

Why Public Art Matters

Cities gain value through public art – cultural, social, and economic value. Public art is a distinguishing part of our public history and our evolving culture. It reflects and reveals our society, adds meaning to our cities and uniqueness to our communities. Public art humanizes the built environment and invigorates public spaces. It provides an intersection between past, present and future, between disciplines, and between ideas. Public art is freely accessible.

Cultural Value and Community Identity

American cities and towns aspire to be places where people want to live and want to visit. Having a particular community identity, especially in terms of what our towns look like, is becoming even more important in a world where everyplace tends to look like everyplace else. Places with strong public art expressions break the trend of blandness and sameness, and give communities a stronger sense of place and identity. When we think about memorable places, we think about their icons – consider the St. Louis Arch, the totem poles of Vancouver, the heads at Easter Island. All of these were the work of creative people who captured the spirit and atmosphere of their cultural milieu. Absent public art, we would be absent our human identities.

The Artist as Contributor to Cultural Value

Public art brings artists and their creative vision into the civic decision making process. In addition to the aesthetic benefits of having works of art in public places, artists can make valuable contributions when they are included in the mix of planners, engineers, designers, elected officials, and community stakeholders who are involved in planning public spaces and amenities. Artists bring their own creative skill set to those conversations, which can also inspire creativity in others, ideally bringing the means of decisions and problem-solving to a more responsive and imaginative result. There is a public art continuum that appreciates the varied creative intentions and roles that artists may bring to a project. Artists may be invited by an official entity, a project may be artist-initiated, or work may take the form of a non-sanctioned artistic endeavor. However, artists inevitably bring personal and distinctive interpretations to each idea, site, social construct, and aesthetic potential. In this way, artists can be social and civic leaders, advocating through art for alternative perspectives that can challenge assumptions, beliefs, and community values.

Social Value and Placemaking

Public art is a reflection of its place and time. It acts as a place marker in all human settlements. Artworks like *Cloud Gate* in Chicago's Millennium Park are intertwined with our images of those cities. Transient artworks, like Christo and Jean Claude's *Running Fence* in California or the *Sultan's Elephant* in London, have become memorable moments in time, captured in picture postcards and in family photo albums. Public art activates the imagination and encourages people to pay attention and perceive more deeply the environment they occupy. Public art stimulates learning and thought about art and society, about our interconnected lives, and about the social sphere as a whole. Public art is uniquely accessible and enables people to experience art in the course of daily life, outside of museums or other cultural institutions. Public art provides everyone in the community direct and on-going encounters with art. It engages social interaction—both during the selection process and following installation. And, an artwork can lead the viewer toward self-reflection and awareness.

Social Value and Collaboration

The effort of creating art for public space is not solitary: the public art process asks the artist to share his/her creative point of view and approach to art-making, and to collaborate with others throughout its development. In consequence, the work can reverberate throughout the community, thereby encouraging a sense of shared ownership and collective affiliation. The inclusion of artists' thinking, creative input, aesthetic contributions, and problem solving methods in the public realm engage ways of working in the built environment that are different from the approaches of practitioners of other disciplines because their concerns are different.

Economic Value and Regeneration

As has been witnessed throughout history, public art can be an essential element when a municipality wishes to progress economically and to be viable to its current and prospective citizens. Data strongly indicates that cities with an active and dynamic cultural scene are more attractive to individuals and business. Public art can be a key factor in establishing a unique and culturally active place. Public art can create civic icons, but it also can transform our playgrounds, train stations, traffic circles, hospitals, water treatment facilities, and airports into more vibrant expressions of human imagination. By building and reinforcing community culture, public art can act as a catalyst for community generation or regeneration. In this case, size does not necessarily matter. Public art can be very visible, large, permanent and unmistakable as an art experience; but it can also be very subtle, short lived or seamlessly integrated into one's experience of a place. Public art matters.

Challenges to the Field of Public Art

In order for the field of public art to stay relevant and thrive in America's rapidly changing environment, we need to actively shape its future and make the case for the value and relevance of public art. These challenges fall into two complementary and surprisingly uncomplicated questions: what to do (ideas and concepts) and how to do it ("nuts and bolts").

How to do it? Working Together

Artists, administrators and curators have so much to learn from one another, and they need to communicate more effectively. There will always be different points of view, but these are strengths and not weaknesses in a field that requires so much collaboration. For administrators and curators, the challenge is to advocate and create opportunities for artists, even while negotiating a minefield of government or institutional bureaucracies, regulations, and budgetary and other constraints, as well as community expectations. For artists, the challenge is to understand (and perhaps reconcile) the requirements, restrictions, and callings of the site with his/her ongoing creative inquiry. Open to productive discussion should be issues related to fees for services, insurance procurement, contracts, image submission, selection processes, artist training for public art, collections management, conservation and other topics of shared interest, with the understanding that standardization may not always be possible or desirable.

How to do it? Services to the Field

The PAN Council -- a 15 member elected volunteer group of artists and administrators -- tackle, debate, organize, support, undertake, create, and revise documents and services of benefit to the PAN constituency. These include the useful and unmediated ListServe, website, blog, sample contracts, best practices, consultants lists, monographs, year-in-review. Forthcoming are: mentoring programs, regional networks, webinars, and other resources for administrators, artists, and community leaders. The PAN Council welcomes ideas and suggestions for services and tools to better serve the field of public art.

What to do? Creative Collaboration

To some degree, every public art project is an interactive process involving artists, architects, administrators, design professionals, community residents, civic leaders, elected officials, approval agencies, funding agencies, and construction teams.

The challenge of this communal process is to support artists' creative involvement through cooperation, not compromise, and to create opportunities for artists to engage in the issues of our time.

What to do? Partnerships and Opportunities

Historically, public art partnerships have been fruitful sources of cultural expression and social practice, as well as catalysts for revenue and urban regeneration. Broadly speaking, partnerships can include private developers or funders, infrastructure consortia, museums and galleries, educational institutions, transportation systems or private industry. Interdisciplinary opportunities can blur boundaries among cultural-visual-performative art, design, decoration, and technology.

What to do? Education, Engagement and Evaluation

We know that learning happens when we ask questions, and public art prompts vital and primary questions about our environment and ourselves. Public art can encourage a broad range of learning opportunities, from didactic to aesthetic. Educational programs and interpretive opportunities can form the basis for evaluation methodologies that help us understand and engage our public art audiences.

Equilibrium on the edge

Public art does something that neither a public space without art nor even a museum with all its art can do: it can capture the eye and mind of someone passing through our public spaces. It can make us pay attention to our civic environment; it can encourage us to question what's around us. Much of our newly built environment lacks the resonance of history or reflection of civic ownership, which makes residents proud of where they live. Carefully conceived public art installations and environments, rich with connections to our history, the natural world or the ephemeral quality of life, help make places of meaning within a community. Art can celebrate the qualities that make one place different from another. The best of public art can challenge, delight, educate and illuminate. Most of all, public art creates a sense of civic vitality in the cities, towns and communities we inhabit and visit.

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