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# Space into Place: Richard Fleischner

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Richard Fleischner is a well-known contemporary sculptor of large, environmental projects severe in their geometries and generous in their implications. From the very beginning his work has been grounded in the notion of Place. An early, pivotal piece involved an actual diner, peopled with life-size plaster figures and installed in a bucolic, rural field. Subsequent, small, imaginary, cast-metal landscapes evoked a primordial loneliness reminiscent of Giacometti's poetic environments. Fleischner's work gradually evolved from piece to place as it outgrew the dimensions of discrete objects to claim sites whose given elements became elements of the art.

A line of hay bales, for example, delineated the axis of a long field; other modular hay blocks described room-sized rectangles and mazes. Fleischner laid out huge, concentric rings of sod and mazes of chain-link fencing and sculpted long corridors through fields of tall grass. He has consistently based his approach on a geometry derived from the specifics of the site and put to the service of an unaggressive, but persuasive, affirmation of human experience.

Fleischner was interviewed for *Places* in his Providence studio in May and June of 1983; the freewheeling conversations were propitiously launched with the discovery that the interviewer's leading question duplicated word for word the projected title of a

book the artist is determined to write: "What Makes a Space a Place?"

He has traveled extensively and thoughtfully; the interviews retraced his path through both memory and geography to single out spots invested with singular significance. These places encompass both the celebrated and prepossessing, as well as the anonymous, eccentric, mundane, and even positively malignant. As his criteria for Place emerged in the discussions, his own artistic process for drawing forth and enhancing the quality of Place became clear.

Fleischner's disarmingly simple and humane prerequisites for Place may surprise those who associate his work primarily with a severe, formal elegance and tautness of design. He argues, it will be seen, as passionately for "fit" as for "form," for how we feel in a space as much as for the strength of its independent conceptual order.

When I think of Places, as distinct from spaces, that I have been in, those that have had the biggest impact on me are all designed in terms of the function that goes on in them. The process by which we are comfortable or not within a space, and whether or not it is appropriate to what we want to do there, is what determines for me whether it is a Place or not.

The quality of experience is determined by the degree to which

the Placemaker keeps his hands on the process of elaborating an environment, continuing to pay attention to issues of appropriateness, intimacy, user-scale, and physicality, as well as the unique quirks that provide every Place its personality.

In describing special sites, Fleischner refers frequently to "the gestures of the place that are always the most important thing for me to establish. I really feel that those basic gestures which are the first to go in and the last to remain are the gestures of the space. You can tell so much by that little bit." For Fleischner a careful reading of the gestures implicit in a space is critical to establishing an appropriate organization that will not become confused or diluted through gratuitous decoration.

To convey the substance and flavor of the somewhat discursive conversations, it might be useful to borrow the artist's method. The "gesture" of the interviews, then, could be located in the phrase "critical distance," which cropped up early and recurred frequently to describe the key determinant in Fleischner's definition of Place. The term carries several layers of significance and implication. It first surfaced in a discussion of one of the artist's preferred Places, a baseball diamond.

Critical distances. It's the distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate, the whole

notion of the double play. It's the time it takes to cover the distance—for a pitcher to throw the ball home and for a runner to go from first to second. It's that slight shift in time, the difference of a second or two, that determines whether the runner is safe or out. That is a critical distance, so the size of the field is a critical distance.

He also cited the example of the fields surrounding New England farms, which were established by means of a network of beautiful stone walls. "The space of the field is determined by how reasonable it was to carry stone. When you couldn't carry it any further, that's where you started to build the wall."

Fleischner admires these two types of organization not merely for their compelling and seductive geometry, but for the fact that the rules for both derived from specific human responses and physical involvement as much or more than from abstract, formal determinants. The term critical distance also referred to Fleischner's conviction that the definers and creators of Place cannot distance themselves from the process of building. Too often the offensive placelessness of the contemporary environment has resulted from the maker's removal from the specific context and a willful inattention to the idiosyncrasies that color and shape a Place.

So that if you walk into some

meadow that's in the middle of the woods, and you are carrying your picnic and you are with somebody you want to have a private picnic with, and it's a great day, then all of a sudden you come out, and here is this meadow that is a nice size, and you have your picnic there and you pack it up afterward, after you have spent a lot of time there and you go away—that's a Place. The whole experience of how you came there, the whole change of what happened in terms of light, being able to feel the sun after not feeling it being in the woods—those sensations are part of what would make that a Place.

In Fleischner's view, then, a space becomes a Place to the degree that it takes into account the quality of human experience occurring within its physical and psychological parameters. A Place is not necessarily gracious or accommodating; it can even transcend inadequate and unhealthy conditions, like the stonecutting factory in Bedford, Indiana, where Fleischner has the limestone blocks of his sculpture cut.

It was cold, damp, the dust was terrible for your breathing, but it was very much of a Place. It was beautiful; the relationship of all the people that worked within it to each other was incredible. The way that that place functioned was art. It was theater. It was dance. It was everything. You go from that into an office somewhere, and the temperature

is considerate, it's warm enough, but the light can be depressing, let's say all fluorescent lights, the air is thin, the windows don't open, there is something that is not healthy. And the relationship of the people in there to each other is very, very, different. It is not intimate.

A space that neglects or ignores these imperatives, which does not promote an intimacy of human exchange with or within it, no matter how thoughtfully conceived or elegantly realized, fails to achieve Place. Not simply neutral, it becomes a bad place.

Government Center in Boston would give anybody a *horror vacui*, which is Latin for a fear of the empty, because here is this enormous open area and it is *deadly*. St. Mark's Square in Venice, on the other hand, is much more open than Government Center. But in St. Mark's it is the detailing of what happens on the sides, it's the scaling down of how the light affects things, it's the quality of the sounds that are around, it has to do with the temperature, it has to do with the pigeons that are in it, it has to do with how it's occupied, and how it's occupied is a result of axial lines, sight lines.

A big space becomes defined down into a Place because for one reason or another we locate specific points—it could be a bench or whatever—that refer to the larger axes, to a larger

expanse. The viewer always is part of something that is either getting bigger or smaller. There are a series of destinations. In Government Center there are no cul-de-sacs where it makes sense to gather, so you are always potentially in somebody's way. Those are things that we are sensitive to as people. One is not apt to settle down in the middle of the street.

Fleischner frequently singles out a straightforward, directness of gesture and a lack of self-consciousness as additional critical attitudes that can elevate a space to the stature of Place.

Once when I was in Egypt in 1972 this cab driver who took us every day to dig for fossils was also the mayor of a little community. So he had a meeting house, and it was a long, narrow building with a bench on each side, and you came in at one end and on either side was a bench, and the building was not any wider than from here to there. You came in this door, it had a dirt floor, simple wooden benches along each wall, the full length of it, white-washed walls. At the end the wall went up and pitched with this diamond window in the end. And when you got yourself up off your knees you sat down on either of the benches where you had tea. And the distance from wall to wall was incredible because it was just far enough apart so there was nothing ill at ease about being too tight, and yet it

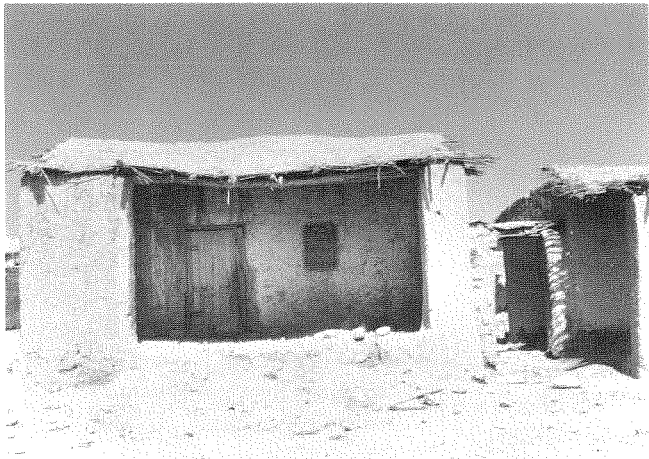
was this long space, people had to sort of lean forward. It was built for the specific number of people that had to use it, for nothing I am sure. The only source of light was the open doors and the window at the other end. It was incredible. It was one of the most special Places I'd ever been in. There was nothing self-conscious about that meeting house when they did it. It was direct and clean and to the point.

He delights in the impact of the comparison between the spartan facade of a dwelling in a Jordanian refugee camp and the elaborate pretensions of a Providence driveway and marquee. Their juxtaposition epitomizes the critical distance that separates a home from a house, a place that *is* compromised by extraneous, metaphorical trappings.

The things that show up in this comparison represent more than anything else I can think of the plusses and minusses, or the pros and the cons, of what I care about, and carry them even to an extreme. The house in Providence is silly; it is almost a caricature of everything you consider *nouveau riche*. It's an applied style, rather than the form actually being at one with whatever it is that had determined it. It is superficiality as opposed to integrity. Nobody using the new materials that are available today has shown the inventiveness maintaining the integrity of the material to the

extent that whoever made that refugee house did in determining how that material was used. When they did those columns out front to support the roof to protect it from the sun, their physical mass was related not only to the material but to the size and scale of whoever made it, so that it is very, very intimate. What I loved about that place and about that house was, on the one hand, the intimacy of each of those elements—I mean they were incredibly personal, but not in an embarrassing way. It wasn't like going through somebody's underwear drawer and thinking, "Oh, I shouldn't be looking here." It was very, very intimate, and it was very sincere. And the other image, of the house in Providence, is almost funny, because it's totally removed. So that if you take your notion of critical distance and apply it not in terms of dimensions but in terms of our physical interaction with that which we are building, whoever designed that Providence house was very far away. There was no plasticity, there was no dialogue between the materials and whoever it was that did it.

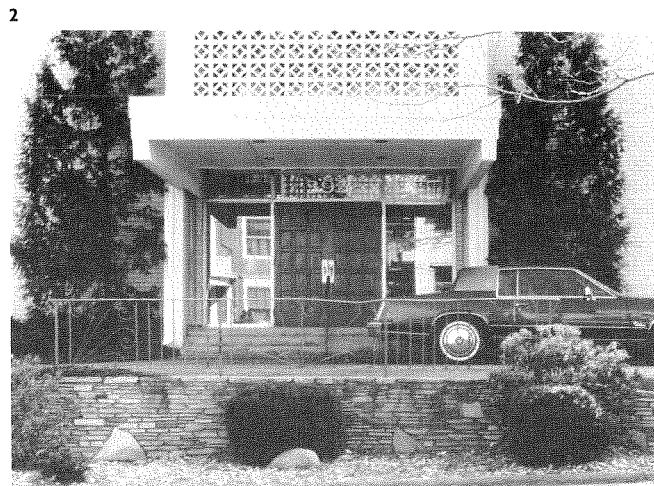
The dangers of retreating from involvement rather than plunging directly into the physicality or plasticity of the design dialogue are revealed by Fleischner's pleasure in an anecdote involving one of Gaudi's studio assistants. (Though his austere purism would at first



appear to be at odds with this Spanish master of extravagant embellishment, Fleischner admires the conviction and integrity of Gaudi's elaborate decoration.)

One of Gaudi's assistants had been spending more and more time thinking only, getting more and more cerebral. So Gaudi sent him for a time to work basically as a laborer for the stone masons working on a church. He later realized two things; one, how much he could lift, how high he could lift it, what the motion was, and how that movement, that doing, affected the way he walked and what he saw, where his eyes went within the church.

Fleischner's reverence for the unintentional and unaffected might appear to present a dilemma for an artist whose approach to problem-solving is so deliberate and whose geometry is apparently so rigorous and reasoned. Yet, the geometry that he savors in memorable Places and aims for in the creation of his own is never an end in itself, but is rather a means toward providing an appropriate context for a set of feelings. Geometry's precise



delineations, which take their source perhaps from the rigid orthogonals of his urban childhood, betray the mind of man imposing his will on the irregularities of nature. In Fleischner's hand they are put to the establishment of a sympathetic scale and system of internal relationships. Fleischner's geometries do not exist as disembodied abstractions, but rather organize and bring to light the special eccentricities of a space, drawing forth and quietly illuminating its potentiality. His lines, planes, points, edges, angles, and axes derive not from his head, but from an extension of his personal and very physical interaction with the space. All his projects have involved plotting by plodding and acting out the measurements and arrangements. From the earliest interventions in the open fields, he has paced, reacted, sensed, visualized, and actually experienced rather than set down any *a priori* notion on paper.

Fleischner made, for example, numerous visits to a wooded grove adjacent to a federal building in suburban Baltimore and explored its original conditions before

deriving the nature, number, and distribution of the steel and granite elements which he then set on the forest floor. This Baltimore Project (1978–1980) placed vertical planes (cor-ten steel column walls and a door jamb), horizontal planes (slab table, low bench, and threshold bar), and both actual and implied cubes along bisecting axes according to a plan that can be understood by the viewer only after recapitulating the artist's own process of exploration.

I went down to Baltimore easily 30 times before I really knew what I was doing. After, let's say, six visits down there, several days each visit, I began to see certain things and pick out certain axes through the woods, and defined spaces and places within it. This process—how specifically you look—you can do it with a square of the sidewalk; you can begin to isolate situations if you look. I really only wanted to deal with very simple horizontal and vertical planes that directed you in lineal, axial situations. That is very much the way a room would also work. It is sort of an

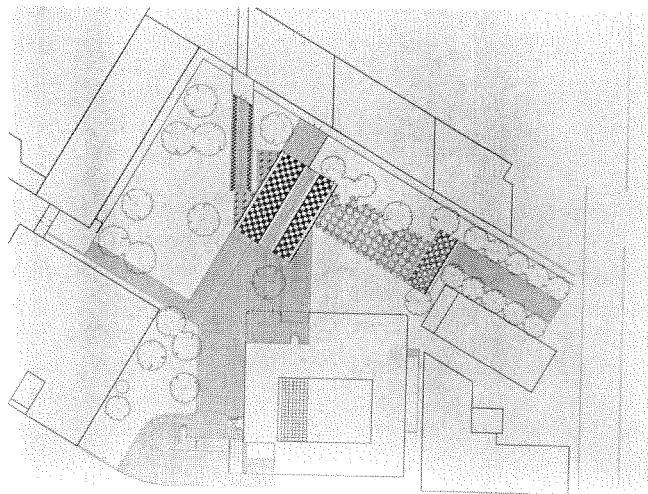
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abstraction of that. If you just take a street, what was a reasonable size for somebody's house is what determined the foundation. That was the first specific area or amount of space; then you needed so much room between it and something else before the next one started. Those are dimensions that we have become very accustomed to and acquainted with. So I am sure when I go into a situation, whether it is in the woods or out of the woods and begin to lay out elements, I am very influenced by those distances.

Fleischner has six major public projects currently underway: a courtyard in the new Dallas Museum, a grassy plaza at a subway station near Temple University in Philadelphia, a second rapid transit station "garden" in Cambridge, a series of modular blocks around a soccer park in Jerusalem, another set of modular geometries on the campus of the University of California at La Jolla, and a sequence of interlocked exterior courtyard spaces at MIT. Unlike his earlier projects, which were conceived and born in the

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studio or on the site with a minimum of midwives in attendance, the current projects, most in the works for nearly three years, have all involved a phalanx of architects; landscape architects; traffic, planning, and engineering consultants; bureaucrats; and miscellaneous interested authorities.

His strategies for combating the distancing between original notion and attenuated process have depended, as we have seen, on a physical interaction with the space that precedes and supersedes any paper plan-making, as well as a close involvement with the actual builders and fabricators. In a recent competition for a major public commission, Fleischner proposed another original means of maintaining an intensity of artistic energy. Rather than relying on a single artist to bear the entire logistical and strategic burden, he proposed selecting other artists of compatible though individual and varied vision, to whom he would assign parts of the larger whole. "One person can only spread so thin. In other words, you have this concentrated energy and you

1 **Jordanian Refugee House**  
(Photograph by the artist)

2 **The Providence House: Driveway and Marquee**  
(Photograph by the artist)

3 **The Baltimore Project, 1980**  
(Photograph by Joel Breger)

4 **Site Plan: MIT Project, 1982**  
(Drawing by the artist)

contain it in this glass and then you spill it out on the floor; it really will dissipate.” The concept of involving many makers, however, challenged professional norms, and he was not awarded the commission.

The Dallas, La Jolla, and MIT Projects present a spectrum of the artist’s approaches to the problem of making an individual statement within existing architectural and natural conditions. Both Dallas and La Jolla involve the strategic placement of large, modular-block pieces to define axes, edges, and zones, in the tradition of the earlier Baltimore project’s geometric elements. At MIT, on the other hand, the signals of the artist’s intervention will be less immediately visible.

At the Dallas Museum, designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, the problem was to take one of a series of inner courtyards and make it into a Place from its original definition as a passing-through, transitory space. Fleischner at first intervened nearly anonymously, making changes only in grade and planting patterns and integrating existing axes so tightly that his presence would hardly have been discerned. In the final scheme, however, he asserts his hand by mimicking one of the entrances to the space, setting a monumental, gate-like, modular-stone piece directly opposite.

At La Jolla the blocks of dimensioned stone assume an even greater significance. (These large

blocks, which the artist first worked out full-scale in particle board in the studio, are curiously reminiscent of the children’s classic educational Froebel blocks that won notoriety in the nursery of Frank Lloyd Wright. While their internal relationships are all carefully and exactly proportioned, their overall dimensions are not at all standardized, but rather were fixed upon by the artist entirely intuitively.)

In deliberate juxtaposition to a rolling, green, two-and-one-half acre site, Fleischner has placed a series of tall, geometric granite groups. Two sets are positioned in alignment with the undergraduate library, while a third planar group derived from Picasso’s *Bathers* reiterates the line of a row of eucalyptus trees.

Then there are some peripheral elements scattered around. And in the center of the whole space is going to be an imposed solid plane which is not level, but which is flat, so it rolls with the land. It doesn’t undulate, it’s tilted. So this plane is almost like a rectilinear footprint that is pressed into the same grass as everything else. And that came from the Bedouin I saw in Israel who had swept out an area in an orchard and then very gently put in a plane so that he would have a flat place for his tent. It had a lot to do with that. That functions as a central place within this whole project.

The geometries at MIT derive from

an architectural context rather than a natural one and are not embodied in freestanding sculptural pieces. The artist’s actions will not be perceived from a distance but instead gradually sensed with the actual experience of the place.

In Japanese thought the term “Ma” accords essence and meaning to the “space between.” At MIT, Fleischner’s attention focuses on the irregular, L-shaped space between two major buildings, Mitchell/Giurgola’s Whitaker Medical Complex and I.M. Pei’s Arts and Media Technology Facility. By drawing forth the potential personality of this impersonal mid-ground and organizing its competing axes and entrances, Fleischner creates a Place to be, rather than one simply to pass through.

As in the Baltimore Project, Fleischner made numerous site visits to begin to sense the conditions of the space, pacing out measurements, stringing up perimeters, and shifting garbage cans to establish critical distances. To create territories within the larger space the artist devised a sequence of differently scaled and patterned geometric inlays of granite pavers. These function either as thresholds to orchestrate arrival and departure or as interior “rugs” to establish new situations. Though the flat schematics of these geometric swatches have historic references—particularly a dramatic black and white mosaic from Ostia

Antica—Fleischner’s intentions are not decorative.

His means are subtle; whereas in Baltimore the granite entry slab was clearly felt as a potent interruption in the soft forest floor, the MIT inlays will flow smoothly and be experienced more quietly. The sequence of inlays sets up a stately cadence that culminates in a center as significant as the inclined plane at La Jolla. This center is a broad expanse of stairs that divides the original, neutral terrain into two distinct levels of exterior atrium: a sculpture court below and a grassy green above.

At MIT you have a structured space that’s even, to a certain extent, flowing. It’s contained, its outermost perimeters are the building planes which begin to establish a certain geometry within themselves. The distances between elements, which are very important to me, ended up best being defined by points, lines, and edges. Those different inlays, the changes of material, become the means to set up a particular scale—going back to that notion of what feels good. So that if we set up a plane within a plane within a plane, without changing any of the elevations of that plane, or want to make a distinction between different parts within that whole, then that geometry, in conjunction with the change in material, ends up working real well for me.

Geometry versus the lack of

geometry in some situations becomes a really important juxtaposition. At MIT there is a lot of grass and then the granite, and within that the dimensioned versus the looser stone. For example, you take a tree and that tree is in relationship to, let’s say, geometric inlay. They really do something to each other that, if I were not using that geometry in my working context, would become totally lost because it is so subtle.

Fleischner is serious, single-minded and far from sanguine in assessing the quality of the contemporary environment. He was unable to come up with a single example of a good contemporary Place to pit against the plethora of bad or nondescript environments that fail their moral obligation to enhance human experience.

It is the loss of significant experience that Fleischner mourns and works to counteract in his own environments. He deplores the indifferent lack of attention brought to bear by the “fast food mentalities” on questions of human scale, properties of materials, workmanship, and the eccentricities of every site. Fleischner sees beyond the visual placelessness of the contemporary scene to its dispiriting implications for a humanity searching for moments of value and meaning. He finds it ironic that many of his models for successful Places evolved unintentionally (“a slap in the face to what I’m doing”) and that his

task has become to emulate consciously unselfconsciousness.

In the Places he admires, as well as in his own process, Fleischner acknowledges several different continua: the continuum of creative effort from the generative impulse through to its consistent and energy-filled execution; the continuum of materials from their origins to their final incorporation; and the continuum of the Place springing from the very nature of its original conditions. In making a Place he channels each of these continua toward human use, wrestling with the need to liberate experience through the apparent contradiction of defining actual physical conditions. By setting up connections and reverberations he deepens the initial experience of the site, whether natural or built. As one critic has written of his Baltimore project: “The initial experience of the natural effect is simultaneously doubled through the artist’s sensitive reading of context and place.”

Fleischner’s claim that he wants to create Places that feel good is disarming and somewhat misleading in its transparent simplicity. He aspires to a confirmation or affirmation of human dignity and a sensing of larger connections. His Places do feel good, but reverberate far more profoundly than a pleasurable sensory tingle.