

a Sustainable Approach

to Public Art Education

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At the last Americans for the Arts' Public Art Network Preconference in Austin, Texas, I moderated the keynote panel on sustainable approaches to public art and landscape design. That experience prompted a look at the state of education for ecology and the environment. The UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art (www.urbanartsinstitute.org), where I am public art project manager, proactively embraces and promotes sustainable approaches when working with communities and clients for the projects we administer.

I asked leaders, practitioners, and students of public art education and ecology to reflect on sustainable approaches to public art, landscape design, and art in the community. Their observations may be summarized as follows:

- Educators 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, educators and 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.
- Education, public opinion, and government effort most effectively evolve hand-in-hand in order to develop best practices and policies.
- The sustainability discussion in higher education is closely tied to the leadership and philosophy of individual educators and administrators. As Tim Collins put it, "We teach kids to do all sorts of important things at a university. There isn't a one I know of that teaches us to live better."

A central concern to all public art programs is involving the "community"—in the widest sense of the word—in planning and creating work that is publicly accessible. Education in public art and landscape architecture can increase awareness

and instigate change in the approach to sustainable methods. Fifteen years ago environmental educator David Orr proposed a goal of "ecological literacy" for students.¹ He requested that no student should graduate from an educational institution without a basic comprehension of the following:

- the laws of thermodynamics
- basic principles of ecology
- carrying capacity
- energetics
- least-cost, end-use analysis
- how to live well in a place
- limits of technology
- appropriate scale
- sustainable agriculture and forestry
- steady-state economics
- environmental ethics

The 1972 publication of *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* sold over a million copies and produced shockwaves in Europe, followed by an intense discussion on the planet's limited resources. These grassroots efforts turned into national policy within a decade. In the 1980s Germany began passing laws to protect the environment while promoting ecology and conservation. In the United States, effective national policies are still lacking. According to experts, sustainable and environmental standards here lag behind German standards. Recently the sustainability debate in this country has become more vigorous. Does the state of education reflect this development? Are colleges and universities leaders in the dialogue?

Education should prepare students for the challenges of real life. Are curricula adequately addressing sustainability and ecology? What is the state of public art education when it comes to teaching best practices of sustainability? Should the definition of sustainability encompass environmentally friendly standards and policies alone, or should it also include

long-term viability and economic stability? Do our curricula address sustainable practices in public art, landscape design, or community art?

Since sustainability can mean many things, how broad or narrow should the term be defined? According to artist, educator, and theorist Tim Collins,

The word *sustain* suggests ideas such as support, stabilization, maintenance, endurance, prolongation. David Orr talks about the difference between technical (conservative and stabilizing) and social (radical and transformative) approaches to sustainability. The technical fix has been the holy grail of modernism. The past hundred years have seen an unfettered growth of human knowledge and technology, yet we have given very little thought to the toxicity and destruction of the industrial culture; we live with blind faith in the technical fix. You can plan and sew new sails and rework the masts and booms all you want, but if the ship is still sailing north at the end of the day you have done nothing. We need a concept that signals a sea change, not merely new sails for the old ships of commerce.

The future of sustainability in public art depends on an interdisciplinary approach, as evidenced in the creation of public art programs themselves. Few such programs exist and most were founded in the last ten years. They tend to be a synthesis of sculpture, landscape architecture, and administrative programs. The University of Southern California's School of Policy, Planning, and Development offers a dual Master of Planning/Master of Public Arts Studies geared towards public art administration (www.usc.edu/schools/sppd/programs/masters/dual/mpl_mpas.html). While planning could and should be the key for change, there is little evidence of ecological awareness in the Public Art Program.

In 2000 the University of Washington at Seattle launched the only interdisciplinary public art curriculum focusing on the creation of works in the public realm. The concerted effort of sculptor John T. Young and landscape architect Daniel Winterbottom, this program's interdisciplinary coursework includes theoretical investigation, design studio, and community design/build projects (www.washington.edu/change/proposals/public.html). Young said that an ecological sustainability approach has been used for a few projects, but it is not the only approach. For Young, "Public art is a conduit for the community's voice rather than an individual, egocentric concept of artists."

The University of Washington's public art program includes interdisciplinary design/build studios in which sculpture, landscape architecture, and architecture students work with nonprofit agencies to develop an actual public art project. Amy Lambert, a student currently enrolled in the program, chose it because of the opportunity to combine her interests in restoration ecology and public art. She participated in a design/build studio project for the Willapa Bay National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, whose goal is to reestablish the salmon run. The department received a \$50,000 grant to create six or seven permanent public art projects as part of an interpretive trail. Lambert's proposal was one of the winning designs.

On the East Coast, the Maryland Institute College of Art created the first-of-its-kind Master of Arts in Community Arts degree in 2005 (www.mica.edu/PROGRAMS/ma/community_arts). The program focuses on communications and administration, with a distinct community outreach mission. Sustainability appears in the context of long-term economic viability,



ABOVE: Christina Lanzl, *Birdland*, 2003, mixed media. One of a series of nest boxes for endangered cavity breeders. Installed at Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, NY.

BELOW: Amy Lambert (left) and her assistant Julie, in the welding studio at the Public Art Program of the University of Washington. The finished piece depicts the skeleton of a spawned-out chum salmon. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service successfully brought these salmon back into the creek at the Willapa Bay National Wildlife refuge.



The new masters degree evolved from an extensive history of community arts programming through the Community Arts Partnerships program on campus. Such partnership programs are increasing, including several recently founded within



Ross Miller, *Interactive Fountain*, 2004, Sheehy Park, in Boston's Mission Hill neighborhood. Funded by the E. I. Browne Trust Fund of the City of Boston and coordinated by UrbanArts. The fountain conserves water because it is activated only by users. Seven remotely located motion sensors respond to people's presence and activity.

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Boston's Colleges of the Fenway consortium (Massachusetts College of Art, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Wentworth Institute of Technology).

Elke Berger, a landscape architect, and Peter Latz, a leader in ecological design and Berger's former professor at Technische Universität München, teach *Postindustrial Landscapes*, a graduate landscape architecture seminar at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. The course is a landscape architecture design studio of an environmentally troubled site. Berger, a designer at Sasaki Associates, has participated in studio reviews at several universities. She sees a potential limitation for students in the American college system because most graduate students have undergraduate degrees in a different field. This reduces the period of specific training to three years, compared to the standard five to six years in European countries. Given the complexity of the field, which combines the natural and historic sciences with design and graphic craftsmanship skills, this appears to be too little time to provide a broad, fundamental approach to landscape-related topics. Berger also bemoans deficits in up-to-date publications covering the intersection of design and ecology, as well as availability of sustainable building materials and technologies. She sums up her own six years of training in the Landscape Architecture Department of Technische Universität München as a "holistic approach to understanding man's effects on nature and the landscape."

Tim Collins is an American practitioner and educator who was recently appointed associate dean of the School of Art and Design at the University of Wolverhampton in England. His work in the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University contributed to the Nin Mile Run Greenway Project and the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project (<http://3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu/collins>). These programs investigated questions about nature and post-industrial public space in Pittsburgh. Collins claims that many U.K. schools are ahead of the United States in the social application of creative knowledge. One attraction of his

current post was the discovery of faculty members and research fellows deeply invested in and internationally recognized for their critical, social, cultural, and environmental art practices. He believes the British public university system is particularly fertile ground for discourse and learning in these areas.

The University of Wolverhampton prides itself on open-access education to the working-class youth of the west midlands. The university's motto is "innovation and access." We offer B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees. Our programs are informed by research clusters in areas such as Interdisciplinary Practices in Art, Society, and Environment. Mind you, this is not atypical of British universities. Take the time to explore the work of our colleagues at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design or the Manchester Institute for Research and Investigation in Art and Design and you will find faculties that are abnormally socially evolved by U.S. standards. We don't just address sustainable practices in the U.K.; we embody change as a pedagogical ideology.

Study, research, and opportunities for scientific discourse in higher education are as important as the curriculum and are crucial to advances in the field. Many universities and colleges host lectures, symposia, and conferences that facilitate cross-disciplinary dialog, exchange, and partnerships, often publishing related proceedings. The group Art Culture Nature: An Association for the Study of the Arts and the Environment at the University of Washington Bothell hosted a May 2005 conference, *Earth Rites: Imagination and Practice in Sci-Arts Eco-Cultures*, which investigated issues and practices involved in building sustainable eco-cultures through the intentional engagement of both the sciences and the arts. The conference explored connections between sci-arts and local communities and examined linkages among culture, science, art, and the environment and how these connections emerge as viable eco-cultures (<http://faculty.uwb.edu/kkochhar/ACN/05conf.htm>).

Funding is an oft-cited stumbling block to implementing sustainable principles, both when it comes to resources for teaching and in applying forward-thinking technologies in the private sector, because clients often shy away from what they consider costly capital spending, not considering long-term savings. Practitioners need convincing data, which one would expect to be published by educational researchers, to support any long-term economic benefits. The question of funding often puts leadership to the test, wisely pointed out by Sandy Weisman of the Center for Art and Community Partnerships at the Massachusetts College of Art: "Leadership, of course, is essential in guiding projects, but so often leadership is compromised by not enough funding. Time is compromised, and therefore sustainability suffers. We see it all the time. Funding is everyone's nightmare."

It is our responsibility to live up to the challenge.

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NOTES

¹ David Orr, "What Is Education For? Six Myths about the Foundations of Modern Education, and Six New Principles to Replace Them." *In Context* (Winter 1991), 52-55.