



JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN
SEEING THINGS

An open table: Public artwork fuels dialogue

About 20 people recently gathered at the elongated picnic table that's perched on a knoll above West Cesar Chavez Street where the Pfluger Bridge terminates, releasing pedestrians and bicyclists onto the north side of Lady Bird Lake.

Made of powder-coated aluminum, the long tabletop is a faux white table cloth, seemingly made of lace with delicate cut-out patterns draping over the sides. Four red tree-like chandeliers surround the table at each corner, creating an open-air room of sorts — a bit of quasi-intimate domestic space within a public park.

Called "Open Room Austin," the table is a commissioned project of the city's Art in Public Places program and was designed by Miami-based artists Rosario Marquardt and Roberto Behar.

As its name implies, "Open Room Austin" is open to all. It's a social sculpture created not as an end in itself, but as a whimsical invitation for people to engage with it, maybe stage a party or picnic or pause for a moment to relish a bit of domesticity in a public park.

The recent gathering was a public art salon open to everyone and hosted by the AIPP office. Among the group were artists, downtown Austin residents, architects and art advocates. On hand was Christina Lanzl of the Urban Arts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design.



Alberto Martínez photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

At the 'Open Room Austin,' a group gathers to discuss public art and to listen to Christina Lanzl, right, director of programs at the Urban Arts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

A public art consultant, cultural planner, curator and writer, Lanzl was in Austin to work with a group from the Austin chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which is bringing attention to the Old Bakery block, the underused 1000 block of Congress Avenue just south of the Capitol, anchored by a small, historic 1876 former bakery building.

Lanzl advocates "placemaking" — a holistic approach to the design of urban space. Placemaking transcends traditional, static notions of what architecture, urban design and public art might be. Instead of considering just a discrete object of public art or the architectural style of a specific building or plaza, the placemaking philosophy

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Jeanne Claire van Ryzin blogs about the Austin arts scene at austin360.com/seeingthings.

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endeavors to consider the totality of urban life. Hence first-rate public art is not merely an aesthetic enterprise. Public health, economic and business development, transportation infrastructure, cultural development — it should all go into the pot to stew together.

And the measure of any successful placemaking effort consists of how busy a place is with people.

“Think of a public space as if it’s your home, your living room,” Lanzl suggests. “Is it comfortable? Is it some

place you’ll return to? And if you don’t like it, will you speak up and try to make your opinion heard?”

Crowd-sourcing is important, Lanzl believes. Public discussion and input is key. So is a self-starting, do-it-yourself approach.



Christina Lanzl

Though the Old Bakery is owned by the city, those advocating for its improvements include a private group — architects, artists and design professionals. In October the group started the “Old Bakery Idea-Thon” project, which is soliciting ideas from the public about what the site might be. Different creative questions posted on the group’s website, www.oldbakeryideathon.org, invite comments and opinions.

A mural, pop-up lending library, outdoor movie screen, and free, public solar-powered recharging station for cellphones and computers are just some of the suggestions posted so far. And when answering to the posted challenge “I Would Linger If...,” one commentator wrote, “If the Old Bakery ‘park had a table I could eat lunch on.’”

“Open Room Austin” sits not too far from the proposed Seaholm Substation Wall Art project, a 1,200-foot barrier wall that will surround an electrical substation on 3 acres of downtown Austin,

the site of the decommissioned Seaholm Power Plant and Green Water Treatment Plant, which is pegged to be a mixed-use development.

Budgeted at \$800,000, the Substation Wall Art project is the city’s most expensive public art project to date. And when the City Council approved the schematic design recently, criticism emerged over plans to illuminate the wall at night with colored lights.

“The objective is to strive for consensus, and consensus is hard,” Lanzl says of public art decisions. “And yes, you can have design excellence even when you engage as many issues, as many stakeholders, as possible in the decision. But it’s a difficult process.”

After about an hour of casual discussion, the group at “Open Room Austin” spontaneously, simultaneously stopped talking. The air had grown a bit chillier as the sun sank into the horizon. The lights of the four chandeliers came on, casting a soft white light around the table as marking out the borders of a room.

But it was the evening sky outside the simulated room that had silenced the group. The clear Texas sky was a periwinkle blue, streaked dramatically with orange and pink. And the gathering of relative strangers seated at the capricious, spurious sculpture cum table-in-a-park all shared a moment of quiet reverie before going their separate ways.

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