Landscape and Public Art in the Age of Aquarius:
Garrett Eckbo’s Union Bank Plaza
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On a February morning in 1970, a small group of corporate representatives, city bureaucrats, artists and reporters gathered at Union Bank plaza, the newest project on Los Angeles’s long-derelict Bunker Hill.

A great canvas screen occupied the center of Garrett Eckbo’s plaza, willowing in the breeze.
As the canvas was drawn back to reveal Jerome Kirk’s stainless steel kinetic sculpture *Aquarius*, the cast of the musical “Hair” arrived, unexpected and uninvited, singing their signature tune. *This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius...*
In fact this optimistic moment served as an awkward end to another contentious episode in the city’s “convulsive” development. Los Angeles, by the late 1960s, had achieved critical momentum in its urban renewal efforts downtown, with several tall buildings under construction and many more in development.

Flush with success, the city required each new development to invest one percent of its budget in public art. The new policy prompted serious questions about public art—its value and indeed its definition.
The developers of Union Bank boldly proposed that Eckbo’s landscape design, itself, would be a work of public art, and that the plaza would satisfy the requirement for public art.

For Eckbo the stakes were great. It had been his life’s mission to elevate the status of landscape design by shaking off tradition and adopting the social values and aesthetic language of modern art.

But after some debate, the City of Los Angeles rejected the proposal that the landscape design was itself a work of art. The developer, Connecticut General Insurance, was forced to fulfill the requirement in a more conventional way and they commissioned *Aquarius*.

The plaza, a mature work of landscape architecture’s first avant-garde, might have been sanctioned as the first work of public art in the new downtown Los Angeles, a city self-consciously oriented to the next century.
Instead, however, the sculpture was a misconceived project from the beginning. This is not to condemn the work of sculptor Jerome Kirk, who was described by Los Angeles Times critic Suzanne Muchnic as “a superb technician.” He was trained as a mechanical engineer, and for Aquarius he designed all the complex kinetic devices that allow the piece to move.

Aquarius was the first totally abstract sculpture installed in downtown Los Angeles. It was also downtown’s first outdoor mobile, and remains to this day, the only one that moves by air currents.
From the beginning, however, Aquarius was lost in the plaza. Kirk designed it to sit in one of Eckbo’s pools, with an appropriate scale, but it was moved to sit adrift in the concrete grid. Moreover, the piece’s brushed stainless steel was intended to glitter in sunlight, but unfortunately Aquarius is cast in shadows for much of the day.
Even Kirk the sculptor, in a later interview, conceded his regret that Aquarius did not function well within its setting. He said it could have been at least twice as large and, perhaps, painted red to enhance its presence, as were some of his other public sculptures.
In a final and fitting twist, Aquarius was installed wrongly; its title remains buried in the concrete of Eckbo's plaza.
The episode is manifestly rich in significance: historically important, politically charged, and layered with aesthetic meanings.
Historically, the Union Bank building and its plaza embodies one of the city’s most aggressive attempts to erase its own history and construct utopia.

Dana Cuff’s term for this is “convulsive urbanism.” “An upheaval or convulsion,” she wrote, “takes one land use, eradicates it, and replaces it with some vision of a better life ... the larger the new project, the more it buries and the more comprehensive its utopian aspirations ... the convulsive city lurches forward...”
Bunker Hill was once an elite residential area, the location of some the most impressive homes in all of Southern California.

But by the 1920s, when elite residential neighborhoods began to migrate to Pasadena and Beverly Hills, Bunker Hill became an area of retail stores and boardinghouses.
It was in 1958 that the city of Los Angeles designated the community of Bunker Hill as a “blighted arena” More than four out of five dwelling units were deemed to be substandard. The then-young Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) started purchasing parcels of Bunker Hill in 1961.

Ultimately, the CRA acquired 285 properties, relocated 6,000 residents and businesses, and demolished 400 structures. They also re-graded Bunker Hill, removing more than a million cubic yards of dirt.
As if to underline the utopian character of the project, the Union Bank Plaza is completely detached from its site, elevated two stories from the city itself. And in the design of the landscape, Eckbo certainly extended that ontology by laying out a neutral grid to serve as the background for his work.
The episode also, of course, forced the city to publicly address the question: what is art? And what is its role in the public realm?

When the CRA began to require public art starting with the Union Bank Building, art was narrowly understood as sculpture, reliefs, mosaics and murals.

This is an excerpt from a warning letter from the CRA to Union Bank’s developer, from 1968.
The developer’s response? “The total plaza and landscape plan is excellent design in itself and is useful to the community. How more useful (or controversial) would be a Rembrandt in the lobby, forty-three assorted and varying height pre-cast concrete sticks, a nine-foot unclothed thirty-two year old statue of ‘Mr. Los Angeles’ or six tons of amoebic and paramecium shaped stone? We have a complete project.”
The city held its ground, of course, Aquarius was commissioned and dedicated, and the pattern was set for the next two decades.
Through the 1980s, every skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles was accompanied by a large metal sculpture. These are now sometimes referred to as “plop art,” inferring the artwork was not integrated into its place, and meant nothing to its public.
The CRA revised and expanded its Public Art Policy twice, and the agency seems to have learned from the Aquarius episode. Now, the Public Art Policy calls for artists to be included in projects from the outset so that their thinking is totally integrated into the concepts for the project.

Tim Hawkinson’s moving 1994 project, entitled “Inverse Clock Tower,” was built into the unused corner of a parking garage.
Most significantly, when the CRA revised its policy, the agency expanded its notion of what is art.

A 1992 project at Citicorp Plaza is entitled It is a series of seven pieces that are collaborations between poets and sculptors. “Poet’s Walk” was designed after the developer proposed a large metal sculpture that the city rejected.

In another prominent project, California Plaza, the “percent for art” requirement was placed in a trust fund in order to finance an ongoing program of free outdoor concerts and dance performances.
Although Eckbo did not publicly join the debate in this case, the plaza was, of course, a work of art and it remains an important example in the development of modern landscape architecture.

At the most simple formal level, Eckbo designed the Union Bank Plaza as a blunt juxtaposition of two systems: the orthogonal hardscape, which articulated the structural system of the parking garage below; overlaid by the an exuberant collection of manicured landforms and pools, neatly contained by concrete, producing a graphic effect of high-relief.
As Marc Treib has argued, Eckbo’s designs were powerfully influenced by the paintings of Kandinsky and Miro, and the sculpture of Henry Moore. He borrowed the flee-flowing lines of abstract painting for his plans, and in doing so he was able to create a sense of mobile dynamism in the landscape.
In the language of the time, such a collection of curves, arcs, swoops, and blobs would have been described as a “free form,” although Eckbo himself bristled at the term, and a brief survey of the language of the period will establish some of the aesthetic issues Eckbo faced.
The Californian Thomas Church, one of Eckbo’s contemporaries and friends, is largely responsible for the development of modern landscape architecture.

He argued: “since the garden is being designed more and more to be seen from several parts of the house, the plan of it cannot be rigid, and set with a beginning and an end. The lines of the modern garden must be moving and flowing so that it is pleasing when seen from all directions both inside and out.”
Another of Eckbo’s contemporaries, Hideo Sasaki, used the word “biomorphic” to describe the shape of his artificial landscape forms.

In projects such as the John Deere Headquarters, Sasaki contraposed biomorphic landscapes against the rigid geometry of the architecture in a process he called “synthesis.” In fact, Sasaki’s theory of synthesis was quite sophisticated.

For him synthesis meant integration, a complimentary visual composition that included building and landscape. However, an integrated environment did not mean that the landscape and architecture were to be similar, instead they were to be different, existing in a complementary state.
In fact, Sasaki advocated the use of “almost completely biomorphic forms” in landscape design, but that was predicated, he said, on the continued use of rectangular volumes in architecture.

Quoting Sasaki: “The landscape architect ... should be eternally grateful to learn that ... the functions he must resolve may lead to a design expression which may often be almost in direct contrast to that of ... architecture.”
Across disciplines, the aesthetic language of the 1950s and 60s was stimulated by the use of organic forms as foreground against a background of rectilinear structure.

In Stockholm, Arne Jacobsen designed the SAS Royal Hotel. He designed everything about it: the building, the furnishings, the bathroom faucets and the silverware. For the lobby, he designed the famous “egg” and “swan” chairs.

Jacobsen had great interest in natural forms and structures and a passion for botany, which obviously influences his designs. Jacobsen’s garden had hundreds of plants, which he grew because of his keen interest in the study of forms.
Charles and Ray Eames, similarly, conceived of architecture as a rectilinear frame — a neutral frame — for its contents, which included, of course, their own groundbreaking organic furniture.

Throughout the Eames House, and in the way Charles and Ray portrayed the house in their photographs and films, there is cultivated an aesthetic of the organic contraposed against the mechanical.

It is a consistent theme in the graphic design of Ray Eames as well.
One is tempted to conclude that a major theme of furniture design and landscape design in the 50s and 60s was that the two were treated equivalently.

At Case Study House #20, Eckbo used a kidney-shaped swimming pool, and the house was photographed with Eames furniture, reinforcing the architecture’s role as a neutral frame for the furnishings, fittings and plantings that would occupy the foreground.
Eckbo had been working with the aesthetic contrast of curvilinear landscape forms against rectilinear architecture since the beginning of his practice in the 1940s.

Notice the contrast in the 1949 Mar Vista Housing tract, where Eckbo worked with architect Gregory Ain. Overlaid on this rectilinear field of lot lines and house plans, Eckbo’s curvilinear landscape. Trees rendered with swooping boomerang curves. The buildings in precise hard-line, the landscape in breezy freehand.

The goal was to avoid the monotonous repetition of tract housing. The two of them placed the landscape in contraposition to the architecture. The highly-artificial architecture in sympathy with factory production; the highly-stylized landscape working in an abstract formal language. The two systems, working in a kind of off-key harmony to produce social identity through difference.
The juxtaposition of the curvilinear and rectilinear would become a hallmark of Eckbo’s aesthetic.

Eckbo called these forms “biotechnic,” and he claimed they would “embody the final marriage of biology and geometry.”

“The general objective in our environment is undoubtedly a quality of equilibrium and stability, coupled with their opposites, movement and growth.”

“Here is our opportunity to clear up this contradiction between geometry and biology, between structure and wild nature.”
Art Historians are only beginning to define and theorize the postwar cross-disciplinary style of blobs and boomerangs. The irregular shapes of the 1950s and 60s were, according to Kevin Stayton, “a rejection of the hard-edged Machine Age forms of the 1920s and ‘30s, the skyscrapers and streamlined objects that celebrated the machine. The war didn’t make the machine look like such a salvation after all. The new salvation — and the new threat — was biology and the atom.”

Similarly, art historian Brooke Camin Rapaport says: “In the 1940s and 50s, people realized that the machine’s promise didn’t pay off, that it was destructive as well as creative.” As a result, artists and designers began to turn “to shapes based on nature, the human body, back to the handmade and the manmade.”
Perhaps these aesthetic problems have been theorized most provocatively by Jean Baudrillard, who distinguished between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ abstraction.

He was referring to painting when he wrote: “The ‘hot’ abstractionism of the 1950s is far more gestural and savage than [the abstraction of the 1920s]. It is no longer an analytical deconstruction of the world, a nonfigurative mathematics of forms. It is a vehement manifestation, a challenge, a shout.”

Architectural historian Joan Ockman extended Baudrillard’s analysis by suggesting that the ‘cold’ abstractionism of modern architecture was ideologically neutral because it harbored no explicit critical references.
But by the 1960s, I would suggest, hot and cold abstraction took on new meanings, and perhaps, new political roles.

Take, for example, the cold abstraction of the United States Air Force Academy, completed in 1962. Rather than using biomorphic earthworks and water features, as Eckbo would have certainly preferred, in Dan Kiley’s landscape design he matched the Euclidian precision of the buildings.

It is difficult to ignore the underlying symbolic meaning of this landscape of total conformity, particularly as it represents the culture of the military.
I think that simple observation enables us to read the hot abstraction of the late 1960s in a new light. The biomorphic forms which characterized the avant-garde in the 1920s, became picturesque and sometimes kitsch in the postwar, were redeployed by the counterculture, circa 1968.

The argument is admittedly speculative and provocative, but there is one more crucial piece of evidence:
Hair. Eckbo’s hair. Even as a young professional in 1949, when social convention would have preferred a crew-cut, an architectural haircut, Eckbo wore his hair long and, perhaps, free-form.
When Union Bank Plaza was complete, Eckbo was by now an old socialist, with hair. Long, beautiful hair.
Biomorphic hair, consistent, now, with the aesthetics of the counterculture.

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