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Asking "What about Art?" & The Possibilities for Public Art

By Deborah Landry

PUBLIC ART DEFINED

"Public Art" fits a much broader definition than art in a gallery or a museum. In simple terms, public art is any work of art or design that is created by an artist specifically to be installed, permanently or temporarily, in a public space. The scope can range from works monumental in size to small nuances added to architecture. Production can involve casting or carving materials as well as assembling expensive materials or found objects. It can be a painted mural or a wall created from clay or glass. It can be permanent or temporary. Whatever its form, public art attracts attention. By its presence alone, public art can heighten our awareness, question our assumptions, transform a landscape, or express community values. For these reasons, it has the power to transform a city's image over time, to define a community's identity and to reveal the unique character of its residence. Public art can "make a place"[1] and be a unifying force.

The focus of this paper is to look past the typical uses of public art (memorials and monuments) and to understand how community participation can be incorporated into the project. We know public art can include commemorative memorials, statues, and murals. But today public art is playing a bigger part in daily living: it is utilitarian and can be found as functional doors, gates, fences, streets, park furniture, and water fountains, as well as the lights for a street or parking garage. It can be part of architecture and surface treatments: for example, a wall, floor, ceiling, sidewalk, or plaza.



Public art can also be temporary in nature as in literary works installed on a bus or metro. Lights, sound, and video installations are being used to create great public art events, like the Twin Tower light memorial at ground zero.[2]



Public art can also be environmental in the form of earthworks. “Earthworks” are defined as a form of art created in nature that uses natural materials such as sand, stones, leaves, or soil. [3]

In particular, this article concentrates on architectural additions, utilitarian projects, temporary art and earthworks because they are the best types of public art for a region that is in transition. The Great Lakes region is in the process of creating visional and master plans to rejuvenate the cities in which we live. Both utilitarian projects and earthworks fit into city’s plan to create growth as well as enhance quality of life for the citizens. Architectural additions will work because it is easy to start with incorporating art into existing buildings. Temporary public art will be explored because it is a means of creating events that will spring board economic growth.

ARCHITECTURAL ADDITIONS

First, let’s look at murals as architectural additions. Public art murals can be designed to be site specific. Many city-owned buildings are utilitarian in design. The buildings provide just the use for which they are intended; that is to say that they are purely functional. They are not designed to reflect the city workers or the community in which they serve. These building make excellent places to start incorporating public art because they already exist and serve the community.

Architectural examples will include two completed community building projects in Georgia and one project in the preliminary stages in Gary. First is an aquatic center in the city of Douglasville, and the second is a senior center in city of Fairburn. The third project is in progress at the local Gary Chicago Airport in Northwest Indiana.

The Boundary Waters Aquatic Center

The Boundary Waters Aquatic Center was designed as a competitive and instructional pool center. It was a good choice for the county’s first public art project because the building was utilitarian in design and was a clean canvas for an artist’s concept (Figures 3 and 4). The Cultural Arts Council of Douglasville / Douglas County Center applied and received a grant for the project from the Georgia Council for the Arts Community Partners Planning Grant. The goal was to nurture, guide, and stimulate the enjoyment of and participation in the arts among the residents of and visitors to Douglasville and Douglas County, Georgia.



Boundary Waters Aquatic Center included a 60-ft mosaic mural and five individual pieces along the waters' edge, and the entire project was called "Singing Waters." To complete the project, four workshops were held within the community, city hall, parks and recreation, community center, and the pool center itself. The workshops were designed to include a large diversity of the community. The participants were guided on how to make fish and water shapes and personalize them by pressing personal mementos in-to the clay pieces. [4]

The workshops provided the public an opportunity to create a permanent piece that would reflect memories and would be forever a part of the public space. The Cultural Arts Council of Douglasville / Douglas County designed the project as a marketing tool to sell the city on the idea of creating a 1% arts program. [5]



The New Beginnings Senior Center

Fulton County in Georgia commissioned the Lone Star quilt as well as twelve other pieces for The New Beginnings Senior Center in Fairburn (Figures 5 and 6). This project was made possible with the county's 1% program. The Lone Star quilt is installed in the front entry and complements the prairie style architecture. The carpenters added plywood behind the drywall making installation easy and insuring the safety of the artwork.

The seniors participated in a workshop to create the diamond shapes. They were asked to press mementos into diamond-shaped clay tiles. The images included show a full view of the quilt [6] and a detail showing the individual tiles created by the seniors. [7] Seniors visited throughout the day as the artwork was being installed each looking for his/her tile. Their excitement in the anticipation of using the building was palpable.



In addition to murals, temporary art exhibits can enhance the architecture of a building. Creating a rotating exhibit of paintings and sculpture in a public space can create a warm and inviting environment and create community involvement.

Gary Chicago Airport

In the following images of the Gary Chicago Airport, one can see how art would enliven the interior and exterior spaces. A public art artist registry is currently being created to establish the first rotating art exhibit for the airport. The Airport also has many opportunities for permanent public art installations in the form of outdoor sculpture, murals and architectural additions. The images of the Gary Chicago Airport depict possible locations for public art. For example, the walls by the ceiling can accommodate large paintings or small relief sculptures (Figures 7 and 8).[8]



The large wall in the boardroom (Figure 9) would be great location for a mural, the landscaping and grounds could accommodate sculptures. [10]Along with the possibilities in the buildings that exist today, there are opportunities for future renovations and a future terminal. The future for public art at the airport is limitless. The airport has high expectations, and art can play a big role in making the airport, a place that illuminates the future of the region. The art would express the regions culture and history as well as welcome visitors. When visitors see the art, it is a sign that they have arrived.

This new “Art in the Airport” public art program will set the tone for future projects in the region. The program will demonstrate the process for government and private entities to develop public art programs as well as the importance of including public art in the developmental phase.

UTILITARIAN PROJECTS

Historically, public art has taken the form of sculptures or memorials, large objects placed in a designated location. Architects or city planners would simply create a concrete slab for art almost as an afterthought. Today public art serves a wide variety of purposes and is more likely to be incorporated into a city plan on the front end rather than the back end. There are endless possibilities as to where and how an artist can be commissioned in utilitarian public art.

A growing number of urban artists are working with architects, engineers, and landscape designers to create visually rich public spaces. These include pedestrian and vehicular bridges, streetscapes, and canal banks. All of these forms of public art make cities more interesting and unique places to live, work, and visit. A bus stop is a utilitarian object that all cities need. These spaces do not have to be institutional in design.



“The Elements”, a sculptured bus shelter created for the city of Tempe Arizona, includes handmade clay and stone mosaics, lighting elements, fabricated steel, rock, and flagstone seating (Figure 11). The image shows the rich texture of the natural elements. Local high school students and community members participated in various stages of the project.

While this project is a good example of utilitarian public art, it also demonstrates the benefits of community involvement and artist collaboration.[¹²]

In Ventura California, the sculpture “Bus Home” [¹³] is another example of a bus stop (Figure 12). In this case, the simple idea of a bus stop has become an artistic space to see in itself, moving well beyond functionality. Imagine traveling on a bus and seeing this structure. You might be compelled to get off the bus and explore the area even if it wasn’t your final destination.

“Bus Home” is a great example of how different public spaces can be if we incorporate art during the planning stages rather than doing the historical “concrete slab” approach to functional spaces. This innovative bus stop would not have been possible had the artist not been invited into the development phase because the side walks and access roads would have to be designed around a bus stop of this scale.

<http://www.dennis-oppenheim.com/browse.php?cat=5&id=224>

Check this website out to see image.

The plaza in Figure 13 is another great example of what can be produced when an artist works with a design team. [¹⁴] The plaza consists of two interconnected spiral water channels that carry water from a nearby canal. Other features include seating, integral color paving, and xeriscope landscaping. Also, in this case, the artist was involved in the development phase and served on a city

design team that developed streetscape amenities and a half-acre community plaza for Southern Avenue.



In another example a pedestrian bridge (Figure 14) becomes a sculptural element for a community. [15] The legs of the grasshoppers serve as structural supports, and animal and insect images are sandblasted and stained onto the concrete deck walkway. In this way, the community contributed the inspiration.

The bridge exhibits the limitless possibilities of taking a utilitarian need for a bridge and turning it into an opportunity for the community to create a voice. The artist worked with local school kids to come up with this grasshopper design.

Furthermore, the plaza and pedestrian bridge are examples of how public art can also be used in transportation as a way of directing or slowing traffic, as well as creating a safety barrier to potential dangers. These public art works become more than utilitarian objects; they have become landmarks, adding to the identity of the surrounding communities.

EARTHWORKS

In another type of public art, earthworks combine landscaping and sculpture. Instead of merely plopping sculptures on a concrete slab, the soil is moved to create forms, and plants and vegetation are used to add texture and color. Earthworks sculpture can be small (size of a playground) or monumental and can involve many acres. Earthworks are effective aesthetics additions to green space.

Green space is important in city planning: it is a primary assessment of property value next to the quality of schools and provides

locations for all types of community and family activities.

An artist can be an integral part of the design process for green spaces in our region. Instead of playgrounds of plastic and hanging tires, the region can have spaces that are stimulating to everyone who visits.



Just across the street of an abandoned church in Gary, Indiana, is open space (Figure 15). [16] This space would be great for an earthworks sculptural park. Imagine using soil in different formations to create hills and crevices that inspire children and adults to use their imaginations.

Earthworks situated in such a space evoke the wonders of childhood, when children create a make believe world from an old box or explore nature and find a caterpillar. The environment can inspire a world of make believe and help each of us understand our place in the bigger picture. It is people's ability to dream that inspires them to do more. When our environment is bleak and nonstimulating, it becomes harder to imagine ourselves in a better place.

Below are examples of earthworks sculpture:[17]



In Figure 16 you can see how the earthen circle configurations form a particular place. The trees line a path that takes the viewer away from the buildings to a place that allows the visitor to easily appreciate nature. Figure 17 illustrates how Figure 15 Figure 16 Figure 17 the earthwork uses circles as well, but this space creates a different feeling all together. The sculpture brings focus to the

natural terrain of rocks and low growing groundcover. The rocks that may have been overlooked or perhaps regarded as a nuisance have become a focal point, one that inspires the viewer to examine them closer. The rocks are now appreciated as sculptural elements and act as spring boards for the imagination.

Earthworks are a real possibility in our region since land is much more readily available than other places in the country. Our region has many brown field properties.^[18] "Brownfields" are defined as abandoned, idled, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contaminations. In places like Washington State, individuals have done earthwork sculptures to reclaim landfills and quarries. These properties are perfect for earthworks that also reclaim the contaminated land. It makes good environmental and economic sense to transform these spaces. It has been reported that the rise in biofuels are also putting a rise of fertilizers/contaminates in the local waters going to the streams and rivers. Earthworks could act as natural barriers to protect our natural resources.

TEMPOARY PUBLIC ART

In many cases, temporary public art can have the same impact as permanent art. One common benefit of temporary art is its lower cost. Temporary art can create a sense of place and community involvement. We have opportunities in our region and in our own backyards to incorporate temporary public art. Towns needing to draw more business could create banners designed by the community that would lead the public to the downtown area to shop and eat. A town may need an event to start the spring season and inspire families to come outside. The town may hire artists to set up easels throughout the town literally making it an event to walk the town's streets. In these cases, temporary public art meets a civic need.

Our region is struggling to develop economically. Temporary art is a good investment for places that are looking to create events to draw visitors. A city would be hesitant to invest in a sculpture if the success of the city planning had been tested. Temporary art allows a project to have a lasting effect psychologically but not a lasting foot print. Just as a family gathers to watch fireworks, the memories of the events are permanent though the fire works are not. Temporary public art can act in the same manor.

Temporary art is also great for situations that are changing and evolving, like areas under construction or renovation. For example, painting a water tower involves covering it so it can be sand blasted and painted. The cover would be large and ugly and it would be there for some time. In this situation the tarps could be designed by an artist and appear to be a beautiful sculptural element instead of an eyesore. Posters on fences can hide what's ugly inside the fenced area of a construction site.



In Figure 18, temporary art is incorporated into a wooden fence^[19] that is put up to protect the public from the construction area. Artists are hired to create posters that are installed on the panels providing the public a more visually appealing environment, rather than an ugly construction site.

Some temporary public art is performance based and becomes an event in itself. This type of temporary art lends itself well to

creating an event in the same way people gather for a parade. A great example is projected art, where an artist designs slides that are projected onto buildings or other solid surfaces. There are great buildings in the region that would look great with projected art. Projected art is temporal and leaves nothing to clean up. It can change frequently. Artists are commissioned to design work based on a given topic or can be inspired by a given building.

Projected art can be a regular event for the area. If the area had more than one projector, participants could experience a tour of images projected onto various buildings. Audio and/or music can be added to create an event that is more than visual. The image "Sacred Light" (Figure 19) is an excellent example of the transformation of a building using light.^[20]



Imagine the library, old church, or train depot in Gary, Indiana with a veil of light. is an image of the old stone library in Gary, ^[21] and Figure 21 is an image of an old church. ^[22] Both buildings are abandoned and are no longer being used. So many of the buildings in the region have great form, and they just need something new or unique for people to see their value again. As we begin to look around and examine the possibilities for art, we begin to see what is in our own backyard. Projected art can be part of an ongoing public art project. For example, imagine a tour of projected art that was accessible to anyone riding the South Shore train.

Audio tours, another form of temporary art, are a great way to create public art for an area rich in history. Audio art can be made into downloadable files accessible via the Internet.

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) has three great audios tours that individuals can download at

<http://www.lmcc.net/art/programs/2006.9.1artwalkingtours/index.html>. This is a simple form of public art that can make an impact. It enables us to share our story with the world; the possibilities are endless.

Adding audio files can create an event as well as share information and make education fun and insightful. Artists could create historical audios with regional music of our towns, and the audios could be linked to websites for tourism, arts organizations, and historical and dunes preservation societies. Dr. Earl R. Jones, (Department of Minority Studies Indiana University Northwest), has created a Midtown tour guide map that shows locations throughout Gary that have significance to the history of the city. Something like this could easily be created into an audio and significantly enhance the impact.

There are organizations like Dr. Jones's all over the Northwest Indiana region. Each of them could ask "What about Art?" Artists can be used to create interesting and proactive media opportunities for the organizations to deliver their messages.



RECYCLING

Along with using the land for earthworks or buildings for projected art, there are material assets in our towns that go unrecognized. Reusing and recycling can be a part of public art. In the region, we are surrounded by abandoned houses and buildings.^[23] I propose these structures could become the foundation for bigger projects. Large murals could be painted on the exterior paying homage to the families that once called these structures home.

An audio could be created to tell their story and it could be downloaded and followed as a tour of buildings.



If the buildings were torn down, the materials could be used to create bicycle paths or side walks. Many of the old homes have unique brick patterns and decorative concrete accents. These parts of the buildings could be integrated into paths. The path could be named after the last resident of the house used to create the path.

It is easy to project a city embracing a program that would honor the past while bringing new hope for the future. Finding new uses for old material can be easy. Old World Bricks is a company located in Indianapolis that pays for quality bricks.^[24] They pay 20-60 cents per brick based on quality. Once a building is torn down, they would come and pick up the brick. Reclaimed antique bricks are used in many new building projects as well as street restoration and driveway accents.^[25] This could be a means of financing some of the public art events.



Sometimes a space inspires an artist. For example, on route 12, there is the remaining shell of an old hotel (Figure 24).^[26] This building would be great for performance art, as each space could be the setting for a different performance. The audience would pull up chairs in the old parking lot and watch as each team performed. The building would also be great for an art festival. In this scenario, each space could house a different artist.

SUMMARY

Public art possibilities are endless. Working with artists can help you convey a message, create an event, sell a product, and enhance the environment. Ask yourself, “What is important to my organization?” and then ask, “What about art?” There is a way in which art and business goals can work hand in hand.

Public art is a community-wide mission with no boundaries for participation and sponsorship. It can be funded by state, local or federal governments. All cities’ goals are funded with capital improvement dollars. This is money set aside for projects such as sidewalks and water fountains. Cities take a small percentage of those funds (usually 1-2%) and set it aside for art. A majority of the approximately 350 public art programs nation-wide are “percent for art” programs. Indiana has two cities with public art programs, the City of Bloomington Percent for the Arts and Indianapolis Public Art Program. This last program is not a “percent for art” program, as they collect their monies in a different manor. The rest of Indiana’s cities and towns have no public art programs.

Capital improvement projects are a fact of life in city maintenance and developmental plans. The cost of adding art into those capital improvement projects is negligible when it is built in to the project processes. For example, a city needs water fountains along a sidewalk and the budgeted cost is about \$1,200- \$2,000. The city has the choice of ordering plain water fountains or, for the same cost, hiring an artist to create water fountains that stand out and create a visual impact. The same money can produce very different results. People need sidewalks, roads, and bus stops, so why not have them designed and created by an artist? This creates a win-win situation for everyone.

Along with “percent for art” programs, cities have many non-profit art organizations that create artistic opportunities for communities as well as revenue. According to the 2007 Economic Impact study conducted by the Arts Council of Indianapolis, each year nonprofit arts organizations in Indianapolis generate nearly half a billion dollars in economic activity (\$468 million) – an increase of 59% since the last study five years ago; they support over 15,000 fulltime jobs and create nearly \$52 million in local and state government revenue.^[27] These nonprofit organizations attract audiences from around the world while spurring business development, which in turn supports more jobs and generates more government revenue.

In our region numerous cities are coming together to create visional and master plans. There is the Marquette Greenway plan, 43 miles of Indiana's shoreline that will include pedestrian and bike trails. There is the South Calumet business district plan for Chesterton. There is the restoration project of the Grand Calumet River, Hobart Marsh, Hoosier Prairie, Grand Kankakee Marsh, Coffee Creek Watershed Preserve, Trail Creek, Ambler Flatwoods and Great Marsh. All of these projects can benefit from incorporating public art into their planning phase. There are many more opportunities around us. As a region we need to ask, "What about Art?"

Funding public art becomes secondary in the big picture of incorporating art into our region. The first and most important thing is to start a dialog within communities. If everyone going to work everyday, attending organizational meetings, shopping, taking public transportation, and going to school and universities were to consider the role and importance of art, then our region would be on its way to having a public art program that would rejuvenate our very existence.

There are opportunities all around us in our daily lives to incorporate art. If, for example, you own a small business and you need to market your service or product, you could sponsor an art exhibit that reflects your interest in a local gallery. A drycleaners business could do an exhibit all about works that reflect clothing, a hardware or antique store could do an exhibit of found objects, and a restaurant could do an exhibit about food and wine.

Perhaps you have a window in your store front; you could hire an artist to create an eye-catching installation for your store front. The Polish Pottery store in Chesterton, Indiana, allows artists to create sculptural installations in its window and Gallery One in Chesterton partners with non-profits to market art as well as market the non-profit organization. Purdue University North Central's marketing program relies on art to bring notice to their campus, and it is highly successful. All three of these examples are businesses that recognize the power of art in marketing.

Let's imagine your town is interested in creating a more pedestrian friendly environment; the impact studies have been completed, and they have identified the town's goals. The first goal is sidewalks. An artist is brought in and designs imbedded mosaics for the sidewalk that will be placed at intersections, helping to identify the area. Another artist designs the benches as well as the trash receptacles. Another artist works with landscapers to design a space for children to play while parents shop. Maybe a bicycle path is needed, and an artist is asked to create the signage for it. All of this started by asking the question, "What about Art?" We can use artists to create community based public art projects that meet the needs of all the organizations working so hard to make a difference.

Northwest Indiana is in the process of developing the road maps for economical development. The Northwest Indiana Forum, Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission and the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority are in the process of developing visional plans. They are working on the Gary Chicago Airport, making plans for a Commuter Transportation District, a Regional Bus Authority and Shoreline Redevelopment. Cities throughout the region are making their own plans for economic development. Millions of dollars are slated to be spent in the region. This situation equates to all sorts of opportunities to include public art.

[12] Figure 11-“The Elements” - Bus stop created by Helen Helwig, Niki Glen, S. Cisson and J. Tyler – Image courtesy of Helen Helwig.

[13] Figure 12- Artist: Dennis Oppenheim Image courtesy of <http://www.dennis-oppenheim.com/browse.php?cat=5&id=224> .

[14] Figure 13-“Patrick Park Plaza”, 1992, Jody Pinto, artist; Krog & Tegnell, landscape architects Built with Street Transportation Percent for Art funds through the Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture Public Art Program, photo by Craig Smith, Image courtesy of http://phoenix.gov/ARTS/cp_35.html.

[15]Figure 14-The Grasshopper Bridge, 1997, Ed Carpenter, artist; Jerry Cannon, engineer Built with Street Transportation Percent for Art funds through the Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture Public Art Program photo by Craig Smith- Image courtesy of http://phoenix.gov/ARTS/cp_59.html.

[16] Figure 15- Image of open field in Gary, Indiana – Image supplied by Deborah Landry.

[17]Figures 16 Designed by Kim Wilkie and Associates- Images courtesy of <http://www.kimwilkie.com/index.html>. Figure 17- A earthworks sculpture in Russia that is thousands of years old.

[18] In city planning, brownfield land (or simply a brownfield) is land previously used for industrial purposes or certain commercial uses that may be contaminated by low concentrations of hazardous waste or pollution and has the potential to be reused once it is cleaned up.

[19] Figure 18-Poster on a construction fence- Image courtesy of Jake Dobkin
http://gothamist.com/2007/09/14/new_ideas_in_ar.php.

[20]Figure 19-Artist Jorge Orta’s Image courtesy of <http://www.studio-orta.com>.

[21] Figure 20-Old Gary Library – Image supplied by Deborah Landry.

[22] Figure 21- Old building in Gary, Indiana – Image supplied by Deborah Landry.

[23] Figure 22-Abandoned house in Gary, Indiana – Image supplied by Deborah Landry.

[24] <http://www.oldworldbricks.com>.

[25]Figure 23–road made of old bricks – Image courtesy of
<http://www.lincolnhighwayoh.com/images/BrickPics/NTCambridge.JPG> .

[26] Figure 24- Old hotel in Gary Indiana – Image supplied by Deborah Landry.

[27] Figure 25- Find more economic information
http://www.artscouncilofindianapolis.org/research/economic_impact_study_2007_111.html .