction requires no framework.16

The Projection states: "The frontiers between pure science, applied science and technology are dissolving...," and they propose, "the use of formable synthetic sheets or fabrics to create premolded rooms ...and the use of flexible fibers stretched into shapes for furniture and made permanent and structural with coatings of synthetic resins."17
CONCLUSION

I still feel that it is possible to design and construct an environmental sculptural grouping that will define its own frame of reference. However, after completing my sculptural environment, I feel that one can develop a more successful environment by designing and constructing the room as well as the furnishings. Much can be taken from Kiesler's concept of continuing space and the design of his Endless House, where the wall flows into the floor and ceiling. I can see how this concept could better fit the idea of environmental furniture where the furnishings could be a natural part of the continuing space, not just an added composition. The idea of creating the entire living space as well as the furniture and furnishings in a unified whole or "continuum" is more functional.

However, it is hard to break conditioned attitudes, since this type of structure will encounter greater expense and is not a part of the present production line as we know it. It is rather hard to change conditioned concepts all at once. Therefore, I feel it is practical as well as aesthetically acceptable to develop environmental sculptural furniture and furnishings to adapt to our present structures.
From the influence of the Bauhaus, Art Nouveau, and the latest ideas of the Projections, one can see the development and fusion of architecture, painting, sculpture, and the creative crafts into a more unified whole. We can see too the results of the creative artists and designers, like Segal, Kiesler and many others, who design and construct new environments within old ones. We are able also to realize the great need for the freshness of their work in such an industrial era.

Like Kiesler, I believe that the designers and artists should investigate the function of life-forces at their roots, and not just modernize old habits. They should use the great bank of technological information and media that is developing about them in order to stimulate and create forms for new environments. With new media and techniques, they are able to break away from conditioned forms. Thus, the artist will continue to expand and explore his materials, his forms, and life-forces in an effort to make, remake, and create his environment.
ENDNOTES


3 Naylor, p. 7.

4 Naylor, p. 7.

5 Naylor, p. 9.


7 Naylor, p. 12.

8 Naylor, p. 13.


10 Naylor, pp. 11-14.

11 "The Designer as the Artist," Art in America, LV, No. 6 (1967), 53.


13 Kiesler, 65.

14 Kiesler, 65.

15 Kiesler, 67.

16 Kiesler, 68.

17 Kiesler, 69.
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