

The International Award for Public Art: Meet the Finalists

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ABOUT PLACE

Putting art
at the heart
of placemaking



Cambodia's vibrant public art scene Washington D.C.'s new 5x5 festival
Mixing past and present at the Golden Gate Charles Landry on city making

Artists Go Public

A city offers hands-on public art training

Tacoma, Washington, is the site of a unique project to train artists in the processes associated with creating public art. The Public Art: In Depth (PA:ID) program, which is wrapping up its first year, combines traditional workshop training with a unique series of opportunities that culminates in a real-life competition for real-life projects with real-life budgets.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time," says Amy McBride, Tacoma's arts administrator, whose undergraduate work focused on effective professional development strategies. "I strongly believe in the practical experience piece. By getting to know what it takes in real life, that's how you learn. And I also needed to build a base of local artists who could compete not only in Tacoma, but on a wider stage."

The opportunity to launch PA:ID came when a city bonding project provided a budget for public art with a bit more flexibility in spending than most. That allowed McBride to hire public artist Elizabeth Conner to help develop the curriculum and devise the program, and still retain stipends for five competitive public art projects.

McBride recruited 23 Tacoma-based artists, all of them with established studio reputations and a few with some public art commissions behind them. Conner led the students in six full-day workshops that included information from engineers and planners, as well as more theoretical discussions of site specificity and placemaking. The students also col-



EDUCATION

laborated in teams on creating temporary works, like those along Tacoma's Prairie Line Trail (learn more on page 34). Finally, the group competed for the budgeted public art projects—receiving extensive feedback on their applications, whether shortlisted or not.

"I'm not a teacher," says McBride, "so being in this role where you see change and improvement and growth—it's amazing. It gives me shivers."

While the program was tailored to meet the needs of Tacoma, its basic contours could be applied anywhere, according to McBride. The success of the program rests on several principles that McBride stresses in adapting it to other locales: that it unfold over a period of time and include a variety of learning opportunities; that it include a cohort of artists who can engage with and learn from one another; and that it include practical, hands-on experience. —Joseph Hart



Elizabeth Conner (top photo, middle) developed the curriculum for PA:ID, a program in which artists learn public art processes. Here, students create temporary works for the Prairie Trail Line.

TOP: Photo by Lia Kimshita. BOTTOM LEFT: Photo by Amy Ryken. BOTTOM RIGHT: Photo by Amy McBride.

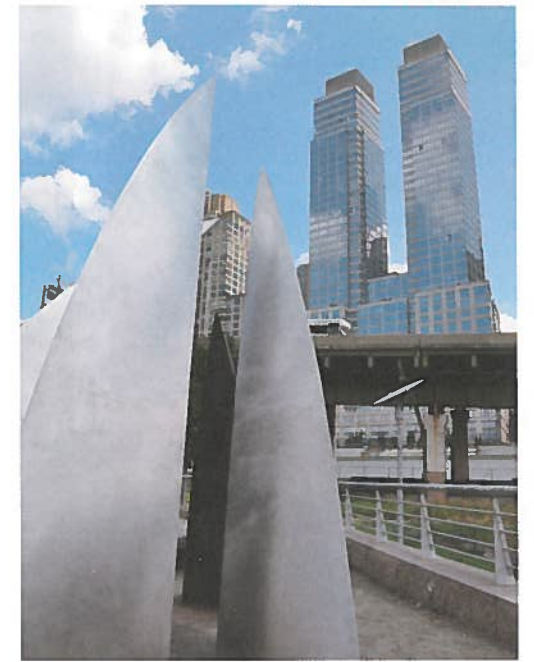
Student Art in the Park

New York's Model to Monument program completes its second year

Model to Monument (M2M), a collaboration between the Art Students League of New York and the city's Department of Parks and Recreation, was featured in *Public Art Review's* fall/winter 2011 issue as a new form of public artist training. In the first year of its five-year commitment, the program saw seven sculptures developed and placed in area public spaces. All seven have since been purchased for permanent placement.

This year, seven more sculptures have been taken from model to monument, including Damien Armando Vera's *Cope* and Sequoyah Aono's *Watching Upon the Present*. The theme of this year's program is "flux," a reflection of the changing nature of the Hudson riverfront, where the sculptures are situated.

As a training ground, the program has unique strengths worth noting. By taking the work out of the classroom and into the public realm, students gain real-world experience in the often-complicated process of site selection, public engagement, and materials handling.



ABOVE: Damien Armando Vera's *Cope*, an M2M project in New York. LEFT: A reception for Sequoyah Aono's *Watching Upon the Present*.

EVALUATION

Proving Public Art's Worth

The field explores models for evaluation

State and local governments have been hit especially hard by the failing economy of the past five years; however fast the recovery, it will likely be some time before budgets ease to pre-recession levels. Given these fiscal realities, there's a growing urgency in the field of public art to quantify the value of expenditures on particular projects and programs.

"A lot of public art agencies are being asked to justify the return on investment in their public art programming," explains Liesel Fenner, the program manager for public art at Americans for the Arts. That organization's landmark Arts & Economic Prosperity IV study provides some data on the economic value of arts spending in general, but public art isn't specifically addressed in that research, she adds. "Public art projects have not only an economic value, but a social, cultural, and an intrinsic value," she says. "That makes this a daunting challenge."

However, it's a challenge that a growing number of administrators in public art are addressing. Americans for the Arts' Public Art Network (PAN) has launched a series of conversations, including an August 2012 webinar, intended to help the field move toward some model for evaluation. A presentation and workshop at the next PAN Preconference will continue the discussion.

As a part of PAN's efforts, educators, administrators, and students at Virginia Tech collaborated on a classroom effort

to begin to form models for evaluation. In the class, students worked in teams to evaluate current and ongoing projects within the public art department of Arlington County.

"The conversation was very rich," says Angela Adams, Arlington's public art administrator. "The class came up with some very good ideas for keeping the public engaged and involved." For example, one recommendation was to include a temporary public art project on the site of a permanent work that was slow in getting completed.

Such efforts to maximize engagement, says Adams, help public art programs like hers "get out ahead of budget talks," rather than react to annual budget reviews. "The arts have always been in a position of defending themselves and explaining what we do. Effective evaluation is just the latest version of this effort. It's important to be able to communicate why public art is a valuable part of local government that adds quality to the variety of services offered."

According to Fenner, the most promising models come from architecture and urban design, and include measurement of increased real estate value, as well as surveys. Additionally, newly launched digital tools have the potential to contribute to evaluation strategies, she says. For instance, artworks using a digital interface (a cell phone number, for example) instead of a traditional plaque capture quantifiable data about the "users" of a particular work. —Joseph Hart

THE POWER OF IMPERMANENCE

With funding for permanent works on the decline, temporary public art installations and creative reuse efforts are on the rise—and they're making a difference

BY JEFF HUEBNER



THIS PAGE: Michelle Acuff's *Sarragale* is one of many works that have been installed in empty storefronts through the Tacoma Arts Commission's Spaceworks program.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Havel Ruck Projects turned a decrepit Houston house into *Fifth Ward Jam*.

In late 2010, movers transported a small, decrepit house from one part of Houston's Fifth Ward district to another, setting the condemned domicile onto an open lot on Lyons Ave. By the following summer, Houston-based artists Dan Havel and Dean Ruck were hard at work, reconstructing—or rather deconstructing—the humble pink abode into what Ruck calls a temporary “performative sculpture” that, among other things, mined the musical legacy of its historically African-American and increasingly Latino neighborhood, seat of famed chitlin’ circuit promoter Don Robey’s empire in the 1940s and ‘50s.

The artist duo, also called Havel Ruck Projects, used the house’s siding as well as scavenged and recycled building materials—along with their “improvisational cutting” technique—to repurpose the structure into a veritable shingle factory explosion with a front-porch stage, where blues guitar great Texas Johnny Brown and other musicians performed when the house reopened in October 2011.

But there’s a deeper level to *Fifth Ward Jam*, a project of the Houston Arts Alliance and the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation, giving it a more poetic dimension. The recontextualized home calls up the low-income community’s housing struggles and successes, its cycles of decline and renewal—a metaphor for how local history and community are continually erased and remade. The architectural intervention, Ruck told me, was “an act of community activism, a hopeful spark to a potential flame in a neighborhood that badly needs it due to decades of neglect and economic stagnation.”

While the newly developed park is permanent and continues to be improved, the house is a temporary project that will be decommissioned in the fall of 2013. Yet although the structure itself will disappear, its impact will remain. “What started out as a temporary art installation has created this new, wonderful gathering spot for the community, where we lack destinations,” says Fifth Ward CRC president Kathy Payton. “It’s created a sense of destination and place.”

There’s no question that public art can help revitalize cities and communities as well as enrich lives. But temporary projects, in distilling the characteristics and histories of specific places, spaces, and landscapes, can also continue to have spiritual and economic impact after they’re gone, perhaps effecting permanent change.

With placemaking projects, “there is productive thinking in terms of acknowledging that culture has a role in the fabric of cities,” says Nato Thompson, chief curator of the New York-based nonprofit Creative Time, which produces temporary, site-specific public art projects. But, he cautioned, works shouldn’t be driven by economic or “passive entertainment” interests. “Is it possible that a project is super-interesting and good for the neighborhood, that negatively impacts the economy? I say, sure! Not all good things have a good effect on the economy.”

Activating the City

“I don’t think temporary work is so much the be-all and end-all of defining place, but it’s a fantastic way to start to get people to pay attention to otherwise ignored space,” says Tacoma (Wash.) Arts Administrator Amy McBride, who’s gained a national reputation for her innovative approaches to place-based public art in this city of 200,000.

McBride has launched popular Tacoma Arts Commission initiatives like Spaceworks, in which artists “activate” empty storefronts and other unused spaces with installations; and fall 2011’s *Temporal Terminus*, an exhibit of eight works along the still-evolving downtown Prairie Line Trail, a half-mile-long pedestrian/bicycle path that was the western terminus of



THIS PAGE: Photo courtesy Ed Schipul / photostream / flickr.com. OPPOSITE PAGE: Photo courtesy Geydafi's photostream / flickr.com.



Northern Pacific's 1873 transcontinental railroad. The exhibit was the kickoff to an NEA-funded public-art plan by urban designer Todd Bressi and Thoughtbarn (Lucy Begg and Robert Gay) that will include curated temporary and site-specific permanent art. Its signature piece, sited on Tacoma's University of Washington campus, was the Austin-based Thoughtbarn's *Ghost Prairie*, a 25-foot-long patch of glow-in-the-dark grasslands, a reference to the trail's past and future landscaped use.

Another advantage of place-based installations, says Thompson, is that works can be timely in a way that more permanent installations cannot. "You can be topical," he says. "It doesn't necessarily have to be political, but things that are on people's minds." An example of this is the Creative Time-produced annual 9/11 World Trade Center remembrance *Tribute in Light*. "It also gives you some freedom in terms of controversial content. With temporary—it's gone!"

Budget concerns may drive the need for temporary work, McBride acknowledges, but there can be positive outcomes. Like other public art administrators and placemakers, she realizes that one of the hallmarks of creating a vital community place is that not everything may work the first time, and tem-

ABOVE: Visitors enjoying Elsewhere, a "living museum" in Greensboro, North Carolina. LEFT: Jeremy Gregory, Diane Hansen, and Ed Kroupa's *Envision* and Thoughtbarn's *Ghost Prairie* mark the Prairie Line Trail, a defunct rail line in Tacoma being turned into a park.

porary public art functions as a "testing ground." It allows artists and administrators "to work out some bugs" while working with partners, she says.

Moreover, while temporary works may be ephemeral, their placemaking impact can be long-term. "You have a memory of that place in a different way than you ever would've because of the art work that was there," McBride explains.

This shift in perception is a central outcome of Art in Odd Places, which has organized an annual thematic public art event along the length of Fourteenth Street in Manhattan (from Avenue C to the Hudson River) since 2005, proving that ephemeral interventions can also activate a streetscape's special character. Begun by Ed Woodham and a group of artists at the 1996 Cultural Olympiad in Atlanta, AiOP presents an annual festival of visual and performance art in, well, odd and unexpected places along the vital crosstown corridor. The idea is to get passers-by to think about and see their familiar surroundings in a fresh way, a reminder that a truly civic space depends on chance happenings, a diverse cultural mix, and social interaction as well as free and creative expression.

Last year's festival—the largest yet—took place the first 10 days in October, a couple weeks after the beginning of the Occupy Wall Street protests, tying in the poetic with the political. With the theme of "Ritual," the artistic occupation's guest curators, Kalia Brooks of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts and Trinidad Fombella of El Museo del Barrio, selected over 60 international projects involving acts of sacred and secular ceremony. This included group foot cleansings, randomly placed ceramic deities, rose petal walkways, and *Tree Kisses*, in which Brooklyn-based Mary Ivy Martin applied heavy lipstick and kissed selected trees (a few times a day) along the street, leaving red traces—an act of nature communion in the dense urban jungle.

ABOVE: Photo courtesy Elsewhere Artist Collaborative photostream / Flickr.com. LEFT: Photo by Robert Gay.



The Art of Creative Reuse

A novel and sustainable way of creating temporary work—and community—that contributes to a distinctive sense of place has brought international artists to a block in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina, transforming a three-story former thrift store into a center of creative reuse culture. Elsewhere, as it's called, is a "living museum," an experimental studio, a life-sized curiosity cabinet and object installation, as well as an ongoing art collaborative, which has helped revitalize this city of 275,000.

Opened as a furniture store in 1939, the Carolina Sales Company morphed into an army and fabric surplus store, and then a sprawling, two-storefront second-hand shop, reflecting the tastes of its owner, Sylvia Gray. (Greensboro was once a center of furniture and textile production.) Over time, Gray became more of a hoarder than a seller, and her stores' goods developed into an idiosyncratic collection, a kind of archive of twentieth-century material excess—a cluttered wonderland of stuff.

Sylvia died in 1997, leaving the store boarded up. But in 2003 her grandson George Scheer and collaborator Stephanie Sherman, recent graduates of the University of Pennsylvania, along with two friends from Michigan, moved to Greensboro, began excavating the decades of amassed bric-a-brac, and created the nonprofit Elsewhere, a place where nothing was for sale and nothing could leave the store. In a residency program started in 2005, artists are invited to come for three- to five-week periods and create public pieces using (or responding to) the collection, bringing new meaning to the environment every time its works are re-created.

"Instead of selling it all and clearing it out," says Scheer, "we used it as a way of building networks and relationships among artists across the country, around the world, and at the same time to produce this space that has a real economic and cultural value to the town."

In Chicago, artist Theaster Gates and his nonprofit Rebuild Foundation are also making creative use of disused buildings and giving back to the community through cultural redevelopment. Gates bought several abandoned properties in 2009, and used recycled building materials to transform them into a local gathering place for discussions, performances, and communal eating as well as other activities. On the July day I visited the Dorchester Project, a rehabbed home/studio located in two neighboring buildings on the South Side of Chicago, part of it was being used as a day care center. In *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, a project in dis-place- and re-place-making, Gates extended the gesture to Europe.

Last year, Gates worked with a team of newly trained unemployed African-American men in Chicago to dismantle the interior of another decrepit house he'd bought across the street from Dorchester. The gutted property was renovated into the Black Cinema House. But the salvaged materials were shipped to Kassel, Germany, where another team of unemployed workers used them to restore the abandoned Huguenot House, itself built by migrant laborers in the 1820s. The building became a talk, performance, and video venue during this year's DOCUMENTA (13).

The fate of the Kassel house is uncertain. Most of its materials are being shipped back to the United States where they

ABOVE: Photo courtesy New Gupta Gallery. BELOW: Photo by Tanja Jurgenen.



ABOVE: In 2009 Theaster Gates bought several Chicago properties and created the Dorchester Project. BELOW: The Black Monks of Mississippi at Gates's *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, made from salvaged Chicago materials for dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany.



will create a new environment at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago next spring, and then perhaps be reinvented in other places. As Gates recently said in an interview with dOCUMENTA's artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Can an artist or an art project amplify the value of these buildings so that people want to take care of them again?" Good question. As with all temporary work, we'll have to wait and see.

JEFF HUEBNER is a Chicago-based art writer and journalist who writes frequently on public art. He is co-author, with Olivia Gude, of *Urban Art Chicago: A Guide to Community Murals, Mosaics, and Sculptures*.