

## ART AND SOUL

### UrbanArt chief preaches getting active for change

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/nov/27/new-urbanart-chief-knows-southern-hospitality-is/>

By Richard J. Alley  
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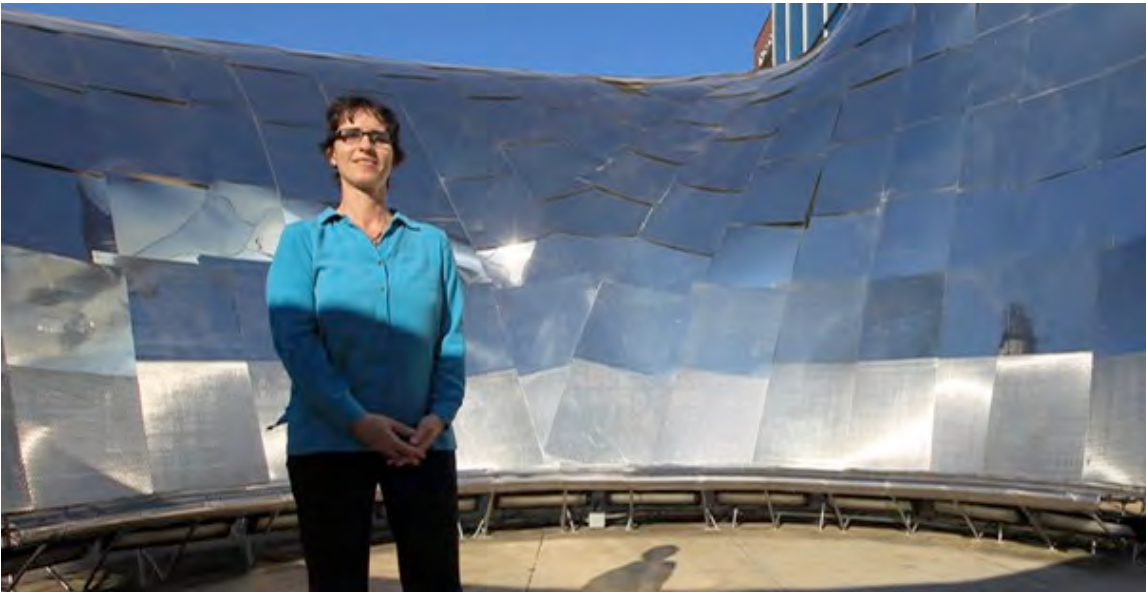


Photo by Nikki Boertman.

Christina Lanzl has been the executive director of the UrbanArt Commission for five months. "The more I saw it (Memphis), the more excited I became," said Lanzl, who grew up in Germany and previously worked in Boston.

In only five months as a Memphian, Christina Lanzl has already settled into an easy routine, finding favorite coffee shops, restaurants and a safe route to bicycle to the Poplar Avenue offices of the UrbanArt Commission, where she is the new executive director. The energetic and eager Lanzl leans forward to speak excitedly about art and the public spaces so important to today's urban planning. She looks at the creation of such public plazas as "place making" and, since moving from Boston, she has been taken with the convenience of the Shelby Farms Greenline and the beauty of a sunset over the Mississippi River.

"Walk outside your house, look around you, think of it as your living room," Lanzl said. "And then think, do you like what you see? Is there anything you can do in your own small realm to actually make it special to you? If there are things that you wish for, then you perhaps want to get active if you have the energy or time."

She points to local skateboarding activist Aaron Shafer, who worked hard on a grass-roots effort to create the first outdoor skate park in Memphis at Tobey Park. The park was recently ornamented with a sculpture by artist Mark Nowell, a project spearheaded by the UrbanArt Commission.

Born in Los Angeles and moved to Germany at age 2 with her German-born parents, Lanzl speaks with a thick accent as she talks about her work before Memphis in Boston where she was the director of programs at the Urban Arts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. She has also been the executive director of the Brookline Arts Center and the director of the Bromfield Gallery. After more than 20 years in Boston, Lanzl says, she "was looking for a new challenge" when she came across the nationally advertised position at the UrbanArt Commission.

"I had heard of Memphis; obviously, it has an important history," Lanzl said. "I'm interested in civil engagement, and if you know about civil rights, Memphis is a big city."

Said Nowell, who has been making art in Memphis for 30 years, "That's a huge thing to be able to get people to come to Memphis and bring the experiences and practices and pace and vernacular from other major metropolitans. The more we can get of that, the better."

In her first visit to the city, Lanzl learned that Southern hospitality is real. She was shown the city and the existing collection of public art by commission board member Mary Jane Fuller, who found the candidate to be "very thoughtful and yet enthusiastic. ... She's delightful."

"The more I saw it (Memphis), the more excited I became," Lanzl said. "One of the first things she (Fuller) said to me was 'the city has soul', and I said if that's the case, that's what's important to me." The soul, as understood by Lanzl, is the warmth of its people, but with some rough edges and "an amazing amount of artistic and creative activity going on."

She is impressed by the amount of public art in a city the size of Memphis and with an entity as relatively young as the UrbanArt Commission, the private nonprofit now in its 15th year. It was founded by Kristi Jernigan and has had a succession of directors over the years including Carissa Hussong, now the executive director of the National Ornamental Metal Museum, and John Weeden, a private arts consultant and appraiser.

Also impressive is the area's local stable of artists as well as nationally and internationally renowned artists represented here such as Greely Myatt (Quiltsurround at City Hall), Jeff Zimmerman (mural at 195 Madison), Kristi Duckworth (mosaic at Cancer Survivor's Park), Walter Kravitz (MATA South Terminal), Jill Turman (Cooper-Young Railroad Trestle) and David Alan Clark (Tom Lee Memorial).

Jumping feet first into work has given Lanzl a crash course in Memphis history and culture. She recently oversaw the dedication of the Legacies sculpture at Chickasaw Heritage Park in the French Fort community, saying she was "the beneficiary of several years of research and a new understanding of this place." The statue, cast in bronze and depicting a Native American woman wrapped in a blanket, was created by New York artist Vinnie Bagwell, and pays respect to the area's rich and varied history.

"It was really wonderful for UrbanArt to bring a representative of the Chickasaw Nation back to Memphis to dedicate this together because we're now coming to grips and to terms with this history," Lanzl said. "It's just a matter of dealing with the past and arriving at the present, and having a symbol of that in this park."

This bringing people together informs Lanzl's worldview and purpose of public art, and is what drew her in for the board, including Fuller, who said, "What seemed to come across to me with her was how collaborative she was and how embracing and enthusiastic she was about the UrbanArt Commission, the city and tying in her past experience with what she saw here."

In addition to the skate park sculpture, Nowell also completed the 40-foot sculpture at William H. Brewster Elementary School in Binghamton, and said that Lanzl seems to have the ability to "ebb and flow with an artist's temperament, but at the same time be very professional about dotting the I's and crossing the T's, so to speak."

"All artists would love to be locked away in some castle in Spain and eat sardines and bread, and drink wine and make art and not be bothered with anybody," Nowell continues, "but we've got to get out there and network with the real world. So you have to marry those two." And, so far, Lanzl seems to be the pastor to make such a union.

Immediate plans for the commission, Fuller said, are to "get back to basics, to balance our budget and get a handle on it. We felt like it was more important to not pull back in any way, but to just stabilize where we were." To this end, she said, the board wanted someone who "understood budgets and respected budgets, and wanted to work within their budget, so we felt that Christina was that person. We wanted to give her the authority to build it the way she saw fit, and that she was someone who would do that responsibly."

It is this delicate balance of an appreciation for both art and finance that the board sees in Lanzl, and she is excited by the challenge and by current projects under way such as a gateway for Plough Boulevard, on the approach to Memphis International Airport, and Beale Street Landing.

An artist in her own right, having built furniture, sculpted, painted and made independent films, Lanzl is well-versed in different media and muses. Her main interest these days, however, will benefit not just a few collectors, but a city as a whole as, she says, laughter in her voice and a gleam in her eye. "It's more of a hobby at this point. I'm really focusing my energies on changing whole cities."

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