

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Civic Space: An Urban Collage

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5d74h35k>

Journal

Places, 2(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bennett, Brett M.

Publication Date

1985-09-01

Peer reviewed

Civic Space: An Urban Collage

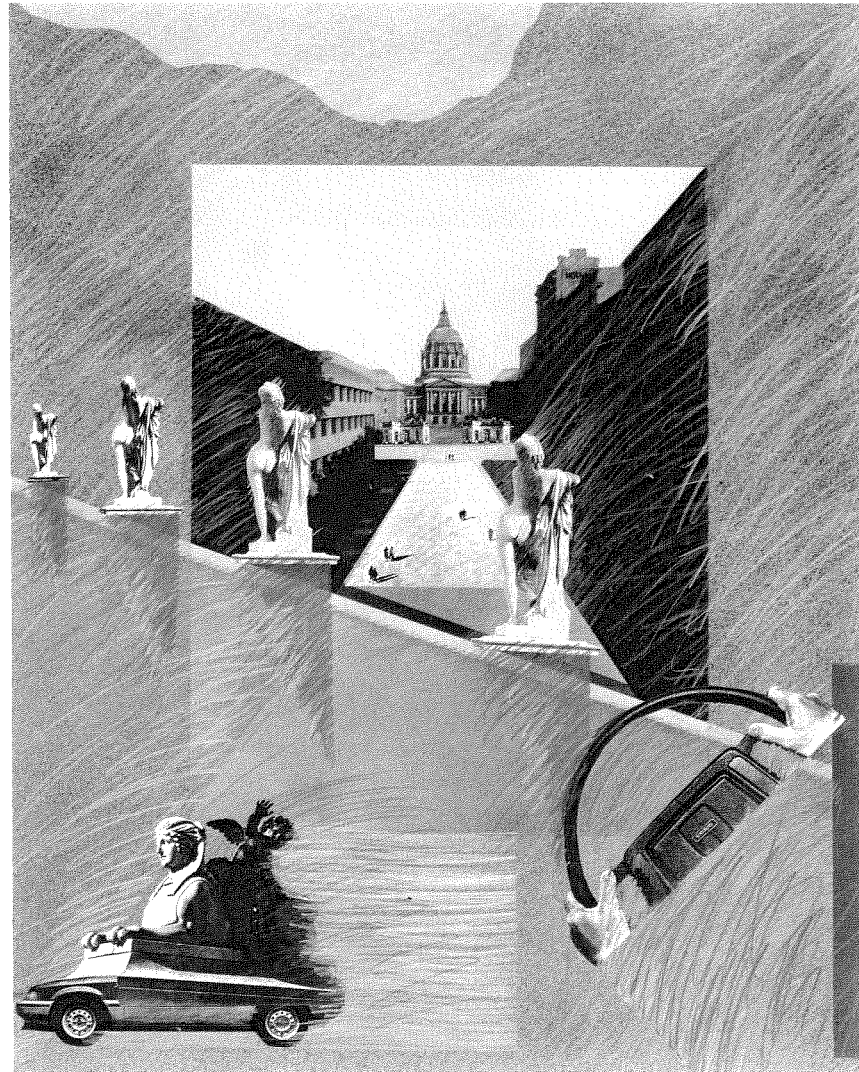
Brett Bennett

“Since ancient times, the abstract geometrical background of buildings and urban architecture has been enriched by the contrast with figural and pictorial representations and sculpture. Since the visual arts rejected this form of expression and began to compete with the abstraction of buildings this contrapuntal dimension has been lost.”¹

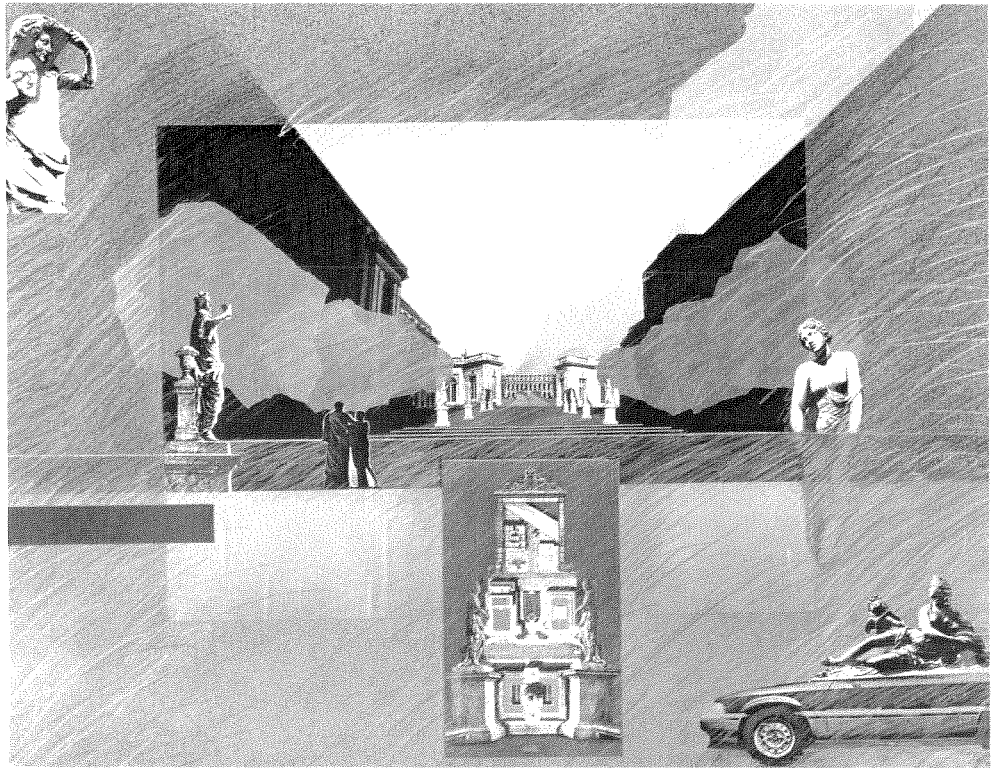
The collages illustrate a proposal for an area in San Francisco’s Civic Center, between the War Memorial Opera House and Art Museum, including the continuation of the City Hall axis to the west. The intent has been to reestablish the counterpoint between the sculptural representation of the human figure and architecture.

In his essay “Architecture, Sculpture and Painting: Environment, Act and Illusion,” Vincent Scully has proposed that figural sculpture has traditionally functioned as a representation of human action in a public or collective realm. In a rather literal response to this idea, the figures that populate these collages not only affect monumental stances, but engage in play or indulge in other nonheroic activities.

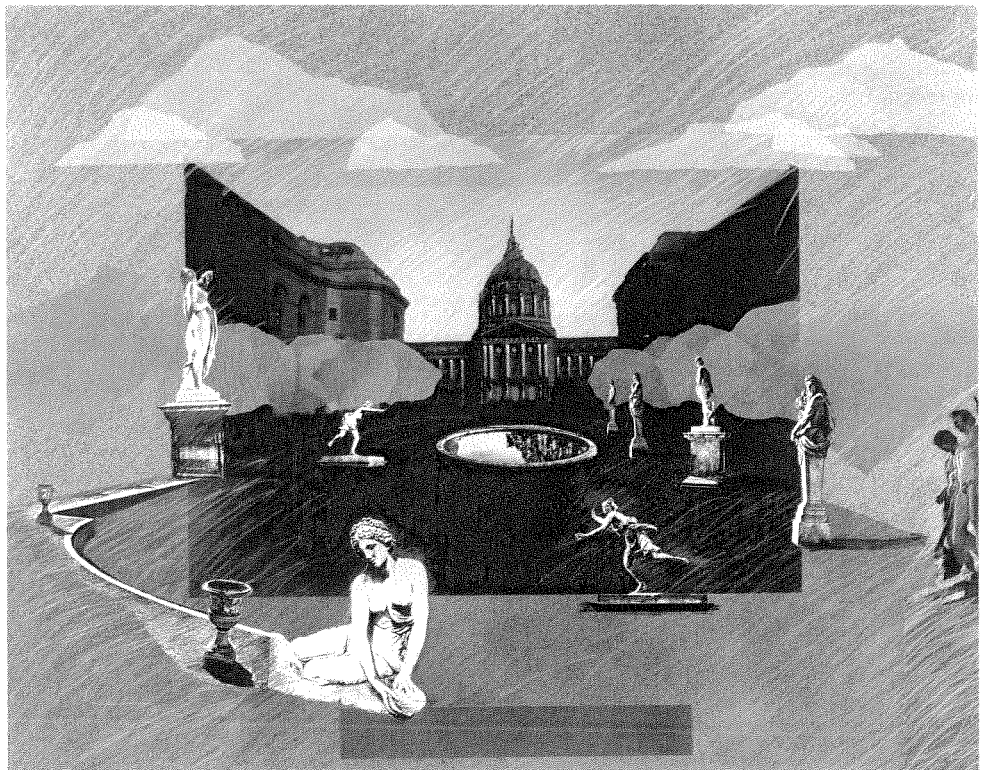
Also addressed is the automobile and its hegemony in the contemporary urban environment. The proposal attempts to include the viewer confined to a moving vehicle in the experience of this place. A façade is applied to the segment of the freeway that interrupts the civic axis, relating it to the surrounding architecture and



1 The freeway, the true entry to the city, provides a privileged glimpse along the axial sightline, one that might be whimsically marked for the decelerating motorist.



2

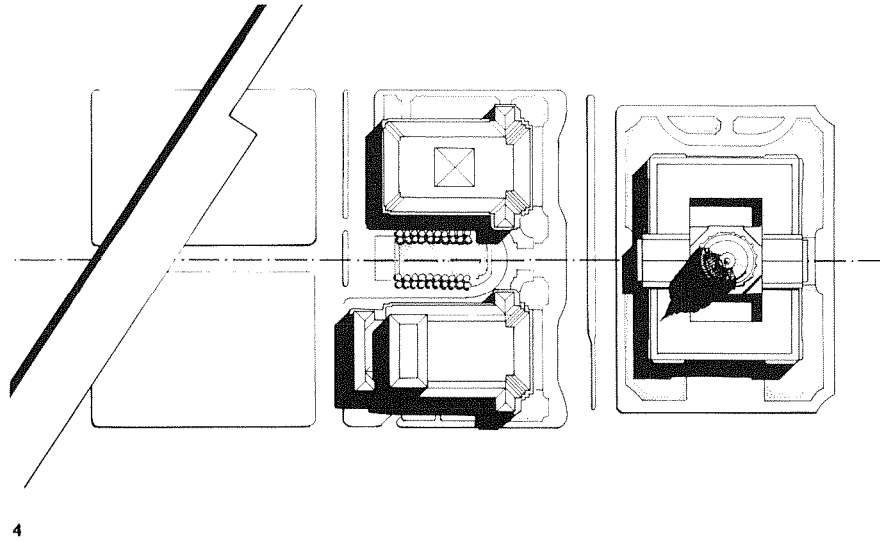


3

tying it to the ground plane of the pedestrian city. The placement of sculpture on the freeway would emphasize the motorist's experience of the freeway as an entrance to the city. The repetition of these pieces might also articulate the transition in velocity on the exit ramp and help to define the new scale of motion that prevails on the surface streets.

A final question arises: Does the auto-induced mobility of our current condition preclude the investment of a single location with such significance? Does the accessibility of escape subvert any concern for a particular (nonprivate) setting? Does a mobile society necessarily sacrifice permanence and pride of place?

In illustration of this question, the most intimate relation of sculpture to architecture—that of the figure to the base—has been disrupted. The automobile which displaces the architectural base threatens stasis and permanence, and perhaps the very foundation of architecture.



NOTE

1 *Rob Krier: on Architecture*, Academy Editions, London, St. Martin's Press, New York.

2 **Two pavilions** anchor the west end of a small park; the freeway, given a façade on the street, is brought down to earth: a backdrop in the near distance.

3 **The formerly desolate park** is now populated by figural sculpture. A counterpoint to the geometry of architecture, it represents a human presence and individual action in the public realm.

4 **The monumental City Hall** faces the majestic twins of the War Memorial Opera House and Art Museum. Between them its powerful axis continues to the west, only to be severed by the last exit of Interstate 101.