

# Mall Evolution

Three artists transform a Queens commercial space into one big walk-in sculpture . . .

By JEAN NATHAN

**T**HOSE who've seen it are calling it, variously, "Pee-wee meets Blade Runner" or "Russian Constructivism meets Virtual Reality."

Whatever. What was once the ground floor of a Macy's warehouse in Long Island City, Queens, is now a mall that's a walk-in interactive sculpture. In 1991, the Corporate Life Insurance Company and SIG Partners, the owners of 47-44 31st Street — a million-square-foot structure, the largest in Queens — gave three sculptors the run of its public spaces.

Two years later, J. J. Veronis, 30; Johnny Swing, 32, and John Carter, 29, have, as they said, "artified" everything in sight. Fifty tons of sculpture cover 5,000 square yards of floors, ceilings and walls. The floor of the mall is laid with 600,000 multicolored tiles made of recycled light bulbs, and the plan is to lay 400,000 more. (When completed, this 15,000-square-foot mosaic will, the sculptors hope, entitle them to a place in the Guinness Book of World Records, shattering the record now held by a Mexico City mosaic mural.)

And it's not over yet. People involved with the project, which is already open to the public, estimate it has at least another year to go. In the meantime, the building's upper floors are filling with tenants (occupancy is at 84 percent), who seem undaunted by the unorthodox surroundings.

The building's tenants include jewelry, clothing and furniture manufacturers as well as O.T.B.'s printing operation. The 2,000 workers form a melting pot of Hasidic Jewish jewelers; the "techies" of Securenet, a security firm whose alarms and cameras watch over 11,000 clients in the



Metropolitan area; the Queens Symphony Orchestra's administrators, and employees of a pool-table showroom for the Blatt Bowling and Billiard Corporation.

"It's a madhouse! It's insane! Look at this place," shrieked Lou Buzzeo, the president of Securenet, as he whizzed through the lobby, competing to be heard over the din of clanging metal and strains of Aretha Franklin alternating with Arabic music, the mall's Muzak alternative.

"I am just floored by their imagination and artistic chemistry," said Ellen Young, executive director of the Queens Symphony Orchestra, referring to the sculptors. She glanced around at the "bathtub gods," Poseidon and Mercury, fashioned of refuse from a nearby Long Island Expressway overpass; boiler parts and old saw blades soaking in porcelain niches, and a 40-foot-long fish fashioned from a pickup truck, with steel whiskers, hanging overhead. (The orchestra's receptionist can operate a motorized steel gong outside the offices' glass doors with a foot pedal the artists provided under her desk).



The ground floor of a onetime Macy's warehouse in Queens, above, has been "artified" by three sculptors, left: from top, J. J. Veronis, John Carter and Johnny Swing. The space also includes a drugstore, below, called Ruthless Health and Beauty Aids.

The "three J's" — Mr. Veronis, Mr. Swing and Mr. Carter — share a first name and a fascination for refuse. Where a non-J might see an institutional metal trash can with a bulbous top and a swinging door, a J sees an astronaut's helmet.

Mr. Carter was born in Anchorage. His father, who was in the United States Air Force, moved the family all over the country, later climbing the ladder of craft sales and then becoming a tile salesman. Mr. Veronis's father was crafting media deals in New York while Mr. Carter's father was tooling a leatherwork rendition of the Last Supper. Johnny Swing grew up in Vermont. His father, a foreign policy expert who is now president of the Foreign Policy Association, traveled the world helping to craft peace agreements.

In 1986, Mr. Swing met Mr. Carter at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. A year later they met Mr. Veronis in the East Village. In 1989, the three began making collaborative sculptures in Mr. Swing's studio, a former gas station at Second Street and Avenue B. Their work was exhibited throughout the city, and they came to the attention of Irwin Cohen, a partner in SIG.

The artists' partnership has endured, despite occasional ego clashes, in a spirit of such democratic harmo-

ny that when they leave an answering machine message, it is in a tripartite welding of their voices. They have been unable to come up with a mutually acceptable new name for the building, so it retains its current name, "The Factory," while the management office waits patiently for their decision. ("The artists are the heart and soul of this building, so we're letting them develop a name," said Geri DeSena, the building's operations manager.)

Allowed to name the discount drugstore in the space, they did concur on Ruthless Health and Beauty Aids, whose chaotic interior, also of their design, includes deliberately crooked shelving and giant facsimiles of deodorant and aspirin containers. The sight of all that work led Mr. Cohen to suggest giving away dramamine, the motion-sickness antidote, at the store's grand opening last spring.

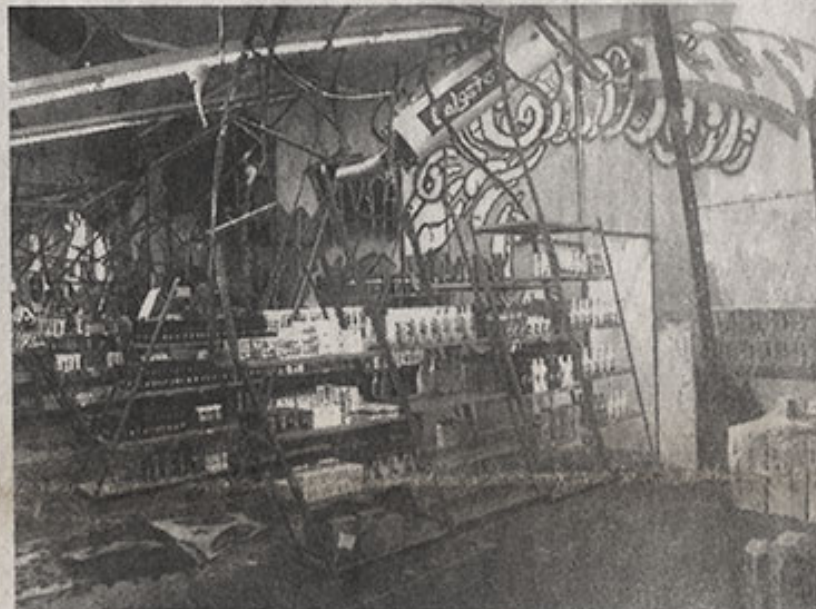
What really seems to be going on here is a giant leap of faith for corporate culture. The project has somehow welded the disparate aims of both the corporate players and the artists. "The downside risk was slight," said Ted Nering, who oversees the building for the Corporate Life Insurance Company, one of its owners. "Life doesn't have to be so heavy and oppressive that there can't be whimsy." Mr. Carter views the

project as a museum about present-day America "The car parts will eventually be seen the way dinosaur bones are today," he said.

Public reaction is still to come. Sightseers do find their way here, but the anticipated influx of shoppers has yet to appear, since the pool table showroom and the drugstore are the only businesses open so far. (Three restaurants are to open soon.)

"They want me to shop here?" said one pioneer, Toula Doufekias, a teacher at the Chapin School who was headed to the nearby Wallach's outlet store when she spotted the building's sign for discount toiletries. Ms. Doufekias was not sure she liked the interior. "Can't we recycle anything for useful purposes?" she wondered.

Hearing this, Mr. Carter asked her, "Don't you think art is useful?"



Photographs by Sara Krubwich/The New York Times