

Beyond the Easel: The Dissolution of Abstract Expressionist Painting into the Realm of Architecture

In 1948 Clement Greenberg, one of abstract expressionism's most perceptive critics, described what would become a defining characteristic of advanced, postwar painting as "a persistent urge to go beyond the cabinet picture, which is destined to occupy only a spot on the wall, to a kind of picture that, without actually becoming identified with the wall like a mural, would *spread* over it and acknowledge its physical reality." Since then historians and critics have cited heroic ambition, the vast American landscape, or simply the manifestation that "something big" had happened in American painting as determining factors in the greatly expanded size of the abstract expressionists' canvases. However, Greenberg proposed what might be a more compelling explanation when he wondered "if there is anything in modern architecture itself that explicitly invites this tendency."¹

This paper responds to Greenberg's as yet unanswered question by presenting several key examples in the development of the work of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko—the progenitors of large canvases as well as the postwar era's most influential painters—which effectively achieve the dissolution of easel painting into the realm of architecture. Notably, at one time or another, each of these artists collaborated with a significant modernist architect such as Tony Smith, Peter Blake, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, and Richard Meier. Often the architectural destination can be seen as encouraging the size of their canvases, but as such, the paintings also began to emulate the architectural surfaces. As Greenberg later wrote of

¹ Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment," 1948, *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 195.

Newman's paintings "[his] constitute the first kind of painting I have seen that accommodates itself stylistically to the demand of modern interior architecture for flat, clear surfaces and strictly parallel divisions."²

As the paintings began to take on new physical size and relational scale, they also acquired a material density. For example, Pollock's "poured" paintings frequently possess an opacity that makes them virtually impossible to visually penetrate. The very colors that Pollock often chose to use—coal black, sienna brown, silver/gray, dark green—tend to make the dense network of linear skeins sit on the surface rather than pull back into recessionary space. The opacity is heightened by the thick application of paint and the crisscrossing ebb and flow of the various paint materials, one layer residing on top of one another, also lends the canvas a degree of tactility that makes it almost less painting and more object.

As these paintings obtained a physical presence that became increasingly congruent with modern architecture's expansive surfaces, they not only began to simulate the effect of architectural planes, but they also began to mimic the effects of architecture. The vast size of the paintings created a sense of space quite apart from depicted space, and their physical presence or materiality asserted a very specific sense of place. Indeed, from early on, Newman insisted that "the basic issue for a work of art, whether it's architecture, painting, or sculpture, is first and foremost for it to create a sense of place."³ On a number of occasions, Newman used photography to illustrate this intended effect of his paintings — that is, that one might experience an awareness of one's physical being

² Greenberg, "Feeling Is All," 1952, *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, *Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, 104.

³ Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," in *Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990; 1992), 289.

while in front of one of his paintings.

Each of these artists at one time or another also shifted their painting toward the construction of architectural environments. Rothko, for example, planned a set of large-scaled paintings for Philip Johnson's Four Seasons restaurant in Mies's Seagram Building in 1958. He achieved such an installation at Harvard University's Holyoke Center in 1961. But in the Rothko Chapel, Rothko's paintings take on the scale and tectonic opacity of the architectural plane to such a degree that the paintings do not so much eclipse the architecture as the central focus of the room as they become the architecture.

These developments have their roots in the influence of the Bauhaus émigrés Le Corbusier, Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius who arrived in the United States during the 1930s and are in large part responsible for the development of a modernist architectural style in America, as well as a more general modernist ethos. Their philosophies advocated the abandonment of narrative and historicizing elements. A modernist wall was itself conceived of as a “pure” surface, uninflected and undecorated.

The Museum of Modern Art, under the guidance of Philip Johnson, a defender of architecture as high cultural practice, also played a part in conjoining abstract expressionist painting with architecture by organizing symposiums such as "How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture" (1951), designed to encourage artists and architects to integrate the disciplines.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, galleries mounted shows that presented scale models of contemporary houses by prominent architects paired with artworks created for their interiors. This was at least partly in response to the fact that those who collected abstract expressionist paintings also commissioned modernist homes. These exhibitions

demonstrated the connection between abstract expressionism and modernist architecture by illustrating how the expansive, uninflected walls of modern homes could become natural sites for the large paintings.

Trends in modern architecture, it appears, promoted the transformation of painting from a window in the wall to a wall without a window. The art dealer Samuel Kootz wrote in the catalogue for his 1950 exhibition "The Muralist and the Modern Architect" that "The modern painter is in constant search of a wall – some large expanse upon which he can employ his imagination and personal technique on a scale uninhibited by the average collector's limited space."⁴ That year, when asked to comment on the status of modern painting, Pollock described it in terms of walls. "Painting today," he told an interviewer, "seems very vibrant, very alive, very exciting. Five or six of my contemporaries around New York are doing very vital work, and the direction that painting seems to be taking here is away from the easel into some sort, some kind of wall—wall painting."⁵ And when Emily Genauer, the *Herald Tribune*'s art critic, reviewed Newman's 1951 exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, she advised viewers: "these are not, as one might think on first entering the gallery, handsomely painted walls against which pictures would probably look beautiful. These *are* the pictures."⁶

As these artists' canvases became larger and as they emphasized the sheer materiality of their painting, their work not only forged a new relationship with architecture, it shifted the viewing experience from one that was visually focused and

⁴ Samuel Kootz, "Introduction," *The Muralist and the Modern Architect* (New York: Kootz Gallery, 1950), n.p.

⁵ Jackson Pollock, "Interview with William Wright," 1950. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 20 (hereafter cited as *JPIAR*).

⁶ Emily Genauer, "Art and Artists: Super-Realistic Old and Nearly Blank Modern Art Both 'Fool the Eye,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1951.

two-dimensional to one that was bodily centered and by implication three-dimensional. The minimalists, whose work clearly reflects aspects of architectural form, would make a somatic or bodily viewing experience a defining feature of their work in the 1960s. Yet, as we shall see, it was the abstract expressionists who first achieved this fundamental shift.

One of the first monumental abstract expressionist paintings is Pollock's eight-by-twenty-foot wall-sized *Mural* commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim for the front foyer of her apartment. Pollock's large-sized paintings have their roots in Mexican muralism and Works Project Administration mural projects, both of which influenced his developing notions of what a large-scale painting could be. Yet *Mural* does not resemble the type of mural that people had become accustomed to seeing in their local post offices. *Mural* is more abstract than any of Pollock's previous works and contains an early instance of his allover technique, which would become so emblematic in his oeuvre. But it also differs from traditional mural painting in another important way. A traditional mural is generally understood as a painting that is usually executed directly on the wall and is meant to be viewed from afar. But Pollock made use of Guggenheim's narrow hallway to enforce upon the viewer a direct and close confrontation with the work. One could not step back to take in its entire breadth without coming up against the opposite wall. Thus, the painting forced a physical encounter upon the viewer while simultaneously conveying a sense of being walled in. Significantly, *Mural* not only redefined previous notions of twentieth-century mural painting, but it also instigated a physical as well as visual experience of painting.

Pollock was also one of the first postwar artists to work directly and eagerly with modern architects. Throughout his career he continually sought opportunities to place his paintings in modern architectural settings. In the fall of 1949, for his third show at Betty Parsons Gallery, which he titled “Murals in Modern Architecture,” Pollock teamed with the architect Peter Blake to present what they called an Ideal Museum. In 1947, the year that he was introduced to Pollock, Blake also met Philip Johnson, who he soon replaced as head of the Museum of Modern Art’s department of Architecture and Design. Blake based the “Museum,” a two-by-four foot model-sized building, on Mies van der Rohe’s 1942 Ideal Museum for a Small City, which in turn derived from Mies’s German Pavilion for the Barcelona International Exposition. He then fashioned eight miniaturized versions of Pollock’s “paintings” that stood as freestanding walls or supported from the ceiling, forming both architecture and exhibition. As such, they became integral to the architecture’s design. Architectural historian Arthur Drexler described the “Ideal Museum” as “a re-integration of painting and architecture wherein painting *is* the architecture, but this time without message or content.”⁷

The Ideal Museum never went beyond model form, but it did inspire Marcel Breuer to commission Pollock to create a painting for the first of his “binuclear” houses. The artist’s 6 x 8-foot *Untitled (Mural)* (1950) stood as a room divider between the dining and living areas where it served as a wall and in a very tangible way created space.

One of the least discussed episodes in Pollock’s career occurred in 1950 when the artist agreed to create a cycle of paintings for a contemporary church designed by his close friend, the architect Tony Smith. Experiments filmed by Hans Namuth that year

⁷ Arthur Drexler, “Unframed Space: A Museum for Jackson Pollack’s [sic] Paintings,” *Interiors and Industrial Design* 109, no. 6 (January 1950): 90.

convinced Pollock to abandon canvas as a support and to create a series of paintings on glass that would be installed as a horizontal clerestory of windows. Pollock's own words suggest that he recognized how pigment could stand for wall since the glass abolished the need for masonry support. As he told an interviewer at that time: "I think the possibilities of using painting on glass in modern architecture, in modern construction, terrific."⁸

The Smith/Pollock Church project never developed beyond the stage of drawings and a three-dimensional model, yet its significance lies in the fact that it represents Smith's attempt to unite abstract expressionist painting and modern architecture with a degree of artistic coherence that would not be seen until almost twenty years later with the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

Nowadays, Tony Smith is known primarily for his reductive, black-painted, often monumental sculpture for which he gained much attention beginning in the early 1960s. But during the 1940s and 50s, at the time when Pollock and Newman were making their most important paintings, Smith was producing his best work as architect. While Smith befriended many of the leading postwar painters, he became especially close with Pollock and Newman. Throughout the late 1940s and 50s, Smith continually sought ways to synthesize their two-dimensional, abstract, planar paintings within his three-dimensional architectural work. According to B.H. Friedman, Pollock's first biographer who became closely involved with the abstract expressionists in the early 1950s as a collector of their art, "[Smith] believed that the main reason for architecture was to make a place for art," and that the large, abstract expressionist paintings worked best in "unframed, uncrowded, and uncarpeted space—so that others could experience it 'by getting into it.'"⁹

⁸ Pollock, "Interview with William Wright," 1950, *JPIAR*, 23.

⁹ B.H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 108.

Smith envisioned a variety of projects, one of which included a tent to showcase the work of the eighteen artists *Life* magazine had dubbed “The Irascibles.” The tent soon developed into a place to exhibit Pollock’s paintings and cutaway view of Smith’s design portrays rectangular-shaped panels that resemble the frieze-like paintings that Pollock was producing at that time, such as *Number 13A: Arabesque* (1948), *Number 2, 1949*, and *Number 7* (1950). They hover above ground and, in one instance, two of the paintings actually intersect as if Smith were dividing space with the “canvases,” similar to the Ideal Museum installation. Had Smith realized the installation of Pollock’s paintings within his exhibition tent, the spectator would have found him or herself within a closed environment in which they were involved with the paintings spatially, kinaesthetically, and intellectually as well as visually.

Interestingly, in 1958 Rome’s Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna exhibited several of Pollock’s frieze-like paintings suspended from the ceiling with invisible wires. They hovered within the galleries like free-floating panels, more like objects than paintings. As James Elkins described the installation, “the curator hung the paintings as though they themselves were walls, free of the gallery walls, and one floated right through an open doorway.”¹⁰

Alongside a preliminary sketch for the tent, Smith made the notation “Theatre in Round.” The idea of a theater in the round was something that Smith and Barnett Newman discussed in their frequent exchanges about church and synagogue architecture. In September 1950, Newman wrote to Smith about Touro Synagogue, which he had visited while vacationing in Newport, Rhode Island. He described it to Smith as “terrific.

¹⁰ James Elkins, “‘Art and the Power of Placement’: Getting the Hang of It,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2005.

The outside is a box. The inside is the essence of an open, living space, the true theatre in the round—where everyone feels himself in it.”¹¹ This idea of a “theater in the round” is closely related to Newman’s notion of his paintings creating a sense of place or a sense of “being there.” Although he had not investigated this concept beyond painting, he would soon have an opportunity to actualize his ideas in architectonic, rather than planar form.

In 1951, while Smith was designing a church to feature Pollock’s paintings, Newman embarked on designing a modern synagogue. Newman’s motivation for designing a synagogue did not stem from any religious impulse, but simply because he had long been interested in architecture and found much of the contemporary synagogue architecture being built “appalling.” In 1963, Richard Meier invited Newman to exhibit a model of his synagogue in a show he was organizing for the Jewish Museum entitled “Recent American Synagogue Architecture.” Ever ready for a challenge, Newman jumped at the opportunity. And so, as the only artist among architects, which included Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn, and Frank Lloyd Wright, he exhibited his model, which, in its structural simplicity, suggests something along the lines that Smith would have designed. But Newman was more concerned with the synagogue’s interior dynamics than its exterior appearance, and, as he sought to achieve with his paintings, his conception of the synagogue was to explicitly impart a “sense of place,” a sense of being there, with its attending physical and psychological potential.

Although Newman’s synagogue was never built, he later produced *Zim Zum I*, a walk-through sculpture that adapts the synagogue’s ninety-degree windows and allows the viewers to experience specific space and place as they walk through its shifting walls. Conceptually, it could be considered a painting in three-dimensional form. Viewers

¹¹ Newman in letter to Tony Smith, September 5, 1950, copy at the BNFA.

become consciously aware of their bodies as they pass within the expanding and contracting space, between the elements that approach and then recede from one's physical being. This kinesthetic experience is more pronounced with *Zim Zum I* than with the experience Newman had earlier achieved in some of his paintings. Yet it was an effect that he consciously sought and one that aligns not only *Zim Zum I* with much Minimalist art from that period, but also Newman's paintings.

Of all the abstract expressionists, Mark Rothko was the sole artist to actually succeed in creating a specific cycle of paintings designed to inhabit a specific building over which he had artistic control. The Rothko Chapel—initially designed by Philip Johnson but ultimately completed, for the most part, by the artist—represents a fully realized architectural project. A chapel was Rothko's long-held ideal setting for his paintings and it may have come, partially, from Tony Smith, who had wanted to design a church with a suite of Rothko's paintings as early as 1954. However, it is unlikely that Rothko considered the paintings religious, let alone thematic. He did not intend for them to convey either a narrative or any content relating to a perceived dogma. The idea of a chapel appealed to him because it offered a quiet, solemn setting, which Rothko felt was far more appropriate for viewing his paintings than the "supermarket" environment he found in most museums.

Johnson had originally proposed a square-shaped interior, but Rothko was convinced that an eight-sided room would encourage a visual "surround" for his ensemble of paintings, which would not occur as effectively in a four-walled structure.

Because of the octagonal plan, a situation is created in which the paintings are simultaneously visually apprehended through the visitor's peripheral vision even when

looking at a single canvas frontally. One is also keenly aware of the fact that no matter where one stands, there are paintings behind one. The viewer must move through chapel in order to see the paintings, which entails the physical act of viewing by moving through an interior space. With their size, monumental scale, and lack of pictorial incident, Rothko's paintings in the chapel incite the viewer to slowly become conscious of their own size, being, and presence within the space.

Each of the panels measures approximately fifteen feet high. They are predominantly plum, black, and purple, and contain the first hard-edged forms Rothko painted. This new format conveys a geometrical exactitude that harmonizes with the interior's stark, linear, and subdued architecture. The paintings impart a sense of opacity that plays a part in the materiality of the work. In David Anfam's words, Rothko succeeded in creating an environment "where walls, wall-like images, the voids of the architecture and voided pictorial rectangles commune with each other." Anfam concludes, "The ethos points beyond 'painting' as such."¹²

The significance of Rothko's Chapel paintings lies not only in their architectural nature, but that they also signal a subtle yet definitive transition from abstract expressionism to minimalism, which by the late 1960s had become an identifiable movement. This new generation of artists, the minimalists, began to shift the emphasis of their work from two to three dimensions by producing what Donald Judd described as "specific objects." In form and concept, minimalism has been recognized as signaling a decisive aesthetic shift, away from the canons of abstract expressionism, which in many ways it did. But these artists also arrived at a self-referential object situated in a specific

¹² David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas, Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; 1999), 73.

physical and temporal space that, most importantly, directly engaged the viewer as a body in space. They accomplished this by placing the work in corners or directly on the floor, as well as on walls, in a way that not only revealed the gallery as an actual place, but also turned the artwork into an object that resided within the viewer's world of everyday experience. This placement of the art object rendered the viewer conscious of moving through space. As Robert Morris put it, "The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision . . . one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships."¹³ Yet as we have seen, it was abstract expressionist painting that initiated this radical alteration of the relationship between viewer and work of art, one that we recognize only retrospectively, largely because Minimalism has conditioned the way we now experience these large-scale paintings. This achievement redefines Pollock's, Newman's, and Rothko's legacy to the subsequent generation of artists and places their production into a much larger historical framework.

¹³ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum* (October 1966); reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 228–35.