

Art in Context / Context in Art

The Intersection of Art and the Built Environment

Organized by Common Boston at the Boston Society of Architects and the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art in conjunction with the 20th Annual South End Open Studios and hosted by Boston Sculptors Gallery on September 16, 2006.

Speakers

Liesel Fenner, Manager of Public Art, Americans for the Arts, Washington, DC

Lillian Hsu, Director of Public Art and Exhibitions, Cambridge Arts Council

Christopher Janney, Artistic Director / PhenomenArts, Inc.

Cynthia Smith, Principal, Halvorson Design Partnership, Boston, MA

Martin Zogran, Assistant Professor of Urban Design, Harvard University

Graduate School of Design, Moderator

Forum Proceedings

Increasingly, *public art* and *placemaking* have entered the conversation of the visual and creative arts. This topic was addressed at a public forum organized by Common Boston of the Boston Society of Architects and the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art in September 2006. The forum took place at Boston Sculptors Gallery and was organized in conjunction with the 20th Annual South End Open Studios.

Boston's South End boasts a lively artist community that helped revitalize an urban community struggling with rampant crime, drugs, arson and declining property values as recently as the 1980s. Beginning in the late 1990s, the area became home to the largest concentration of galleries in New England. This context creates the backdrop for the question of *public art and placemaking*. What are the

effects of the city's renaissance? How is local identity retained as an area is gentrified and the population shifts? How does branding through the arts affect an area? Who gets to speak on behalf of the multiplicity of publics?

The place of art in the public realm, its integration into the disciplines of architecture, urban planning and community building is a timely subject as these interrelated areas of interest are experiencing shifting boundaries. Best practices in the field are continuously evolving. Common Boston and UrbanArts invited leading professionals in public art and landscape architecture to present selected case studies with the following three key questions driving the analysis:

1. Boundaries & Collaboration: How do the roles of design professionals and artists complement one another in creating public spaces? What distinctions continue to be meaningful between such disciplines?
2. Publics & Placemaking: What is the role of local municipalities, resident communities, design professionals and artists in the creation of successful public spaces? Whose "local identity" and "sense of place" does public space promote?

3. Policy & Agency: How can public or private entities and decision makers at local, state and federal levels promote better design of public spaces? What practices foster creativity and general excellence?

“Artistic practice in combination with almost any human activity increases the possibility of having depth in that activity”.¹ Based on this insight, The **Art & Community Landscapes** (ACL)² program of the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA)³ offers an award-winning model for temporary art programming in public spaces. Now in its final stages of funding, ACL paired artists with communities to create awareness of environmental concerns the chosen civic partner wanted to see addressed. In the course of six years, twenty-four artist projects were supported across the country, with the final projects coming to a conclusion in 2007. Funding was provided through a collaboration of the National Park Service, the National Endowment for the Arts and anonymous contribution.

Liesel Fenner, newly appointed Manger of Public Art at Americans for the Arts, developed and managed Art & Community Landscapes at NEFA. She sees art as a revelatory process that raises awareness and knowledge and heightens one’s senses. The ACL program was built upon the Park Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program, offering pro-bono services to communities in two-year cycles. ACL particularly supports cross-disciplinary approaches to the creative process that can be mutually informative and may elicit new models of partnership and outcomes. Emphasis is placed on multi-disciplinary activity and constituency building.

¹ Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard: Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development. New York, NY: Rockefeller Foudation, 2001.

² The Art and Community Landscapes program was preceded by Visible Republic, which funded 28 temporary, site-specific works between 1998 and 2002 with grants of up to \$40,000. The Fund for the Arts completes NEFA’s public art initiatives. Up to \$100,000 are awarded for permanent site-specific works each year.

³ NEFA administrates grant-making programs that support dance, performing arts, and public art projects in New England and beyond. Its mission is to creatively support the movement of people, ideas, and resources in the arts within New England and beyond, make vital connections between artists and audiences, and build the strength, knowledge, and leadership of the region's creative sector.



Epicenter by Karen McCoy and Matt Dehaemers

Epicenter by **Karen McCoy** and **Matt Dehaemers** combines the ACL premise in a noteworthy manner. The installation was created in collaboration with the Missouri Arts Council as part of the national Bicentennial commemoration of Lewis and Clark’s historic, cross-country expedition. *Epicenter* consisted of a 12-foot long dugout canoe cast out of ice from the frozen Mississippi River water. The ice canoe was filled with corn and set on top of uprooted corn stalks. During the signature event the canoe slowly melted and disappeared. As it melted, it deposited its cargo of corn in a mound atop the corn stalks. The uprooted corn stalks speak of the continual upheaval of tribal families as they were pushed out of their homelands along the Mississippi River in the 1700’s and 1800’s. The diminishing presence of the canoe may be likened to contemporary cultural misconceptions concerning

American Indians. The corn kernels are metaphors of growth, vitality and sustenance.⁴



Still from Crossing Paths by Denise Marika and Corey Tatarczuk

In Boston, NEFA commissioned video artists **Denise Marika** and **Corey Tatarczuk** to create *Crossing Paths* with images generated from collaborative workshops with youth from Bikes Not Bombs who lived in communities abutting the Southwest Corridor Park's bike trail. Photo images of teens were projected onto large concrete panels flanking a rail corridor at Roxbury Crossing. During production, Liesel Fenner created an environment that was open and committed to the creative process: images for the project were selected by youth and artists without intervention or control. A broad audience including bicyclists and motorists viewed the installation during its lifespan of eighteen months. Though the project administrators were fearful of vandalism, *Crossing Paths* ran without incident, a success that can be attributed to the project being deeply rooted in the community.

⁴ Quoted from <http://www.nefa.org/projinit/lewisclark.html>

Key characteristics of ACL projects are the collaborative approach and the focus on process and involvement of communities. The creation of art becomes a democratic, participatory experience that elevates the mere observation of landscape and the environment to a cultural experience. The art imbues a place with meaning and creates awareness among the audience both at the site and through the continued broadcasting of documentation long after the project has ended.



Pamplona by DeWitt Godfrey

Temporary public art can be refreshingly exuberant, as evidenced by a winter 2006 installation by **DeWitt Godfrey**, administered by the Cambridge Arts Council with funding from NEFA and the LEF Foundation. At Cafe Pamplona near Harvard Square, the sculptor intervened with large-scale, flexible steel cylinders he stacked between two buildings. Word of mouth and media coverage of the curious installation caused onlookers from near and far to embrace freezing temperatures for a glance or photo op. Mr. Godfrey's installation was most successful as it afforded a different perspective on a usually

overlooked alleyway. The project demonstrated the unique power of temporary work to intervene in the public space and change our perception of our environments.

The Cambridge Arts Council has overseen the creation of well over one hundred publicly sited artworks since the Cambridge Public Art Ordinance was introduced in 1979. The impact has been tremendous – anyone entering Cambridge and its neighborhoods will notice the care and attention devoted to its public squares and parks, streetscapes, even back alleys. Employed by the City, **Lillian Hsu**, Director of Public Art and Exhibitions at the Cambridge Arts Council, is a public servant with one major concern at heart: Who owns public art and public space and how do you serve them responsively?



Taylor Park by Paul Ramirez Jonas

Public art administrators know that investing community in the process of public art lies at the core of successful outcomes. Artist **Paul Ramirez Jonas** engaged the residents of the Taylor Square neighborhood in North Cambridge in an unusual and innovative way. Taylor Square is home to the smallest park in Cambridge, measuring a mere 57 square feet. Located next to the local fire station, this small patch of lawn features a bench and a flagpole. A 3' high fence with a locked gate protects this green space. To create public access for the locals, the artist designed and mailed 5,000 keys. It is a public space through the distribution of 5,000 artist-designed keys and the invitation to the public to duplicate them endlessly. Keys embossed with the phrases "Taylor Square" and "Copy Me", were mailed to Cambridge households along with a poster and note to copy the key and it pass it on to neighbors, friends and visitors.



Danehy Park – Turnaround Surround by Mierle Laderman Ukeles

While access to tiny Taylor Square Park has been limited to the locals, North Cambridge's Danehy Park is a large open space resource. Danehy Park is a 55-acre site which serves its neighborhood as an important open space with athletic fields, paths, and playgrounds. For the redesign of this former dumpsite into a park, the Cambridge Arts Council commissioned New-York based **Mierle Laderman Ukeles** who is known for her work centering around waste and urban maintenance issues. Entitled "Turnaround/Surround," her multi-faceted design consists of a half-mile

long 'glassphalt' path, a planting plan for the central mound, two rubber discs with a galaxy image and cast aluminum 'thrones'. Noteworthy also are issues of scale. How does the acreage of Danehy Park relate to the intimacy and human scale of a small pocket park like Taylor Park?

Graffiti on the cast concrete benches and paving in Danehy Park have been a major issue. There is a sense that the vandalism problem is the result of individuals not feeling ownership of the green space. In planning the next, fifth phase, Mierle Ukeles is specifically addressing the issue of connection. Dealing with people's response to the space has become an important concern. Inclusiveness in this conversation is key. How the dialog is facilitated can make or break a project. Resources and organization of the community process are paramount to success.

Vandalism has also been an issue with **Wen-ti Tsen's** stencil painting on Vassal Lane. At extensive public meetings the city planned traffic calming elements with the community. A budget of \$10,000 was invested in pavement paintings by Mr. Tsen, to be covered with pink paint by vandals only a few weeks later. Those responsible have not been identified, but the message clearly is that public meetings do not warrant broad acceptance. It often also is difficult to gauge who is not part of the conversation during the planning stage.

Currently in the planning stage are streetscape improvements on Palmer Street in Harvard Square and the new Robert Healy Public Safety Facility. On Palmer Street, **Jody Pinto**, internationally acclaimed for her creative integration of art into architecture and landscape architecture, has designed a plan that features multiple upgrade elements, including in-ground lighting, graphics on service doors and illuminated blocks to guard bollards, along with a drop-down screen for film screenings. For the new public safety facility, the Arts Council engaged **Krzysztof Wodiczko**, internationally renowned for his large-scale slide and video projections on architectural facades and monuments.

Landscape architects **Halvorson Design Partnership** has been proactive in working with artists on design teams. The result have been public spaces that bear witness to the firm's commitment to creating exemplary landscapes that stand the test of time. This dedication to quality and the integrated design team has remained the hallmark of the firm since its founding in 1980. Principal **Cynthia Smith's**

experience in collaborating with artists is that they help to push envelope. An important component of the planning process is to establish a connection with the users. How do they react? What is the experience? Successful urban spaces make connections with people and collaborations help forge the sense of site.

Urban *placemaking* can take place in a variety of experiences, such as

- Tell a story/educate
- Convey history
- Honor and memorialize
- Generate curiosity/mystery
- Celebrate the senses
- Express materiality, e.g. play with pattern and repetition
- Solace and contemplation
- Delight and discovery



Quincy Square Park, Halvorson Design Partnership with David Phillips

Cambridge's Quincy Square Park, located next to the Inn at Harvard in Harvard Square, was designed in 1997 by Halvorson Design Partnership and sculptor **David Phillips** under a partnership of the City of Cambridge and Harvard University. David Phillips initially proposed the Golden Means concept and spiral. The moderate \$20,000 art budget was possible, because the artist himself cast the bronze snails and detailing. Noteworthy is that Halvorson proposed to work with David Phillips beginning in the design phase to create a seamless experience in this small pocket park, affectionately nicknamed Snail

Park. The value of an artist as member of a design team is that they often come to the table with provocative ideas and drawings that administrators or architects might not think of. The often-quoted ‘thinking outside the box’ has a greater chance. An artist’s vision may assist the design team in twisting and turning an idea or a concept to achieve an outcome that is larger than the sum of its parts. At the same token, the willingness to collaborate is an essential quality a design team would look for in an artist.

Cynthia Smith, project architect of Cambridge’s Porter Square redesign, registered two concerns relating to many standard design processes. First, the late introduction of the artist after completion of the schematic design for this percent-for-art project forced the existing design team to rethink months of effort, review and process. This also led to the team’s continued polarity in working with artist **Toshihiro Katayama** to finalize the integration of “*the art component*”. The result was a mixed reception by public and press. The integrated design team approach can be in diametrical opposition to the allocation of percent-for-art funding. Public art funds may be subject to prior completion of the landscape design, before the art budget can be designated. It becomes clear that design and budgetary processes may need evaluation and restructuring to ensure that public spaces can reap the benefits of integrated design.

Unfortunately, the US lacks a national infrastructure for public art. The national Public Art Network of Americans for the Arts was founded as recently as 2000. National architecture associations, such as the American Institute of Architects or the American Society of Landscape Architects offer no guidelines on involvement of artists in a design team context. The Romantic period created the ideal of the artist genius, supplanting the centuries-old model of the guilds, in which the trades worked together to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, most evident in the fully integrated Baroque castles and cathedrals of Europe. In these modern times, a reconsideration of highly successful past practices and advocacy for integrated design teams beginning in the planning stage are in order.



South Boston Maritime Park, landscape architect Halvorson Design Partnership, with 3 interactive mosaic wheels by Ellen Driscoll on bottom left and granite carvings by Carlos Dorrien.

South Boston Maritime Park is the centerpiece of a new mixed-use neighborhood being created on formerly industrial docklands owned by the Massachusetts Port Authority. The 1.1-acre award winning ‘signature park’ by **Halvorson Design** evokes the maritime ambience of the working harbor. A cafe pavilion and adjacent pergola of monumental scale by **Machado-Silvetti** architects are placed at the center of the wedge-shaped green space. Two artists, **Carlos Dorrien** and **Ellen Driscoll**, joined the design team, facilitated through artist selection by the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art. The team’s combined efforts resulted in a well-appointed contemporary public park serving the day-to-day needs of the area as well as offering a location for special events. Carlos Dorrien’s granite carvings and gateway recall the heyday of the port and its fishing industry. Ellen Driscoll designed cylindrical interactive mosaic wheels. The mosaic images are both historical and contemporary, referencing immigration, industrial and maritime events. On the ground plane, a large granite circle is engraved with the navigational stars used by sailors to chart their course in the ocean.

Programming in public spaces is not as evolved as knowledge of interior spaces. Newly designed public spaces should be thought of in 25-year cycles, asserts Cynthia Smith. Designers have a tendency to want to create a complete space, but there has to be an anticipated imprint by people in the future. The 'theater of life' makes spaces and reinforces local identity. Though physical space usually stops growing at the dedication, designers and artists ought to devote thought to future uses and anticipated interactivity. Involving the community in this process is beneficial.

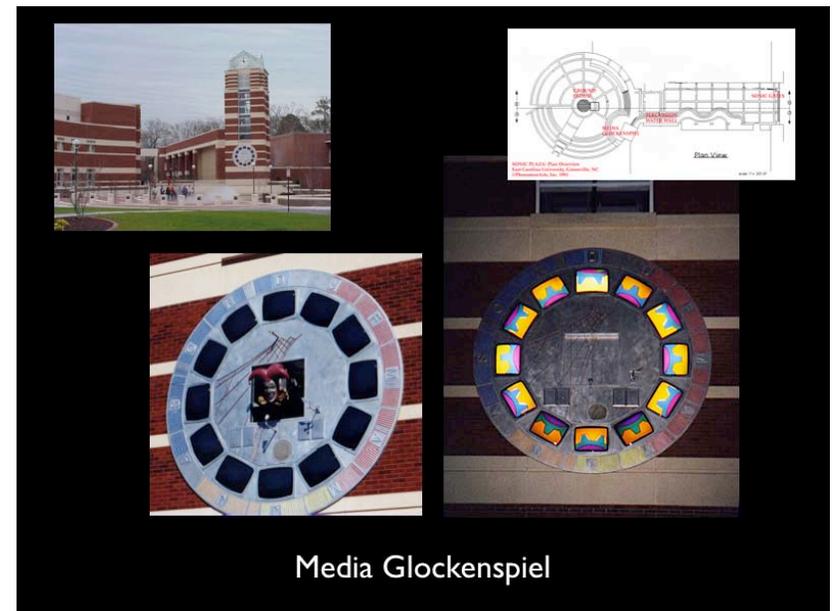


Harmonic Runway by Christopher Janney

More ephemeral in nature, **Christopher Janney** creates what he has coined an architecture of the air. Trained as an architect and musician, the artistic director of **PhenomenArts, Inc.** designs sound and light environments. Both he and Cynthia Smith emphasize the importance of the public feeling a sense of connection to the environments they create. At the 34th Avenue subway stop in New York City, Chris Janney's urban musical instruments invite the public to play while waiting for the next train. Installed in the late 1990s, *Reach* is enjoyed by audiences 24 hours a day.

The artist's email address is posted on location at the subway stop. Chris Janney reports that every once in a while he receives a note, reporting of fabulous midnight jam sessions or some such. Some people miss the work altogether, while others think of it as a classic. Similarly, Mr. Janney's walkway at the American Airlines terminal at Miami International Airport features rainbow-colored glass walls that change appearance triggered by passing travelers, complemented by sounds from the Florida environment. These works transform and bring relaxation into busy commuter lives.

Created mostly for the student population on campus, Chris Janney's Sonic Plaza at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC represents another design team effort. The project took seven years from the design phase to inauguration. Rather than picking an individual spot, the team developed the idea to integrate the art within the architectural framework. The plan shows that Sonic Plaza actually features four works, Sonic Gates, the Percussion Waterwall, Ground Round and the Media Glockenspiel.



Media Glockenspiel

Sonic Plaza Plan and Media Glockenspiel by Christopher Janney

The four classicist entrance columns to Sonic Plaza – a former library entrance – contain sensors that provoke sounds as passers-by cross the threshold. Once past the gateway, the pedestrian sightline is Ground Cloud, a mist fountain, the brainchild of a romanticist who wants to make things that are enchanting, like a walk through the clouds. Mist fountains are also smart design, because they will consume less water than a conventional fountain and they can easily be turned off during the cold months, without turning into a naked obstacle or collector of unsightly items.

The southerly edge of the plaza is bounded the two-story wall of a mechanical systems building. In this location, Janney's Percussion Waterwall not only invites interactive triggering of sound and water, but it masks the sound of the equipment behind it. Abutting the wall to the west, the Media Glockenspiel is housed in the campus's 185' high clock tower, which also marks the entrance to the modern campus. Christopher Janney has held a life-long interest in glockenspiels. He fueled his passion on trips to Europe to explore existing models. Mr. Janney's 20th century response to the medieval glockenspiel is a circular media invention with 12 video monitors.

In his effort to connect students with new art media on campus, PhenomenArts worked with the university administration to develop opportunities. If inspired by the Media Glockenspiel, students can enroll for a course to program the video monitors. While work was in progress, Christopher Janney designed a series of four sculptures with students from the sculpture department. Together, they created four works that emerge from niches in the tower four times a day – morning, mid-day, evening and at mid-night. At the Percussion Wall, performance pieces have been choreographed that interact with the wall, assisted by a scoring system designed by Janney.

The elements of boundaries and surprise connect all highlighted projects and are a common characteristic for successful experiences in public space, noted forum moderator **Martin Zogran**, Assistant Professor at Harvard University's School of Graduate Design. The best-case scenarios and challenges highlighted in the discussed projects portray the interrelatedness and tension among the design and art disciplines. In attempting to answer where the role of artist and landscape architect or planner overlap, the ever-present question, "What is art?" needs to be addressed. Is it the new, the shocking or provocative? If anything, the presented projects demonstrate the transformative experience of their creation. The overlap exists in the

creative process and the openness to ending up somewhere entirely different from where one started out.

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