

PublicWorks



Richard Fleischner

Lower Courtyard, 2008–2010

**A Percent-for-Art Commission for the Media Lab
and SA+P Extension**

MIT Building E14



Richard Fleischner

Rarely is one offered the option to return to a project after its completion with the understanding gained through its accomplishment. Yet that was precisely the opportunity presented to Richard Fleischner, when Patricia Fuller, then Public Art Curator at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, informed him that a new building for the expansion of the Media Lab was planned for the south end of *Courtyard* he had designed in 1980–1985. The new building by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Fumihiko Maki would offer Fleischner a new context in which to rethink the lower terrace of the courtyard as part of MIT’s Percent-for-Art program.

Fleischner, an internationally recognized artist best known for his ability to shape “spaces into places,” had his first experience on the site at the invitation of Kathy Halbreich, then Director of Exhibitions for the MIT Committee on the Visual Arts.¹ She asked six artists including Scott Burton, Dan Flavin, Kenneth Noland, Alan Shields, and James Turrell to collaborate with the architect I. M. Pei on the creation of the Wiesner Building (E15), which would house the Media Laboratory and the List Visual Arts Center. Three of the artists—Burton, Fleischner, and Noland—signed on for the project.² It was a time when artists were becoming increasingly interested in the improvement of public spaces, but collaborations with architects, engineers, or city planners were still unusual. The critic Calvin Tomkins described this phenomenon upon the completion of the Wiesner Building, calling the project “one of the first major achievements of this changed concept.”³ Pei’s deep exchange with the artists led to modifications in the building and its surround that stretched the boundaries of what publicly sited art could encompass.

The initial assignment for *Courtyard* was to create an outdoor sculpture garden adjacent to the Wiesner Building. Fleischner quickly shifted the scope of his contribution to include the entire courtyard within which the sculpture garden was placed, as he could not conceive of the garden without the context of its setting. The courtyard, enclosed by the Wiesner Building, Seeley G. Mudd Building (E17), Whitaker College of Health Sciences and Technology (E25), and Health Services (E23), is the size of nearly two football fields. Working closely with both Pei and Romaldo Giurgola, architect for the Whitaker College/Health Services complex, Fleischner completely integrated his design into the context of the architecture and the activities, actual and potential, for this enclosed space. He took responsibility for the plans and materials for the paving, outdoor staircases, landscaping, lighting, and seating, and the scope was the same for the new *Lower Courtyard*.

Fleischner describes his MIT projects as “totally-integrated sited work,” as opposed to site-specific or independent objects, which he also makes. The MIT projects were created completely in relation to the context in which they were placed and accomplished with the collaboration of an architect, landscape architect, and other professionals from the beginning of the project. Fleischner has had many such satisfying experiences, including the *Dallas Museum of Art, Courtyard Project, 1981–83* (restored 2009–10); *St. Paul Project, 1988–91*; and *Marsh & McLennan Companies September 11, 2001 Memorial, 2002–03*.⁴ Collaborative relationships are key to his ability to successfully carry out his ideas and were critically important for *Lower Courtyard*. Fleischner conferred with Maki’s office and day-to-day collaborated with the landscape architect, James Heroux, and the Project Manager at MIT, Arne Abramson.

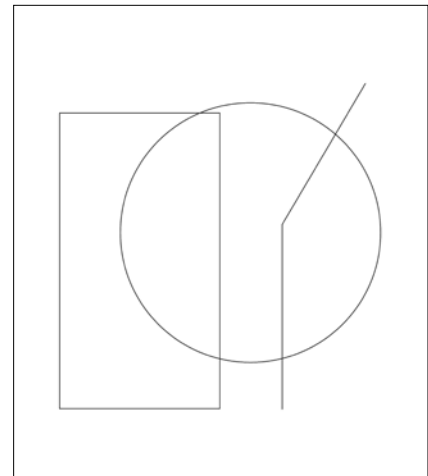
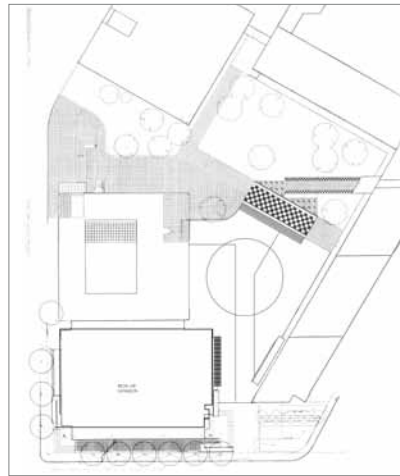
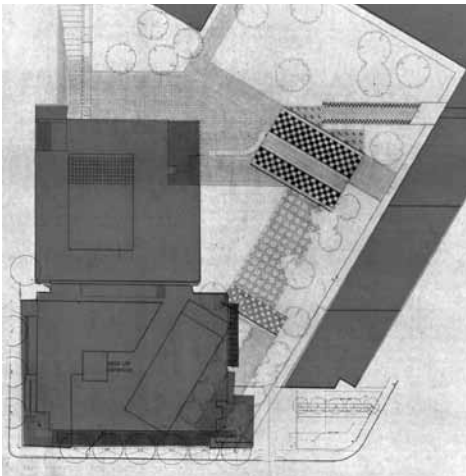
The expectations for collaboration on the Pei and Maki buildings were quite different. When Pei was invited to collaborate with the artists, he was open to intercessions that could and, in fact, did change aspects of the building. Maki and Fleischner had different

assignments with slight intersections. Even within the sophisticated sited art projects for the Percent-for-Art program that has continued at MIT since the Wiesner Building, the relationship Pei had with the artists was exceptional. More typically, the architect will make a place for an artist to work within the building, such as the Dan Graham *Yin/Yang Pavilion, 2002*, on an outdoor terrace in Simmons Hall designed by the building’s architect, Stephen Holl.⁵

Fleischner began work on *Lower Courtyard* by thoroughly considering the new configuration of the entire site with the addition of the Maki-designed Media Lab and SA+P Extension (E14). As is typical of his process, he made many visits to the site to pace out distances within the established perimeter and identify relationships between landmarks. There were limited options for the placement of the main thoroughfare through the space given the relatively narrow opening at the south end of the courtyard at the entrance to E14. That gap was on a relatively straight axis to the main staircase leading to the upper terrace. The west edge of the path, parallel to Pei’s Wiesner Building, naturally met the original perpendicular walkway leading out from its staircase onto the lower terrace. The east edge had to address the broad main stairway between the terraces, which Fleischner managed by gracefully fanning the walk near the stair on a thirty-degree angle parallel to Giurgola’s Health Services building. As Fleischner considered the boundary of the path and the space around it, a circle emerged as the most natural form to place within that context. One of the earliest drawings recording that experience was a line drawing of the path, the rectangular open space to its west, and a circle. The simplicity of this early drawing remained central to all decisions going forward.

In addition to drawings and site visits, several models were built to begin to understand the scale, placement, and exact configuration of the elements on the site. Fleischner modified an eight-by-twelve-foot wooden model repeatedly before settling on a double-ringed formation, the placement and scale of which were intuitively discovered. Surprisingly, for Fleischner, it has a precise fifty-foot radius. He made mock-ups of the structure on site to again refine the height and width and placement. The result is an elegant circular concrete structure set in the middle of a seemingly generous expanse of grass and trees. The rings are literally double arcs dissected by the new pathway, yet they retain a powerful presence as complete circles from every vantage point, especially as one passes through the center.

The circle has been a major element in Fleischner’s vocabulary since a series of *Lead Drawings* begun in 1973 and his celebrated *Sod Maze, 1974*, which is still extant on the grounds of Château-sur-Mer in Newport, Rhode Island. The use of this form stems from the memory of ancient mazes, stadia, gardens, and other sites he has experienced during his extensive travels around the world. Images from a wide variety of sources sit near his models for inspiration. The early line drawing that is a touchstone for the project is related to the lucid geometric drawings of the Russian Constructivists, a source that Fleischner has looked to on many occasions as inspiration for his sited projects.



Plans for *Courtyard* projects, before and after the Media Lab and SA+P Extension

Graded circle line drawing



Wooden model of *Lower Courtyard*



Sod Maze, 1974

While one might be tempted to call the ringed construction a sculpture, Fleischner refers to its lower walls as benches. These exterior and interior walls east and west of the walkway (actually contiguous arcs that break off-center) are set at different heights and invite one to sit. The stepped design recalls an amphitheatre—a structure Fleischner refers to in other works, most clearly in the four-tiered arc seating for the *St. Paul Project*. It also, interestingly, echoes the Scott Burton concrete benches in the lobby of the Wiesner Building that were another Percent-for-Art collaboration in 1985. The outer ring which extends beyond the lawn onto the pavement seems eccentric, but for the artist it “served a specific function in the overall success of the piece; containing the rings on the lawn would have been deadly.”⁶

An incline of grass gradually slopes upward to the top of the taller east interior wall encouraging lying about under the shade of the surrounding mature trees. Behind the opposite larger, west arc the lawn slopes upward to the center of the taller outer wall with newly planted red bud trees softening the geometry of the Pei building behind. Lighting fixtures amidst the trees mimic the branching structure.

In rethinking the lower terrace, Fleischner shifted the feeling of the place from a plaza to a park. The dominant feature of the original upper and lower terraces was the distinct geometrically patterned corridors created in dialogue with the connecting buildings and the directional flow of pedestrian traffic. The upper terrace, which Fleischner re-titled *Upper Courtyard* in the context of the expansion, remains as Fleischner originally designed it, but is re-contextualized. The park-like area of the upper terrace, with its mature trees and facing arced benches, resonates with the facing concrete rings of the lower terrace.

The new *Lower Courtyard*, striking in its elegance, spare geometry, and precision, parallels the character of the Pei and Maki buildings. Fleischner’s placement of elements feels completely natural. He has created an inviting place that includes poignant gestures in the configuration of the rings and the grading of the terrain that gently prod the viewer or user to become aware of his decision-making. Although function guided him, it is not only a space for traversing, congregating, working, relaxing, but it is a deeply satisfying place of heightened perceptual awareness. Even more striking is that this beautiful, practical, potent *Lower Courtyard* was created with such modest materials—earth, simply configured concrete paving and segmented rings, plants, and a few light fixtures. It has much in common with the simplicity of Fleischner’s most successful early projects, such as *Sod Maze*, *Floating Square* (Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany, 1977) and *Wood Interior* (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1980) especially in its gestalt. Fleischner, unique in his comprehensive and assiduous approach to his projects, has created poetry. He speaks like a poet when he describes this work: “The less there is, the more particular it has to be in its context and the more difficult it is to get everything to work.”⁷

Jan Howard

For more information about this and other MIT Percent-for-Art projects, please visit:
http://listart.mit.edu/public_art

Endnotes

1. This is a phrase Fleischner has long used to describe his practice.
2. For a thorough discussion of this project see MIT's Committee on Visual Arts publication, *Artists and Architects Collaborate: Designing the Wiesner Building* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1985). See also the excellent article by Katy Kline, "Space into Place: Richard Fleischner," *Places* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 59–65.
3. Calvin Tomkins, "Introduction," *Artists and Architects Collaborate: Designing the Wiesner Building*, 8.
4. For a discussion of Fleischner's work through the mid 1990s see William H. Jordy, "Richard Fleischner: Projects," *Richard Fleischner: Projects* (Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University, 1995).
5. I am grateful to Patricia Fuller for answering my questions about Fleischner's relationship with Pei and Maki and whether the Wiesner Building projects had shifted the way architects worked with artists in later MIT projects. She and Fleischner concurred that the relationship with Pei was exceptional. Conversations with Fuller and Fleischner, July 20, 2010.
6. In conversation with the artist, July 25, 2010.
7. In conversation with the artist July 9, 2010. The author is deeply grateful to the artist not only for his extraordinary work, but also for generously discussing the project on several occasions.

Richard Fleischner was born in New York in 1944. He received a BFA and MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. A sculptor, painter, installation artist, and photographer, Fleischner began working environmentally in the 1970s. His landscapes and large-scale public sculpture emphasize the relationship of man-made forms and the natural world. The maze, the corridor, the box, and the field are all cultural elements that have figured in Fleischner's work; these elements are utilized in combination with and in contrast to features in the natural environment such as trees, hills, sod, and plants. Fleischner's environments have been constructed in numerous public and private sites. His drawings and complex, textured paintings have also been widely collected. Fleischner's awards include the Pell Award for Excellence in the Arts; the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award; three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships; and a grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Richard Fleischner lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island.

Jan Howard was appointed Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, in April 2000. Since 2002 she has also served as the Museum's Curatorial Chair. Prior to her position at RISD, she was a curator for fourteen years in the Department of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at The Baltimore Museum of Art. Her training includes an NEA Internship in the Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and curatorial positions in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. She holds a BA and MA in Art History from the University of Kansas. Her exhibitions have primarily focused on modern and contemporary art, including *Pat Steir: Drawing Out of Line*, 2010 (with catalogue); *Consent to Gravity: Frederick Sommer's Photographs and Musical Scores*, 2005; *Interior Drama: Aaron Siskind's Photographs of the 1940s*, 2003 (with catalogue); *Adrian Piper: Food for the Spirit*, 2001–2002; *Laurie Simmons: The Music of Regret*, 1997 (with catalogue); *Roni Horn: Inner Geography*, 1994 (with catalogue); and the series *Drawing Now*, 1987–1989. She recently completed a collaborative reinstallation of The RISD Museum's 20th-century galleries.

About Public Art at MIT: MIT's Percent-for-Art program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allocates up to \$250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or campus construction project. The policy was formally instituted in 1968, but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on MIT's campus. When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak designed the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertoia designed the altar screen.

In 1985, architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on Percent-for-Art projects for the Wiesner Building and plaza, home to the MIT List Visual Arts Center and Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works have been commissioned or purchased from such artists as Mark di Suvero, Jackie Ferrara, Dan Graham, Candida Höfer, Sol LeWitt, Louise Nevelson, Jorge Pardo, Sarah Sze, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Anish Kapoor.

An art committee headed by Adèle Naudé Santos, Dean, School of Architecture and Planning selected Richard Fleischner as the artist for the Media Lab and SA+P Extension. Special thanks to Arne Abramson, Program Manager, Projects, Department of Facilities, MIT and James Heroux, Principal, Strata Design Associates, Inc. for all they did to realize this project.

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MIT List Visual Arts Center

Wiesner Building, E15-109
20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Tel: 617.253.4400
Fax: 617.258.7265
<http://listart.mit.edu>

Cover: Richard Fleischner
Lower Courtyard, 2008–2010
Cast concrete, pavers, landscape
Commissioned by the MIT Percent-for-Art program
for the Media Lab and SA+P Extension.
Photo by James Heroux

All images courtesy Richard Fleischner