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Commission for the Open University Library

Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, T: 01908 659 001.

'Architecture, sculpture, and painting are specifically dependent on space, bound to the necessity of controlling space, each by its own appropriate means. The essential thing that will be said there is that the release of aesthetic emotion is a special function of space.' *Ineffable Space* Le Corbusier 1945.

Art and craftsmanship have always been part of architectural expression, the expression of civilisation itself. Every society seeks to express the zeitgeist in this combination, even at the birth of the modern movement. From the Secession movement in Vienna to Adolf Loos' radical views on ornamentation and architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright's design for fabrics and furniture and even in Le Corbusier's radical modernity, art is an integral part of architecture. But since then, art, crafts and architecture have taken different routes, only occasionally and often awkwardly reunited in commissioned art for public buildings.

Ptolemy's commission for the Open University in Milton Keynes represents one of the few recent collaborations between an artist and an architect. The brief was simple: a piece of work for the central atrium. The building is an elegant contemporary structure. From the outside, the structure is a concrete grid, of bays alternately open or with solid aluminium panels. The central atrium slices the building along its length, with the lifts and stairs located at its extremities.

Ptolemy wanted to integrate her piece into the building and, after discussions with the architects, her pieces were allocated the spaces on two large blank walls, next to the lifts and stairs at each end of the atrium.

They were incorporated into the fabric of the building which was key to the success of the overall composition, allowing art and architecture to create a dialogue.

Ptolemy chose to extend her choice of colour for the panels to the lifts and stairs, again blurring the boundaries between architecture and art. On a practical level, it allows the occupants to locate the stairs and lift easily, and to use colour differentiation to navigate the building.

Clues to Ptolemy's interest in architecture are apparent in her palette, particularly the influence of Luis Barragan, the Mexican architect famous for his striking acid colours. The composition itself is reminiscent of early works from the Russian avant garde, by Malevitch and El Lissitzky. Each large panel contains six smaller woven inserts. This change of scale and attention to detail is a device used by Ptolemy, with the intention to capture and hold the attention of viewers as they use the stairs and walkways.

Ptolemy mentions her interest in the work of Donald Judd, and there are certainly clear references to Rothko and Bridget Riley. But what makes the work of Ptolemy Mann so special is the combination of woven structure and three dimensional abstraction. Each piece is conceived as an individual composition.

The collaboration between the artist and the architects at the Open University is the demonstration of how craft, art and architecture can be combined to create a meaningful composition that will participate in the everyday life of the occupiers. Together they have created a powerful and uplifting backdrop for this education facility. ●●● Patrick Richards

Details of Commission

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 UK £7.50 EUROPE 12
 USA \$15.00 RTW £10.00