



## Interconnectedness is the Key to Understanding Public Art

Posted by [Christina Lanzl](#) On May - 15 - 2012

Many of us will readily name a favorite work of art in a treasured public place, a priceless cultural asset. Similarly, we can probably point to the destruction of such works by neglect, human or institutional failure, war, or extreme events. To put a finger on why certain outdoor works of art are so important or to provide a clear value can already be more challenging.

If anything, one can point to the unique, irreplaceable quality of the treasured cultural asset. If anything, the qualifier 'priceless' may be the only accurate valuation of something that is of high quality and unique. Because public art programs and cultural planners have been asking for such a tool kit, the Public Art Network at Americans for the Arts is currently developing a framework for public art evaluation

While public art programs create permanent public art in partnership with contemporary artists, these works immediately begin their art historic trajectory once installation is complete, beginning with a short and long-term maintenance plan. Thus, collection management evaluation criteria for public art can serve as a point of departure and should be coordinated in partnership with existing preservation initiatives. At the national level, heritage preservation institutions like [Save Outdoor Sculpture](#) take on advocacy and protection roles in the U.S., joined by local and state historic preservation organizations.

Once the approach has been determined, the process needs to zero in on the types of questions and figures that not only quantify, but also qualify the value of public art. Evaluation of public art projects and programs is a difficult task, particularly so if the researcher considers them within the framework of the cultural or urban context.

Attempting to create a state-of-the-art evaluation structure would need to include site-based qualifiers in any assessment. Such endeavors could be likened to a municipality or a state being asked to submit figures on general or specific well-being of residents.

Interconnectedness is the key to understanding public art and cultural assets within the fabric of a community. Prior to commencing the research, the meanings and boundaries of the terms relevant to the field of public art would need to be defined. Public art inventories and maintenance records contain statistical tools that would aid in measuring size, age, condition, value, and other tangible criteria of an individual object. However, beginning with the question of the contextual framework, other typologies apply. An interdisciplinary effort lies at the heart of delivering a successful methodology for public art assessment.

Any appraisal would need to include an analysis of the more ephemeral qualities of a vital public space and its cultural assets, such as the psychological effect of an environment on the individual, as well as cultural vibrancy and legacy, both short- and long-term.

Urban planners like Jan Gehl and the late William H. Whyte have been instrumental in developing the tools for assessment of public space. Consequently, a review of the principles and methodologies they developed would add important criteria for the valuation of public art uses.

Economic social researchers like Richard Florida have reported their findings on the popularity of cities to the creative class, which also has much to do with a successful public realm, including permanent, temporary, and performative public art and cultural assets.

Most public art programs and affiliated municipal and/or state agencies will lack expertise or time to develop, distribute, evaluate, and report findings of such complex surveys. Opinion poll firms and think tanks would be more adequately equipped to conduct such inquiries with the necessary professional acumen, although the engagement of knowledgeable public art professionals would be crucial to ensure the approach and gathering of data fulfills.

Much work lies ahead—let's move forward to accomplish the task at hand.

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## About Christina Lanzl

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**Bio:** Christina Lanzl is a public art consultant, cultural planner, freelance curator, presenter and author with more than 20 years of experience working with the creative leadership of neighborhoods, towns, and cities to create successful places that become part of our history, part of our evolving culture, and part of our collective memory. Affiliated for 12 years with the Urban Arts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design as seasoned cultural planner and facilitator, Ms. Lanzl is committed to excellence in the public realm, art and design. An expert in public art processes and community engagement, Christina Lanzl has completed more than seventy projects working with public and private sector clients, cultural institutions and grassroots community initiatives. Recent public art and cultural master plans include Union Crossing (Lawrence, MA), Knoxville Museum of Art (Knoxville, TN), Shams Al Reem Island Open Space (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates), and the South Bay Harbor Trail (Boston, MA). Given her professional background and expertise, Ms. Lanzl is particularly versed in think tank facilitation, public engagement, research and analysis to explore planning opportunities in public art and urban culture.



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