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# Art in Architecture

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*I think that the moral, the ethical dimension of art is mostly gone, and only in a newly significant relationship with a non-art audience can any ethical or social dimension come back to art.*

Scott Burton, artist

*People shouldn't look at our process and consider it an ideal example. It's probably an "existence proof"—if it could work here, it could work anywhere.*

Jerome Wiesner,  
Former President of MIT

*This article on the design process for the Wiesner Building at MIT is excerpted from *Designing the Wiesner Building*, a publication of the MIT Committee on the Visual Arts, and is reprinted with permission of the authors and the Committee.*

In 1979, Kathy Halbreich asked six artists to collaborate with architect I. M. Pei in the design of the Wiesner Building at MIT. Six years later, the authors of this essay were given a rare opportunity to interview almost all who participated in the resulting collaboration. We spoke with the artists and the architects, with the many users and clients of the building, with the contractor, and with some persons who were primarily observers. Full transcripts have been placed in the MIT archive. The present essay is a commentary on them.

Halbreich, Director of Exhibitions for the MIT Committee on the Visual Arts, originally conceived of the collaboration as a research project. It was an experiment, intended to find out how and whether artists and architects might collaborate on a new building. Such a notion isn't new, of course. It goes back to Palladio and Veronese at the Villa Malcontenta, and long before that. In our own century, much lip service has been paid to the idea of such collaborations, and there have been examples: the UNESCO Building in Paris, and the more successful Maeght Foundation in St-Paul-de-Vence. What makes MIT a departure is the fact that it involved artists of a new kind, sometimes called environmental artists, members of a generation that has become a presence in the art scene only since about 1970. Since that time, increasing numbers of artists have chosen to work not on discrete "pieces," made of paint or stone or steel, but rather in such media as earth forms on

the landscape, neon tubes, natural light and shadow, or carpentered environmental space. Increasingly, the work done by these artists has tended to occupy visible sites in the public realm, often in contexts provided by architecture.

More traditional works of sculpture or painting, conceived as signed objects and contained in frames or otherwise delimitable locuses, can also be placed in an architectural context. The difference is that they do not aspire to become part of the architecture. They maintain, instead, a dialogue with it. To Halbreich, by contrast, the emerging movement toward environmental art—environmental art being a wholly inadequate term, as all admit—suggested that there might be a possibility of integrating the work of several artists and an architect into a single piece of built environment, one in which the artists' contributions would disappear as discrete entities and instead become part of the larger fabric of the whole. By thus removing art from its sacred places—the studio, the gallery, the museum, the display wall, the ceremonial plaza—and returning it to the world of public use and need, the collaboration might also, she felt, help to cleanse art of what many have seen as its current malaise of consumerism and preciousness.

The Wiesner Building is a test of that hypothesis, and this catalogue thus the document of an experiment. As always happens outside the laboratories of science, the experiment is inconclusive. As



one of the interview subjects said, the story of the MIT collaboration should be thought of as being like a novel. It is filled with useful perspectives on life and art, but its message is a matter of interpretation.

The best place to begin the story is not with the work of Kenneth Noland, Richard Fleischner, or Scott Burton, but with the artifact that, in concept form, preceded their involvement: the design of the Wiesner Building itself.

### **The Wiesner Building**

The Wiesner Building was designed by the internationally known firm of I. M. Pei & Partners. As it stands, it is a building of a very strong and definite character. It is a square box, with a flat gridded skin made of modular metal panels painted white. Beside it is a rather idiosyncratically shaped concrete archway.

A square is a closed and finite form, stable and centered. The squareness of the box and the smoothness of its skin make the building appear self-contained and sealed off from the life of the world around it, like a Christmas present that has yet to be unwrapped. Very little that happens inside the building can be seen from outside, nor for the most part are the activities inside the building visible to one another. The building gives the sense of a set of isolated boxes packed one within another, the innermost being the cubical experimental theater, a mysterious box within a box that is dark and almost inaccessible.

**I Wiesner Building, east facade, with plaza paving by Richard Fleischner**

The building stands on its site very much as an object. It is handsome, well sited and well scaled to its surroundings. The grid surface of the exterior is, whether intentionally or not, itself a metaphor for technology—immediately suggesting, by association, a positivist world of graph paper and number matrices. It relates visually to other gridded surfaces in the vicinity, such as the square granite tiles around the windows of the Health Services building across the courtyard, designed by a joint venture of Gruzen and Partners, Mitchell/Giurgola, or the chessboard paving pattern of Richard Fleischner's courtyard, itself a response to both the Giurgola and the Pei buildings. On a deeper level, the grid evokes the special *genius loci* of MIT, its unique morphology: an open-ended grid of corridors.

The Wiesner Building sits on a kind of fault line of the MIT campus, exactly at the place where the older campus, which is finished either in pale, warm gray limestone or else in concrete colored to look like limestone, meets the emerging East Campus, a former industrial area whose buildings tend to be red brick. Pei chooses to imitate neither material. He thus makes his building a discontinuity in the otherwise continuous matrix that is MIT, giving it a specialness that is appropriate both to its use and to its location as linchpin at the joint of the two campuses. The concrete gateway gathers these meanings into a symbol of passage between two worlds and frames an important pedestrian axis that runs between

the central MIT dome in the west and the glass atrium of the Health Services Building in the east. The elaborately and arbitrarily shaped gateway is a form of architectonic expression as different as possible from the gridded metal skin, and it is also, perhaps, I. M. Pei's attempt to address the question of art in architecture by fashioning his own artwork.

All this is the Wiesner Building we can see. What we can't see, except in certain vestigial clues, are two earlier building concepts. Having called Pei's structure the Box, we will label these earlier ideas the Barn and the Village. Like the ghosts of unborn siblings, these two unrealized buildings haunted the Box throughout its design and construction, and even today a knowledge of them serves to place the Box in a helpful context of possible alternative designs. Both were conceptions of what the Wiesner Building might have been, conceptions that were present in the minds of many of its early planners but were eventually supplanted by the Box.

The Barn was conceived by its supporters as a big, undifferentiated, "undesigned" loftlike building, in which the many activities of the MIT arts community might proceed in happy chaos, expanding or contracting within the generalized space as their needs changed over time. The Village, on the other hand, was a conception of the arts center as something broken into smaller increments and opened up to the community—a group of spaces of

different sizes and shapes that might be clustered together or might, more radically, be dispersed throughout the Institute in order to foster maximum interaction between art and the life of the community. The cluster version of the Village reached the stage of being programmed and diagrammatically designed, for the site now occupied by the Box, by Donlyn Lyndon, a former head of MIT's Department of Architecture. In this scheme, the various art functions would have been made visible to a passerby, since they would all have opened off a glassed pedestrian spine.

There would have been extensive use of outdoor courtyards and rooftops for semipublic social and art activities.

How the involvement of the artists with the architecture might have played out in the case of either the Barn or the Village will never be known. Both were loose, informal, open-ended ideas about architecture. Neither was pursued in the end, and the selection of Pei as architect was an accomplished fact before the idea of the art collaboration was formulated.

These half-forgotten precursors of the Wiesner Building, Barn and Village, are mentioned not in criticism of the more determinate building that was built but rather to indicate the limits of the experiment. Collaboration in the case of either of these alternatives would have been a very different matter, whether for better or worse. Being comparatively



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**2 Wiesner Building, atrium.** Bench, banquette, and balustrade by Scott Burton. Interactive color bands on left wall by Kenneth Noland

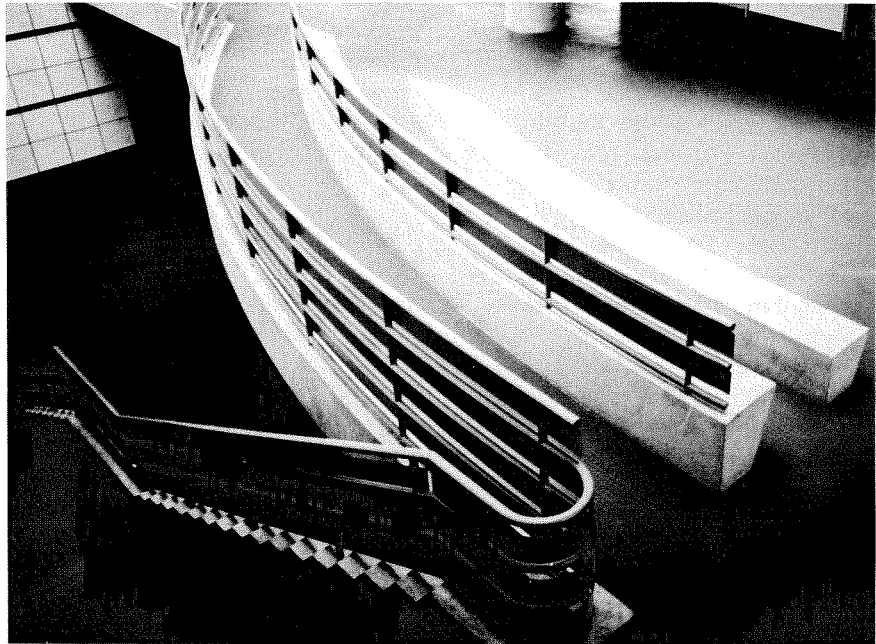
open, comparatively forgiving toward change, not contained so much within a closed formal envelope nor governed so much by a unitary organizational concept as is the Pei scheme, the Barn or Village would surely have given the artists a chance to get involved in the architecture at a more basic conceptual level—to push it around or even reshape it, perhaps improving it or perhaps ruining it. These issues of Barn and Village raise the question of whether Halbreich's original expectations about the collaboration were even appropriate to a different kind of architect such as Pei. It was the hope of both Halbreich and William Porter—then the Dean of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning and the putative leader of the original client team—that the artists would be involved at the very beginning of the design process. They would begin their work at the same moment as the architect. Artist and architect would simply sit down as equals in front of a blank sheet of paper and together they would generate the concept of the total building. I. M. Pei & Partners, however, it not a firm that can reasonably be expected to work in such a pluralistic way. As more than one observer pointed out in the interviews, if such a collaboration was the goal, it would have made more sense for the Institute to choose a younger, less celebrated architect with a less fully evolved architectural style and design process. The Pei firm is well known for creating definite architectural form, regardless of circumstances. It is not a firm that is likely to sit down with a group of

artists over sheets of yellow tracing paper, jointly imagining a building together. Indeed, there is skepticism within the Pei group as to whether *any* such process would have succeeded in producing a building at all.

Thus if complete equality of architect and artists was the definition of collaboration originally in Halbreich's mind, there was no true collaboration on the Wiesner Building. The architect's role was always primary, the artists' secondary.

The predilections of I. M. Pei & Partners weren't the only reason. Circumstance, too, made it impossible in this case for the artists to get into the process early or to stand on an equal footing with the architect. The first obstacle was the time required for approval of a federal grant to support the artists: the design of the building was already well under way before the artists could be commissioned. (Indeed, the artists attended early organizational meetings on a speculative basis, since there was, at that point, no guarantee of funds being available.)

Fund-raising was another obstacle that blocked the potential for full and equal artist/architect collaboration. Raising money for this building was, for then-President Jerome Wiesner and others, a desperate concern. MIT's traditional donors are inclined to support science and technology more readily than art, and Institute administrators had agreed not to approach those donors in this case.



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3 Detail of Burton's bench, banquette, and balustrade

Not surprisingly, the “Arts and Media Technology Building” (now the Wiesner Building) proved to be one of the hardest buildings to finance that MIT has built in recent years. For these practical reasons, Wiesner—who had the chief responsibility for getting money—wanted each stage of the building’s evolution to be presented in drawings and models of a professionally complete and finished kind, suitable for showing potential donors. Such a method of presentation was congenial in any case to the Pei firm, which typically avoids presenting a client with alternative designs or unresolved sketches, preferring to show resolved and complete ideas. Pei’s penchant for designing and for presenting designs in this “marketable” way may have been a factor in his selection as architect. It’s obvious, though, that this pressure for professional polish, for a seamless surface in presentation, undercut the concept of four hands at the drafting table.

Another block to collaboration was Pei’s renown, which intimidated some of the artists. “He’s a famous and powerful man, and I’m a little nothing,” said one. The power imbalance was eventually corrected by Pei’s willingness to take seriously most of the artists’ proposals—but, meanwhile, time was passing, and the design of the building was continuing separate from the artists.

Except for Flavin and Noland, none of the artists remarked to us on the fact that they hadn’t been asked in at the beginning of the design

process. Instead, the tendency was for the artists to be grateful, even delighted, that they hadn’t been asked at the very end of that process to provide merely an ornament for a finished building.

### Six Artists Begin

The six artists, therefore, came on the scene comparatively late, at a moment when a design for the building already existed. Each was assigned a different issue and a different part of this building as his problem, rather as if they had been the blind men exploring the elephant. These assignments were informal and were based on the previous work and interests of the artists. Thus Scott Burton was asked to consider the atrium furnishings, Richard Fleischner the outdoor sculpture court, Kenneth Noland the interior surface, Dan Flavin the problem of artificial lighting, James Turrell the problem of natural light, and Alan Shields the activation of the space of the atrium. Although there were a couple of early meetings at which all the artists were present, there was never any significant interaction among the artists, all of whom touched base with Pei rather than with one another.

The architectural design they began to work with, it is important to note, was not the same building that has now been built. At the time the artists began work, the design was about to undergo the first in a series of metamorphoses that surprised and confused them. The proposed building began to alter in size and shape—like “shifting

sand,” as Noland remembers it—in response to discussions between MIT and Pei. What they first saw was the schematic architectural proposal of April 1980, a set of drawings and a scale model for a building much larger than the one eventually built. This proposed building was to have had a cubic atrium in its exact center and an experimental pie-slice-shaped theater on the far side of the gateway arch. (Here the structure we see today gains meaning from a knowledge of this history. The arch that now projects out into space once served to connect the main building with its satellite theater.)

This early building proposal was strongly attacked by members of the client team as being too inward-looking and too much sealed off from the community. It also soon proved to be too ambitious and costly. Quickly it shrank. The experimental theater moved into the middle of the building, approximately where the atrium had been, and the atrium migrated north next to the arch where, at least in theory, it could foster interaction between the building and the public.

It was during this period of change in the building that three of the original six artists drifted away. Accounts of their departure are conflicting. Dan Flavin says he left because he felt there was no artist-architect collaboration and never likely to be any. Others say Flavin never seemed interested in the project. James Turrell apparently departed from the scene because his proposals (which included leaving

part of the roof open to the sky) were deemed impractical by the architects. Turrell's geographical remove from Cambridge and New York—he lives in Arizona—may have been an impediment to collaboration. Alan Shields left when the original cube-shaped atrium was abandoned. He felt he had received a clear message from members of the MIT client team that his proposal for a double catenary of beaded chains, intended to hang in the upper half of the atrium, was too much a conventional “piece,” not sufficiently integrated into the building. Shields had been intrigued by the cubic atrium; when it disappeared, he chose to depart for a more promising commission elsewhere.

The three artists who accepted the initial working relationships and survived the first, most radical design change—Scott Burton, Richard Fleischner, and Kenneth Noland—continued on to complete their projects. The work of each raises a different set of issues about the nature and validity of collaboration. In Burton's case, these issues have to do with conflicts between the artist's intention and the public interest, the latter as expressed in the building codes. In Fleischner's, the problem is that of an artist trying to design in a holistic way in a world governed by competing and isolated experts. And in Noland's, the interesting issue is the difficulty experienced by this most established, most “traditionally avant-garde” of the artists (to lift Burton's deft phrase out of context)

in making the transition from the studio to the environment.

### **Kenneth Noland**

Noland's work is the most visible of the three. Where Fleischner's design is largely co-incident with the landscape and Burton's with the building, Noland's—despite being deeply interwoven into the architecture—remains more finite, more like a traditional signature piece. It is the most obviously successful of the three interventions, and its success is quite brilliant. A way to measure Noland's achievement is to imagine the building without his contribution. To do so is to imagine a corpse.

Noland's color begins on the building's exterior, with three prominent squares—yellow, red and black. (A fourth square has been persistently painted and repainted a sickly green color by an anonymous MIT student.) In a progression of increasing color density, these squares march along the Ames Street facade; once turning the corner, however, the color breaks up into smaller segments and the palette changes from primary to more tropical hues. Snaking through the building and out again in an uninterrupted band, these lines of color pulse along vertical and horizontal strips. The frequent color changes along each line suggest moving electronic impulses against a subtly flickering background of tinted panels. On the major five-story atrium wall, narrow inserted splines project the color forward from the plane.

Noland's use of color is clearly modernist. It is flat, saturated, abstract, and rich in optical effects of movement and contrast. It fits well with the predispositions of the architect, also a modernist, whose architecture is typically abstract, geometric, specific, and lacking in representational elements. And yet, merely by introducing color, Noland's work constitutes an implied criticism of much modern architecture, especially post-World War II architecture, including Pei's—an architecture in which spatial and sculptural experience is valued more highly than experience of color or surface. None of Pei's other buildings at MIT, for example, contains significant color inside or out. Where buildings done by members of the Pei firm *do* contain color—as in the Hancock Tower lobby in Boston—that color is used to emphasize architectural elements. It does not take on independent or critical reality of its own. Even in post-modern architecture (an architecture little admired by either Pei or Noland), color is used for atmospheric, scenographic, or historicizing effects very different from those sought by Noland. Working out of the same modernist tradition as the architect, Noland has succeeded in creating an independent world of color that is integral to the architecture but not contingent on it. Art and architecture are in tension with each other, but the tension is not disruptive; it is classical, the kind that occurs between parts of a whole. His work is the least experimental of that done by any of the three artists. It may even be thought of as



conventional, harking back to such familiar high-modern models as Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-Woogie." Its conventionality may help it marry well with the architecture and may help it to its success as public art.

Noland's experience is probably prototypical of some kinds of problems likely to occur in a collaboration between artist and architect. Noland is an example of an artist asked to move from the comparatively small scale and total control that characterize studio and gallery painting to the larger scale and greater uncertainty of an architectural building project. The apparent self-assurance of his atrium wall is deceptive. It is clear from our interviews that Noland experienced anxiety and blockage in making this move. He had difficulty conceiving the problem he was being asked to solve with his art, and he required continual encouragement from the architect. His eventual performance came late in the process of building construction—late enough to force the contractor to paint the colors by hand onto the finished wall, instead of baking them onto the panels at the factory, or applying them in prefabricated strips on the site. The practical result is a lack of color permanence; the paints are guaranteed stable for fifteen years. Noland, it appears, was unwilling or unable to come to grips with the project until the building design had settled into a final form. Only after that form had been defined did he begin his search for a means of approaching the new scale of his "canvas." It was not until a mockup

wall at one-quarter scale was built in a Manhattan loft that Noland found his means. His key idea—working within the panel interstices rather than on their surface—came early, but the actual design came late.

The prolongation of the process eventually led Noland to feel underpaid. He proceeded only after negotiating an increase in his fee, an increase that was then applied equally to the other two artists.

It is clear that the acquaintance and mutual admiration between Noland and Pei helped bridge some of these potentially fatal problems. Pei's personal support at key moments was probably critical. "I wasn't surprised that the others dropped out," as one participant put it, "but I was surprised that Noland *didn't* drop out."

In Noland's case, as in those of all three artists, our sense of his art is inseparably linked with the memory of the physical surroundings in which he works, and in which we interviewed him. Kenneth Noland received us at his home and studio, a former farm north of New York City, a place rich in color and sensory experience. In the course of an afternoon and evening, we moved continually from one setting to another in an ambiance of green grass, blue ponds, bright flowers, wine and food, dogs and sunshine, and a child's toys—a world rich in small, vivid, differentiated visual events. Noland's work at MIT seems a distillation and abstraction of our afternoon at his farm.

### Scott Burton

The *mise-en-scène* of our interview with Scott Burton presented a memorable contrast to that with Noland. Burton's studio is a narrow, gloomy, depressing sixth-floor walkup in a dilapidated midtown Manhattan building. It is a setting that rigorously excludes the slightest gesture toward sensuous experience or physical comfort. Although Burton the artist is primarily a creator of furniture art, his studio is furnished haphazardly with a bare table and a few nondescript chairs. Both the setting and Burton's own close-cropped physical appearance are correlatives of his intense, almost monastic personality, and emphasize his intellectual, nonintuitive approach to art.

Burton's contribution to the Wiesner Building is the design of three elements: the shape of a cut-out opening in the floor of the main level of the atrium, through which a broad stairway descends to the lower level; a railing that edges this stair and stairwell; and a curving concrete "settee" and a backless bench in front of the stairwell.

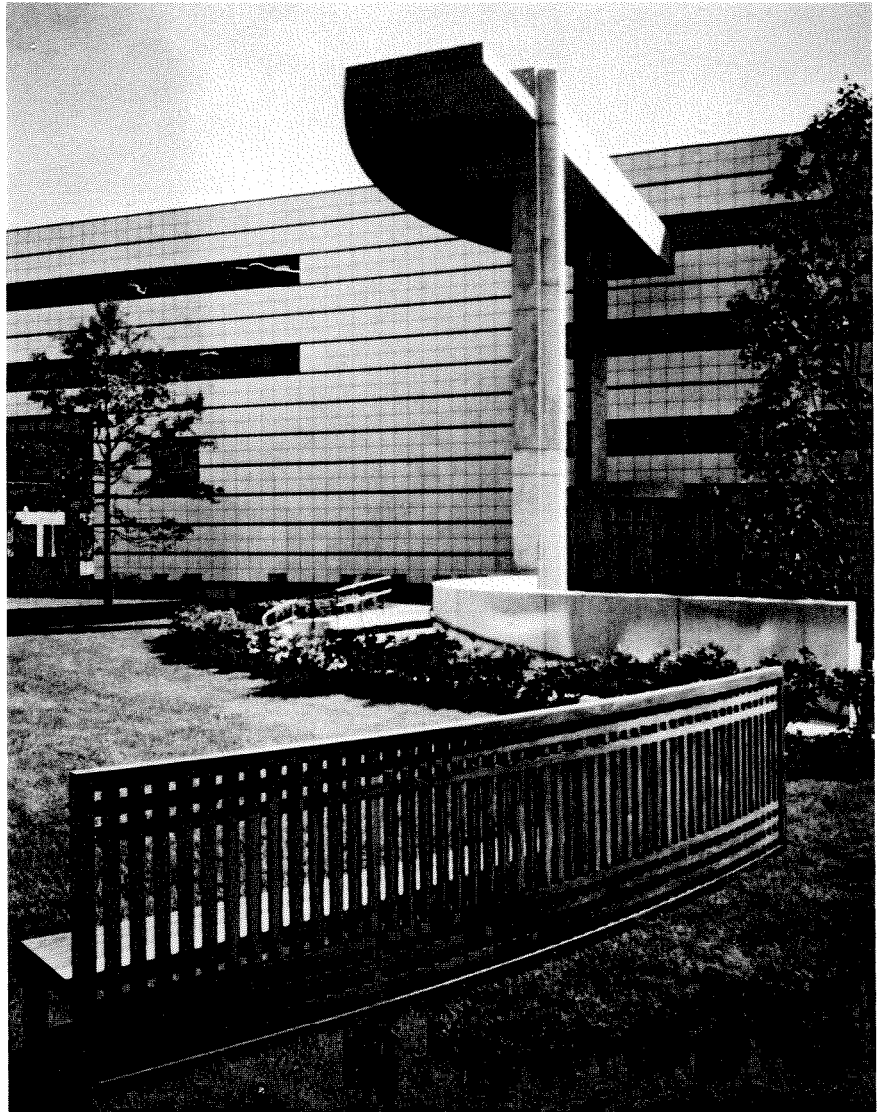
Since Burton's work has, for many years, been in the realm of sculpture that is furniture (or furniture that is sculpture), it was natural that he should take on the problem of seating in the atrium. His "settee"—as he calls the bench with a back—is a curved form positioned so that a person seated on it can, by turning slightly, survey both main entrances to the atrium and also the elevators.

This placement implies an actor-spectator relationship between the users of the bench and those who are coming and going in the atrium. The bench is separated from the stairwell by a narrow aisle, with the same metal assemblage being used for both the railing of the stair and stairwell and for the back of the settee. In front of the settee is another bench, shorter in length and without a back. There is, therefore, much visual punning and ironic transposition among the three elements of bench, settee, and railing.

Once Burton had established the curve of the stairwell cut-out, changing it from the architect's earlier proposal of an S-curve, the architect responded by replicating Burton's curve in the balconies that project over the atrium at the second, third, and fourth levels, setting up a reciprocity of forms throughout the atrium space—or, as Burton suggests, “de-Burtonizing” the curve. It is this give and take between the architecture and the art that leads most observers, including the artist and architect, to regard Burton's as the most successful of the three collaborations *as* collaboration.

Besides this complex of benches and railing, a second Burton design—for circular granite seating in the lower-level lobby—has only just been funded at the time of this writing.

Burton's bench and rail are much more problematic and less simply satisfying than Noland's wall. The seating does not appear to be



4 Teakwood seating in plaza by Richard Fleischner



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**5 Granite cube constructions along north facade by Richard Fleischner, looking toward atrium of Health Sciences/Health Services Building**

welcoming or comfortable, and in fact is not comfortable to sit on. It is hard, cold, rigid, and immovable. It does not offer a secure vantage point for watching other people, partly because it is too far forward in the space of the atrium and partly because there is too much going on (or potentially going on) behind it in the stair for psychological comfort. The long, shallow curve of the seating offers little opportunity for social interactions among sitters. The work as a whole is perhaps best understood less as useful furniture than as a shrine that focuses the energies of the atrium. It is more appropriate for ceremonial, self-conscious, slightly theatrical activities than for ordinary sitting. Tour groups now assemble at the Burton piece for short orientation lectures, and one can imagine it as the setting for future group photographs.

The seating group inspires awareness of and reflection on the nature of seating, movement, and centering in a public space. It makes a self-conscious, slightly histrionic event out of sitting and out of watching/being watched. Its theatricality reminds one of Burton's background as a performance artist; it could be the set for a play by Beckett. It contrasts with Noland's work in its relative passivity; it takes its cues directly from the architecture, exaggerating and dramatizing the shapes and materials—and also the chilliness and austerity—that are already present in the atrium (which would be far chillier, indeed, except for the Noland). If the Noland and

the architecture seem equal and opposite, like energy and matter, the Burton seems more of a piece with the architecture, an intense and ironic extension of the vocabulary of the building.

Although Burton speaks eloquently of his work in terms of his interest in people and in how they use and perceive space, his bench complex, paradoxically, is less congenial as experience than it is impressive as theater. Aside from physical discomforts, it conveys psychological messages of pain and disruption. The metal back, replicated in the stairwell railing, is made of flat steel strips, which—because they are cut sharply at the edges and are set unexpectedly close together—imply a prisonlike need for secure enclosure. The strips flow powerfully as they turn and descend the stairs, dramatizing movement to and from the lower floor, but become problematic once again on the lower level, where they have no visual relationship to the elaborate sawtooth edge of Pei's cantilevered stair.

Although it has a strong physical presence, Burton's is an art that nevertheless can only be understood—that, indeed, only becomes interesting—on a conceptual level, the level at which some knowledge or speculation about the artist's intentions becomes part of the experience of his work. This fact raises a question of whether such art can be fully successful as public art, since the public is unlikely either to acquire the needed knowledge or to engage in the hoped-for speculation.

Burton arrived at his final design only after a long struggle with a series of unanticipated constraints. His original design was very different. It had no aisle behind the settee; instead the settee was placed directly against the stairwell, with the stairwell railing serving along as the back of the bench. The notion was pedagogical as well as visual, the artist implying that an architectural element, while retaining a single form, could metamorphose through more than one function in the same space.

The problems raised by Burton's initial design were practical ones. The scheme violated the building code in three respects: first, the spaces between its horizontal bands were too wide, so that a child could conceivably fall through them; second, the horizontal metal strips could have been climbed like a ladder, leading similarly to a fall; and third, a person standing on the seat could defeat the functional purpose of the railing, since the railing would not, in such a case, be high enough to be an adequate barrier against falling.

After the rejection of this design—which Burton today still considers the best solution to the challenge of the atrium seating—the artist largely withdrew from the collaboration for almost a year. I. M. Pei then personally persuaded Burton to renew his efforts, and Burton eventually came up with the design as now built, with a separated settee—bench and more closed rail. Rather than abandoning the ladderlike configuration of the horizontal railing strips,

Burton instead pushed them so tightly together that a toe cannot reasonably be expected to be inserted into the finished rail. The dense, barrierlike, and uninviting form that results is perhaps Burton's conscious or unconscious mockery, his *reductio ad absurdum*, of the code requirements.

In our interview, Burton expressed the belief that architects learn and internalize building codes in school, whereas artists working in architectural settings must learn them on the job. This is a minor misconception, since architects, in fact, also tend to learn about such pragmatic matters on the job. While in school, architecture students spend most of their time learning to create order and form—in other words, to do what Burton does. Burton's difficulties with the building codes is the inevitable result of a lack of experience in construction. But no simple lesson can be drawn here, since that same inexperience allows Burton his freshness of vision.

Burton worked much more intimately with the architect's team than did either of the other artists. His location, only thirty blocks or so from the Pei office, enabled him to go there frequently and exchange ideas. (No one from Pei's office, however, visited his studio). To those meetings, he often brought a carefully made model, fabricated by an assistant, to explain his ideas. Burton is notably articulate and thoughtful—about his work, about his position in the art world, and about art in general—and the architects came away from the

interaction with the feeling that they had learned more from working with him than with either of the other artists.

### Richard Fleischner

If the setting for the Noland interview was one of color and exuberance and that for the Burton interview one of willed austerity, the Fleischner interview, too, possessed its own character: purposeful and extremely well organized. Fleischner had set aside a specific and generous amount of time, had established an informal agenda, and had ensured that there would be no interruptions. The talk took place in his studio, which fills several spacious and airy rooms in a small former factory a few blocks from Brown University. Neither exuberant nor austere, the studio appears useful.

Fleischner's contribution to MIT is the treatment of the exterior courtyard space that lies between the Wiesner Building on the west and the Health Sciences Building on the east (completed in 1983). The area is about that of two football fields. The space is complicated and rather shapeless and is fronted by three very different buildings—the third being the Seeley Mudd Laboratories—all of them set at odd angles to one another. There are changes of grade, and a powerful visual and pedestrian axis runs through the middle of the site, passing beneath Pei's arch on its way from the main MIT dome to the atrium of the Health Sciences Building. Fleischner's original assignment, later greatly expanded, was to develop a sculpture court for

the MIT exhibitions program. In this task, and in those added subsequently, he saw his problem as one of bringing legibility, order, identity, and human scale to a complex outdoor public space.

Fleischner ended up designing virtually every inch of the courtyard, deciding which areas would be paved and which planted in grass, selecting the paving patterns and materials, locating and sizing stairs, choosing and placing all plants, designing or specifying lighting and seating, and doing virtually everything else that is normally in the realm of landscape architecture. His design paves the main pedestrian axis with a broad pathway of granite slabs, with steps down to the sculpture court beside the Wiesner Building's gallery spaces. Other areas of paving and grass angle off to respond to varying edge conditions. Within the largest paved area is a chessboard pattern on a four-foot by four-foot grid, perhaps the boldest element in the work, which proclaims somewhat theatrically that the purpose of the space is one of human occupancy and interaction. The gridding and the coloration of the chessboard squares relate them to both the Wiesner and the Health Sciences buildings.

At the time of this writing, the implementation of Fleischner's work was far from complete. It seemed clear that the courtyard would be much more interesting and pleasant than it might have been without him. It was difficult to tell whether the carefully thought out paving patterns and changes of level would

have their intended effect of resolving all the impinging forces and edge conditions of the site, or whether the whole design might turn out to be too subtle or too busy to work as well as intended.

Like that of the other artists, Fleischner's work changed very much during the course of the project. Originally assigned to do only the sculpture court, he rapidly enlarged the scope of his efforts to embrace the whole outdoor space, including a large portion that fell entirely outside the contract boundaries of the Wiesner Building project. This expansion was the result not so much of ambition or aggressiveness on Fleischner's part as of his holistic view of problems in general. He felt he could not design one part of the landscape without also designing everything that impinged on it.

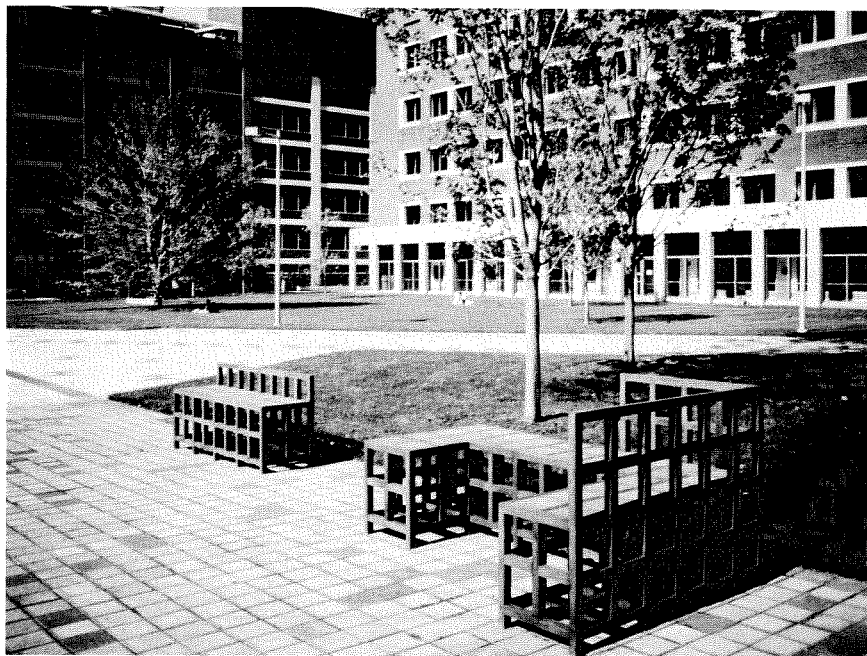
Fleischner's approach to his work was as different from the intellectual, verbal approach of Burton as it was from the visual, intuitive approach of Noland. Fleischner worked socially and physically. He visited the site dozens of times, stringing lines and erecting poles to help him visualize actual heights and distances on the site—which was, during this period, a pit that later became a muddy wasteland. He also made dozens of visits to the offices of both Pei and Mitchell/Giurgola in New York. He made numerous trips to the Rhode Island stoneyard where the granite was cut and to the New Jersey nursery that eventually supplied the trees for the site. Fleischner is dedicated to a

physical, hands-on, crafts ideal of art and architecture, with its roots in Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts Movement. He has little faith in the reliability of drawings or words as predictors of reality, although he can produce drawings of a quasiprofessional quality. He feels that abstract representations cannot render experience and that a designer must therefore walk and measure a problem with his or her own body. He is interested in the building trades and crafts, can perform some of them competently, and has great respect for master craftsmen.

As was also true of Noland, Fleischner's process required him to remain open to feedback from his own work as he saw it begin to be implemented on the site. He made many small alterations as he watched it progress. He made none, however, to the basic concept he had arrived at after those several dozen early visits to the site.

Fleischner's way of doing things, combined with his tidal persistence and willpower, upset some of the other participants. The architect's lighting consultant, for example, became so irritated with Fleischner's interventions, according to Fleischner, that they presented him with a pile of lighting catalogues and said, "You pick." They had grounds for their defensiveness, because Fleischner's methods do, in fact, constitute an implicit criticism of the way we build environment in our society.

That environment is most often the result of a patchwork of decisions,



6 Teakwood seating in plaza by Richard Fleischner



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**7 Wiesner Building, plaza.** Paving, landscaping, planting, lighting, and seating by Richard Fleischner

each one made by a different kind of expert, many of whom work with drawings much more than through on-site responses and who may not communicate at all with one another. Almost any typical city street provides an example: the traffic department chooses signs and traffic lights, the public works department chooses paving materials and streetlights, developers and architects build buildings, tenants erect signage, and so on. The result is normally a chaos of unrelated visual incidents, not so much polyphony as cacophony, which accurately expresses the mosaic of separate expertisms, the random collision of unrelated initiatives, that went into its design. When Fleischner insisted that every part of the landscape had to be understood as inextricably linked to every other part, he challenged the fiefdoms of expertism, each presided over by an expert (often a highly competent one).

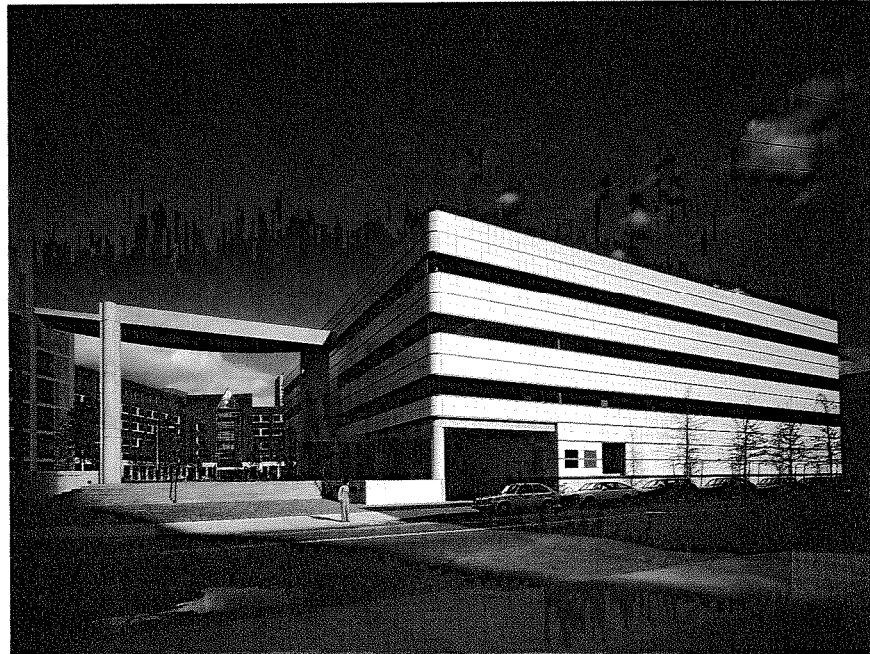
The result was that he faced a political problem as difficult as the esthetic problem. Fleischner, by his own account, invited and welcomed these complications, seeing the two kinds of problems as one. Thus if the elements of the landscape are to be resolved in a harmonious way, the actors who contribute to the design of that landscape must concurrently be brought into harmony. The artistic problem, in other words, was for Fleischner as much one of reconciling people and bureaucracies as of handling changes of grade or movement paths on the site. Paving patterns should be bold and individual but

shouldn't clash. People should fulfill themselves but should also learn to understand one another and work together.

As a result of this utopian drive for wholeness and harmony, Fleischner proved, not surprisingly, the most politically accomplished of the artists. In a time of tight fiscal restraints at MIT, and in the same period during which the Wiesner Building was itself being curtailed, the scope of Fleischner's work (and his budget) were growing enormously. He established credibility and goodwill in part by getting to know all parties involved, ranging from Wiesner to the individual tradespeople. His breadth of contacts and his reservoir of goodwill afforded him practical advantages in achieving his aims. He was able, for example, to get a price quote from his stonecutters—for a set of granite cubes on the north face of the building—that astonished Pei's office.

The drawback to Fleischner's method of working is its enormous investment of time. By patiently training people not to take details for granted, not to assume *anything* about his own preferences, he came to be consulted on manifestly unimportant decisions. In retrospect, he defends the process, but he is not certain he would wish again to create his art within so complex a situation.

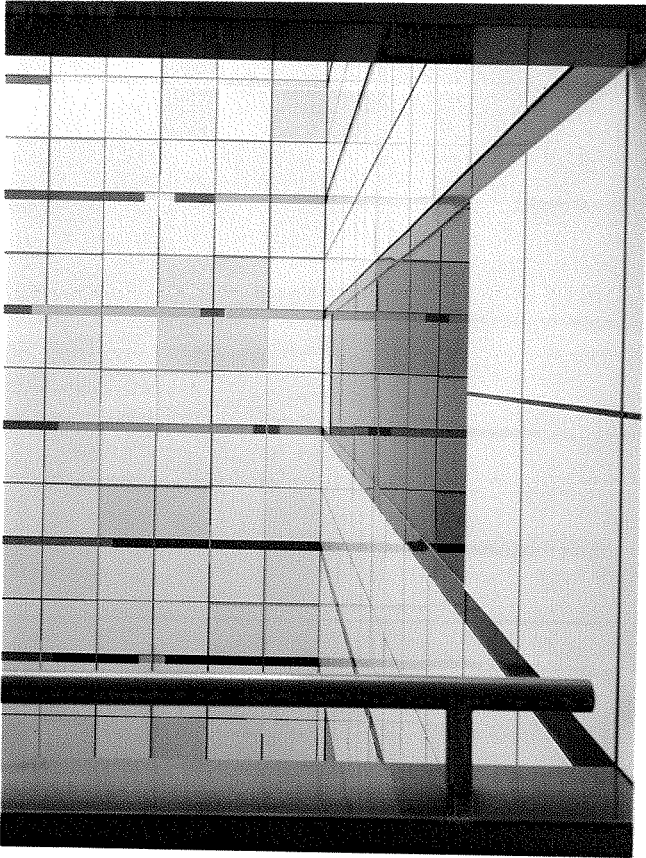
Probably one reason why people become artists in the first place is that they tend, as personalities, to be impatient with the compromise



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8 Wiesner Building, west facade from Ames Street





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9 Detail of interactive color bands on atrium wall by Kenneth Noland

and messiness of ordinary life. Choosing to spend your working life in the fully controlled confines of your own studio, addressing your own canvas or other private format, offers a degree of godlike self-sufficiency that can be matched by few experiences in life. If you are an artist used to working in that way, you are not likely to be pleased to find yourself working instead with someone else empowered to tell you that the building code or the project budget prevents you from doing what you want to do or telling you why, from his point of view, your esthetics are faulty or your attitudes arrogant. Add to this the fact that the “canvas” (to use a wholly inadequate word) on which the collaborative artist must work—that is to say the building itself—may exist only as a sheaf of drawings in a constant state of change, and the result is a situation in which only an artist of some aplomb is liable to thrive.

These kinds of difficulties, surely, are the reason for the fact that, until recently, so much public art has been an art in the creation of which the public and its representatives were allowed no role at all. Public art has been private art installed in public places—an art created autonomously, then placed in a pluralistic world. Recent controversies, such as the case of the Richard Serra sculpture in New York, have demonstrated that such art, whatever its other virtues, may often not be culturally appropriate. To achieve culturally appropriate art, or even any notion of what such a term might mean in our

society, may take many more groping attempts like MIT's.

Still another issue raised by the MIT collaboration is the temporal one: At what point in the architectural design process should a collaborating artist first become involved? Dean Porter thought the artists at MIT came in too late; I. M. Pei, on the other hand, seemed to think they arrived too early. Rather than suggest that either of these views is right or wrong, we can transform the question into another one: should the artists and the architect begin together, at the same moment? Can the very first design concept be a collaboration?

The answer to *this* way of putting the question is probably “no”; the design process just doesn't work that way. The reason is that most architectural design problems bigger than a house are hopelessly overdetermined to begin with. That is to say they already embody more variables and constraints than any designer or group of designers can hope to comprehend and more than any design can hope to reconcile. The architectural problem *as given* is thus normally unsolvable. As a result, an architectural design idea usually goes through many iterations. With each iteration, the designer understands the problem better, the design accommodates it better, and—at the same time—the problem itself “learns” from the reiterating design and gradually metamorphoses from the unsolvable form in which it was originally stated into a reconceived form that is accessible to solution.

To bring a group of artists into such a process at the beginning is merely to add more constraints to an already overconstrained problem. One can imagine artists performing the first iteration of a collaborative design, or the architect doing so, but one can't imagine both together doing so productively. Even where one party clearly has temporal priority, as Pei did at MIT, there remains another difficulty: most artists are, no doubt, aware of an iterative process in their own work, but a collaboration such as MIT's presents the new problem that the artist's autonomous iterations may well be out of phase with the iterations of the architect's building design—a form of static that occurred in the case of both Burton and Noland.

One of the minor pleasures of the MIT experiment is the way in which it suggests the many other approaches that might have been taken. One could, for example, deploy the artists more along structuralist principles than topographic ones. Thus, instead of giving one the atrium wall and one the courtyard, one could ask one artist to address the issue (everywhere in the building) of “threshold,” let's say, and another the issue (again, everywhere) of “arrival” or “wall” or “history” or “scale.” Or one might imagine, at the risk of trendiness, that the artists' work, instead of integrating itself with the architecture, might appear to misread the architecture altogether and either partly deconstruct it or—failing that—stand as an indictment of it.

None of these thoughts, obviously, amounts to a conclusion about the MIT collaboration. The truth is that we don't have any conclusions. The MIT collaboration, by its nature, raises many more questions than it settles. For the authors, the most nagging and obvious of these is a simple one: What do you call this kind of art? “Environmental art” is a term already too loaded with previous associations to describe what Noland or Burton or even Fleischner has done, one working in mural, one in furnishing, and one in landscape. What all three have done in common is help to create place. Perhaps “place art” and “place artists” would be an acceptable term. In any case, a review of the interviews reveals, over and over again, failures of articulation owing to the lack of such a term.

At the very least, one can say of the MIT collaboration that it was valuable to bring all these people from different compartments of society together to talk and work with one another. One can say that the building is the better for the collaboration and that it raises questions worth thinking about. For ourselves, we can say that we found our interaction with many of the protagonists, but especially with Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner, to be an enrichment of our lives and perceptions. Perhaps what is most significant is the mere fact that these and other artists seem willing to venture into such collaborations in increasing numbers. Artists have, surely, no special vision that can transmute

the environment. They are often naive and have much to learn from architects and other professionals, from the public, and from existing research into the questions of how people behave in public spaces. What they bring, instead, aside from their personal gifts and tenacity, is precisely the reality of collaboration itself. By being part of the process, they break down the categories of expertism and make design a more collective act.

Collaboration isn't easy for artists. They can no longer hope to build a readable monument for a society that knows its own values (for example, a statue of Robert E. Lee on horseback). Nor can they expect to create an autonomous object whose value inheres within itself and within its relationships to an art subculture (for example, a Tony Caro sculpture). To be a public artist today is to abandon autonomy for nothing safer than the risk of collaborating with a society that does not know its values. By their willingness to address the public realm at all in such a situation, the artists imply two parallel propositions. The first is that a fragmented and disordered

society can perhaps regain some coherence through art. The second is that, reciprocally, a confused and egocentric era in art can perhaps regain some meaning and purpose by reconnecting with society.

Whether the ideas about MIT implied by the Wiesner Building will be absorbed or rejected remains to be seen. MIT for three generations has been successful with an approach very different from that proposed by the Wiesner Building. It has been, essentially, a background set of buildings, a neutral grid of architectural space, in which lines of communication can be kept open even while the grid accommodates, with almost infinite flexibility, radical changes of functions as departments of knowledge grow, shrink, are born, and die. The Wiesner Building lacks, or at any rate, appears to lack, this anonymity and flexibility. It is special, and its specialness derives partly from precisely the fact that its art *is* integral. The art cannot move or change. Thus it challenges the MIT morphology of the anonymous grid, challenges the idea of a changeableness and anonymity.

In connection with that issue, it is interesting to assess the earliest public comment on the building: the green square added persistently by a student to the Noland colors. The comment is ambiguous. On the one hand, it mocks the Noland, and thereby the whole art effort. The choice of color—the “hospital green” one associates with anonymous institutional corridors—is a clear statement (though perhaps not a fully conscious one) that the anonymous is preferable to the special. In other words, the green square says that what is special about MIT is the work the teachers and students do in its spaces, not the spaces themselves. It suggests that perhaps the work may be more special if the environment is less special. On the other hand, the green square supports and emulates the collaboration by being, itself, the product of a further collaboration—an unauthorized collaboration that nevertheless gains its permission to exist from Noland and the other artists, who have led the way in creating personal form in and on the built environment.