

# Sculptural Links in the Chain of Urban Events

Goldberger, Paul

*New York Times*; Jan 29, 1989

The New York Times

pg. H33

ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN

ARCHITECTURE VIEW/Paul Goldberger

## Sculptural Links in the Chain of Urban Events

**F**EW THINGS ARE AS DESIRABLE to integrate with cities as sculpture, and as difficult. All too often public sculpture seems an afterthought, a punctuation mark added, like an exclamation point, at the last minute for extra pizzazz. Who could not say this of even the best of Alexander Calder's stabiles, like the one in Chicago that sits in front of the great Federal Center by Mies van der Rohe, or of works like Dubuffet's "Four Trees" in front of 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza in lower Manhattan?

They enliven the cityscape, but there is always a nagging thought that they are there partly as an antidote to architecture. And if this is true with sculpture placed beside good buildings like these, it is all the more the case with the sculpture that is paired with bad architecture: there seems to be some mystic belief that sculpture will have the power to lift us out of a wretched environment. But do any of those Henry Moore "Reclining Figures" really make the buildings behind them any less banal?

There are some artists who are honest enough to know how bad the urban environment they have been given is, and choose to respond to it, but even this is no guarantee that a piece will work. There is no better example, surely, than Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" in front of the Federal Building at Foley Square in Manhattan, a piece that is a brilliant, searing comment on the wretched plaza on which it sits, but whose very artistic power, paradoxically, makes that plaza even less workable as an urban space.

There is a tremendous difference, of course, between works commissioned for specific architectural spaces, like the Serra, and works that have simply been placed outdoors. It is these objects that were not designed for any particular place, but have been put on display outside, that seem to suffer the most from their relationship to the city, for they so often cry out to be removed from the intensity of their urban surroundings.

But this hardly means that the answer is to drop them in a park: there is a Henry Moore piece that sits on a pedestal in the southeast corner of Central Park that, though it offers us the pleasure of surprise, does not in any substantial way enrich the quality of Olmsted's great landscape. Indeed, in the sense that the last thing the park needs is more objects in it, the sculpture diminishes the park.

What outdoor display of indoor sculpture really requires, I think, is territory that is dedicated largely to it, yet permits the sculpture to be seen at some remove from the most intense moments of the city. Probably the



The bridge to the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden—a loving tribute to the two great types of bridge, suspension and truss

only place in New York that fully meets this criterion is the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, which is at once a gallery and an enclosed, protected urban piazza.

All this is a somewhat roundabout way of saying that these qualities are also to be found in the finest new outdoor space in the country for displaying sculpture, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at the Walker Art Center. Dedicated last fall, this is probably the best such place anywhere since the Museum of Modern Art garden. Like its counterpart at the Modern, the Minneapolis garden is on the cusp of two worlds, at once part of the city and a place unto itself, gloriously serene and strong.

The Minneapolis garden is more parklike than New York's, which befits its presence at the edge, rather than in the center, of downtown. But it is an integral part of downtown

Minneapolis nonetheless — one of its most important aspects being a 375-foot-long bridge by Siah Armajani, over a freeway, which joins the garden to Loring Park and thus to a pedestrian route extending all the way through the city's parks. The garden is a link, then, in the complex chain of urban events, not an isolated place unto itself.

The garden fills seven and one-half acres in front of the Walker Art Center, which sponsored it in association with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Under its director, Martin Friedman, the Walker has been doing remarkable things within its Edward Larrabee Barnes-designed walls for nearly 20 years; now Mr. Friedman is showing us that he can do just as well when he moves outdoors, since the standard of both design and connoisseurship here is every bit as

high. The garden provides superb display space for indoor pieces that have been brought outside; it has a splendid conservatory as its visual centerpiece, and it contains several important commissioned works, including the Armajani bridge and a fountain sculpture by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, that provide a perfect counterpoint to the older objects.

The design for the garden was by Edward Larrabee Barnes as architect and Peter Rothschild as landscape architect, and its layout is simple, elegant and powerful. Four square spaces, in effect roofless rooms, serve as the main display areas for sculpture; they are arranged two by two, so as to form a larger square. Running through the middle between them are two perpendicular *allées* of trees, which cross at the center of the garden. Fronting on one side of the garden is the

**A new Minneapolis garden is one of the finest outdoor spots for displaying sculpture.**

Cowles Conservatory (designed by Alistair Bevington of the Edward Barnes office), an exceptionally handsome structure of glass with a pyramidal roof at its center. Beyond the four squares is an open lawn with a free-form pond spanned by the Oldenburg and van Bruggen sculpture, which is entitled "Spoonbridge and Cherry Fountain" — a vast spoon containing a nearly-as-vast cherry.

Within the conservatory is a mix of plantings and sculpture, including what is really the building's climax, Frank Gehry's 22-foot-high glass "Standing Fish," made originally for the Walker's 1986 Gehry retrospective. The fish, a theme that Mr. Gehry has used repeatedly, here is an architectonic element as much as a sculptural one; the faceted glass form plays off against the glass walls of the conservatory to create visual rhythms unlike any others.

Equally remarkable is the Armajani bridge, a loving tribute to the two great types of monumental bridge, suspension and truss, which Mr. Armajani has in effect woven together to create a new visual form. The bridge is an almost magical mix of the toylike and the monumental. It is made of steel, with a 12-foot-wide wooden floor; its colors, a mix of pale blue, dark gray-green and pale yellow, make the bridge a witty and welcoming link between the garden and the city. It is almost — but not quite — able to lift the curse of a wide expressway at the project's edge.

Ultimately, what really makes this garden a potent architectural experience is the way the formal order of the Beaux-Arts axis plays off against everything around it — the pond, the Oldenburg, the bridge, the expressway, the Walker building itself. The square, roomlike garden spaces it yields, spaces that are more traditional in their geometry than any of the galleries inside the Walker, make a kind of ordered city in themselves. It is a measured, controlled urban environment made up of landscape, and thus it is a kind of city inside the country which is in turn within the city. The garden becomes an essay on the counterpoint not only between formality and informality and between order and randomness but also between the urban and the rural. □