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A Brief History of Percent-for-Art in America

Did you know that for a records depository the government spent over 4 percent of its construction budget on art? How about 2.75 percent for a law office? Or over 2 percent for a post office? And all the while, not a single statue, law, or guideline covering the commission was in place.

The year was 1927. The project: the Federal triangle in Washington, D.C. Two percent was set aside for sculpture to adorn the Department of the Post Office building; \$280,000 for the Department of Justice; and John Russell Pope's National Archives was lavished with over 4 percent of its construction budget on art.¹

There is nothing particularly new about the U.S. government's allocating some of its construction budget on art. In the days of Beaux Arts architecture, when architects designed pediments to be filled with allegory, architraves to be punctuated with reliefs, and plazas to boast uplifting symbols perched high atop pedestals, art in architecture was considered *de rigeur*. And as a percentage of budget, government officials expected to spend far more on art than they do today.

As a matter of public policy, the percent-for-art concept dates back to the New Deal and the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (established in 1934). The program set aside approximately 1 percent of a federal building's cost for artistic decoration. Artists were chosen by anonymous competition, although provisions existed so that especially accomplished artists could receive commissions directly. The section differed from other New Deal art programs because it had nothing to do with welfare relief or "make-work" strategies. The program essentially continued the nation's practice of decorating its public buildings but transferred the selection of artists from architects to separate committees of experts who administered competitions intended to encourage and publicize the development of American art.²

Art purchased for federal buildings during the Roaring Twenties was regarded as an essential component of classical design, but during the Depression era, the Treasury Section established an expanded rationale for public art. Now, in addition to securing

high quality art for public buildings, the section was committed to stimulating appreciation of art by the American people, and, through competitions, to offering little-known artists a means of recognition. In practice, the competitions often provided specific narrative themes to assure that the final work would please the local community, a practice that led juries to favor styles of “contemporary realism.” In concentrating on recognizable, local themes, the section hoped to inspire an essentially “democratic” appreciation of fine art at the grass-roots level.

When national priorities were realigned by World War II, the section gradually lost impetus and officially disbanded in 1943. Its practice of selecting artists through independent panels of experts rather than through project architects would not reappear in federal policy until the late 1960s. The broader percent-for-art concept, however, endured, becoming an increasingly attractive model once policymakers recognized the meager adornment of governmental buildings erected after World War II.

Given the scarcity of post-war federal art commissions you might imagine that the percent-for-art guideline fell into disuse. On the contrary, officials understood the concept and purported to follow it, sometimes at an even higher percentage than the more celebrated one or half of one later used during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. In testimony before the Commission of Fine Arts, recorded in its 1953 report on *Art and Government*, administrators from the General Services Administration (GSA, the federal agency responsible for buildings and supplies) described their “rule” that set aside 1.5 percent of each project’s appropriation for sculptural or mural decoration. In contrast to the frugal bureaucratic attitude of the times, GSA Administrator Jess Larson actually wanted to raise the limit, objecting to the 1.5 percent formula as “establishing a ceiling for expenditures for decoration, rather than a floor.” As for aesthetics, GSA policy considered art to be “functional decoration,” such as “a mural painting which immortalizes a portion of the history of the community in which the building stands, or work of sculpture which delights the eye and does not interfere with the general architectural scheme.”³ Seeing art as decoratively subordinate to architecture and to

³ See *Art and Government: Re*

perceived popular standards, GSA practice circumscribed artistic creativity and proved incapable of inspiring any significant use of art in governmental buildings.

In 1959, Philadelphia became the first city in the United States to approve an ordinance mandating a percentage of its building costs for art. The ordinance codified an existing policy of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority that, since the late 1950s, had included a clause in contracts for rehabilitation projects that required no less than 1 percent of the construction budget to be allocated for art. The contract allowed a broad interpretation of “fine arts;” in addition to sculpture and murals, “fine arts” included such amenities as foundations, textured walls, mosaics, pools, tiled columns, patterned pavement, grillwork, and other ornamentation. According to its originator, Michael von Moschzisker, Chairman of the Redevelopment Authority, the program endowed public spaces with particular identities, as did such Philadelphia landmarks as the bronze eagle in Wanamaker’s store and the billy goat in Rittenhouse Square.⁴ Von Moschzisker’s percent-for-art requirement was neither a special interest hand-out to artists nor a subsidy for modern art but a public interest program to accentuate the distinctiveness of downtown Philadelphia.

The municipal ordinance, established through the lobbying efforts of the local Artists Equity Association, extended the percent-for-art requirement to structures as diverse as offices, bridges, and city gates. Standards for categories of art included relief, stained glass, and fountains as well as murals and sculpture. Nothing in the legislation particularly advocated modern art and, in fact, its most vociferous Artists Equity sponsors were old-school practitioners of academic art. As implemented, the ordinance produced a variety of sculptures in public places, many of them figurative, some abstract. Most were small-scale pieces by local artist that, however pleasant, could hardly have wielded any national influence. It was, in short, an urban enhancement measure, offering incidental benefits to the local art community.

Baltimore followed Philadelphia with a municipal percent-for-art policy in 1964. Like Philadelphia’s, Baltimore’s ordinance originated with lobbyists from Artists Equity, but its rationale extended far beyond the art community. City Councilman William Donald Schaefer (later Mayor of Baltimore and Governor of Maryland) sponsored the bill

as a vital urban necessity—a measure, as he would later characterize it, to distinguish the city’s aesthetic character:

*The question of financing art in new construction is not a matter of can we afford the expense of art in our new buildings, but rather can we afford not to finance art...It is art in the form of sculpture, paintings, mosaics, fountains and the like, that turns sterile new buildings into living things that attract people. People, in turn, are what a city needs to live.*⁵

Next, San Francisco adopted percent-for-art legislation in 1967, and a host of cities soon followed. States also embraced percent-for-art measures, starting with Hawaii in 1967, Washington in 1974, and succeeded by many others during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The Kennedy administration markedly redirected the federal attitude toward architecture in May 1962 with its publication of recommendations by the President’s Ad Hoc Committee on Government Office Space. Chaired by Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg, the Committee was convened in autumn 1961 to explore solutions to the scarcity of administrative buildings in Washington and to what many perceived as the mediocre design of federal office buildings. Its final report confronted the absence of prior policy in a special section, “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture” which spelled out a new, quality-conscious federal attitude toward architecture, one that would lead directly to a mandate for fine art in public buildings. Prefaced with ideals of “dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability,” the “Guiding Principles” proposed revitalizing governmental architecture through a three-point architectural policy: 1) distinguished building design should be acquired from the finest American architects; 2) no official governmental style should be allowed to develop; and 3) attention should be paid to each building site for its location and beauty. In effect, the “Principles” proposed to abolish the “old-boy” system of federation commissions that had presumed a Beaux Arts style and had relegated sculpture and mural painting to the second-class status of ornaments. The report also contained an economic rationale: “The belief that good design is optional...does not bear scrutiny, and in fact invites the least efficient use of public money.” Originally, the Committee had drafted a fourth guiding principle, which would

have required the government to spend up to 1 percent of a building's cost on art.⁶ This fourth principle did not appear in the final report only because before publication, General Services Administrator Bernard Boutin (an Ad Hoc Committee member) had already instituted the policy.

In the background of the "Guiding Principles" lay a heightened awareness in the early 1960s among architectural critics, journalists, and policy makers that urban America had become exceedingly ugly and that federal architecture had set a leading example of conformity and the mundane. *Architectural Forum* hailed the Committee for at last confronting "the Beaux Arts clique that has banished good architecture from the capital city for many decades, and made Washington a cemetery of neo-classic plaster casts, stacking ennui alongside tedium."⁷ Jane Jacob's book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) had already turned a spotlight on the unsightliness of urban America, supplemented by Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard* (1964), an expose on the vulgarity, litter, and decay produced by commercial marketeers and industrial polluters and tolerated by complacent civic officials and apathetic citizens.

The GSA activated its new policy in spring 1963, by continuing, if in greater numbers, the commissioning procedures already in place. Suggestions for art still depended on each project architect; the percent-for-art policy simply protected art line-items from budgetary cut-backs. The architect normally provided a short list of potential artists, which the GSA would pass along to the Commission of Fine Arts for non-binding selection (normally based on artistic competence, not necessarily on creative ability). The Commission of Fine Arts might even approve the entire list, leaving the choice to the GSA. In any event, the selection process was not very rigorous.

With the GSA's role in selecting artists effectively subordinated to that of the architect, the art it commissioned naturally varied in kind and quality. Academic sculptors continued to enjoy governmental support (such as Paul Jennewein, Joseph Kiselewski, and Marshall Fredericks); but modernists, too, received commissions (such as Robert Motherwell, Dimitri Hadzi, and Herbert Ferber). In its first four years, the

program sponsored nearly 40 commissions, eclipsing the paltry twelve executed during the four previous years.

But by 1966 it was all over—the program was suspended because of the budgetary pressures of the war in Southeast Asia, some scattered controversy, and probably most damaging of all, apathy. No GSA commission during the period distinguished itself as artistically extraordinary: architects treated art as minor parts of their designs, and the public ignored the artwork. Even Congress expressed uneasiness about the GSA program whenever legislators presented bills during the 1960s to mandate percent-for-art appropriations and to invigorate the selection process.⁸

By the late 1960s, the persistent mediocrity of federal art revealed itself in the growing perception that the architectural and aesthetic concepts of the once-hopeful “Guiding Principle” had been altogether neglected. Speaking on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Edmund Muskie (D-Maine) proposed his Federal Fine Arts and Architecture Act of 1969 with a speech distressingly evocative of those same themes of American ugliness that had supposedly been addressed during the Kennedy administration:

Too often Federal buildings outside the District of Columbia are unimaginative, mediocre structures which have been built to last, but not to add aesthetic beauty to their surroundings.

Too often they bear little relation to their sites or to architectural styles around them. Frequently the works of art in these buildings have been added as afterthoughts and not as integral parts of the total design. Unfortunately, many Federal buildings throughout the United States stand as monuments to bad taste for generations to come, when they should be examples of what is best in contemporary American art and architecture.⁹

So by 1970, the initiative to enhance federal architecture with art had once again reached a standstill.

Modern public sculpture became a requisite component of federal building design in winter 1973, when the GSA reinstated its art in architecture program and made its first monumental modern commission: Alexander Calder’s *Flamingo* for the Federal

Center in Chicago. By this time, major corporations such as Chase Manhattan and Pepsico had already committed themselves to acquiring modern art; significant municipal commissions such as Henry Moore's *Archer* in Toronto (1996) and the Picasso in Chicago (1967) had earned civic acclaim; and the National Endowment for the Art's (NEA) Art in Public Places program had dedicated Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids in 1969. The impetus for the 1973 program came from the Nixon White House, articulated in a presidential directive on federal aesthetics issued on 16 May 1972. The directive proposed an annual design assembly for government administrators, a program to improve official graphics and design, and a comprehensive review and expansion of the 1962 "Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture" to encompass "a program for including art works in new Federal buildings."¹⁰ That summer, GSA officials agreed to reinstate the percent-for-art policy; by September, with the help of representatives of the NEA, they had framed a new procedure to select artists. Project architects would thereafter recommend the location and characteristics of art proposed for their building design. An NEA panel, including the architect, would then nominate a list of artists, from which the GSA Administrator would make the final selection—a process that included GSA officials and architects but essentially entrusted selection to independent panels of experts, administered by the NEA.

The GSA resurrected its art in architecture policy with a newfound determination to use it. The Public Building Service memorandum that accompanied the new guidelines assertively declared that "fine arts shall be treated as any other essential part of the building...[and] shall not be deleted as a part of a cost-reducing expediency effort without...written approval."¹¹ New standards of aesthetic excellence arbitrated by experts, would constitute, in GSA Administrator Arthur Sampson's words, "a fresh commitment to commission the finest American artists."¹² The most striking aspect of the new program was the rapidity with which it began. By January 1974, the GSA had received thirty-two proposals from contract architects, with twelve more in preparation. Founded upon the trial-and-error experience of the NEA, the GSA's percent-for-art program began quickly with long-term commitment.

The subsequent prosperity of the GSA's percent-for-art program and the many similar programs administered by states and municipalities is by now well known. What is often forgotten, however, are the broad inclusive reasons for which such programs were formed—not just as entitlements for artists but as necessary accoutrements to governmental architecture, means of urban enhancement, and expansive commitments to civic welfare. But since the notion of allocating a small percentage of architectural budgets for art is nothing new, the salient question about percent-for-art has never been one of whether to allocate funds, but simply, of how.

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Notes

¹ These figures are extrapolated from George Gurney, *Sculpture and the Federal Triangle*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985).

² On the Treasure Section, see Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Art Patronage*, (College Park: University of Maryland, 1966.)

³ See *Art and Government: Report to the President by the Commission of Fine Arts*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, (1953), p. 45.

⁴ See Joyce Newman, "One Percent for Art Kit No. 2" published by Artists Equity Association, Inc., n.d. (NEA Library, Art in Public Places notebook).

⁵ Quoted in the document "% for Art," p. 29 (NEA Library, Art in Public Places notebook #2).

⁶ Letter from Daniel P. Moynihan to Arthur Goldberg, John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of August Heckscher, box 30, "Executive Branch—Federal Building: Design & Decoration, 3/30/62-6/15/62."

⁷ "At Last: Leadership from Washington." *Architectural Forum* (August 1962), p. 79.

⁸ A file marked "Fine Art Legislation" in the files of the GSA Art in Architecture program contains copies of seven different percent-for-art bills proposed in Congress from 1961 through 1972.

⁹ *Congressional Record—Senate*, 10 March 1969, v.115, pt. 5, pp. 5688-89.

¹⁰ "Statement about Increased Attention to the Arts and Design in Enhancing Federal Buildings and Publications," *Public Papers of Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, 18 May 1972).

¹¹ Larry Roush to All Regional Commissioners, PBS, 24 April 73, GSA Files, "Art in Architecture: '73-Present."

¹² Arthur Sampson, in “Fine Arts in Federal Building,” *Calder/Chicago* (dedication program published by the GSA, 1974); on the GSA program, see “Donald W. Thalacker, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture* (New York: Chelsea House, 1980).