



State of the Art

PUBLIC ART IN BOSTON

BY CHRISTINA LANZL

Many cities have successfully used art and culture as a vehicle for urban revitalization and pay special attention to neighborhood identity through public art programs. Boston is no exception to this development, although a number of initiatives are sponsored by private organizations.

The City of Boston revived its long dormant Art Commission in 2003. Originally established in 1890, it is the oldest municipal art commission in the United States. This body oversees the existing public art collection and reviews newly proposed works on city land. Both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston lack a percent-for-art policy. Although the Boston City Council voted in favor of such a measure in December 2005, the mayor's ratification is still needed. Further, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) recently discontinued its Arts on the Line capital program after being the first public transit authority to introduce such a program in the 1970s.

Despite the setbacks, Boston—a city rich with cultural non-profit and grassroots organizations—has seen a tremendous increase in new projects over the last five years. Awareness on the part of the public and the city government has grown significantly. Noteworthy new initiatives of temporary and permanent public art have been launched by respected institutions, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), and the newly established Forest Hills Educational Trust (which began a contemporary art program at its 250-acre garden cemetery in 2002). In parallel, many grassroots organizations and small nonprofits, such as the Fort Point Cultural Coalition, have introduced art in the public realm with some highly visible, provocative results. Public art staged by institutions tends to take place annually and is managed by designated staff, while other initiatives tend to be single-cycle and serve specific goals. There are countless grassroots actions—too many to mention here—but I will highlight one major permanent endeavor that began as a grassroots effort, the South Bay Harbor Trail Public Art Initiative.

JOHN KENNARD, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LISSON GALLERY, LONDON

Opposite: Julian Opie, *Julian walking*, 2005. Installation on the Northern Avenue Bridge, sponsored by the ICA/Vita Brevis Project. This page: Jerry Beck, *The Secret Ark of Icon Park*, 2005. Interior and exterior views of mixed-media work, sponsored by the ICA Artists-in-Residence program.

There is a shared understanding that public art is a powerful tool to bring communities together and to improve our neighborhoods and public spaces. Public art offers community-building and civic opportunities for collaboration and participation. Though various programs have different roots, agendas, and objectives, both temporary and permanent public art share the same principles. They foster dialogue, create awareness, and stimulate new expressions of contemporary art.

Annually since 1998, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) has sponsored Vita Brevis and ICA Artists-in-Residence, two temporary public art programs. ICA director Jill Medvedow conceived Vita Brevis after seeing public art installations organized by Art Angel in London and at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Vita Brevis commissions local, national, and international artists to create new, temporary works for public settings that "encourage people to experience Boston's environs and history with renewed meaning and focus."

The 8th Annual Vita Brevis installation featured Julian Opie's *Suzanne walking* and *Julian walking*, two life-size, full-length animated figures on LED screens on the Northern Avenue pedestrian bridge. Opie's choice of site was significant because it demonstrated how a previously unknown, even endangered site can be transformed from a place of blight into a place of delight. Embattled for several years, the Northern Avenue Bridge is the only swing-bridge remaining from Boston's heyday as a port city. Successful lobbying by Boston artists, architects, and preservationists from neighboring Fort Point saved it from demolition. Ongoing maintenance of both temporary and permanent public art is key to the success of any project: the ICA deserves kudos for promptly repairing Opie's piece after it suffered damage during a storm.

Since the new ICA building is on the Boston waterfront, it is only suitable that the next Vita Brevis projects are scheduled for the Boston Harbor Islands in the summer of 2007. Art on the Harbor Islands is commissioning four projects by Ernesto Pujol, Teri Rueb, Anna Schuleit, and the principals of Office dA—Monica Ponce de Leon and Nader Tehrani.

Based on the success of Vita Brevis and as a counterpoint to bringing national artists to Boston, in 2000 the ICA launched Artists-in-Residence, which matches local artists with local historic sites. A partnership between the ICA and the National Park Service, this program provides a contemporary interpretation of cultural resources and historical themes. Jerry Beck, artist, founder, and director of the Revolving Museum and long-time art maven with roots in the Fort Point arts community, was at the Charlestown Navy Yard in summer 2005 where he built his large-scale ark installation, critical of the war in Iraq and situated near historic ships like the USS Constitution. Beck's large-scale interactive environment contrasted with Niho Kozuru's more intimately scaled cast rubber architectural elements at the Paul Revere House, which



were exhibited the year before. These enlargements of historic ornament drew attention to infinitely small things and the fine craftsmanship of times past.

Another partnership program introduced just three years ago by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) puts environmental awareness at the top of its agenda. Art and Community Landscapes (ACL) addresses local and regional environmental concerns by funding site-specific art projects and artist residencies. NEFA's latest initiative is an award-winning, joint project with the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Park Service. NEFA solicits proposals for sites from organizations and then invites artists to develop concepts for the chosen sites. The artist and partner organization work as a team to implement a community-based public art project. ACL's emphasis on inter-disciplinary approaches and innovative partnership models is noteworthy, as demonstrated in the Chelsea Riverway project by Mark Dannenhauer in collaboration with East Boston's Chelsea Creek Restoration Partnership (CCRP). CCRP strives to reclaim the neglected, contaminated Chelsea Creek as an environmental, recreational, economic, and educational asset for East Boston, Chelsea, Revere, and the region. Dannenhauer's project supported that effort by allowing community members to "re-story" the polluted, neglected waterway. The parade of monumental puppets that documented Chelsea Creek's history, ecology, people, and places continues to linger in hearts and minds, serving as a powerful advocacy and educational tool.

Newly commissioned ACL works are currently being created for two sites. Artist team Legge Lewis Legge from Austin, Texas, and



Top: Niho Kozuro, *Longfellow Balustrade Column*, 2004. Cast rubber, work included in “Re-Turning the Past,” sponsored by the ICA Artists-in Residence program. Bottom: Nora Valdez at work on a sculpture for the Day and Evening Academy.



New York City is designing pathways, earthworks, and ornate Corten steel sculptures that loosely recall urban street furniture for the Lincoln Street Greenstrip in the Brighton neighborhood. Across the city in Roxbury, sculptor Nora Valdez is working with students of the Day and Evening Academy, an alternative public high school. As part of an innovative apprenticeship project, students are assisting the artist to carve three limestone figures and benches for the new stone garden in front of the school.

Similar environmental and urban planning concerns have been core interests of Reclamation Artists, a loosely connected group of Boston-area artists and architects active since 1980. Over the years, the group’s artists have created major installations at neglected urban sites, many of which have since experienced revivals. The mission is to “call attention to the urban landscape and question how we shape, inhabit, neglect, or enhance it.” Reclamation Artists is an elusive group that often works guerrilla-style, quietly scoping out neglected spaces and seemingly appearing out of nowhere with temporary, often large-scale public art.

Most recently, Reclamation Artists addressed the environmental, political, and social impact of establishing an urban wild versus development at Nun’s Field on Mission Hill. In 2003, a developer bought Nun’s Field as part of a 22-acre real estate transaction of former church properties. The field offers views of a dramatic 30-foot-high Puddingstone rock ledge—the last cliff on Mission Hill of this rare, agglomerate rock unique to the Boston area. Invited by a neighborhood association opposed to development on the site, participating artists—including myself—worked individually or in teams. In conversation with neighbors and after researching land use in the area, 14 artists developed an urban wild concept. Participating artists included Sarah Ashodian and Terry Bastian, Lisa Jeanne Graf, Jane Hans, Phil Manker, Vivienne Metcalf, AE Ryan, William Turville, Leslie Wilcox, Ellen Young, Rusty (Walter) Crump, and SMFA students of Mags Harries.

Vandalism is a serious threat for any outdoor art initiative, but low-budget initiatives are especially vulnerable. Over the years, several Reclamation Artist sites have been vandalized, including Nun’s Field. Since the projects are self-financed and created with shoestring budgets it is difficult to face these challenges. At times, it becomes more important to document a work of art than to try to protect it.

Fort Point artists pursued an equally laudable goal for the Public Art Series of 2001 and 2002, namely their own survival. The Fort Point Cultural Coalition’s Public Art Series was a small grassroots initiative created to raise awareness of a community of 350-plus artists threatened with displacement due to development. In 1999, the Fort Point Cultural Coalition (FPCC) was formed as an independent 501 (c) (3) nonprofit. After securing funding from the Boston Foundation, FPCC launched a campaign to increase visibility of Fort Point’s artist community. The resident artists did

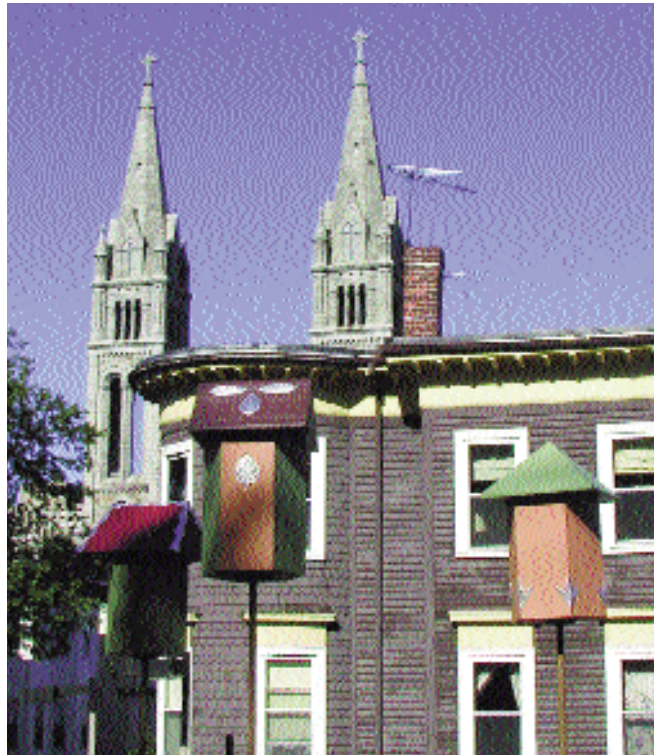
Top: Mark Dannenhauer, *Re-storying Chelsea Creek*, 2004–05. A collaboration with the Chelsea Creek Restoration Partnership, sponsored by the New England Foundation for the Arts. Bottom: Christina Lanzl, *Nest Boxes for Screech Owls*, 2003. A Reclamation Artists project at Nun's Field.



what they do best, using individual creative skills to bring their cause to a larger audience and build support at all levels of public opinion, as well as in city and state government. Sixty-plus artists created 35 projects over three years. Jeff Smith organized Beret Day, for which he ordered hundreds of black berets and distributed them across Fort Point for a photo op and as proof of the artists' presence (many had been living in their studios illegally). My own project, in partnership with Ricardo Barreto of UrbanArts and Jed Speare of Mobius, took place as a four-day, community-driven think tank with over 100 participants from Fort Point and Greater Boston, including artists, arts administrators, city planners, architects, and corporate representatives. Ten temporary public art projects complemented the think tank in multiple locations in the Fort Point district, at South Station, and at Mobius. Installations were created by Caroline Bagenal, Terry Bastian, Yani Batteau, Alison Canfield, Leslie Clark, Lisa Roth and Shauna Gillies-Smith, Danielle Krcmar, Melora Kuhn, Ruth Mordecai, Jessica Poser, John Powell, and Reclamation Artists.

The South Bay Harbor Trail Public Art Initiative exemplifies a grassroots effort turned permanent public art endeavor. The project is a laudable effort to humanize major traffic arteries and to improve the quality of life. In Boston, its integrated design team approach (most common in states with percent-for-art statutes) is innovative. The South Bay Harbor Trail (SBHT) is a 3.5-mile multi-use trail that, when completed, will re-connect five communities to each other and to the Boston Harbor. The trail effort was begun by a small group of Boston residents led by urban planner Michael Tyrrell, who formed the South Bay Harbor Trail Coalition in 1997. The Coalition formed a partnership with the environmental advocacy organization Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, which provides organizational, fundraising, and technical assistance. During the next phase, a public art initiative was launched and the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art was brought on board as consultant. Fundraising for two public art components is underway to finance sculptor A.M. Lilly's 30-foot-high kinetic *Watercross* proposal and a Wayfinding masterplan by Selbert Perkins Design Collaborative (SPDC).

SPDC creates art, communication, and environmental designs. Its approach will be to look at the "big picture," to establish an environmental communication plan that unifies the South Bay Harbor Trail as a significant landmark for the entire city. SPDC will use retired U.S. Coast Guard buoys as markers to engage visitors and effectively tell the story of each neighborhood and site along the trail. Lilly's *Watercross* will establish a major landmark on the site. The work consists of large stainless steel hoops activated by the wind. These rotating and overlapping rings, reminiscent of bicycle wheels, reflect the industrial nature of the proposed Fort Point Channel terminus site and suggest the joining of neighborhoods, of water and land.



Boston enjoys rich offerings despite tight resources. Public art is understood as a valuable quality-of-life factor that increases dialogue. The city benefits from the fact that it is a close-knit community where individuals and organizations tend to collaborate and build alliances. It also has a large educational sector that attracts and produces highly trained and experienced professionals. Boston's diverse temporary and permanent public art initiatives complement each other in their goals. The Boston Art Commission has been working on developing a comprehensive public art policy, an ongoing process. A next step would be to pool together and work on a master plan for public art, as called for during the Fort Point Vision for Public Art proceedings. Increasingly, large-scale entities such as airports and cities with percent-for-art policies develop such master plans to create a more cohesive urban realm. Boston is a great city and it deserves the best.

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