



Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Corporate Model: Sculpture, Architecture, and the American City, 1946–75

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The National Endowment for the Arts inaugurated the Art in Public Places (AIPP) program in 1967, awarding its first commission to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for Alexander Calder’s monumental stabile *La Grande Vitesse*. Two years later, the sculpture was installed on a plaza in front of new glass and steel civic buildings designed by the firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), which replaced cramped nineteenth-century structures as part of a federally funded urban renewal project that remade forty acres of downtown. Although many scholars use *La Grande Vitesse* as a starting point for their histories of public art in the United States, I view this commission and its larger context as symptomatic of a corporate model for sculpture, architecture, urban planning, and federal policy that took shape during the first two decades following World War II. Through a series of case studies, this dissertation will sketch a critical history of the intersection at mid-century of the various phenomena that established the infrastructure for a modern public art in the U.S.

My study begins with the earliest commissions for art in architecture by SOM, one of the first firms to urge its clients to include art in new structures. The firm selected artists, including Calder and Isamu Noguchi, whose ideas about the spaces they shaped were informed by their experiences designing sets for theater and dance. By the early 1960s, open plazas and abstract sculpture were desirable components of urban corporate campuses and federal complexes. The second part of my study examines how sculptures by “modern masters” accompanied official architecture as a part of large-scale urban renewal schemes such as the one in Grand Rapids. Finally, I consider a shift away from the stage-plazas of Noguchi and Calder toward an urbanism and outdoor sculpture defined by notions of everyday life in the city. Less closely tied to architecture, multiple exemplars of sculptures by Barnett Newman, Tony Rosenthal, Claes Oldenburg, and others became new landmarks created on spec by fabricators such as Lippincott, Inc., and funded by municipalities across the United States.