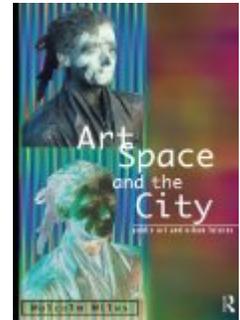


**Malcolm Miles.** *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures.* London and New York: Routledge, 1997. viii + 266 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-13943-4.



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Throughout western society, the last half-century saw a burgeoning of "public art," broadly defined to encompass the familiar statues, monuments, and murals as well as newer genres such as environmental or performance art. It is hard to think of another historical period when art has exerted as visible, ubiquitous, and diverse a presence, especially in the large and medium-sized cities of Europe and North America. One could offer many explanations for this. Since World War II, a dense network of institutions have evolved with an ideological or practical stake in public art. This network encompasses museums, art schools, foundations, and galleries staffed by curators, professors, grant administrators, dealers, and so forth, all of whose professional mindset and interest disposes them toward promoting public art as a sideline to their core activities. The modern sponsors of public art -- government, business, civic groups, and individual donors -- are enormously varied and wield far greater aggregate resources than the famed arts patrons of the Renaissance. Finally, virtually any town of consequence now features professional and semi-professional art centers, artist colonies, artist collectives, and

what not, all of which believe that communities need or want art and many of which have projects to promote.

Malcolm Miles, Principal Lecturer at London's Chelsea College of Art and Design, takes note of the structural transformations behind the recent flowering of public art. He focuses his energy, however, on the arguments and goals of arts advocates and on issues that have made the movement to fill cities with art a prolific source of controversy. In contrast to many writers on this subject, he does not dwell upon the most fertile source of bickering: popular resistance to modernist or experimental genres. When he does discuss resistance, Miles largely sympathizes with the resisters. In his view, much of what passes for public art is merely "museum art outdoors"(p. 205). The presumption among arts professionals that their job is to select works of high standard and the public's job is to be edified strikes the author as indicative of the arts profession's arrogance and its authoritarian streak. Even vandalism might not represent "unsociable behaviour"

so much as an expression of a lack of a sense of community ownership (p. 205).

Miles directs more of his attention to what he rightly sees as a more fundamental issue than the style of monuments or sculptures: whether public art as commonly practiced improves urban life, as proponents claim, or whether art mainly renders the aridity of the modern city more palatable. What basis is there to the widespread belief among urban planners, public officials, civic leaders, and arts professionals and advocates that works of art, carefully selected and properly displayed, can soften the harshness of modern urban space and help to generate civic consciousness in diffuse, alienating, conflict-ridden cities? On one level, therefore, Miles has written a skeptical examination of public art as an urban design tool. He draws upon an impressive level of reading and experience to assert that most claims made for art as an element in urban design "tend to be nebulous and the social benefits undemonstrated and perhaps, given the vagueness of the claims, undemonstrable" (p. 2).

In a reflection of the hyperseriousness and acrimony with which people in the arts nowadays debate the ethics of government and business patronage and the relation of politics to aesthetics, Miles is not at all content to offer a detached analysis of public art as an element in urban planning and urban policy. He polemicizes against genres he dislikes, especially large, abstract, modernist sculpture of the sort one sees in the plazas of office towers and government buildings. Miles believes artistic modernism to have degenerated into an expression of western, masculine artistic egotism, "complicit in [the] agenda" of its main patrons, the state and corporate capital (p. 87). Richard Serra's notorious *Tilted Arc*, removed from New York's Federal Plaza after a lengthy quarrel, epitomizes modernism's "scarring of the urban fabric," along with "the complicity of art in the trend toward urban dereliction" (p. 208). In Miles's view, modernist public sculpture rein-

forces a dehumanizing, "Cartesian" understanding of the city. By Cartesian, he means the modern, western penchant for representing urban space and modeling urban social relations in a way that supposedly privileges abstract, impersonal analysis over the sensations and experiences of women and men (pp. 186-87). As urban history, Miles's attempt to attribute the alienating qualities of the modern city to Cartesian mind-body dualism seems eccentric, although this assault upon the "Cartesian rationality" of zoning and planning does have roots in the writings of postmodern theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and antimodernists such as Suzi Gablik (p. 45). Though dubious as urban history, Miles's critique of formalistic modernism in public art merits attention. Professional review boards for outdoor projects do often act, as Miles charges, as though the formal qualities of artworks and their geometric position within the urban fabric are considerations of such inherent importance that they override the social and political implications of a particular work or site. Anyone who has worked in or researched this area can cite instances where responsible professionals have created a mess by acting on the presumption that, as long as a proposed work is of a high order in a technical or aesthetic sense, people -- after a period of grumbling, of "sorting out their responses" -- will embrace the work in question and consent to be uplifted by it (p. 99).

As an alternative to such didacticism, Miles offers a manifesto on behalf of a "participatory" public art that questions "dominant concepts of the city" and that "engage[s] people in local narratives and personal politics, creating an ambience of social criticism" (p. 188). Harboring a political agenda as well as an aesthetic one, Miles sees this participatory public art as a tool in the creation of a "sustainable urban future," characterized by "convivial" cities "concerned with social and ecological healing," attentive to "difference and diversity," with "empowered" inhabitants, and in which

"the publicness of urban space" is reclaimed from state and corporate usurpers (pp. 2, 18).

Miles begins his book with the shrewd observation that arguments over public art make little use of theories of urban development, urban space, or the urban experience. Accordingly, after a short review of the varieties of contemporary public art and of the knotty problem of defining "public," the author spends two chapters reviewing theories of how modern cities are shaped and how people perceive and experience them. Though a sound idea, this portion of the book suffers from the author's apparent inability to extract his own coherent vision of the development and character of the contemporary city from the variety of theorists he has read. Instead, he presents a stream of generalizations drawn from standard writers such as J.B. Jackson, Kevin Lynch, and W.H. Whyte, as well as from neomaxist, postmodernist, and feminist theorists, ranging from David Harvey and Richard Sennett through Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and a host of others. The result is an old-fashioned indictment of the modern city as bleak and exploitative, awkwardly wedded to a more contemporary critique of the manipulative "gaze" of the planner and of the abstract, masculine, and exclusionary ways that western society represents urban space.

In the middle of the book, Miles moves into matters where his voice seems stronger and his ideas more formulated. In a chapter on monuments, he notes that for millennia, art in streets and squares has ratified the current regime and glorified military violence. At their worst, monuments create a hegemonic narrative of "the" past, "as though history might be consistent whilst everything else, like our own lives, is mutable and temporary" (p. 61). Miles's critique allows inadequate room for the taming of monuments into landmarks, orientation points, or artifacts as regimes fall or issues fade. American scholars will balk at Miles's lumping the *Statue of Liberty* and the *Lincoln Memorial* among monuments that

represent the hegemony of the established order. Both are renowned for their multiple meanings and constituencies and their ability to inspire questioning as well as reaffirmation of established social and political arrangements. Nevertheless, his stress upon the customary, hegemonic functions of monuments allows him to throw into relief two twentieth-century countertrends. The first is the monument that, while having no overt political function, glorifies culture for its own sake and thus by implication counsels acquiescence to the established order. Miles largely places abstract, modernist sculpture in this category. Miles is more amenable to the second trend, one toward the democratization of monuments and the creation of "anti-monuments," a trend evident in Rodin's *The Thinker*, in those few World War I monuments that commemorated the dead without ennobling death in war, and in celebrated recent works such as the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and the *Harburg Monument Against Fascism*.

Next come the most useful chapters, especially from the perspective of readers unfamiliar with British public art programs and debates over them. >From an analysis of standard British arguments for urban public art from the 1960s through the 1980s, Miles concludes that advocates have remained committed to art as a valuable partner of architecture and urban planning, despite the waning prestige of modernism and the appearance of poststructuralist and feminist critiques. Arts advocates have grown less confident in the customary notion that one of public art's purposes is to educate people's aesthetic tastes, though not enough to suit Miles, who sees an enduring "collusion of public art in the construction of a dominant culture" (p. 92). In a chapter on art in urban development projects, with examples that range from London Docklands, to Birmingham, Sunderland, and Cardiff, Miles builds upon Rosalyn Deutsche's well-known critique of the art at New York's Battery Park City to argue that art can serve to express a city's history or character,

but it more commonly seems to aestheticize corporate dominance, social fragmentation, gentrification, economic and environmental decay, and other urban ills.

Two chapters then focus on art programs in public transportation and in health buildings. Miles recalls that designs for stations and posters in the early days of the London Underground, the New York Subway, or the Paris Métro celebrated "modernity, with all its optimism and utopianism" (p. 134). By contrast, he asserts that much-lauded, recent art programs in the London Underground reflect declining confidence by sidestepping modernist themes of speed, power, and progress in favor of a hodgepodge of "heritage culture" in the worst sense, "an aesthetic escape route" from worries over declining safety and service (p. 144). Given Miles's reliance on Foucault, one might expect a more sweeping condemnation of art in hospitals as a tool in the "abjection of the patient." He mainly argues that little evidence supports claims that art alone --divorced from efforts to deinstitutionalize hospitals and promote "patient empowerment" -- can ease suffering and promote healing (pp. 161-62).

In the final two chapters, "Art as a Social Process" and "Convivial Cities," Miles completes his polemic against formalist art that reinforces Cartesian representations of the city and his manifesto in favor of participatory art. He cites with approval numerous examples of projects that promote attentiveness to "social healing," cultural diversity, "ecological healing," the reclamation of public space, and the "empowerment of urban dwellers." Many of the projects Miles cites sound creative and useful. Most readers of this review will sympathize with the notion of using art to humanize urban space, to engage people with each other and their city, and to encourage ownership of the city by its people. Still, most urbanists will conclude that Miles's radical skepticism of abstract models or representations of cities amounts to an unworkable, even intemperate form of anti-

modernism. Attentiveness to the human scale and to the diversity of experience and sensation makes urban life worthwhile, but aggregation, typologizing, and coordination -- of land, food, water, raw materials, machines, consumer goods, energy, transportation, capital, social classes, institutions, interests, and information -- make urban life possible. Perhaps a truly healthy public art would encourage people to appreciate both immediacy and abstraction and to act effectively and humanely on both the personal and the collective level.

One downside of this book is its denunciatory tone, which belies its humane intent. The author indulges in numerous insinuations that people who persist in seeing abstract modernist sculpture as an adornment to cities have sold out to power. There remains a formidable case for formal aesthetics, divorced from politics, as a criterion for selecting public art, but this book repeatedly suggests that those who adopt such a stance care little about the displaced and downtrodden. In places, the author's denunciatory rhetoric crosses the line from grating to deplorable. For example, after making a fairly cogent criticism of a public art plan produced in 1990 by the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation -- a plan the author sees as opportunistic and damaging to the area's natural environment and sense of history -- Miles throws in this non sequitur: "Would the same team of consultants who wrote the report for Cardiff Bay develop an art program for a nuclear reprocessing plant, or a concentration camp, and if so would any quality of art justify the activity it masked?" Through the rhetorical trick of formulating the charge as a question, Miles leaves himself the option of denying that he has accused the Cardiff planners of having the mindset of time-servers for Nazis, a suggestion that the people involved might perceive as libelous.

Overall, a style that unhappily combines ponderousness, righteousness, and acrimony makes this book a chore to read. Few in the intended au-

dience -- academic urbanists and planning and arts professionals -- are likely to work through *Art, Space, and the City* carefully enough to take full advantage of Miles's learning, powers of observation, and social imagination. The author justifies his interminable seriousness with the claim that western society has reached such an impasse that "irony and parody are insufficient" [166]. That may be, but public art is not so indispensable to the fate of humanity that authors of books upon it must show themselves superior to humor and generosity to their opponents. Those looking for a readable introduction to the social activist perspective on contemporary public art should start with Erika Doss's earnest but good-natured *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). Scholars with a particular interest in the relation of public art to urban design will want to consult Miles's book for the sheer range of references and cases studied and for its author's versatile powers of observation.

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