

# Report on The Conference on Architecture and the Allied Arts

John MacGregor

The revolutionary phase of modern architecture is drawing to a close. A half century of zealous asceticism has cleansed the main currents of modern building of two centuries of eclecticism. The doom of the age of "Less is More" was sealed when its prophet's newest black office tower appeared sporting a plaza with fountains, non-functional window mullions, amber glass, a Picasso tapestry, and a lavish interior by Phillip Johnson. Thus was heralded the arrival of an era of greater richness in architecture.

With this as background, the New Mexico Chapter of the AIA called its first conference on the integration of building and the allied arts on the cataclysmic anniversary of December 7, 1963, at Flatow, Moore, Bryan and Fairburn's First National Bank, East, in Albuquerque.

Besides architects, in attendance was a large contingent of painters, sculptors, designers, and craftsmen from throughout the state. In the bank lobby was an impressive display of their works along with photographs of several New Mexico buildings exemplifying the successful integration of art and architecture.

The discussion began with statements from a panel of six architects, artists, and craftsmen. It was moderated by Ann Plettenburg (the charming wife of Santa Fe architect, Robert Plettenburg) who professed total ignorance of the arts but whose ability to synthesize and give direction to the discussion betrayed a considerable familiarity with the subject matter.

Bainbridge Bunting, professor of art and architectural history at the University of New Mexico and co-editor of the *New Mexico Architecture*, led with the statement that the successful historical examples of the integration of an art form into a piece of architecture had certain characteristics in common:

- Although the art work had a unity all its own, it had a common denominator with the architecture and blended with it as part of a unified whole.
- The art form was usually not something applied to the building after it was finished, or that could be detached from it, but an integral part of the structure and expression.
- The art form usually had a function other than decoration, often an educational purpose.

Examples of the second characteristic, Bunting noted, were the capitals of the columns in Romanesque and Gothic churches which were an integral part of the structure of the building and became individual sculptural works only upon close inspection. The third quality was displayed by the mosaics in the Byzantine churches, the stained glass windows of the Gothic cathedrals of the thirteenth century, and the Baroque church ceiling of the eighteenth century. Each of these carried

a religious message and told a story in addition to serving as embellishment of the building.

Designer-craftsman Wilke Smith of Albuquerque, whose works range from a thriving textile painting business to the creation of the mosaics for Welton Becket's giant Southland Center in Dallas, made the point that the responsibilities of the architect and the artist should be clearly defined and understood by both parties. The architect must determine the function, volume, scale, color, texture, general theme and mood, and cost of the space of which the artist's work will become a part. The artist has the responsibility to stay within the size, cost, and other specifications set by the architect, to foresee and provide for environmental and maintenance conditions his work will encounter in the future, and to decide who will install his work.

Mrs. Smith stressed the importance of frequent consultation on all these matters from the earliest stages of the design to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure that the artist and architect are thinking in the same terms.

Paul Morris Wright, Albuquerque painter and sculptor and sometimes guest instructor at UNM, stated that for an architect and a painter or sculptor to work together, they must at least have a common approach to design. Without this, Wright said, no matter how many specifications are written, complete integration of their works will never be achieved. He also noted that a sense of humor is always helpful in overcoming the differences over design details bound to arise when two artists with strong ideas attempt to collaborate.

Albuquerque landscape architect José Luis Yguado said that men of his profession were not concerned with interior space as were many of the other people from the allied arts present, but rather with the total landscape of which the architect's building is only a part. He noted that there was frequently as much of a communications breakdown between architects and landscape architecture as with the allied arts, and he called for the fostering of a greater interdisciplinary knowledge and respect among all men of the arts.

Yguado attributed part of the tendency of today's architect to use standardized materials rather than turn to artists for individual solutions of his design problems to the increased complexity of the functions of modern buildings. But, he noted, architects frequently make use of consultants in the engineering fields, and he urged the architects present to make a greater effort to consult with persons in the fields of the arts as well.

Also concerned with the total environment in which buildings are placed, architect John Reed of Albuquerque levelled a blast at the monstrous signs which, he asserted, frequently cover up or overpower good works of architecture. Reed estimated that 90 per cent of the designers of signs in Albuquerque have absolutely no



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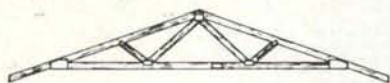
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training in art and suggested that the graphics and advertising field was one area in which persons of the allied arts might make a great contribution to architecture. Reed explained that he spoke of signs in a general sense and that a painting or a piece of sculpture might serve just as well as a conventional sign to communicate to the public what goes on within a particular building or what products or services a company has to offer. He said it might also be easier to justify financially the hiring of a painter or a sculptor to design a sign, since the sign would not be considered just an unessential embellishment of the interior and the client would have to pay for a sign regardless of who designed it.

A negative view was expressed by architect George Wright, also of Albuquerque. Wright asserted that the necessity for standardization, the increased emphasis upon mechanical equipment and subsequent de-emphasis on other parts of the building, and the tremendous budget and time limitations an architect has to contend with today have totally excluded the allied artist from the architectural picture, and that major cooperation between the architect and artist is now impossible. The architect is no longer the master builder of the past, Wright said. Today he is reduced to the role of master coordinator and budget juggler.

One way in which the artist could help the architect if he cared to, Wright went on, is to apply his talents to the design of the standardized building components the architect has to work with rather than concerning himself with the embellishment of the architect's design. However, Wright questioned whether the allied arts were ready or willing to help the architect in this way, although he hoped that they could and would.

Battle lines thus drawn and topics suggested, the discussion was opened for comments from the floor. State AIA president John McHugh, who had foregone the opportunity to read a prepared speech earlier, selected excerpts from it to refute some of the points made earlier by George Wright.

McHugh denied the assertion that the artist has no place in architecture today. Art in architecture dates from prehistoric paintings on cave walls, he said, and is a manifestation of a universal human urge for self expression. McHugh noted that the architect also uses art in creating a mood and setting a tone for a room, thus influencing the behavior of the persons who use that room as a background for their activities.

He disagreed with Wright's position that this is no longer an era of great art patronage, pointing out that fine art is still a status symbol in America today. "The Guggenheim collection does today for Mr. Guggenheim what the Medici collection did for the Medicis in their day," McHugh said. And he went on to cite the collections of Andrew Mellon or the Container Corporation of America as further supports to his contention.

McHugh attributed the tendency of modern architects to think in terms buildings without ornamentation to the revolt, around the turn of the century, against the excessive gew-gaws of the Victorian era. The leaders of this revolt, many of them both articulate writers and fine designers, saw beauty in pure, unadorned structure and materials. The combination of their writings and their works has had a profound effect on public taste, and the buying public has largely been talked out of



## ART in ARCHITECTURE

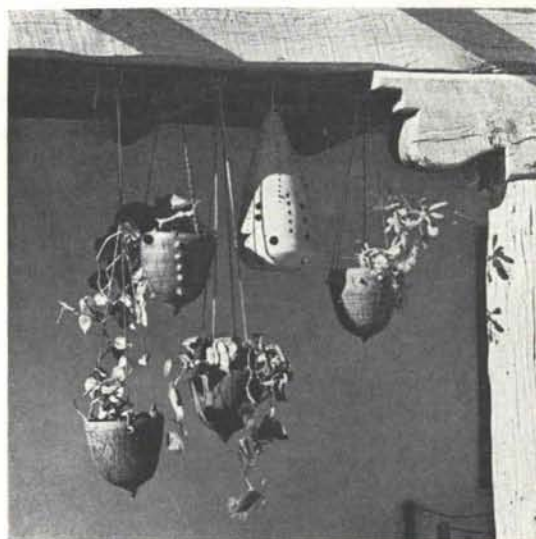
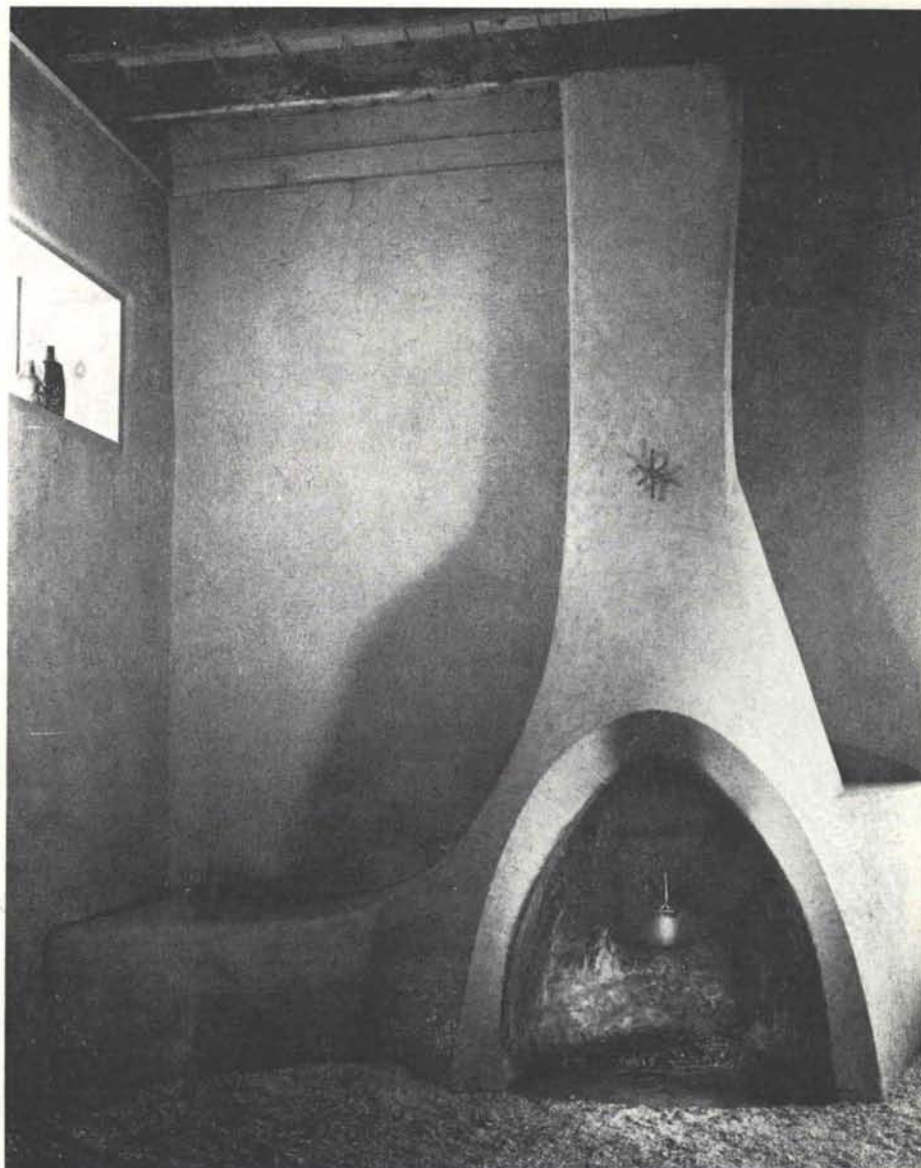
Displays by  
Artist-Craftsmen

N M - A I A Conference

saturday, december 7, 1963

Top: Adobe fireplace by Malcolm  
Brown, Taos painter & sculptor

Bottom: Ceramic planters & light-  
ing fixture by Betty Colbert, Corrales





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the practice of combining ornament with architecture, McHugh explained.

Over the space of the last sixty years, he added, the world has lost most of the artists and craftsmen who used to work well with architects, and with them, their skills. During this time the architectural artist has had neither opportunity for training nor for work.

But was McHugh discouraged? His answer was, "I'm not ready to give up like George is." He suggested several educational steps architects could take toward remedying the situation, including:

- Set examples by beginning to design with integrated rather than applied architectural art.
- Encourage the training of architectural artists and artisans.
- Publish examples of the successful wedding of art and architecture in the *New Mexico Architecture*.
- Put together a travelling exhibit similar to the one displayed at the conference to be circulated among public libraries, art galleries, and banks throughout the state.

Problems of education and communication drew considerable comment throughout the conference, in terms of both informing the architects of the skills the artists and craftsmen could make available and in making the public more receptive to the use of more embellishment in architecture.

Jim Kerr, a painter from Albuquerque, suggested that, if the federal government would require that a minimum of ten per cent, or even one per cent, of the cost of every building built be set aside for embellishments, the architect would soon beat a path to the artist's door.

Local architect Walter Gathman said that if artists and architects had done as good a job of selling what they had to offer as the sign painters had, they would have no problems today. He was not in favor of legislating a need for art, considering this an excess of organization against which all artists and architects, as individualists, have a natural aversion. But he did favor individual efforts on the part of the designer to sell the concept of good design to the public. He explained that this could be done by accepting every chance to speak to civic groups on the subject as well as supporting research into new methods of getting the message across to the public.

Sculptor Paul Morris Wright also objected to an excess of organization, feeling that it stifled individual creativity. But he suggested that individuals should write articles explaining the approach and ideas of artists for the various art and architectural magazines.

Painter-sculptor Thurmond Dillard from Santa Fe suggested that before artists attempt to sell the idea of integrated art and architecture, they should examine the values of their society and develop a common philosophical foundation for art in general. From this point, after establishing a basis of cooperation, the field could be narrowed down to solutions to individual problems.

Several persons offered practical solutions to the problem of informing the architect of crafts and skills available in the state. Mrs. Smith noted that the designer-craftsmen of the state had discussed the possibility of publishing a loose-leaf brochure with pictures and descriptions of the work of each designer-craftsman.