What's in a wall?: It can be decorative, witty, sardonic or sad. But ...

By Ada Louise Huxtable

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 29, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 182

Design

By Ada Louise Huxtable

To think about walls at all—and the point is that one doesn't—is to conceptualize, with difficulty, something blank, neutral and finite that dead-ends space. A totally negative thing, a wall — or is it?

Think again. The wall is the sleeper of the environment. There is nothing more infinitely expressive than its receptive expanse: It establishes style and setting, creates mood as well as enclosure, defines time and place. The wall is an environmental event.

The architect, for one, has always known this. The walls of Borromini are brilliant, playful refractions of surface, light and form, manipulated with a passionate intensity and skill. In front of these stage-set facades modeled by sun and moonlight, pedestrians become actors in a Baroque drama. The classical walls of Sir John Soane are cool and clever; Ledoux's are suavely sinister; Gaudi's whiplash curves are exercises in the Freudian and the surreal. Today's walls come out of catalogues. The blank exteriors of the modern shopping center state the visual poverty of consumer affluence. Urban walls tell the the city's history from grandeur to despair.

Walls communicate. They deliver signals, images and messages. In the modern city, the messages are minimal, beyond the state of technology and real estate, and they are delivered as often by the graffiti artist as by the architectural designer. But the wall is increasingly recognized as one of the few resources of popular expression with substantial public impact. It is utilized for everything from self-advertisement to environmental improvement. It can be decorative, witty, sardonic or sad. But it is never without implicit comment on its surroundings.

The most obvious and traditional wallwork is the mural. The affinity of the blank wall for political comment is a condition of history, whether it is used for protest or propaganda. Robert Sommer, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at the University of California at Davis, who has written a book called "Street Art," deals with this kind of outdoor painting in a deeper sense, both as community statement and action. He sees it as a therapeutic, unifying group effort that is an instrument of pride and place for the poor and underprivileged. Far more complex than folk art or propaganda, it is a socioesthetic act often tied to the frustrations and dislocations of today's urban condition.

At the other end of the scale, many cities now have a mural or wall-painting program devoted to purely environmental-esthetic ends. Artists, dealing mainly in large, colorful abstractions, camouflage the wounds of the city. At their best, they are miraculous city brighteners.

Some examples of this genre go beyond abstractions of eye-pleasing color and pattern. Artist Richard Haas, working for City Walls, has turned the bleak, dingy brick side of a cast-iron-fronted landmark building on Prince Street in Manhattan into a *trompe l'oeil* triumph. His design simply continues the ornate iron front around the side of the building. It is an exercise in art and wit and instant architecture.

Every elaborate detail of the windows (the wall incorporates two random real ones), columns and piers has been reproduced from measured drawings, and then the artist has added shadows and a basking cat. This solution is both a tribute to the building's architectural quality and a visual punch line for the original, unintended joke of its one-sided excellence.

Both political and decorative wall painting are highly organized in cities across the country. In New York, City Walls has commissioned artists to embellish more than 35 of those raw building surfaces that disfigure so many streets and vistas. They provide bold, professional designs. The City-arts Workshop supplies paint and guidance to community groups for more polemical efforts, and while the results are messier, they make up in sincerity and *Zeitgeist* what they lack in graphic expertise.

There are walls that deny the environment, that willfully turn it into something that it is not by simply painting out the existing condition and substituting something else. And because what is suggested is clearly more desirable than what is there, and no one is really fooled for a minute, there is a sad or bitter edge to the decorative act.

In California, a blank wall carries a picture of a bucolic railroad station that once stood on the spot where its presence is nostalgically invoked. In Stamford, Conn., a Bicentennial project conceived by Renée Kahn and carried out by Melanie Melia has covered the walls of a warehouse (the only thing blanker than warehouse walls are shopping-center walls) with an eye-fooling row of houses in perspective on a pleasant street. This dematerializes an ugly reality into the neat propriety of a cozy scene, or another kind of street entirely.

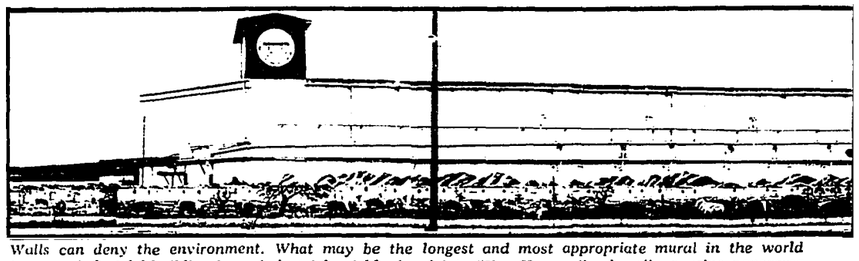
But some kind of record for dematerialization of the real environment has been carried out in Vernon, Calif., with the transformation of the Clougherty Packing Company's Farmer Jones Sausage factory into "Hog Heaven," a porcine panorama believed to be the longest mural in the world. This is a bucolic spectacular of serene, full-scale farmland and frolicking pigs, with grassy fields, outbuildings, fences, roads and distant hills under a blue sky and cotton clouds. It is continued on every side and surface of the building. The work was begun in 1957 by Les Grimes, who died in a fall from a scaffold, and was continued from 1961 to the present by Arno Jordan.

This is an environmental fantasy that not only denies the existence of its unattractive setting but also denies the nature of modern industrial development. The scale and insistence and specificity of this denial create both a definitive environmental comment and a Pop Art masterpiece.

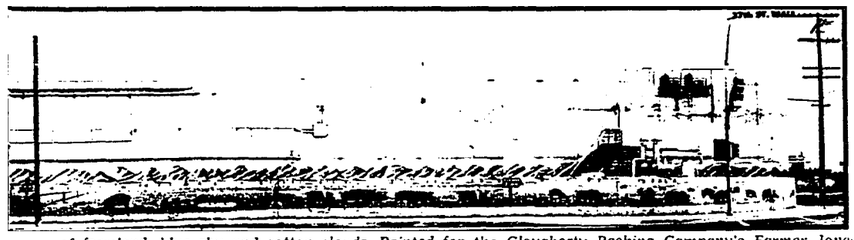
There are simpler, more cosmetic messages: an architect's office in New York—Doman & Associates—has turned an unprepossessing brick facade into an overscaled architect's blueprint as a lively form of improvement and identification. The Schmidt Music Center in Minneapolis has covered one of those omnipresent parking-lot walls on the side of its building with the tidily painted score of Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit." Detroit's Eastern Market added painted pigs, chickens and produce to old sheds for instant revitalization, as one of many graphics projects under the direction of Alexander Pollack and the Mayor's Merchants Assistance Program.

And then there are the walls that nobody designs, that appear spontaneously to add color, communication and gaiety to grim streets and demolition sites. These are the graphic accidents of posted advertisements that turn walls into billboards overnight. Unpremeditated murals, they are walls with Warhol impact, from rows of movie posters to Sun Myung Moon faces stretching to infinity.

But the most provocative walls have more complex aims. They make both *(Continued on Page 56)*



Walls can deny the environment. What may be the longest and most appropriate mural in the world turns an industrial building in an industrial neighborhood into "Hog Heaven," a bucolic, porcine panorama

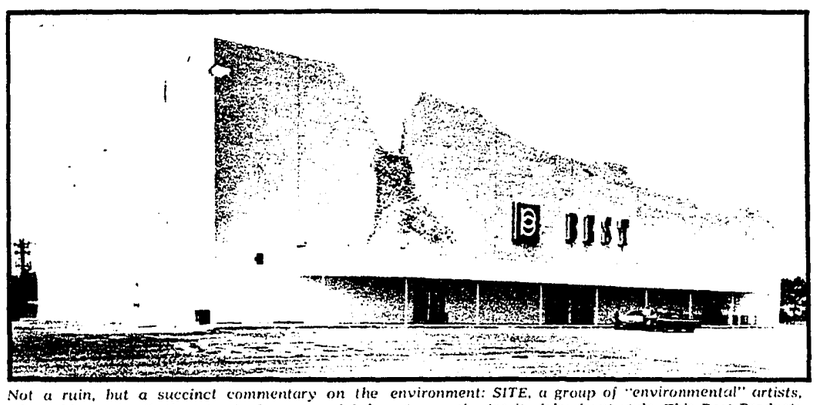


of farmland, blue sky and cotton clouds. Painted for the Clougherty Packing Company's Farmer Jones Sausage factory in Vernon, Calif., it covers every surface of the building with an environmental fantasy.

What's in a wall?

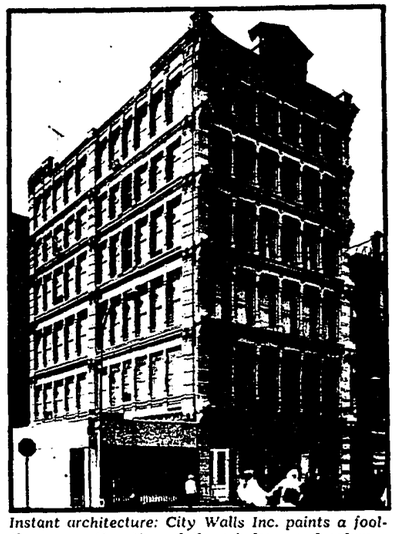
It can be decorative, witty, sardonic or sad.
But it is never without
implicit comment on its surroundings.

By turning the facade into a giant blueprint, the walls of a small brick building convey the information that there is an architect's office inside, Doman & Associates, of New York City.



Not a ruin, but a succinct commentary on the environment: SITE, a group of "environmental" artists, "de-architecturizes" the standard commercial box to emphasize its false-front style. This Best Products Company building in Houston is the ultimate wall communication, or architectural put-down.

One of many hogs that frolic across the Pop Art creation above which dematerializes the real world.



Instant architecture: City Walls Inc. paints a fool-the-eye continuation of the windows and columns of an ornate cast-iron front on the plain brick sidewall of a building in New York.

Instant street scene: A blank warehouse wall becomes a row of pleasant houses in Stamford, Conn. No one is fooled, but the substitution is clearly better than the harsh reality.

Continued from Page 53

visual and philosophical points about the state of the city and society. These are not decorative or informational in the traditional sense; they deal in more esoteric environmental observation. Their imagery is sophisticated, obscure and controversial.

One artists' group, called SITE, specializes in a kind of constructivist-nihilist treatment of the elements of the environment. Their projects are set forth as "the conversion, or recycling, of architectural banalities," in the words of James Wines, the group's spokesman. They are the ultimate in facade communications.

An early design envisioned an irreverent red stripe up the side of the General Motors Building's vertical marble facade to parody its pretentious pseudoelegance. A recent project was an "iconographic proposal" for an abandoned grain building on the Island of the Giudecca, prepared for the 1975 Venice *Biennale*.

This design simply reverses the building wall and the canal. A replica of the structure's 19th-century "German Gothic" front would be laid down horizontally over the water, and a glass wall erected in front of the building, washed by a built-in sprinkler to represent the canal. A deliberately unsettling visual device, this proposal does more than suggest the ephemeral quality of substantial architectural undertakings. It is meant to call attention to the area's need for revitalization.

SITE's artists refer to their work as an "inversion of situation or of public expectation," an "imagery of uncertainty," or "de-architecturization." It could also be called a superb example of the architectural pratfall or putdown.

Nor does it all end as an intellectual exercise. The group has designed and executed two showrooms for the Best Products Corporation, a national mail-order firm. (For whatever it is worth environmentally and esthetically, Best Products was one of the three top performers in last year's stock market.) These buildings are, ordinarily, the archetype of the dull, omnipresent, commercial roadside box. But SITE does not dress them up. Instead of applying "style," it apotheosizes the implications of the standard crumminess of their accepted false-front vocabulary.

One building, in Richmond, Va., has an applied brick wall, shaped, sculpturally, to look as if the facade is peeling off. Another, in Houston, has a facade of concrete block laid up to appear to be crumbling, with jagged outlines and a small avalanche of blocks spilling over the entrance marquee. (A local story suggests that a building inspector, given the choice of deliberate design or hurricane damage to enter on his forms, chose the latter as the more believable.) Still another, projected, design sets up a stylish box with a smart logo, of which one corner is casually rotting away.

The most provocative walls have complex aims. They make both visual and philosophical points about the state of the city and society.

The approach owes something to Pop Art in its celebration of the ordinary and the vulgar and something to Environmental Art, with its accent on natural phenomena in outrageous packaging, and something to the fantasy of the avant-garde. What it adds of its own is a succinct critique of the built environment which reaches independent levels of esthetic expression.

Beyond that, a wall cannot go. It was a much simpler matter when the Diego Rivera mural on a wall of the newly built Rockefeller Center of the 1930's scandalized the world with harsh portraits of American capitalists, including the sponsors. They were removed on Rockefeller orders, inspiring the E. B. White poem with the memorable refrain, "'And after all,/ 'It's *my* wall. . . .'"

Today the wall has gone public. It has become one of the most universal art objects of our time. Beautiful or ugly, barrier or invitation, it is the arbiter of city environment and life. ■