

Art in Architecture - Carlisle Chang- March 1977



The Association of the artist with the Architect goes back quite far in time and it would be preposterous in fact to take it too far back. The really important association, the climax of the whole thing in the modern world, took place around the Renaissance and later developed in 17th and 18th Century France; which gave sort of being to our well known West Indian Georgian and Colonial American styles. This was gracious living at its height and we had finally come round full circle developed out of an agrarian society into a proper manufacturing, civilized, sophisticated society with developed forms of art - music, dancing, painting, poetry, literature and the like. In those times it is possible to indicate that the association was so very close that in fact, very often the artist was the architect as in the case of Michelangelo; or the architect could be the artist and sometimes the gardener, or the builder of fountains like Cellini, maker of epergnes, decorations and Royal gifts. They were designers for the Royal entertainments, as happened at Versailles, and farther back in the Renaissance .the most ecliptic of them was Leonardo da Vinci, who was also a creative scientist.

These are things I mention as a point of reference because it is necessary to see that one has come from there into a rather different kind of association in more modern times. From the moment romanticism began to wane in terms of men's sensibilities, style, fashion and particularly fashion in living and therefore architecture, the arts began to diverge into their separate disciplines, each one trying to outdo the other or outdo itself in a much more personal way. The disciplines were becoming much more self-centered and trying to be extremely original and separate from the others.

Up to the time of the early 20th Century, Dada, Surrealism, Bauhaus and Art Deco, the work of the artist was still an integral part of the Architect's fundamental concepts. It was such as though there was in fact a broadening of the fundamental principles of this kind of liaison. Artists began to delve into interior design for example and many architects had become quite splendid furniture designers up to the Art Deco period. Later on, as a result of the Bauhaus development in modern Germany, and its ensuring principle of new brutalism, the Architects began to concentrate on totally new principles of architecture which denied the artist any participation at all for a time. This brings us up to the Forties and Fifties and the end result of that being that art also in its experiments, as such in graphic painting, developed more plastic qualities and a tactile quality. And the moment art became texture then it once more became part of the Architectural environment.

It is possible to see therefore, the creations of artists creating an environment in an architect's building but not necessarily destroying the space or merely creating a pictorial reference. In other words: one

is no longer painting things, subject matter like history, as though one were illustrating a book, one was creating a mood which was intended to fit into the architectural concept. One of the most striking examples of this that I have seen is the work which was integrated into many of the Canadian buildings in Expo '67 (see <http://expo67.ncf.ca/>). One was that of a wall in which the concrete was cast over globules of clay and the clay eventually washed away leaving this entire faceted, riven kind of concrete structure, projecting from the inside of the building through a twenty foot glass frontage to the outside of the building. This was total integration on an artist and architectural level as far as I could see.

Now, we in Trinidad don't have the opportunities for this. First of all the architect or the artist is intensely frustrated because the horizons are extremely limited. One does not have the same quality or size of practice in which these experiments could be conducted and carried to their logical conclusions. For a time there was a hiatus in Trinidad. Worse than that, the much touted building boom remained on an extremely working class level rather than on the grand scale that it was expected to reach at the time: pre-Federation and pre-Independence. The sort of mood of the country which was moving to a sense of bigness and integrity of one's total individualism; the command of one's own destiny did not occur totally in architecture and in painting. Architects suffered from slumps of one kind or another and shortages worse, so that they were not able very often to integrate things and perhaps out of that has come the dire problem that we seem not to have put the stamp of late 20th Century Trinidad or West Indies into our architecture at all.

With that sort of problem, it is very obvious that the architect also with his limited budget will have very little to offer the artist. Yet, some attempts have been made. Perhaps the prime motivating factor underlying these other suggestions of mine as to why there was divergence has to be that the (artist is slightly less sophisticated than he ought to be and has been unable to bring his concepts in line with the much more developed sophistry of the architect. The painter is not aware, let us say, and hasn't been for a long time of the exquisite qualities of Kabuki, that a well informed architect would have, or playwright would have. In my own case, I have had the opportunity more than any of the other artists in Trinidad, or the W.I. for that matter, to do a number of decorations of one kind or another for architects, some of whom I consider among the foremost architects of the times.

Most of these are in public buildings and they gave one an opportunity to experiment with a variety of media. Originally, one tried to first make the statement that if you want me to do the work, then here is something that I hope you'll be proud of so that you will be encouraged to ask more artists to participate in future projects; but as I said, the building boom did not occur. The opportunities were so far in between that one kept toying with experiments, each one very different from the last and possibly not linking at all either in concept or in technique. The other problem, of course, was that building was now becoming very much, I would not say Jerry-built, but when a building was put up, it was subject to various vagaries and one could not put up permanent murals as such. There were so many adaptations of existing buildings that one had to do surface decoration instead and as new light panelling was coming into offices one had to do very light works. Perhaps what I was trying to do was to match the given propositions of the architectural demands. If your spaces are small, you obviously have to be very reticent and merely create a central point of focus to give the room some kind of dimension without destroying the architect's adaptation let us say, as happened in the Central Bank.



Carlisle Chang Mural at Piarco- note: right side missing)

Over the years, the first and foremost mural which I did was in fact the 'Inherent Nobility of Man'¹ which is 39 ft. long and 15 ft. high in the arrival hall of Piarco Airport. It was the first large Government commission in terms of size in the W.I. and I was so proud of it that at once set out to do it rather pedantically at the time, with strong influences coming in from Mexico. In fact, the formula for the paints used was prescribed by the artists in Mexico and the experimental school for mural painters in Mexico City sent out the book of formulae by Dr. Guitierrez. Dr. G. and the Mexicans had, for nearly a decade or more prior to this mural I am speaking about, been experimenting with techniques where they were trying to find permanence with modern technology. For example they worked with Du Pont in America to find out why artists' paints could not be as durable and as hard as say the paint on a motor car body. They experimented with painting on steel therefore, and fired enamels in order to achieve brighter colour, greater technical diversity and so on. They also experimented with plastic and built fantastic, almost volcanic, structures as murals and this is what gave their work not only its intense beauty but also its tremendous power.

Mind you, they were Communist inclined or Socialist Countries, and Socialist story telling quality has a very high erratic quality, very powerful and dominating. This was what I was trying in a sense to achieve and I had to weave my own legends into the mural. The story of it is really: Here is an island between the sun and the sea which grew from the jungle and out of its history of discovery by various peoples until it became a beautiful land; and once it became a developed and beautiful land it became almost like, let us say, a Carib Indian's Garden of Paradise with the Humming Bird God going up to Heaven. The idea of the mural in the centre was that this was an untamed land of jungle and superstition and the superstition had to do with the society, its limiting factors and what it imposed, and the human figures shown in three positions. One in the foetal birth position the other in cringing position and the other in an act of defiance which eventually produces the true Trinidad man. Now I understand that the mural could possibly be destroyed very shortly, and I'm a little sad because it is in fact the largest there is in the W.I. and the only one if its kind in any public building in the B.W.I, which is also the only one that is a permanent feature of the architecture as such. Also, it would be impossible to replace either the thought or the technique at this point in time. The materials involved high octane alcohols like carbitol, and butanol and the Shell House in Toronto sent down a movie to show us how the technique was to have been used.

Later on of course there were other kinds of murals. Murals on hardboard and ply board panels, a thirty-six foot one in the Laventille Community Centre for example, which was called 'Children's Games' and which I gave to them as a gesture of a successful artist who had already done two or three murals successfully for the country returning something to a small community on the edge of the City.

Subsequently I had done the "Conquerabia" at the Town Hall and at the Hilton Hotel, the Humming Bird and Scarlet Ibis rooms. The Hilton Hotel was a case in point where in fact though the artist and the architect got together very, very well in the earliest planning stages, because the theme was dictated, it left a kind of cold attitude "to the entire" work. The two works, the Humming Bird Mural and the Scarlet Ibis Mural in their respective rooms are about 120 feet long, but they were painted on canvas (which presented a first problem) and also in the same vinyl-like medium which was used at Piarco. But the subject matter became too rigid.

It was done in two weeks under great stress with bulldozers backing you up eight inches against the wall and that was because the hotel had to be opened on time. So while they are pieces of virtuoso technique, particularly the Humming Bird with its delicacy and its use of gold leaf (which I became very fond of at that time), I don't feel that they were essentially more than wall decorations.

Now it's hard for me to separate decorating from mural painting or to separate mural painting from decorating. If a client wants to have his wall decorated, and hasn't got the where-withal to appreciate a fully strong bold mural, I feel perfectly valid that he should be given some sort of decoration which will be pleasing to him. But in the course of time I made tremendous mistakes as for example in the Cindiana Room in the Bretton Hall Hotel. To compensate for that, the lovely 12ft. one done also on Canvas for the Bel-Air Hotel called 'Folk Festivals' and to me is as delightful as the 'Children's Games', because it gives you virtually an entire history of the folk festivals of Trinidad.

The most important structural mural that I ever did was the Conquerabia for the Town Hall. When the idea was presented to me I had no clue as to what should be done because I wanted to try out the splendid new technique of casting concrete in sand. So, again, for the Town Hall, because one had to give people something to think about, and to read into the picture some literary content, I created my own mythology and the entire thing is like a plan of P.O.S. if you looked at it you would see a bit of Woodford Square with its environs: The Red House, the old Town Hall and so on etched in the concrete. The work was cast in several blocks at Bestcrete Works and they gave me tremendous help for without them I would not have been able at all to master this heavy piece of work. Subsequently when it was installed, with considerable difficulty, three Italians came across from Venezuela and did the stone work which we had collected from all over Trinidad to make up parts of the motifs, the sun, the Carib heads and so on and the main content is spread between the Serpent's Mouth and the Dragon's Mouth at either end of the mural. (The name of it of course is Conquerabia because that was the name of P.O.S. and I think specifically of the area that is now called Woodford Square where a battle was fought between various Indian tribes before the Spaniards came).

A similar technique of cast concrete was used in the foyer of the Royal Bank, Independence Square. Unfortunately it had to be cast on the sidewalk rather than in situ because the Bank was moving at a faster pace than I was able to work. But this one purported to use strips of brass. Unfortunately the brass was not treated and never kept polished so that the contrast between the raw concrete and the brass has faded away with time and one day will have to be brought back to life. Also unfortunately, as happens very often again with public buildings, the Boards usually require something that they could get their fingers into, so one has to create a story about it with evident loss of sensitivity. One tries to control it by rigid construction and keeping a very careful eye for chance effects, but in fact the work very often becomes, rigid and I think this occurred in the case of the Royal Bank. Not so, however, in the case of the Central Bank where one was given carte blanche to create and because this was to go on a thin partition wall, I chose to work in cast fibreglass. It was executed, by men from a fibreglass factory, in my studio and working on my moulds and was an extremely successful experiment. Also the resins used were painted on directly, dried in five minutes and the gold leaf, applied arbitrarily, was covered with resin and is totally bound in with the mural. An infinitesimal amount of gold leaf but it does look quite attractive in the banking hall, and it gives a total blue/green cast. At that time somehow I thought that blue/green was the colour of the Aborigines simply because the Humming Bird God was often depicted as being blue/green. This was a successful one in which the motifs tried to grasp the inspiration of original Aborigine pottery and it is called the Four Seasons, so that you have four elements described across the wall: Air, earth, fire, and water; all the elements that make up the destiny of man.

By the time we came to do the Textel building which was a different proposition because this was now to be exposed to the weather and on a much larger scale, the proposition was very different and

much more taxing. Instead of gold leaf this time we used silvers of Copper. Unfortunately my technical experts did not advise me carefully and the mural began to show some deterioration within a year, but this has been very carefully remedied, although with some loss of the original handwork that was done on the surface. It, however, remains quite monumental in scope and it is a pity, in fact, that one is never able to see it clear across Independence Square. You can only see it at an angle.

These are the main works of murals that have been done in Trinidad and it gives some idea of the kinds of ways in which an artist tries to meld his thinking with the architect's original concept. I think it is such a fundamentally interesting study that when I first elected to study for mural design I had wanted to work in clay, and I still hope that in some future time our artists would be producing works both in painted and textured clays because after all the clay tiles could be removed off the surface of the building. It has a lovely warm brown colour to it, it can be made to fantastic three-dimensional depths and mounted is capable of all sorts of manipulation but unfortunately I was not able to do it. I hope someone else would have the opportunity.

