

Splashing malls with artwork

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"The basic ingredient in getting shopping center art budgeted is an intelligent developer," asserts Chris Ramos, the Kansas City, Mo., architect who designed Rockaway Town Square, the Rockaway, N.J., mall that houses five works of sculpture. "If you're talking to a smart man, he'll understand the need for an aesthetically pleasing environment."

If this is the case, developers must be getting smarted because artwork is popping up in malls all over America. Irwin Blitt, leasing agent for Copaken, White & Blitt, developer of Rockaway Town Square, thinks mall sculpture especially attractive because, in many cases, customers can walk up to pieces and touch them. This means the three-dimensional objects become an active part of the mall environment, compared to murals and mosaics, whose viewing is a more passive activity.

Participatory art is a theme being echoed by a number of developers, architects and artists. Developers such as Blitt are attempting to make sculpture a part of malls and to make malls a part of the community, so that sculpture becomes part of the community in the process.

At times, however, mall art is an afterthought. "Sometimes planners reason it can be put in last and then they never get around to it," says Blitt. This is probably because developers don't derive tangible benefits from placing artwork in shopping centers. It's main advantage is rather abstract—it simply makes the mall a nicer place in which to shop.

But Blitt's wife Rita has had a great deal of success placing her sculptures in malls around the country, including her five pieces at Rockaway. Her work there is a showpiece of participatory sculpture, as well as an example of how various pieces work best when designed for their environments.

Blitt's 17-ft. x 9-ft. bronze and stainless steel sculpture of the American flag provided an opportunity for Rockaway students to engrave their names on the stars, making the piece a dynamic work. In addition, Blitt lectured area students about sculpture. And Ramos says the flag piece is perfect for its environment because New Jersey is one of the union's earliest states.

"Art can't be developed in a studio, then put in a mall," Ramos insists. "It must be integrated with the architect's and developer's ideas about the mall community."

In fact, meetings with the mall developer and architect are usually the first part of the process when Blitt's making mall sculpture. Installation usually takes place two weeks prior to the mall's opening and Blitt says something unexpected almost always happens.

The 26-ft. piece at Rockaway was missing some key pieces upon arrival and last minute welding was done to right the situation. Similarly, a 16-t. painted steel piece called Nessie was unstable after implantation in the ground. If one grabbed it and released it, it shock in an irregular rhythm. It was feared that the paint would crack and that the piece might come out

of the ground, so metal slabs were attached to the legs of the sculpture to anchor it.

"One of the things that comes up most often is how close to let people get to the artwork," says Ramos. "If the public can get to it it has to be durable."

But the main consideration, according to Irwin Blitt, is how an art object fits into its shopping center location. "Mall art ought to mirror shoppers' aspirations," agrees Ramos. "It should be dynamic. That can be something as simple as polished stainless steel that reflects images. Passive art doesn't belong in malls."

