

# Art: Public Sculpture as City Companion

By MICHAEL BRENSON

**A**S much as any public art project in recent memory, the fine-arts program of the Battery Park City Authority has been perceived as a model. Announced in 1983 for the new 92-acre development in lower Manhattan, it has an advisory committee of distinguished art professionals. Scott Burton and Siah Armajani are two sculptors who have been involved in the planning and design of the World Financial Plaza. Ned Smyth, Richard Artschwager, Mary Miss, R. M. Fischer and Jennifer Bartlett, artists, have been commissioned to make large-scale works for sites alongside the Hudson River.

The kind of sculpture that will emerge from this project is seen by many as the public sculpture of the future. It does not grow out of monuments such as Michelangelo's "David" or Rodin's "Burghers of Calais," but rather out of architecture and design. It will be collaborative and functional: the public will be able to sit, rest and perhaps play on it. Since it is meant as a companion, one of its challenges will be finding a way to retain its artistic independence and

## Exhibition Space For New Art to Open

A new exhibition center for contemporary art is to open Oct. 8 in a renovated building at 548 West 22d Street. The center is a project of the Dia Foundation, a private organization that sponsors venturesome artists' works. The foundation was established in 1974 by Philippa de Menil Friedrich, the daughter of the art patron Dominique de Menil and Heiner Friedrich, a former art dealer.

The building, with nearly 40,000 square feet of exhibition space on four floors, is intended to let artists create and show innovative works on the long term that might not be adaptable to conventional museum programs or settings. The work, all in Dia's collection, of three German artists — Joseph Beuys, Imi Knoebel, and Blinky Palermo — will be the center's first show.

The building has been used by Dia since 1980 to store its extensive collection of contemporary works, most of which are on loan to the recently opened Menil Collection in Houston. The foundation, extensively restructured in the last two years after financial difficulties, has sold several properties it owned in downtown Manhattan and elsewhere. But it still maintains its headquarters building on Mercer Street and smaller exhibition spaces on West Broadway and Wooster Street.

purpose. It has to remain discreetly ahead of the public, maintaining its edge while concealing that it has one.

The first completed step of the project is an auspicious success. Ned Smyth's "Upper Room" bridges Albany Street and the esplanade along the Hudson River. The sculpture is 77 feet long, 40 feet wide and made of cast concrete inlaid with mosaic glass. With five columns on one end, four along each side, and seven closest to the river, it suggests a courtyard or roofless temple. A stone table, with a stone tree on top and 12 stone stools around it, is inlaid with six checkerboards. A stone pergola shelters another stone tree.

Situated in lower Manhattan, not far from Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, the work is something of a melting pot. The columns contain references to Egyptian, Greek, Byzantine and medieval architecture. The art critic Nancy Princenthal wrote in *Art in America* magazine that the title of the work was inspired by Hinduism. She links the table and chairs to "The Last Supper." The table is rectangular, which is the shape of the table in Renaissance versions of "The Last Supper," so the Renaissance is represented as well.

The iconography is so rich that it would be worth unraveling. If "The Last Supper" is identified with betrayal and death, the tree growing out of the table suggests the tree of knowledge and life. The mosaic glass enhances the sense of openness and spirituality, and at the same time builds into the work an element of Oriental opulence. In addition, the tops of the columns near the river are forked, like the cloven hoof identified with the devil.

Yet these columns seem to be holding hands, like figures in an Israeli dance. Mr. Smyth has clearly tried to incorporate all aspects of life into a work that sings of universality and brotherhood. What makes it successful is his ability to accommodate the disparate aspects of the old and new, tall and squat architecture around it, including the remarkable crowd of buildings that seem huddled together, observing and testing this sculptural upstart from the financial district in the distance.

As Mr. Smyth was imagining a new artistic Eden, however, the reality of the Battery Park City fine-arts project was something less than paradise. When the project was announced, five artists were asked to submit proposals: Mr. Smyth, Mr. Artschwager, Nancy Graves, Frank Stella and Patsy Norvell. Of the five, only Mr. Smyth and Mr. Artschwager are still involved. Mr. Artschwager's work is scheduled to be installed this fall. The environmental sculpture of Ms. Miss and the gateway of Mr. Fischer are expected to be ready next spring. It is not known when Ms. Bartlett's complex garden project will be completed.

The problems should lend a note of caution to a project that has been promoted with almost messianic

zeal. They should also be instructive to artists interested yet inexperienced in public sculpture. This is a very peculiar kind of art, and artists need to go into it with eyes wide open.

For one thing, public art inevitably involves a loss of artistic autonomy. City officials may know very little about art but they know very well what requirements a work in a public place must meet, and the demands placed on an artist as a project moves through committees and boards can be relentless. A work may be obliged to change far more radically than an artist might have expected and be willing to accept.

If city or state officials make a large commitment to a project in time and money, they are likely to expect that project to be a signature work. In other words, if the project inspires an artist to make similar public and even private works, the officials involved in the original commission may not be overjoyed. For artists who experience their work as a continuous stream, in which every sculpture flows out of every other and some all but merge, a public commission with as much at stake as the ones for Battery Park City, with its demand for absolutely distinct work, may seem like alien land.

Public sculpture also means politicians, and they are likely to differ from administration to administration. The advisory committee to the fine-arts project includes Elizabeth C. Baker, the editor of *Art in America*; Michael Graves, architect; Barbara Haskell, curator, and Robert Rosenblum, an art historian. But this committee only advises. The decisions are made by Meyer S. Frucher, president and chief executive officer of the Battery Park City Authority. If Mr. Frucher wants a site earmarked for a sculpture to remain as is, his word goes.

Perhaps this landmark project will now run as smoothly as everyone hoped it would at the beginning. Whatever happens will be watched.