
When Artists Build

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Examples abound of artists, writers and others influencing architects, hence architecture itself. Mexican architect and Pritzker Prize winner, Luis Barragán clearly benefited from the collaborative input of several from beyond architecture, including Mexican artists Mathias Goeritz, Jesus "Chucho" Reyes, and writer Edmond O'Gorman.¹ Such relations, moreover, can yield a mutuality of effect. Barragán, the architect, along with other artists, for example, offered advice to Goeritz as he set out to design his only building, a performance space and gallery. The product of that effort is known as *El Eco* in Mexico City, built in the 1950's. However, the tale of Goeritz's command of his project while involving other artists and architects in a successful collaboration might promote a somewhat naïve and romantic expectation on our part about the potential ease of artists and architects working closely together in a synergetic manner. This paper examines the manner and dimensions of this collaboration and offers examples of others as well. The paper sheds light upon the nature of and potential for a synthesis of rival or distinctive aesthetic sensitivities and in so doing begins to codify its essential parameters.

BACKGROUND

Such a synthesis is necessarily difficult to forge. Artists and architects do not share a common language or purpose. Artists are generally more conceptual and focused on a singular expression. They enjoy full control over the creation of their shorter-term productions. Prizing their freedom, they do not ordinarily wish to involve themselves in compromising situations. Their artistic products are rarely sullied

by the mundane requirements of the broader world. Exhibitions of their works are most often of short duration in protected settings. Aside from those who produce art using reproduction techniques and art at a large scale, the artist does not usually require technical assistance. In addition, artists who do respond to the specific desires of patrons and critics are often regarded by their peers as having a diminished stature in the art world, and their works are less well regarded. The ideal for artists is to develop an innovative personal style for which they are individually known and celebrated.

Architects on the other hand, are required to respond to multiple needs and requirements in the creation of buildings. They too are interested in an overarching concept, but they know that they must be willing to adjust the "big idea" to the demands of the situation. Because buildings must stand for extended periods of time in all kinds of difficult environmental conditions often over a succession of users and occupants, there are more extensive issues to be resolved by a multitude of professional consultants. Architects are ordinarily in full charge of building projects to better orchestrate the consultant's expertise. This allows the architect to see that the efforts of the designer, clients, consultants and regulators remain as true as possible to the overarching social, environmental and aesthetic visions of all of those involved in the project. Architects understand that building endeavors are a collaborative effort and that they are required to work effectively with others. Their professional training prepares architects for collaboration by offering them opportunities to acquire the legal and social skills needed to carry out a successful collabora-

tion. Architects are prepared for the extended period of time that is required of them to see projects through to completion.²

EIGHT WAYS ARTISTS BUILD

In spite of the characteristics of artists and the differences in their working habits as contrasted with architects, there are various degrees and categories of artists' contributions in the design of buildings. Before entering into detailed discussions of particular examples, we must distinguish the basic ways that artists involve themselves in building and their levels of collaboration:

1. Artists who renovate a found space with minor changes. This is an operation performed by most artists who find industrial, storefront, attic spaces, etc. in disrepair. Many art journals and books picture artists in these types of spaces. The finished spaces may call for simple repair of plumbing, heating and cooling; replacing or painting the surface; the installation of new flooring; and the building of shelving and storage as well as working surfaces. There are seldom artistic conceptual ideas at work in these endeavors beyond the pragmatic needs for the space. Artists generally plan all of these operations without collaboration.

2. Artists who renovate a found space with major changes. Sculptor Donald Judd's renovation of the derelict 1870 cast iron building on Spring Street in New York City illustrates this category. The loft spaces over the years were broken into many cheaply built rooms, and the attachment of an exterior fire escape to the building façade destroyed some of the attractive outside surface detail. Judd wanted to restore the building to its original condition, which would allow him to open the space completely on each floor. Judd had very firm ideas about the way his sculpture should be exhibited and used this open space to absorb his works for a permanent exhibition.³ His artistic intentions were motivated by these values. No other designers were involved in this project.

The Spring Street renovation for the purpose of a permanent exhibition of Judd's work is a precedent for the development of the multiple spaces he created in Marfa, Texas. The alterations and renovations undertaken on the series of abandoned warehouse spaces in Marfa required considerable

advance conceptual thought, however the display needs for his art pieces provided some direction. So did his attitude about proportion, symmetry, materiality, craft and the restoration and acknowledgement of the environment play prominent roles in the design. As he was a strong-willed loner and determined to see his project through to his liking, he did not involve others in the design and development of the building.

3. Artists who provide focal art pieces, but have no involvement in the creation of their setting. For many years plaza art and building murals were one of the most common ways to involve artists. Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and Mathias Goeritz, to name a few, are known for their work in this regard. The artists had no impact on the building design other than the art commissioned for their assigned space. The artists are the sole creators of their artistic contribution to the designated architectural setting. Such efforts though, necessarily resonate with the architectural envelope in which they are set.

4. Artists who have ongoing friendships with architects and their ideas substantially influence the formal design concepts of the architects. Architect Frank Gehry named artists Ron Davis, Ed Moses, Robert Irwin, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen as being very influential in his work. He was directly inspired by their design motifs and artistic concepts, and he incorporated their ideas into his work.

Sculptor Richard Serra is an especially important life-long, influential friend of Frank Gehry. He is credited with inspiring Gehry to use curved surfaces. When Serra told Gehry he was having trouble creating some of his curved walls, Gehry helped Serra calculate his surfaces with the help of a computer program that Gehry was using in his office. Serra was then able to reach a new level of complexity. The forms Serra created in turn, inspired Gehry's design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.⁴

5. Artists who are commissioned to work with architects in the design of the building. Chinese artist, and curator Ai Weiwei collaborated with Herzog and de Meuron Architects by helpfully interpreting Chinese culture for them and suggesting that a

bird's nest form would be viewed with pleasure by the people of Beijing and should be used as a model in the design of the National Stadium Beijing.⁵

6. *Artists who are trained in the visual arts but are known primarily for their work as architects.* William Bruder, the Arizona architect, was trained as a sculptor, but developed an interest in architecture after he became aware of buildings designed by architects such as Louis Kahn and others. Bruder reinvented himself, became a registered architect and is now known only as an architect. He has produced distinctive buildings many of which have received architectural awards.

7. *Artists who are trained in the visual arts and architecture.* Le Corbusier is an outstanding example. He painted under the name of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret and practiced architecture as "Le Corbusier." His artistic side greatly influenced his architecture.

8. *Artists who initiate, design and manage the creation of a building.* Artists seldom occupy this category. However, in the rare examples that exist, their design dominance and leadership in the building design experience is compelling. This is the primary subject of this study.

WILLIAM DE KOONING

Willem de Kooning's house in Springs, New York is an example of the last most central category of artist-led collaboration. De Kooning envisioned a "loft in the woods" as a get-away from his destructive drinking habits, largely connected with his urban residence. He wanted a house that was:

Something reminiscent, perhaps of a boat on the sea... [that] he could wash down every week, as you might a factory floor or the deck of a ship. He imagined steel girders and oblique angles. No right angles, no boxy rooms, no walls pressing inward. ... [With] a viewpoint that was up and out. You're aware in the studio of it being lower in the middle and higher on the sides.⁶

De Kooning hired a local builder who drew up plans from de Kooning's rough sketches and determined if his ideas were feasible from a construction point of view. The builder suggested to de Kooning that to save money he should pursue a prefab building system with industrial metal trusses. De Kooning was inspired by the idea and turned the trusses

backwards to make a butterfly roof. The studio was the central focus of the design and benefited from the glorious light allowed into the space by the building system. De Kooning lavished upon the kitchen and heating system with the very latest equipment. And even though he rarely cooked in his kitchen it was professional enough to feed large crowds. Because of his many changes during construction, the project became very expensive and took five years to build. De Kooning's building process mirrored his painting process. When de Kooning added something to his paintings he then adjusted the entire composition to respond to the new gesture. Likewise, with his building, he often could not envision how the entire design would work together. Therefore, he was forever tearing down walls and moving finished carpentry to adjust the latest additions to the existing structure. Even though his builder was very helpful and they got along well, it is clear that de Kooning was in full charge of the design of his project.⁷

HENRI MATISSE

Another example in this category is the artist Henri Matisse who was an old man when he was approached by a Catholic Brother to become involved with the design of a chapel for the Dominican sisters in Vence, France. One of the sisters from this order had cared for Matisse when he was ill and Matisse believed this endeavor would be a fitting tribute to her. The Brother was not an architect, but he had drawn up a simple plan for a room that indicated all of the necessary symbols for a chapel. The Brother had hoped that Matisse would alter his style and provide more traditional church art. But, Matisse immediately took over the project and it soon became clear to the Brother that he could not work with Matisse and he resigned. Although the first simple room proposal remained essentially the same in shape and size, the church brethren wanted to replace the Brother with the architect, Auguste Perret, to insure that the building was professionally designed. Perret's suggestions were also rejected by Matisse, and Perret exited the project. Ultimately, a less known, more compromising architect was hired who was willing to carry out Matisse's wishes.

Primarily, Matisse wanted the simple room pared down to as few objects as possible given the program. His key idea was to promote the feeling of

infinite white space in the chapel. This he hoped, would inspire the sense of spiritual solitude. Seventeen long and narrow arched windows in the room with stained glass designed by Matisse were meant brilliantly to illuminate, creating the perception of infinite space.

Matisse had never worked with stained glass before, and it took several tries to find the design that would best succeed in creating the space he envisioned. Prior to the onset of the chapel project, he had just completed the large gouache cutouts reproduced in *Jazz*, which also included pages of his own handwriting. This was the temporal and intellectual point of his departure for the chapel. He based the design of the windows on flat color shapes that were contrasted with three large scale simple line figures drawn on the opposite white walls. These drawings are powerful evocations of Saint Dominic, the Virgin, and the Stations of the Cross. Both the windows and the drawings went through many sketches and renderings before the final solutions were found. The inspiration for the windows, walls, doors, chandeliers, altar objects, church steeple, and bell came from favorite objects out of his past. His conceptual development of these produced unique and memorable forms. Many priests and workmen helped him to create the building, but his creative genius dominated the chapel's design.⁸

The dominance by artists in their design collaborations utilizing architects is also illustrated by the examples of artist James Turrell with architect Leslie K. Elkins in the design of the Quaker Meeting House in Houston;⁹ and painter Mark Rothko with Phillip Johnson in the design of the Rothko Chapel, also in Houston.¹⁰

MATHIAS GOERITZ

Finally, we return to *El Eco* to study its informative development in detail. Perhaps Werner Mathias Goeritz is the most perfect example of a multimedia, visual artist who has initiated an architectural masterpiece with the supportive advice and involvement of talented friends whom he gushingly admired. This is largely because there are not many examples of artists who embark on such efforts; and also because most of his consultants were people for whom he had worked before and they wanted to return in kind his pleasant profes-

sional demeanor.¹¹ In the creation of *El Eco*, selfish temperaments were put aside by all participants, which resulted in a true and happy experience.

Mathias, as he was known by his colleagues, was a gregarious, enthusiastic, German art historian and artist who, because of his Jewish affiliation, began a gradual exodus from Germany in 1941 that finally ended in Mexico in 1949. Soon after his arrival he began to befriend many of the Mexican intelligentsia, the most influential of whom was Mexican architect Luis Barragán. Barragán soon commissioned Mathias for several sculptures--plaza art--that were famously included in some of Barragán's projects. Barragán also looked to Mathias and other close friends for opinions and suggestions regarding Barragán's projects in progress.

Because of Mathias' German education, which emphasized *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis of the arts, he was enamored of cultural movements such as those associated with the work of De Stijl and the Bauhaus. Indeed the premise for his one architectural project, *El Eco*, was based on the *Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich, a turn-of-the-twentieth century artistic center where young artists came to participate in visual and performance art along with raucous discussion. The Dada artistic movement was spawned in that environment.

However, although the idea was identical to that of the *Cabaret Voltaire*, in the *Eco* not only the events that took place in its interior were exciting but the building by itself represented a revolutionary proposal in every sense. In the first place because it was completely empty with the exception of the two murals and the snake shaped sculpture in the courtyard: it did not have the intention to lodge any permanent collection or activity or to become another mausoleum or supermarket. It pretended to be a living and dynamic forum that gave space to any interesting plastic, musical or literary experiment.¹²

One of Mathias' friends, Daniel Mont, was his benefactor of sorts. Caught up in Mathias' enthusiasm for the project he arranged for the purchase of the site and unlimited financing to cover the cost to build *El Eco*. Mont was curious how Mathias' approach to design--an emotional connection to beauty rather than the art of social equity that dominated Mexico during the early part of the twentieth century--could be incorporated into the extended design of a building.¹³

With the completion of his commissioned pieces for Barragán and his other independent works, Mathias was judged by some Mexican artists to be a *mimetic* talent who followed, sometimes too closely, the latest artistic trends.¹⁴ The artists Jean Arp and Joan Miró are the two men most mentioned as the source of his dominant style.¹⁵ The mimetic nature of Mathias' art is a legitimate source of design ideas. It is also reasonable, as well, to search for and study these sources of his inspiration. To begin, there are no detailed architectural drawings of *El Eco*. There are only three small drawings, a sketch perspective and two small plans of the first and second floor that are dated from 1952. The perspective acts as an ideogram and it is the most important means for identifying Goeritz's influences upon this project.

Examining the 1952 sketch, one is struck by the strong resemblance to sketches drawn by Louis Kahn from 1948-50, entitled *Transparency, No. 1 & No. 2*. The one sketch by Mathias and the two by Kahn are both pen and ink on paper.

Kahn's sketches are a departure in style for Kahn, and all three bear strong resemblance to Miró's graphic style. The three sketches distribute the black solids and linear line textures in similar proportions and placement. All three feature the perspective interior of a large rectilinear volume. To the left of the sketches are dominant black shapes, mountains in Kahn's sketch, and a snake shape in Mathias' sketch similar to the sculpture that he did at *El Pedregal*. There is another tall outlined rectangle that dominates all of the sketches. Since Kahn's sketches predate Mathias', could Mathias have seen Kahn's drawings in a published form? Since Mexico did not have a public library system as in the United States, the educated public relied on book and journal purchases. Goeritz had an extensive private library with subscriptions to the major art and architecture journals.

Two other people influenced the development of Mathias' sketch, Josef Albers and Luis Barragan. Josef Albers' work was a life long source of ideas for Mathias. In the sketch we are reminded of the ink drawings Albers created based on Mexican ruins which feature outlined rectangles that are proportionately similar to the key rectangle in Mathias' sketch (Illustration 8). The reversing of black and white at the intersections of some of the overlap-

ping objects in the sketch is another of Albers' drawing devices.

Luis Barragán's ideas emerge in the sketch much as Mathias' do in dividing a square into a crucifix form. This form parenthetically reminds one of the living room window Barragán designed in 1947 for his house. In the actual *El Eco* building, we see more of the presence of Barragán:

[Mathias] frequent presence at Barragán's house and at the gardens of El Pedregal gave him his most direct experience of how to make architecture. From the Calle Sullivan façade of El Eco one could see looming behind the unrelieved courtyard wall a mysterious free-standing, tower-like plane painted yellow, reminiscent of Barragan's placement of solitary dovecotes in his Pedregal gardens. The front door of El Eco was a swiveling flange like that of the iron fence at Plaza de las Fuentes in El Pedregal. One entered through a long dark corridor analogous to the vestibule in Barragán's house, though twice as long and slightly tapered towards the interior to heighten the perspective tunnel effect. The converging walls created a telescopic aperture for the luminous, double-height gallery space at the back of the site, where Henry Moore had inscribed macabre line drawings of gigantic skeletal figures on the rear wall.¹⁶

Mathias was the designer and builder of *El Eco*. He incorporated artwork and suggestions from Henri Moore¹⁷, Rufino Tamayo, Carlos Mérida, and choreographer Luis Buñuel. He sorted through the ideas from Kahn, Albers, and Barragán to use in the design of buildings. He consulted with architect Max Cetto and engineer José Creixell to determine structural needs. He welcomed discussion and advice from many acquaintances. All of those who were involved in the project were encouraging and supportive. Although Barragán's influence was hugely present in the building, he did not design it and in fact he was out of the country for most of the time of its creation. Mathias was open to the participation and impact of those who contributed suggestions or art objects to the work. His respect and admiration for these artists, architects and builders fueled the good will of his collaborations. No one was offended if his ideas were not used. His project is a model for what can be accomplished in artistic collaborations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study illustrates how artists become involved in the design of buildings. Most frequently their

participation focuses on renovation of their own spaces, or upon the creation of an art piece for a space designed by an architect while seeking congruence between the two through parallel adjustments when the process is concurrent. The successful involvement of an artist, in collaboration with others, with the prime responsibility of producing building designs is more rare, but possible under the right conditions. It is this last that offers the greater opportunity for robust examination. Clearly, the aesthetic sensitivities of each are brought into play as such collaborations proceed. As in all collaborative endeavors the experiences, personalities and relative statures of the protagonists will necessarily influence the interaction.

But beyond these there are structural conditions whose antecedents inhere in the intellectual regimes of artist and designer. Architecture is itself collaborative, the work of the artist less so. The work of each though is indeed constrained by budgets, consumer expectations, technology, materials, manner of execution, timelines, marketability, and the like. The work of each, moreover, is encumbered by history, and by the contemporary thrust of generative discourses.

Architecture however must achieve functionality. Insofar as function dictates form, the latter is mere byproduct. But of course, function seldom so fully determines form. The "solution space" for form in fact can be appreciable even after functional specifications have been met. The artist, with very few exceptions, is not so constrained, dealing as he/she does with mere aesthetics. For the artist it might indeed be said that function—the pleasuring of aesthetic and associated experiential sensitivities—follows form, seldom the reverse.

The essence of fine art is the surficial quality of the artistic product as experienced by the senses. If there is functionality in art it is this alone. Admittedly, buildings can be evocations of artistic accomplishment. But this alone can never be the sum task of the architect. But when, as we have seen here, the artist and the associated artistic discourses posit new forms and new modes of material composition and expression that define a new cutting edge for architecture, the collaboration between artist and architect can be profoundly fruitful. Indeed, the intellectual histories of art and of the surficial aspects of architecture travel

in tandem to some degree. Each history delves into commonalities of artistic expression that reside well beyond functional concerns. It is for the architect however to find among these possibilities those few most conversant with functional building constraints and requirements.

Finally, consider the guidance we extract from the examples of collaboration provided here. What is the nature of a successful collaboration? First, these few examples suggest that projects where the artist is also the paying client afford the artist authority over the project that is unassailable. When a third party is the client, determined artists, inexperienced in working with others, can foster troubled relationships. It is at times such as this that the other participants may withdraw or become critical of the direction of the project. Second, it takes a special building type wherein there are few pragmatic needs for compromise for artists to dominate the process and incorporate their considerable creative talents. Houses for the artist, small chapels, and small performance spaces and galleries are good candidates that can be designed with few complications. Third, collaboration succeeds in these examples when the artist's intentions need not be substantially altered for the design to succeed. This is most likely to occur when the artist is sought because of his or her reputation and stature, and the other people involved in the work are prone to unquestioningly to carry out the artist's intentions. Or, collaboration can be successful in situations where colleagues have long-standing experiences in working with each other and their contributions are clearly defined. The technical information to build is generally provided by those people--contractors, and engineers et al--who have no desire to design the project, or by admiring architects who aspire to fulfill the artist's needs and desires.

How does each participant establish a shared understanding of the task at hand, and both the technical and aesthetic knowledge sufficient to interact across disciplinary divides? Respect for each others skills, and empathetic communication with one another about the intention of the project are critical. The artist must listen carefully and treat the involvement of the consultants with consideration. If suggestions are not taken, the artist would need to explain to the consultant his/her reservations about the idea, if the project is to reach a success-

ful conclusion. In this way, good relations with one another can foster successful brainstorming and add to the value of the project.

How does the artist acquire the knowledge regarding the technical information needed to complete a successful project? Since the building types are small and simple, the artist most often turns to a contractor, architect or engineer whom he/she trusts will stay as close to his/her artistic idea. The artist who has prior building experience or has prior working experience with people who do know how to build gives the artist enough knowledge to carry out the project.

Can the resultant features of collaborative design be attributed to specific participants or are such design outcomes uniquely synergetic? Those involved in the above examples drew heavily from their previous designs and the experience of designs by others whom they admired. The results of the projects displayed designs that are similar to a sort of "legacy quilt"-- a structure, that is, that holds memories and sources of inspiration that they encountered over a lifetime. A thoughtful critic can identify the strands of ideas in these works and suggest from whom the ideas originally came. Unhappy collaborations can spawn arguments about design credit. But, for the most part, artists approach their building designs earnestly and their accomplishment, which for them has often taken an inordinate amount of time and effort, is frequently regarded by they themselves with exceptional pride. For us, the answers to these questions enable broader speculations about the cross-fertilization of aesthetic expression amongst coexisting art forms within individual cultural contexts. Artists working under the right circumstances can produce powerful, encompassing building designs that few others can achieve. They enhance the building experience with their unique perspective, and provide inspired spatial sequences and material details. If art and artists bring to architecture new design perspectives, so also must the reverse be true. At this difficult intersection is a creative pulse able with proper nurturing, to enrich both endeavors.

ENDNOTES

1. Danièle Pauly, *Barragán: Space and Shadow, Walls and Colour* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2002), pp.210-20.
2. Jes Fernie, "Introduction", ed. Jes Fernie, *Two*

Minds: Artists and Architects in Collaboration (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), pp. 9-16.

3. Marianne Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architectur* (Auflage: Edition Cantz, 1992), pp.18-93.
4. Philip Ursprung, "What happened to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*? The Love-Hate Relationship Between Art and Architecture." ed. Jes Fernie, pp.16-29.
- Mildred Friedman, *Architecture + Process: Gehry Talks* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), pp. 7-57.
5. Herzog & de Meuron, ed. Jes Fernie, p.115.
6. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 439.
7. *Ibid.* pp.458-60.
8. M.-A. Couturier and L.-B. Rayssiguier, *The Venice Chapel: The Archive of a Creation* (Milano: Menil Foundation - Skira Editore, 1999), pp. 7-29.
9. Lynn M. Herbert, "Spirit Light and the Immensity Within," in catalogue, *James Turrell: Spirit and Light* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1998), pp. 11-21.
10. Dominique de Menil, "Matisse and Rothko," in M-A Couturier and L.-B. Rayssiguier, *The Venice Chapel: The Archive of a Creation* (Milano: Menil Foundation - Skira Editore, 1999), pp. 7-8.
11. Emilia Terragni, "Art Within Architecture," in ed. Federico Zanco, *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution* (Milano: Barragan Foundation - Skira Editore, 2001), pp. 244 - 45.
12. Maria Teresa de Alba, "El Eco de Goeritz," *Bitacora-Arquitectura* (Agosto 2001): p.69.
13. Natalia Carriazo, "El Eco: una ecuación del movimiento," *los ecos de Mathias Goeritz : Catalogo de la Exposición* (Antiguo Colegio de San Idefonso: Ciudad de México,1997), p.98.
14. Source: Michael Gerzo, son of Mexican artist, Gunther Gerzo, recalls gossip among some artist at the time who often stated, "If you want to know what Mathias is doing today, go check the latest art journals."
15. Louise Pelletier, "Meeting the Void: Mathias Goeritz and the Architecture of Emotions," *Journal of Architectural Education* (November 2008): p.7.
16. Richard Ingersoll, "In the Shadows of Barragan," ed. Federico Zanco, *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution* (Milano: Barragan Foundation - Skira Editore, 2001), p.223.
17. Incidentally, the murals that Rufino Tamayo and Henri Moore painted on the walls of El Eco bore a strong resemblance to Matisse's Chapel drawing of Saint Dominic. Photographs of the Chapel, at the time, were being covered in many Art Journals. Tamayo and Moore had never worked in black and white before this commission. Their subject was an interpretation of the tall *papier-mâché* Judas, a Mexican popular craft, that loomed over Diego Rivera's studio.