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A QUARTERLY DEVOTED TO ART IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Our Cover Design is a portion of the mosaic marble strip wall of the "Wachthuis" in Pretorius Street, Pretoria. The building was designed by Norman Eaton and the actual mosaic was executed by Chris Venter.

ART IN ARCHITECTURE

Norman Eaton

In this brief essay I am asked to give my views on "Art in Relation to present day Architecture in South Africa" and hasten at once to say that, notwithstanding the particular reference this title suggests, the basic questions it raises are actually universal and unrestricted in time and place so that I would prefer the simpler and broader one — "Art in Relation to Architecture". Even this could be reduced to the ultimate brevity of "Art — what is it?" but I will not complicate the issue by insisting upon this here.

Although exceptionally fine examples of engineering, as may sometimes be seen in certain bridges, dam walls, cooling towers and other such 'single-purpose' structures normally considered to be purely utilitarian in character, can to my mind be regarded as architecture, the term is otherwise self evident enough to require no further definition for my present purpose. But what do we mean by *Art* in this context? The possibility for variation here is so great that a thousand different media — (including Architecture itself) — would have to be considered if this deceptively compact term is to be given its proper comprehensive meaning.

Usually Art's architectural relationships turn our minds most readily to the major mural media represented by large scale Painting, Mosaic work, Tapestry or Stained-glass and to Sculpture in a great variety of materials shaped in the round or applied as some kind of bas-relief. But, if we are to be correct and consistent, no embellishment, fixed or movable, which plays a part, even a temporary one, in any architectural ensemble can be excluded from the term 'Art' if this ensemble is to be seriously considered. I therefore suggest that we still further modify the title by calling it "The Arts in Architecture".

The word ensemble immediately calls to mind the age old saying "Architecture is frozen music". If this is intended to convey the meaning that Architecture results from the proper 'orchestration' of all the instruments of function and beauty that combine in this mother of the Arts to give visual and emotional pleasure and instruction to the observer then it is most appropriate and I agree. But then mother Architecture's children — that great family of kindred and interdependent Arts which I have mentioned above and who join her — sometimes as small intimate ensembles, sometimes as a great 'concert' group, sometimes individually isolated as an exquisite solo — (though almost always and inevitably to her accompaniment) — *these* must be included too which means that, for purposes of their ultimate expression, Art and Architecture, as instruments of this metaphorically 'frozen' orchestra, become one inseparable thing.

The creative aim of important artists in each of the three major Arts of Architecture, Painting and Sculpture is, as I see it, to 'freeze' within the forms they use, in a visually accessible and telling way, some deep or profound individual thought about Life — or special aspects of Life and its myriad accessories — so as to convey, by responsive emotion, this thought to others. While the more 'photographic' aspects of a work play their part as a necessary visual bridge to the inner mind, it is the abstract qualities inherent in it, reacting upon the subconscious, which provide the interpretive force. In its highest achievement this emotional interpretation has come as a sudden, thought-shaping revelation about its subject — so much so in some cases that this subject has taken

upon itself a new and clear character not entirely realized before and with which the artist's name has sometimes become indelibly linked. In painting, for instance, there is here near home, the case of the "Pierneef" trees, and clouds and sunset skies of our own Transvaal.

This pinnacle of revelation has, however, seldom been achieved without some kind of subtle 'orchestration'; without some deep sense or understanding of the complex nature of the thing; without using as a basis for creative effort all elements building up to that harmonious synthesis, that flowing, interweaving "wholeness" which is Life itself.

It is with this thought that I point to the Trees for the answer to the question "what should the relationship be between Art and Architecture" — Yes, to the trees and to all else subject to the minute yet mighty forces — (the *climatic* and *ethnographic* ones among them) — which, except where man ignorantly interferes, guide and govern every animate or inanimate relationship we know and which, for want of a better term, we call the 'Laws of Nature'.

In Art and Architecture as in Nature nothing can be dismissed as unimportant from any ensemble which is to have significant meaning. What in man-made things we might be inclined to separate as structure and embellishment we can, in Nature, easily see are mutually dependant parts of an indivisible whole. Whatever we may sometimes playfully say about such relationships we do not ordinarily think of stems and branches being decorated by leaves and flowers; rock formations being decorated by vegetation and water or human and animal skeletons being decorated by skin and eyes and hair but accept their inseparability without question.

In an unevenly accompanied piano-concerto we might think of the sole instrumentalist as decorating the orchestra but in a superb performance would not really have any serious doubt that he was, and must be, at one with the rest of the performers.

In Architecture, for the most time, there is still, however, a strong tendency to think that different expressions of the Arts associated with it — be they painting, sculpture or even furniture — fixed or movable — can each stand in their own right as a sort of self-contained embellishment having no necessary reference to any other items or to the structure with which they are grouped. It is this "itemising" of Art which in the end minimises if it does not actually in some cases destroy both its own significance and that of the architectural frame which should be its living bones.

Even today, and too often in the highest quarters of our society which should be more sensitive or, at least, better informed, the remnants still exist of the attitude of mind of a past decayed age which regarded *Architecture itself* as an applied decoration — (some sort of fancy dress!) — to cover the outside of an otherwise intolerable structure, and, notwithstanding all the great creative opportunities implicit in our contemporary materials, methods and way-of-life, blindly and obstinately demand the use — (for instance) — of the Cape-Dutch gable on important private and public buildings little realising, no doubt, what an aesthetically insulting negation this is of the true nature of this detail and of the great 18th century architecture at the Cape it adorned. As a contemporary minded colleague of mine said who knows and loves the Cape work and was recently asked to prostitute his art (and our heritage) in this way — "After failing to persuade them otherwise I turned the job down and, although someone else promptly took it on, I feel that I can at least face my beloved vineyards and valleys again."

Neither Architecture nor any other of the Arts can have its "ancestral" details dragged out of context and bandied about in this way and —

unless significant art is necessarily born of opposition, discouragement and abuse — the sooner this is understood by those who have a part in shaping our artistic destinies, the sooner we may look forward to honest and telling contemporary works of Art of the same calibre as those created by artistic leaders of the past.

In Architecture the first step in any new work is not merely to analyse the problem but in most cases to actually formulate it. Quite apart from the thousand and one purely functional items that must be carefully arranged to play a living and indispensable part in the scheme in the way the various organs of the human body do, the 'nature' of the work must be determined, so that the right character and atmosphere is created in which thinking human beings may function and be served according to the accepted social behaviour of the time. In the next and final step all this must be brought together in terms of prevailing materials, methods and tools and be subjected to certain carefully determined co-ordinating structural disciplines, so that it all becomes, in the executed work, an orderly, detailed and complete statement about a particular aspect of human life. It should, however, be more than this. It should also be a demonstration of how best these detailed functions may be brought together to *improve* accepted standards and to *elevate* the way-of-life. Finally, it should carry prophetic overtones pointing, for aspiring minds, a future way.

In this scheme of things the Arts play, or should play, an important part and the architect worthy of his title, unless prevented from doing so by restrictions beyond his control, will all the time be consciously providing stimulating spaces in which they can best fulfill themselves and at the same time point up the overall theme.

And here I come to the Artist and wish to put it to him that he must also regard his work as *a solution to a problem* to be, formulated, analysed, disciplined and integrated with the scheme as a whole and with his space in particular and not, as has too often been the case in the past, be regarded as a studio piece, created in an 'ivory tower', and thereafter left wanly to eke out an unhappy existence in uncongenial surroundings it has ignored.

I realize this places a great responsibility on the architect to provide the stimulating spaces but it also, to my mind, places an even greater responsibility on the artist to demand, if necessary, such spaces; regard them seriously as a starting point and generally fall into the spirit of the thing. I am convinced that, given the proper sense of responsibility on both sides, this can be done without limiting the individuality of the tried artist or his approach though it goes without saying that a general sympathy between the two must exist and their willingness to co-operate be accepted as a necessary corollary.

I know full well the difficulties and human weaknesses which, in practise, operate against the relationships I have tried to propound, but I believe that, in some form or another, these are basically necessary if creative effort in this field is not to be mutually self-defeating. I believe, too, that, in this context as in so many others, the resolutely "star-hitched wagon", in refusing to allow these difficulties to deter its heavenly intention, will reach greater heights in the end.

To sum up then let me say that it is my belief that the relationship of the Arts to Architecture must be one of mutual sympathy, understanding and endeavour in which *each contributes in its way to a main central theme* and that whatever superficial requirements may or may not have to be considered as a material part of the problem it is the combined abstract or underlying spiritual contributions, each flowing from a mother source, which will most effectively achieve this end.