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## **Walls For Paintings**

“If Ed Ruscha was dead we never would have been able to complete this phase of the project, and build the new grand staircase,” the architect explained. “Landmark Preservation opposed our plans for the renovation. They fought us through the whole process.”

Sixteen of the seventy panels from the Ruscha mural were removed from the third floor bridges that divided the Great Hall from the adjoining atria. The second and third floor bridges were demolished in order to create space for the new staircase.

As sections of the painting were displaced by the construction, the grand staircase also replaced the existing escalator system. As the preferred postmodernist mode of vertical conveyance, the escalators previously served to collage together the incoherent elements of the architecture.

A new surface was required to display the displaced panels. The architecture team designed a solid parapet wall for this purpose to replace the previous open railing that wrapped around the second floor of the rotunda. This in turn altered the flow of light and sound, redefining the space by creating a more definite separation between the levels.

“I’ll tell you, since no one else has noticed. When I saw it after the construction was done, I knew we made a mistake,” the architect explained when I asked her about the unusual proportions of the new parapet, designed, as required, in relation to the specific dimensions of the painting, rather than the human body.

“We wanted to preserve, as much as possible, the original proportions between the painting and the architectural space. The distance from where we are standing now on the first floor looking up at the painting, that’s the same distance as between the second and the third floor where the painting used to be installed. Now that it’s completed, seeing it in context, we should have lowered the parapet another six inches.”

According to the proposal presented by the architecture team, the grand staircase was designed to introduce seven distinct moments where a visitor can now pause, and fully appreciate the Ruscha mural.

“Ruscha understood our proposal, and the necessity of redesigning the space in order for the institution to continue to be vital into the future. My team met with him twice, and he was supportive. It was critical that we were able to have these conversations with him, otherwise Landmark Preservation would have been able to argue that relocating the panels would compromise Ruscha’s artistic intention. The project never would have been able to proceed at that point if we weren’t working with a living artist.”

**Ian Jeffrey, August 17, 2024**