

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

The Confounding Issue of Collaboration Between Architects and Artists [The University of Oregon Science Complex]

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Ever since the seventeenth century, when the modern age of academics began, works of architecture have been thought to possess certain properties of “art,” even as they incorporated other art forms in the fabric of buildings. Meaningful compositions of color, sculpture and the subordinate crafts were considered to be a part of architecture.

During the same centuries, the study of architecture was institutionalized as one of the fine arts and located in schools alongside painting, sculpture, music and drama. Simultaneously, and, perhaps, schismatically, architecture was also studied in schools of technology as a property of engineering.

Nevertheless, it was not until the radically atomized academics of the late twentieth century that the confounding notion that “art” and “architecture” are categorically different professions was established. How else could the present notion of collaboration between artists and architects be explained? Collaboration implies a joint project between distinct and even hostile parties.

To make matters even more puzzling, the call for collaboration is occurring at the very time architects are designing buildings that are often promoted to the status of artwork and whose drawings and models are frequently exhibited in art museums. Coincidentally, many painters, sculptors, graphic designers and artisans, whose work has been traditionally exhibited in museums, are now resisting the autonomy of exhibit space and seeking specific landscapes, streetscapes and buildings as environments in which their work might achieve greater significance and public orientation.

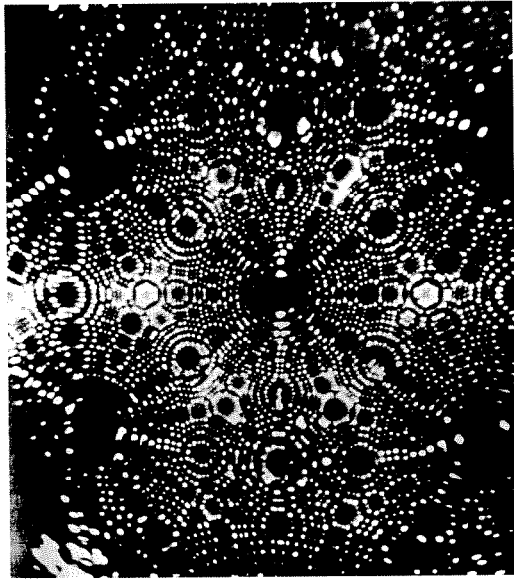
Is there a confusion of tongues?

Admittedly we all pretend to know why the divisions exist. Architects are licensed to design buildings, painters apply colors-of-the-mind to flat surfaces, sculptors make three-dimensional things that can be moved from place to place, and artisans fabricate practical things in a particularly virtuoso manner.

But these partial distinctions fail to suggest why one constituency produces “art by artists” while the other does not; nor why one constituency is expected to engage the imagination dramatically while the other is expected to solve realistic problems. I think it is fair to say that, excluding the goals of pragmatic and specialized self-interest, that is, “professionalism,” many of the theoretical divisions between art and architecture, as well as between art and “problem-solving,” are the fossilized remnants of obsolete theories of knowledge.

## **The Confounding Issue of Collaboration Between Architects and Artists**





Images such as this ion-field photograph and these drawings of Greek and Anasazi pottery inspired the ornament of *Physics Wall*.  
Photos courtesy Kent Bloomer.

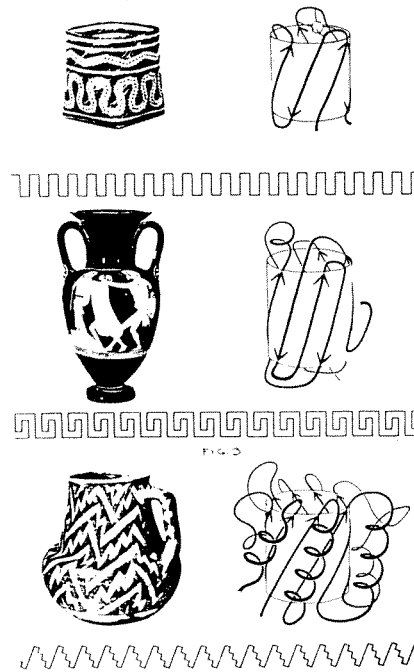


FIG. 2

Perhaps we should not despair. There is an obvious and established way out of the dilemma. By returning the priority of ornament to the act of making architecture in full regalia, certainly not in some sort of hesitant, guarded, or abstract manner, the fractured community of “architects,” “artists” and “artisans” can be powerfully reunited.

Ornament, rigorously considered, provides the grammatical strategy for orchestrating the complex hierarchy of visual languages and crafts within a unified vessel. Many ornaments, no matter how much criticism or rejection the practice of architectural ornament has experienced in recent years, have

endured in the many fabrics of public life during the late twentieth century.

Indeed, the grammar of ornament probably constitutes the quintessential language of place. Of course, architecture is trusted to be the quintessential language of place, but it seems that the recent academic inclination to portray architecture as a specialization devoted to its own purities inhibits it from making profound contact with the myriad specificities of a particular location. Why else would architects seek the sanctity of museums?

The clearest way to think about ornaments is to characterize them as semiotic “things,” that is, units of language. Henri Focillon alluded to the linguistic nature of ornament when he stated in *The Life Forms in Art*, that “ornamental art [was] perhaps the first alphabet of human thought to come into close contact with space.”<sup>1</sup>

Visual ornaments are utterly dependent on the objects or spaces being ornamented. They have neither the locational autonomy achieved by phonetic language nor the locational freedom granted to most of the artworks of the late twentieth century. To seek the ambient space of a museum is to seek autonomy. A figure of ornament, separated from its host and temporarily located in a viewing space is treated as an autonomous artwork. That autonomous status denies to the figure its function of ornamenting. In this respect, ornaments must be understood as needing to act in rigorous combination with other things.

The necessity for a bond between an ornament and the object or space being ornamented confers a condition of fixity to the act of ornamenting that congeals originally dispersed figures into the hard circumstance of place. Ornament is necessarily

combinative, while much of what is called “art” in today’s world is associated with an aura of individuality and freedom from a commitment to place.

### **Physics Wall**

*Physics Wall*, funded by the Oregon percent-for-art program, was conceived as a system of ornaments. The ornaments situated in *Physics Wall* signify some elementary diagrams typical of the disciplines within the physics department, whose offices and classrooms surround the Willamette Hall atrium. The “diagrams” were reconsidered as ornaments to be positioned within the formal and typologically Gothic ordering of bases, shafts, capitals, scroll-course and tracery. In that ordering, the ornaments function as visual “units-of-vocabulary” grammatically united by an imposing and familiar symbol of construction.

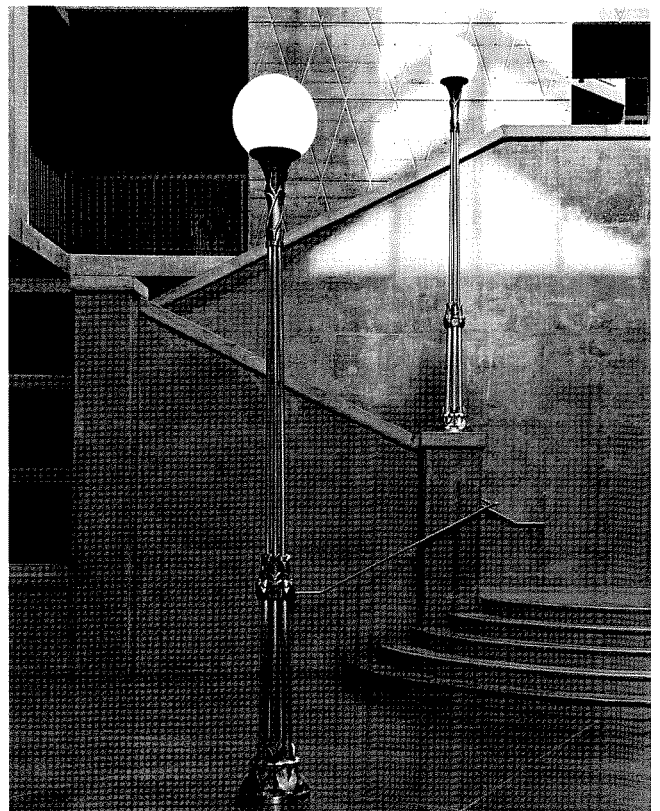
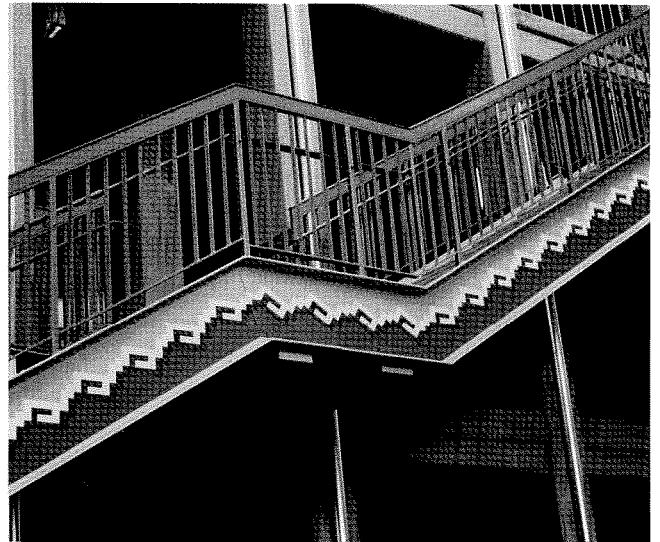
The spatial ordering of the ornaments in *Physics Wall* emphasizes the vertical model of earthly nature in which solid particles are at the ground-level and the fiery stars are overhead. I interviewed some of the physicists from the four disciplines to determine what particular figures might signify and even memorialize their unique sciences. The solid-state

physicists housed on the ground floor spoke of the symmetrical constellation of atomic particles such as those recorded on the ion-field photograph; the molecular physicists spoke of simple clusters of molecules represented by intersecting icosahedra.

The biophysicists led me to drawings from an article in the English journal *Nature* by their colleague Jane Richardson, who is devoted to providing visual descriptions of DNA. In the article she included examples of Greek and Anasazi pottery ornaments, which performed as elegant symbols of the double helix and zig-zags that typify the geometric actions characteristic of DNA. Her cartoon of Lactate Dehydrogenase domain illustrates ribbon-like forms that coil from the ends of the double helix popularly associated with DNA. The astrophysicists spoke of the Crab Nebula, an immense cloud of celestial gas.

The column bases were fabricated out of metal to contain lights that illuminate frozen atomic geometry. Projecting from the bases are parts of shafts that hold “molecular” capitals as lighthoods just above the second floor. Between the molecules and stars on the stringers of the stair

Detail of stairways along *Physics Wall* and lanterns in the atrium.  
Photos by Timothy Hursley.



case is a polychrome fret derived from the Anasazi to celebrate the motion and presence of life forms. The Native American fret is as unique to the Western Hemisphere as the Greek Key and Yin-Yang symbols are to ancient Greece and China. The galaxy above is constituted by 1,800 laser-cut stainless steel stars suspended from a frame under the ceiling and barely touched by long intermediate shafts turning into the shapes of tuning forks.

*Physics Wall* under construction revealed the confounding issue of collaboration between artists and architects. The so-called “art” consists of the ornaments, which are inextricably associated with the silver shafts, which, in turn, are positioned by the concrete piers upon which the balconies and staircase are mounted. Where does the “art” begin and the “architecture” end? If we consider *Physics Wall* to be a system of communication, what part of the system is more communicable than another?

The architect and project architects, Charles Moore, Steve Harby and Carl Christiansen; the principal client for the physics department, John Moseley; and the principal representative of the Oregon Plan for the Arts, Lotte Streisinger; understood early on that *Physics*

*Wall* was to be a system of ornaments rather than a typical autonomous artwork. Their cooperation and encouragement were extraordinary.

Nevertheless, the modern distinction between art and architecture prevailed with enough force to cripple the project economically. Because *Physics Wall* and Willamette Hall were built under separate contracts, *Physics Wall* was burdened with the expense of separate scaffolds and other routine accoutrements of construction.

I had to make additional flights between the East and West coasts in order to earn cooperation from the general contractor, and to pay for them myself. The electrical contractor blew the union whistle and then physically interfered with the progress of installing the ornaments by pre-installing fragile light fixtures in a critical passageway that we required for our equipment. There was no provision within the basic building budget to install special hardware in the steel overhead rafters to which the star field was attached, and there was no budgeting provision for light fixtures for the ornaments beyond the existence of wires poking out

of conduits buried in the concrete. Thus, beyond the will and cooperation of the architects and client, the operational reality of separating “art” and “architecture” corroded both the esthetic and practical economies of uniting the two agendas.

The real gremlin is the contemporary concept of art itself. Any activity can achieve a level of artistry. Art is too general a concept to legitimize a subclass of “artists.” Art is an attribute, not a profession.

If we were to remove the concept of art from the rhetoric defining architecture, painting, sculpture and craft; if we were to replace it with the concept of ornament; and if we were to insist at the outset that ornaments are a critical part of the idea, language and cost of architecture, then we could return to the legacy of architecture as a more profound process of orchestrating visual expressions and artisanry within the craft of building.

If an architect can design the ornaments, in the manner of Louis Sullivan, the architect, not a collaborating “artist,” should do the job. If the architect is not prepared to design ornaments, he can plan the character and disposition of ornaments and commission a working painter, sculptor, or artisan to execute them.

If there are wonderfully inspired artisans like the O'Shea brothers, who in a Ruskinian manner embellished the frames and columns of the Oxford Science Museum by Benjamin Woodward, we should be delighted to let artisans participate in the making of architecture.

To reconsider the life of ornaments as a primary property of architecture would be to eliminate unnecessary and petty professional contests with all the attendant parodies and inefficiencies. Ornaments have always been the adventitious linguistic elements of architecture, and their grammar deserves full citizenship in the act of significant place-making.

#### Note

1. Henri Focillon, *The Life Forms in Art* (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1948).

#### Credits

##### Artists:

Kent Bloomer, *Physics Wall* and lantern; Ed Carpenter, stained glass; Wayne Chabre, copper gargoyles; Jane Marquis, stained glass; Ken VonRoenn, etched and bevelled glass; Alice Wing-wall, fountain; Scott Wylie, masonry for Science Walk.

##### Selection Committee,

**Architecturally Integrated Art:** Stephannie Bartos, The Ratcliff Architects; Christie Johnson Coffin, The Ratcliff Architects; Wilmont Gilland, Dean, Architecture and Allied Arts; Stephen Harby, Moore Ruble Yudell; Roger Hull, Art Historian; Allan Kluber, Artist; Nancy Lindburg, Oregon Arts Commission; Arthur A. Mancl, Oregon State Board of Higher Education; Charles Moore, Moore Ruble Yudell; John Moseley, Vice President for Research and Professor of Physics; Kit Ratcliff, The Ratcliff Architects; J. David Rowe, University Planner; Lotte Streisinger, Arts Administrator; Margaret Via, Artist; Jim Weston, biology department; Buzz Yudell, Moore Ruble Yudell.



Willamette Hall atrium.  
Photo by Donlyn Lyndon.