

Capstone Proposal

Public Art, Public Landscapes, Public Decisions

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Abstract

Public art can serve as a vital expression of collective identity and pride. At its best, it can support social cohesion and create distinctive neighborhoods and communities. Public art can be a prominent representation of the identity of a place. However, at its worst, it can be no more than an appropriation of space and power. Controversial public art works, such as *Tilted Arc* in Manhattan, and the *Rocky Balboa* statue in Philadelphia, illustrate the complex power dynamics inherent in determining the decision-making “public.” Increasingly self-referential art over the past century has led to art being perceived as a specialist’s realm, therefore effectively excluding the general public from any decision-making role in public art. The public art process as it stands tends to marginalize the lay community. Yet, public art is intended for the general public, or a specific population within the public realm, and therefore must be relevant to that population. Involving the public in decision-making regarding public art is crucial to generating art that is truly public. This study will facilitate community participation in decision-making about art in an attempt to generate art that is relevant and legible to the public, thereby creating more “accessible” art; as well as by providing empowerment and education for the community, thus creating a better informed overall audience.

Introduction

Purpose of Research

Public art can serve as a vital expression of collective identity and pride. At its best, it can support social cohesion and create distinctive neighborhoods and communities. Public art can be a prominent representation of the identity of a place. However, at its worst, it can be no more than a “preemption of public spaces by an art that is indifferent, if not hostile, to human needs” (Danto,). Controversial public art works, such as *Tilted Arc* in Manhattan, and the *Rocky Balboa* statue in Philadelphia, illustrate the complex power dynamics inherent in determining the decision-making “public.” Increasingly self-referential art over the past century has led to art being perceived as a specialist’s realm, therefore effectively excluding the general public from any decision-making role in public art. The public art process as it stands tends to marginalize the community. Yet, public art is intended for the general public, or a specific population within the public realm, and therefore must be relevant to that population. Involving the public in decision-making regarding public art is crucial to generating art that is truly public.

This study is an attempt to involve the most immediately affected public in the decision-making process for a public art scheme for the proposed Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum in Syracuse, New York. For the purposes of this research, “most immediately affected” is defined as those individuals residing in the neighborhoods surrounding the site. This project is framed around the following question: Can community participation in decision-making about art be beneficial by generating art that is relevant and legible to the public, thereby creating more “accessible” art; as well as by providing empowerment and education for the community, thus creating a better informed overall audience?

Literature Review

Defining Public Art

Public art is generally defined as art which is located in a public space, freely accessible to the population at large. Public art can be manifest in many forms, such as: sculpture, monuments, murals, fountains, or functional amenities such as seating, lights, and signs. It can be a permanent installation or a temporary intervention. Penny Balkin Back describes public art as follows:

“Public art can express community values, enhance our environment, transform a landscape, heighten our awareness, or question our assumptions. Placed in public sites, this art is there for everyone, a form of collective community expression. Public art is a reflection of how we see the world—the artist’s response to our time and place combined with our own sense of who we are” (Bach, 1992).

According to Miwon Kwon, an art historian and theorist teaching at UCLA, public art can be categorized by three different paradigms. In *Public Art and Urban Identities*, she delineates these three paradigms as follows:

“(1) **art in public places**, typically a modernist abstract sculpture placed outdoors to "decorate" or "enrich" urban spaces, especially plaza areas fronting federal buildings or corporate office towers;

(2) **art as public spaces**, less object-oriented and more site-conscious art that sought greater integration between art, architecture, and the landscape through artists' collaboration with members of the urban managerial class (such as architects, landscape architects, city planners, urban designers, and city administrators), in the designing of permanent urban (re)development projects such as parks, plazas, buildings, promenades, neighborhoods, etc.; and more recently,

(3) **art in the public interest** (or "new genre public art"), often temporary city-based programs focusing on social issues rather than the built environment that involve collaborations with marginalized social groups (rather than design professionals), such as the homeless, battered women, urban youths, AIDS patients, prisoners, and which strives toward the

development of politically-conscious community events or programs.”
(Kwon, 1997).

This project is intended to synthesize the last two of these approaches based on an underlying premise that public art is not made accessible simply by locating it in public spaces. Issues of legibility and social relevance effectively privilege some viewers over others, creating an inequity in accessibility.

Public Art as an Expression of Power

Although public art is generally viewed as an innocuous and beneficial contribution to communities, it is fraught with dynamics of power. Issues such as who pays for it, who selects it, who expresses it, and who lives with it can divide a community and leave many feeling disenfranchised. This was precisely the case when Richard Serra’s work, *Tilted Arc*, was installed in Manhattan’s Federal Plaza in 1981. The controversy surrounding this sculpture has become “a touchstone for debates over the role of public art in America” (Senie, 2001) (for other controversial art see Rice, 1992; Finkelpearl, 2000; Griswold, 1992). The sculpture is of cor-ten steel, 120 feet long, 12 feet high, 2 1/2 inches thick, and 72 tons, bent into an arc, and situated so as to span across an urban plaza. Those who worked in the buildings surrounding the plaza responded with outright hostility to the work. Within months of its installation, a petition demanding its removal was signed by 1300 federal employees working in buildings surrounding the sculpture. The sculpture was perceived as a barrier, a disruption, and an assault on the community. After exhausting other means, the opponents of *Tilted Arc* took the case to court in 1985. They argued that the integrity of the artist’s sculpture did not supercede the needs of the community. During the hearing, Representative Ted Weiss asked,

“But what of those who live and work nearby? The sculpture cuts a huge swath across the center of the plaza, dividing it in two and acting as a barrier to the building’s main doorways. Access to the building is awkward

and confusing, and the normal walking patterns of those who enter and exit the building are disrupted.”

The artist fired back, stating that,

“When the government invited me to propose a sculpture for the plaza it asked for a permanent, site-specific sculpture. As the phrase implies, a site-specific sculpture is one that is conceived and created in relation to the particular conditions of a specific site, and only to those conditions.

To remove *Tilted Arc*, therefore, would be to destroy it . . .”

Opponents responded to this argument by asserting that Richard Serra’s sculpture had destroyed a pre-existing artistic creation and had no more right to preservation of artistic integrity than the original design. According to Judge Dominick DiCarlo’s testimony,

“We don't have to guess why the iron wall was placed in the plaza. Those responsible have told us. It was to alter and dislocate the decorative function of the plaza, to redefine the space, to change the viewers' experience of that plaza. Simply put, their intention was to destroy the plaza's original artistic concept, the concept of its architects.

To object to the removal of the iron wall on the basis of an honest, moral right to preserve the integrity of the work is astounding, since the sculptor's intent was to destroy another artistic creation . . .”

The poignant testimony of Joseph Liebman clarifies the center of the debate.

“Regardless of the thoughtfulness and artistic accomplishment of its creator, *Tilted Arc* fails to add significant value to the plaza. The arc has condemned us to lead emptier lives. The children, the bands, and I no longer visit the plaza. Instead, the arc divides space against itself. Whatever artistic value the arc may have does not justify the disruption of the plaza and our lives.”

Eventually, the opponents to *Tilted Arc* won the case, and in 1989 the sculpture was dismantled and removed.

The case of *Tilted Arc* illustrates some of the complex power issues surrounding public art. The debate was based on conflicting perceptions of the hierarchy between artistic expression and community needs. Art is perceived as inviolate once it is installed, and

this has been furthered by the introduction of the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990. This legal statute protects works of art from removal or destruction, within certain parameters. However, both the needs of the community and the integrity of the artistic expression can be protected by using a more inclusive selection process. The ultimate disposition of the *Tilted Arc* case is a result of a public art process that did not solicit community input.

Alternative Approaches

The process used in selecting *Tilted Arc* was an expert-driven approach. This approach tends to utilize teams of experts to make decisions for laypeople, who are supposed to be inadequately qualified to make the decisions themselves. In this case, a team of three art professionals were sanctioned by a public agency, the General Services Administration (GSA), to represent the nearly 10,000 people living and working in the buildings immediately surrounding Federal Plaza. Clearly, this approach did not serve them well.

The debacles over *Tilted Arc* and other equally controversial public arts projects, have led to a more participatory process in the selection of public art over the past decade. According to Marie Gee, a visual artist working in Santa Fe,

“Whether it's a public sculpture, an environmental installation, a mural, a performance or a media project, presenters now agree that when people's lives are being impacted by something, they deserve to have a say before that impact occurs” (Gee, 1995)

In addition, percent-for-arts programs have been initiated by over 300 agencies throughout the nation, generating over 200 million dollars per year to be committed to public art (Brown & Rubin, 2000). Therefore, the public is not simply the audience for public art, but also the financial patrons, which doubles the impact of public art. Artists, designers, and theorists are increasingly recognizing the crucial role of engaging the public in a dialogue in order to shape public environments which are truly “places” for people (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995; Whyte, 1980; Project for Public Spaces, Shared

Vision). Berkeley, CA and Albuquerque, NM are both representative of the many cities employing community participation in public art (Berkeley Civic Arts Commission, 2004; City of Albuquerque, 2004). These cities require community participation as an integral component of the public art selection process. Community representation on the selection committee is required, information about the project is actively disseminated to the community, and input is solicited.

Relevance to Proposed Study

The above-mentioned research offers valuable insights and models for the development of a public arts scheme for the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum. Public participation in the art scheme for the project is crucial to the long-term success of the plan. Research done in the community surrounding Onondaga Park indicates that some members of the community are suspicious of “outside entities” planning the project. In a focused interview, one community member reported that,

“Every time some outside entity has decided this type of project should be done, they always come about it the same way. Participants are always ignored...regardless of residents...one of the hurdles you need to get around. They never deal with the ethnic groups. These organizations do what they want to do and that’s that.” (Maxwell School Consulting Team, 2001).

Another recommended that in order to involve the community, organizers need to:

“Make the park *their* park.” Yet another asserted that project organizers should,

“keep the community informed about what they are doing since it impacts the area in which they live” (Maxwell, 2001).

These remarks clearly indicate that involving community members in decisions about projects located in their neighborhood is necessary.

Site Background

This project will be framed within the context of the proposed Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum Master Plan for Syracuse, New York. The master plan was developed at the behest of members of the neighboring Strathmore community, and is located within Onondaga Park, a designated Syracuse Historic District. The park consists of two areas: Upper Onondaga and Lower Onondaga Park. These two areas are separated by a sharp drop in topography between the Upper and Lower portions.

Upper Onondaga Park is the larger of the two sections, and is characterized by a man-made lake, an island bandstand, strolling paths, athletic fields, a swimming pool, a picnic grove, and a soon to be rehabilitated 1913 firehouse. This portion of the park is surrounded by an upper-middle class neighborhood, known as Strathmore. Strathmore is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, and has been nominated for the designation. Many Strathmore residents are actively involved in the Onondaga Park Association, a neighborhood based organization serving a stewardship role for the park.

Lower Onondaga Park is characterized by a stone bridge arch and spray fountain, sunken gardens and grottos with pools and fountains, a neo-classical greenhouse, athletic fields and a playground, original trees planted in 1907, with Onondaga Creek running along the park's edge. The surrounding neighborhood is quite different from the Strathmore community. This is an area of lower socio-economic status, marked by vacancy and some visible deterioration. The community residents have been more difficult to engage in the process of planning the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum, and will have to be specifically targeted for inclusion in this study.

There are several sites within the proposed Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum Master Plan which are at more fully developed stages of design. These sites are recommended as well-suited for the purpose of this study. Because they have been more fully developed, these sites offer more information with which the community can work in establishing appropriate themes and expressions. These sites are: the Willow

Biomass exhibit, the greenhouse area, several botanical areas, the firehouse environs, and the Kirk Park extension of the Arboretum.

Goals and Objectives

Goal One: To generate art addressing themes which are relevant to community members

- Objective 1:** To work with municipal and Southwest Community Center Staff to identify and invite the participation of neighborhood citizens with an interest in telling the neighborhood's stories.
- Objective 2:** To hold a meeting with interested community members to generate themes/narratives to be explored by artists.
- Objective 3:** To include community members as representatives on the Public Art Steering Committee for the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum.
- Objective 4:** To include community members in the charrette process which generates artistic expressions of community determined themes.

Goal Two: To involve the community in the selection of public art

- Objective 1:** To facilitate the community in selecting themes for public art
- Objective 2:** To present the full range of charrette responses to the community Seeking feedback regarding their preferred approaches
- Objective 3:** To utilize the community's feedback in determining which themes and approaches are further developed

Goal Three: To elicit art which contributes to the overall design context in which it is situated (pursuant to the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum Master Plan)

Goal Four: To provide opportunities for education and empowerment

Goal Five: To use the study process as a catalyst in generating an ongoing Public Art Committee of interested and involved community members representing both the Strathmore and the Lower Onondaga neighborhoods

- Objective 1:** To target the Lower Onondaga residents by working with Southwest Community Center staff to identify and invite citizens from the neighborhood.
- Objective 2:** To encourage communication between residents of Strathmore and the Lower Onondaga residents by structuring the committee as a component part of the Onondaga Botanical Committee (made up primarily of Strathmore residents).
- Objective 3:** To provide recommendations and a precedent process for making future decisions about art in the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum.

Methods

I. Community Participation

The keystone of this project is the involvement of local community members in selecting themes, approaches, and preferred expressions of public art in the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum. Accessing residents willing to participate is a difficult proposition. It will be necessary to utilize existing organizations in the area to identify possible participants. This will be accomplished through the following steps:

- A letter introducing the project will be sent to key organizational administrators including:
 - ❖ Jesse Dowdell, Southwest Community Center
 - ❖ Brian Nolan, Corcoran High School
 - ❖ Paul Pflanz, Onondaga Park Association
 - ❖ Walter Dixie, Jubilee Homes

The letter will be sent on Syracuse Department of Parks letterhead and will be signed jointly by the Parks Commissioner, Patrick Driscoll, and by the Major Professor, Emanuel Carter.

- The public meetings for generating relevant community themes and providing feedback will be held at the Southwest Community Center and advertised through the Center.
- Corcoran High School is the local school for these neighborhoods, and will be actively involved in the charretting process through the school art department. This ensures the integral participation of local youth.
- Several artists who are neighborhood residents and associated with the Southwest Community Center have been identified and will be approached to participate in the charrette.

While there is no way to guarantee complete representation of the diverse population surrounding the proposed Onondaga Botanical Garden and

Arboretum, these steps can exponentially expand the communities' awareness of the project, and thereby access to decision-making roles.

II. Charrette

Charrettes are short, intense periods of “brainstorming” solutions to particular site or design problems. Generally, participants are broken into small, mixed groups made up of both professionals and laypeople. This format helps to encourage participation by all members of the team. All the resulting ideas are considered, even seemingly outlandish ideas, and used to generate further possibilities and stimulate creativity. The mix of professionals and laypeople provides the expertise required to consider practical necessities, as well as insights into local community needs and immediate feedback regarding potential community responses. The charrette will be approached as follows:

- Participants will include a mix of Corcoran High School art students, community artists, and laypeople from the community.
- The charrette will be facilitated by the study investigator (Heather Carrington).
- Artists will be divided between groups and will serve as team facilitators
- The charrette process will be assigned as a project to the students by their art teacher, and will take place over the course of several weeks.

Process Outline

1. Establish a list of artists and administrators to approach
2. Contact administrators
3. Contact artists
4. Meet with steering committee of administrators, artists, and art teachers at Corcoran to establish parameters for charrette scheduling and format.
5. Work with Southwest Community Center staff to identify and invite the participation of neighborhood citizens with an interest in telling the neighborhood's stories.
6. Facilitate a meeting with the steering committee and the community team. This meeting will be used to generate themes/narratives to be explored by the artists and potential sites will be discussed.
7. Lock in the schedule for the charrette assignment.
8. Complete the charrette.
9. Committee reviews charrette submissions.
10. Present full range of responses to the community. Discuss community preferences. Discuss the categories of responses present, and evaluate preferred approaches.
11. Committee uses community feedback to make decisions regarding which themes and approaches should be moved forward.
12. Committee decides where exhibition of results is mounted. (Multiple exhibitions, simultaneous or rotating)

Products

Process Report

A chronicle of the process used to generate public art expressions for the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum will be submitted in report form at the conclusion of the project. This report will include: a timeline as chronological record of the activities involved, investigator observations on the process, anecdotal reflections, and results of informal interviews with participants. The report will also contain an evaluation of the process, clarifying its strengths and weaknesses, implications, and recommendations for future guidelines.

Public Art Addendum to the Master Plan

A Public Art Addendum to the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum Master Plan will be compiled at the conclusion of this study. This document will catalogue the full range of responses to the charrette, with an emphasis on the community's preferred responses. It will include a complete list of suggested themes, and categories of preferred themes. The various approaches or modes of expression will also be documented and categorized, again highlighting community preferences.

The general role of public art in the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum will be discussed, and recommendations for future directions will be made. The document will also contain projected next steps in terms of phasing, funding, and implementation. This will serve as a roadmap for the ongoing Onondaga Botanical Garden Public Arts Committee, which is to be the final product of this study.

Onondaga Botanical Garden Public Arts Committee

At the conclusion of this project, it is hoped that the assembled steering committee consisting of artists, administrators, and community members will continue to play an integral role in decision-making regarding art in the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum. With the skills and relationships developed and refined throughout the course of this project, this committee could ideally go on to seek funding and implementation of the resulting public art scheme. Using the Public Art Addendum as a guide, the committee could replicate the process in order to continue to accommodate the representation of new voices and new stories in the community through public art at the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum.

Schedule

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April
Literature Review								
Write Proposal								
Contact Administrators								
Maintain Project Log								
Public Meeting – develop themes								
Charrette								
Present Charrette results								
Compile Addendum								
Final Product								

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