

DEFINING PLACE:
BUILDING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH PUBLIC ART

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Introduction

Public art or art in public places can be defined as art with a civic purpose. Public art enhances relationships, between individuals as well as people and places. It brings people together and serves as a tool for communication. Many communities have realized the great potential of the arts and culture as a vehicle and centerpiece in connecting individuals to each other and to their localities. Public art has proven an excellent tool in invigorating neighborhood activity and identity.

For more than two decades, I have been immersed in creating, shaping, and advancing the artistic and cultural life in my local community, and at the state, national, and international levels, as creator, manager, and consultant. I am pleased to share direct observations and experiences gleaned from recent public art projects. Since Boston, Massachusetts, is my home—and was the site of the 2006 Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) national conference—I have selected Boston-based projects as case studies and as opportunity to highlight successes and challenges. I invite the reader to keep in mind the following recurring themes while traversing the neighborhoods with me:

- Place-making, community building, and quality of life
- Planning within the context of the urban fabric
- Best practices and creation of a supportive framework for public art
- Application of sustainable methods and materials
- Integrated design team approach

“Site-specific” Public Art

Tying art in the public sphere to its location begins at the planning stage to create a local context and ideally involves the resident community. With increased understanding of the importance of community and urban context, there has been a noticeable shift from installing *individual* works—often decried as “plop” art—to creating *environments*, where public art is a part of a whole, and each part has a role and functions within visual and conceptual contexts. The term *site-specific* (along with several permutations) has commonly been employed to define this approach. Recent writings caution that the term is beginning to be applied rather indiscriminately and warn of a weakening and redirection by institutional and market forces.¹ With this warning in mind, let us proceed.

Community and Culture

Although art in public places has been created since the prehistoric age, functioning as a centerpiece that references historic events and identity across cultures, the critical analysis and institutional facilitation of public art as a coherent field of study only evolved within the past 40 years. The second and third generations of professionals working in the field are now building on past research and “trail-blazing” projects, such as Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park sculpture program or Boston’s subway art program, setting the stage for advancements in theory and practice. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the early 1930s can be seen as an early large-scale, federal effort that employed artists to create work in the public sphere, though much of it inside buildings, such as post offices and other civic facilities. A crisis management tool in its day, the program has been superseded by the Federal Project Administration’s percent-for-art policy.²

Even though there have been setbacks, a renaissance of cultural awareness and civic engagement is evident in the many flourishing public art programs around the country and internationally. Formerly restricted to the recognition and expression of ruling factions—equestrian monuments are a prominent example—public art has more recently morphed into an egalitarian vehicle for local, individual, and neighborhood identity by involving the “community”—in the widest sense of the word—in its planning and creation.³ My own work is permeated by formative experiences with *community*, in the roles of visual artist, public art project

manager, and active citizen. Public art can introduce positive change on many levels, and I will outline a few firsthand experiences.

As long-term resident of Boston’s Fort Point Arts Community (FPAC), I have been observing the fundamental changes brought about by the rapidly changing urban landscape, a process that is ongoing in many places, both urban and rural. Fort Point is a story full of successes and losses, and I have been an active participant in the attempt to shape its future as part of the resident arts community. Partly, my presence in Fort Point triggered my involvement in public art. Carrying out projects beyond my own neighborhood both as public artist and as public art administrator has confirmed and augmented knowledge that has now accumulated to two decades of professional practice and quite a few anecdotes. In 2000, I joined the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art.⁴ As project manager, I have been part of this nonprofit’s mission to incorporate the arts and cultural programming into urban design and community revitalization efforts. Founded in 1980, the organization’s efforts are “based on the belief that cultural vitality depends on a more active role for the arts in shaping the urban landscape, with greater involvement by artists and citizens as participants in this process.”⁵

The Quality of Enabling

Successful public art requires the combination of creative talent with managerial dexterity. Are there key requirements for public art-related job descriptions? To me, anyone who takes on a role in facilitating art in the public realm—be it artist, fabricator, administrator, community activist, or sponsor—needs to be an *enabler*. A person with a positive, can-do attitude will make all the difference when being confronted with complex administrative processes usually involving multiple stakeholders, permitting agencies, and restrictive funding sources. Outstanding communication skills, a penchant for challenges, flexibility, and a sense of humor are absolutely essential. Qualifications also include a willingness to face the odds, setbacks, and surprises that will invariably occur. Negativity and misguided, incompetent bureaucracy are the most common and worst enemies of public art process.

The managerial skills of the public art administrator are directly tied to administrative structure, process, and funding. A formidable number of public art projects by internationally acclaimed artists have been dedicated since Berlin became the new capital city of the reunified Germany. Both public and private investment funded significant works by Jonathan Borofsky, Jeff Koons, Claes Oldenburg with Coosje van Bruggen, and

Robert Rauschenberg, to name a few. Noticeable is the lack of women artists in the lineup. Of note also is the fact that many American artists have been commissioned to install work at prime locations. Berlin's office for art in public space does have a highly efficient structure of a main office for public art that delegates implementation to local neighborhood offices. By comparison, American public art agencies' operations tend to be more centralized.

Placemaking and Quality of Life

Why is there a need for art in the public realm? The argument is that appropriate incorporation of art in public environments greatly enhances not only the visual qualities, but actually improves the *quality of life*. Historic cities and town centers, well known for their active public use, are ardent proof of this theory, because they invariably feature central public plazas and streetscapes adorned by statues, fountains, and other well-designed and integrated amenities for the user. As we study these often centuries-old accomplishments, we also need to remind ourselves of the dearth of public art designed by or featuring women and minorities. This consideration should be ever-present with every new proposal entering the planning stage.

Urban planner and theorist Jan Gehl has extensively researched the psychology of public space. He categorizes outdoor activities into three basic groups: *necessary*, *optional*, and *social activities*. Physical appearance directly impacts use of public space:

When outdoor areas are of poor quality only strictly necessary activities occur. When outdoor areas are of high quality, necessary activities take place with approximately the same frequency—though they clearly tend to take a longer time, because the physical conditions are better. In addition, however, a wide range of optional activities will occur because place and situation now invite people to stop, sit, eat, play and so on. In streets and city spaces of poor quality, only the bare minimum of activities takes place. People hurry home.⁶

What makes places special and therefore worth visiting or worth living in? For most of us, it is the rewarding experience to feel a *sense of place*. In many public environments, there is a dire absence of these qualities. For almost a century, particularly following the invention of the automobile and modern urban renewal practices, our public spaces were either endangered or actually sacrificed to progress. In her bestseller, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, architectural critic and urbanist icon

Jane Jacobs eloquently writes about her own battles to save New York's West Village neighborhood from highway construction. Many cities are now working to correct various depravations, usually at high costs. Boston is one such city, where the elevated I-93 expressway that dissected its downtown beginning in the 1950s turned into the Central Artery/Tunnel project just one generation later, as the largest public works project in U.S. history.

Public Planning for a New Greenway

Planning for the Rose Kennedy Greenway, the new public park that sits atop the new highway tunnel, became one of the most intensely discussed topics in the City of Boston. In 2002, the debate found a public outlet at large-scale community meetings aimed at getting input from the public on what the park should be.⁷ Central Artery park forums were sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects and the Boston Foundation. More than 350 people took part in a pair of public events, called *Creative Community Conversations*. Media sponsors and Web sites carried the conversation into millions of homes, complemented by hundreds of other, smaller meetings sponsored by other organizations. Participants shared ideas for uses of the Big Dig parkland, with special emphasis on what would keep them coming back again and again. At the top of the wish list were public amenities that offered something for everyone during the day and at night, such as *inspiring sculpture and modern art, fountains, creative lighting design, and performance areas*. It remains to be seen if the residents' dreams will be fulfilled, since neither city nor state have been willing to set aside public funds for this most public new parkland. Critics warn that relying on private funding will lead to private interests controlling the Rose Kennedy Greenway.

When planning public art, a distinction has to be made between temporary and permanent projects. A healthy, active community offers high quality programs in both genres. While permanent projects provide the framework and focus of a public space year-round, the nature of temporary work is ephemeral. The former generally has substantial planning and implementation phases, and is more restricted by permitting and issues of longevity. Temporary programs, on the other hand, can be more experimental and realized within shorter timeframes. This insight has been effectively employed by Boston's Fort Point arts community.

Fort Point: No Art / No Point

Just blocks away from the new Rose Kennedy Greenway, in Fort Point, several hundred artists have worked in their studios for several decades. The artist community in Fort Point quietly grew on the east side of Boston's Fort Point Channel, a district of historic warehouses that thrived during the heyday of Boston Harbor in the nineteenth century, whose industry has long since left New England. Beginning in the 1990s, major infrastructure improvements introduced the new underground highway system and new public transportation service to the airport, followed by the largest convention center in the Northeast and cleanup of Boston Harbor. These public investments led to a surge in popularity of Boston's waterfront, both for office and residential development. The formerly isolated seaport district became a prime real estate opportunity. These outside influences resulted in an imminent threat of displacement to the resident artist population, which was thriving unnoticed by many up to that point. Well organized since the early 1980s through the Fort Point Arts Community⁸ (FPAC), a not-for-profit organization, the community realized that the only way to stay put in the neighborhood was to acquire its own real estate. Today, three complexes offer roughly 150 affordable legal live-in units reserved for artists, while rentals in the area are commercially zoned non-live-in units. The first live-work artist coop was purchased and refurbished in the 1980s, followed by the Artist Building in the 1990s. In 1999, the Fort Point Cultural Coalition (FPCC) was formed as an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, in part as an outgrowth of FPAC's building search committee. Midway, a three-building warehouse complex, was acquired and built out as artist live-work space with both affordable and market-rate lofts.

At the same time, a campaign was launched to increase visibility of the artist community in Fort Point. Driven by artists and art advocates, the resident artist community did what they do best: they utilized their creative skills to bring their cause to a larger audience and to build awareness and support at all levels of public opinion, as well as in city and state government. The *Fort Point Public Art Series* of 2001 and 2002 were a grassroots initiative born out of a need to create awareness and visibility for a community of artists under threat of displacement. I launched *A Fort Point Vision for Public Art* as part of this initiative, geared directly towards integration of long-term public art planning for the neighborhood.

How did it work? FPCC secured grant funding from the Boston Foundation, New England Foundation for the Arts, and the LEF Foundation. Through an open call to artists in the Fort Point community,

small project grant proposals for up to \$2,000 were solicited and reviewed for approval. The series began in the fall of 2000 with an outdoor public forum, concert, and video screening. In the catalogue *No Art/No Point* (2004), Fort Point Public Art Series coordinator Jed Speare writes:

The forum, *Let's Get to the Point*, was meant to bring artists' housing issues to the fore. Further programming then commenced over the winter through community meetings at Mobius, introducing the project, and creating a dialogue with and encouraging artists with their ideas, several of whom had not ever made public art.⁹

Anita Lauricella, Fort Point Cultural Coalition (FPCC) president, summarizes the outcomes. The Public Art Series:

- Got three Fort Point organizations to work together, namely FPCC, FPAC, and Seaport Alliance for a Neighborhood Design (SAND)¹⁰
- Put the neighborhood on the map for many who had never heard of it before
- Brought people together, both in creating and experiencing art

A Fort Point Vision for Public Art

Public space is a system of interconnected, highly unique sites that need to be seen within an overarching framework. I see a great need to plan within a larger context when attempting to create a more successful public realm: the parts make the whole and vice versa. A sound, well-versed plan begins with good communication and the recognition that good process is crucial for successful outcomes. Community-oriented urban planning theory and tools offer the best practices for this process. I initiated *A Fort Point Vision for Public Art* within this conceptual structure. At the outset, I forged partnerships with two key organizations—with a competent public art agency, UrbanArts, under the directorship of Ricardo Barreto, and with Mobius, an alternative performance art space located in Fort Point with a long history of temporary public performance art, led by Jed Speare. Mobius became our headquarters and UrbanArts provided public art expertise.

A Fort Point Vision for Public Art was both open forum and public art project and was conceived as a community-driven response to Fort Point development with the goal to discuss the future of public art in the neighborhood. The project took place as a four-day community-driven think tank comprised of a diverse group of over one hundred 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. Art installations were created by artists from Fort Point and the metropolitan Boston region: namely Caroline Bagenal, Terry Bastian, Yani Batteau, Alison Canfield, Leslie Clark, Shauna Gillies-Smith and Lisa Roth, Danielle Krmar, Melora Kuhn, Ruth Mordecai, Jessica Poser, John Powell, and Reclamation Artists. These temporary art installations can be seen as a pilot project and point of departure for future permanent work. Temporary projects have the advantage that creative ideas can be implemented quickly and without concern for long-term implications. Charrette findings and art projects were documented in a brochure that was forwarded to participants, planning agencies, and developers as a resource. Ultimately, success of the project will be evident in the creation of policies that integrate the arts, artists, and open space in the planning of Fort Point and the parks corridor on the depressed highway.

In summary, Fort Point's efforts can be viewed as a model for community building through public art. Long-term development of the Fort Point arts community will be living evidence to the success of the project and the idea that public art enriches the urban cultural experience, not only for the community, but for the entire city and visitors alike. Much work needs and continues to be done, much of it by engaged citizen volunteers. The outcome of the *Fort Point Vision for Public Art* sessions was the vision for a cultural district and the call for a cultural master plan. The community and affiliated cultural planners continue to pursue this initiative to benefit the neighborhood as it grows and continues to develop. With arguably New England's largest community of artists, the Fort Point district is in the enviable position to draw on extraordinary local talent, which in turn will help guarantee the future success of the district for both residents and visitors alike.

Integrating Public Realm Planning and Public Art

The development of a high quality visual environment makes great sense and is increasingly supported by scientific research and discourse. Yet, there still is a great need for professionals who design the public realm to think and act collaboratively and in a cross-disciplinary fashion. The City of Boston, for example, would certainly benefit from an increased interface between urban planners and public art professionals. For one, both the City of Boston and the State of Massachusetts lack a "percent-for-art" policy, which would mandate incorporation of public art

into the public built environment. By the same token, much development is private and there continues to be a dearth of well-designed public space. In my experience, it often takes the initiative of an enlightened individual or community to change the status quo.

UrbanArts advocates for an *integrated design team* approach, so that architects, planners, and artists work collaboratively from the beginning stages of a design project. This process is still underdeveloped when it comes to planning and designing the public realm. Partly, this can be attributed to oft-quoted funding constraints, though one might intone the old adage, "Where there is a will there is a way." Another hindrance is professional barriers and unfortunate turf-wars between the architecture and art disciplines, leading to fears of contact.

A Sustainable Approach to Public Art and Design

Employment of *sustainable practices* has been a longtime, dedicated personal cause.¹¹ Sustainability of our basic resources becomes an ever more urgent question as resources dwindle and pollution increases. Opportunities are twofold: public artist and landscape architect apply best practices and state-of-the-art, ecologically sound products and processes to minimize negative impacts on the environment; secondly, this application can offer a crucial link to increase awareness and to instigate change in communities' approach to sustainable methods. New commonsense principles are being adopted by both private initiative and governing agencies, including mandates to be fair, restore, and enhance the environment, conserve natural resources, and implement overarching planning. In 2005, UrbanArts adopted an expressly stated commitment to promote sustainable approaches and to mandate employment of sustainable methods and materials whenever possible. My own environmental efforts have found expression in several nest box projects for endangered cavity breeders, including an urban wild installation on Boston's Mission Hill, a hillside neighborhood of primarily double and triple-decker homes.

These initiatives are in response to and investigate the effects of urban development on the environment, urban culture, and the individual experience. The project consisted of individually designed nest boxes for screech owls who lack breeding opportunities. Large cavity breeders and other wildlife face increasing difficulties as rapid development diminish their habitat.

Some important principles regarding sustainable approaches were gleaned during prior international research on the subject.¹² I surveyed

leaders, practitioners, and students in the field of public art to reflect on sustainable approaches to public art, landscape design, and art in the community. Their responses may be summarized as follows:

- Professionals tend to reject the notion of sustainable approaches as a means to an end.
- Since public art is often seen as the *voice of the community*, practitioners must avoid being reactive rather than proactive when it comes to sustainability and ecology.
- Scientific discourse is crucial to advance the field and benefit the public at large.
- The sustainability discussion is closely tied to the leadership and philosophy of individuals.
- Public opinion, government, and educational efforts most effectively evolve hand-in-hand in order to develop best practices and policies.

¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 1.

² President Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the spring of 1935 as a massive employment relief program of the Depression era. WPA was the largest and most important of the New Deal cultural programs, aimed at putting the unemployed back to work in jobs that would serve the public good and conserve the skills and the self-esteem of workers, artists and artisans throughout the United States. Detailed historic overview at <http://www.wvcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html#TREAS> Access date May 24, 2007.

³ The *AIDS Quilt* is a prominent grassroots example. Initiated in San Francisco in 1987, the project documents the lives of those lost to AIDS and educates the public on the devastating impact of the disease. To date, more than 44,000 individual 3' x 6' memorial panels have been sewn together. See <http://www.aidsquilt.org>. Access date May 24, 2007.

⁴ The UrbanArts Institute (UA) works to promote excellence in public art and design. UA is an independent non-profit organization affiliated with Massachusetts College of Art, the only *public*, independent college of art and design in the United States. UA incorporates the arts and cultural programming into urban design and community revitalization efforts by offering services in three key areas: (1) *Art in Public Places*: Providing services to implement public art projects for private and public-sector clients. (2) *Arts and Community Development*: Creating neighborhood-based collaborative design projects that involve citizens in planning for the future of their communities. (3) *Education and Resources*: Offering educational programs for the public; access to resources for artists, community groups and design professionals seeking to implement public art programs, including UA's national artist registry of more than 2000 artists. See <http://www.urbanartsinstitute.org>. Access date May 24, 2007.

⁵ UrbanArts mission statement.

⁶ Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings* (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987), 13.

⁷ Central Artery park forums were the brainchild of Thomas Piper, Principal Research Scientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Detailed account of events at http://www.boston.com/beyond_bigdig. Access date May 24, 2007.

⁸ Annual events include open studios weekends, first held in 1978. This and other events bring thousands of visitors to the neighborhood, directly contributing to the district's revitalization. See <http://www.fortpointarts.org>. Access date May 24, 2007. Now popular across the country, the concept of open studios originated in Boston's Fort Point.

⁹ The Fort Cultural Coalition Point Public Art Series. Introduction to *No Art / No Point* (Boston, MA: Fort Point Cultural Coalition, 2004).

¹⁰ Fort Point's Seaport Alliance for a Neighborhood Design (SAND) was founded in 1998 to advocate for long-range planning ideals, envisioning the South Boston waterfront as a vibrant, diverse *community* with a distinctive character and sense of place.

¹¹ Sustainable growth theory began with the landmark publication, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. (New York: Universe Books, 1972), 39. Over one million copies have been sold worldwide. The Club of Rome was formed in 1968 by and as "an informal, multinational, non political group of scientists, economists, planners, educators, and business leaders." Commissioned by the Club of Rome, a research team at MIT analyzed existing data and published them in this highly controversial report. This book marks the beginnings of the sustainable development concept in light of the exponential increase in human population and the finite size of resources on our planet. As a result of the report, the unquestioned belief in economic growth and technical progress of the 1950s and 1960s began to be regarded more critically.

¹² Christina Lanzl, "A Sustainable Approach to Public Art Education," *Public Art Review*. 34, 42-44 (Spring 2006): 42.