

Fresno Bee photo

Helicoptered Kite  
With Rubber Band'

# Stan Bitters' dream: buildings to fit people

By LEO STUTZIN  
Bee arts editor

For more than 20 years, sculptor Stan Bitters has pleaded in a lonely voice for the integration of art and architecture.

To Bitters, a building is more than a machine for living or working, as many architects have contended since the 1930s, when the Bauhaus' credo of form follows function swept everything decorative from most new commercial and institutional structures. The environment created by a building, Bitters believes, affects the people who see and use it, and should be created with full consideration for its human impact.

Architectural trends are cyclical, he feels, and change is coming, even if it has been slow to catch hold on a wide scale. "We've gone through that sterile period that cried for some involvement of human scale and activities," he says. He sees change taking place more rapidly in urban centers than in the Central Valley, but expects the trend to broaden, particularly if interest rates decline and building activity accelerates.

Throughout history, Bitters points out, art and architecture have been joined to express the values of the societies they represented. "But here's a culture that pops out of a mixture of all those and yet it's devoid of it," he says in frustration, though he has rarely lacked major commissions for

more than a decade. "It's a dehumanizing experience."

"Human" and "humanizing" are adjectives he uses frequently. They are adjectives that can be applied to his work, creations which invariably inject comforting, often amusing, elements into architectural environments.

Even where art is less comprehensible than his, it is valuable, Bitters says. "People respond. Even though it may be foreign to their background, there's still a sense of some involvement with other people."

That's why "we should be doing more of it, especially in public buildings."

Bitters is particularly happy with the fountain he designed and built for the Stanislaus County Administration Building. No believer in false modesty, he considers the work "one of my grander statements," and his most successful fountain. He also considers it one of the two most effective matings of art and architecture in the Central Valley. The other is at a savings and loan association in Fresno.

He recalls a morning, soon after the administration building opened in 1976, when he was photographing the fountain while county employees were arriving for work. He tells of seeing expressions change — relax — as people walked by, watching and hearing the water splash over free-form projections along the sides of the fountain's three pillars.

The recollection was not a self-serving fiction. The reactions are still

there, still happy, even though a hard-to-find leak has shut down the fountain for most of the last year. Walking through the building a few weeks ago, Bitters was greeted as a celebrity by several county staffers and officials.

Chief Administrative Officer Gardner Hutchins told him, "Everybody who comes in remarks about it . . . how it makes you feel you're outside when you hear that splashing water." Others said essentially the same thing, for themselves and their colleagues and visitors.

When it was running, the pool at its base became an inevitable magnet for coins thrown in for luck. And even now people try to land coins on the tops of its three pillars, whose blue tile sides are ringed by stylized landscapes of the valley and Sierra.

Bitters likens the effect of environmental art, which is so seldom integrated into building plans, to that of the plantings which are almost always built into institutional and residential designs. He would like to see a parallel attitude toward their use. "We want to see that life of nature around our buildings . . . and we don't balk at the cost of putting it in. I'd like to see us gain that same feeling for art."

The cost is far from prohibitive. In the case of the administration building, constructed and furnished for approximately \$9 million, the expenditure for art — Bitters'

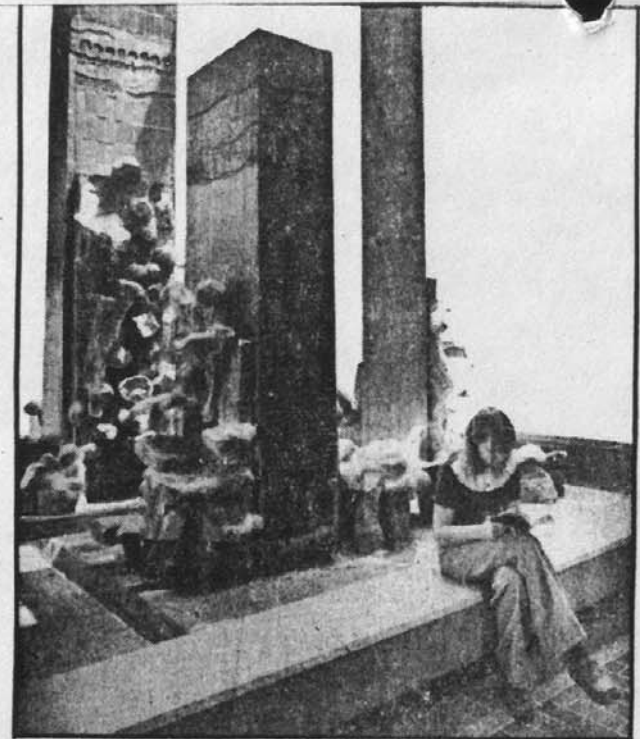
sculpture — was around less than two-tenths of one percent of the total. And, perhaps reflecting the values of the board of supervisors which commissioned the building, the \$15,000 or so was not paid by the county.

It was donated by Modesto radiologist George S. Feher and his wife, Geraldine, who had long wanted to contribute some form of public sculpture to the city or county. In selecting Bitters, after consultation with architect Richard Lewis, Feher made only one request: that the work reflect the county's character, its sun and soil and orchards and rivers.

The Feher's role is noted on a clay plaque inscribed with these words by poet Theodore Roethke: "What I love is near at hand always in the earth and air."

Although the fountain has remained out of operation despite several efforts to trace and stop the leak in its piping, Hutchins and chief maintenance engineer Jim Gomes are hopeful it will be repaired soon. Armed with advice from architect Lewis, who was responsible for the construction of the structure that underlies Bitters' ceramic surface, Gomes and crew will try once more to locate the source of the few drips a minute which are running into the basement.

Even if the leak is coming from an unreachable spot in the concrete floor, the fountain could be reactivated if the water can be channeled into a drain.



County  
Administration  
Building's inert  
fountain: still a  
tranquilizing site

By Debbie Noda, Bee staff photographer

Although Bitters, who is 44, has made his reputation principally for work with ceramics, he totally abandoned that medium for his latest major project.

To shape an appropriate environment for the new Solano Mall shopping center in Fairfield, site of Travis Air Force Base and the widely known Nut Tree fly-in restaurant, he turned to fabric and steel tubing to create four huge, whimsical flying machines.

When the mall opened in March, Bitters says, people asked him whether the 20-by-30-foot contraptions could fly. One viewer was fully convinced, he said, that a balloon-like form could be taken for a ride. They can't, he assures questioners, though they were designed to create an illusion of lightness.

Like any significant artist, Bitters is constantly pursuing new horizons. The shift to fabric and metal was one. His visit to Modesto while on the way to talk with architects in Sacramento may presage another. He's excited about urban planning and involved with a group that is researching the possibility of building an entire community in the foothills; he is designing a neighborhood shopping center near his home about 40 miles east of Fresno.

But whatever the venture, Stan Bitters keeps coming back to the same basic conviction: "You have to think about people, not just buildings."