

Artists Reclaim the Commons

New Works / New Territories / New Publics

Edited by Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer



isc Press

Reclamation Artists and Grassroots Public Art in Boston (2006)

by Christina Lanzl

Reclamation Artists, a loosely connected group of Boston-area artists and architects, has addressed environmental and urban planning concerns since 1980. Over the years, member 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.

In one of its most prominent projects, Reclamation Artists addressed the environmental, political, and social impact of development at Nun’s Field on Mission Hill and offered an urban wild as a counter-proposal. In 2003, a developer bought Nun’s Field as part of a 22-acre real estate transaction involving 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 and in teams. In conversation with neighbors and after researching land use in the area, 14 artists (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) developed an urban wild concept.

Vandalism is a serious threat for any outdoor art initiative, but low-budget initiatives are especially vulnerable. Over the years, several Reclamation Artists 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 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 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 more than 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.

Christina Lanzl, *Nest Boxes for Screech Owls*, 2003. A Reclamation Artists project at Nun's Field.





Laura Baring-Gould, *Five Places, Five Chairs, Five Boxes*, 1991. Found chairs, boxes, and objects, a Reclamation Artists project along the waterfront.

In Boston, public art is understood as a valuable quality-of-life factor. The city benefits from close-knit communities in which individuals and organizations collaborate and build alliances. In addition, its influential educational sector attracts highly trained and creative professionals willing to engage with local concerns. “Unofficial” grassroots projects like these, together with temporary and permanent initiatives launched by the Institute of Contemporary Art, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the Forest Hills Educational Trust, strike a balance with large-scale works sponsored by the Boston Art Commission. Given a chance to thrive in Boston, these projects have fostered dialogue, brought communities together, and improved neighborhoods and public spaces—all while stimulating new expressions of contemporary art.