

Five Lessons Learned for a Successful Public Art Project

BY PATRICIA WALSH

Community engagement is a key component to a successful public art project.

PUBLIC ART CAN PLAY A UNIQUE ROLE in a place by providing a platform to explore community identity, engage the local arts and cultural sector, offer a space for civic dialogue, and enhance appreciation for art—to name just a few of its benefits. The process and outcomes for each public art project and program vary from city to city, town to town, community to community—however there are some fundamental lessons that have been learned over the years by public art professionals working in the field. Here are some lessons I have found to be true no matter the size of the budget, the final outcome of the project, or the community where the artwork lives.

1. The Public Comes First in Public Art: Community engagement is a key component to a successful public art project. The engagement process can vary from a broad public meeting to a community-based committee or public contribution to the creation of the artwork. Whatever is the case for your project, it is important to ensure that the community is providing input into the final outcome. Their engagement in development of a public artwork can equate to the long-term success of the project. Part of this success requires having an artist who is open to working with the community when developing a project. How the artist works with the community can vary from direct engagement to conceptual input in the design.

The need for community input was evident during my time as collection manager with the San Jose public art program. As this position required field work, it was clearly visible when an artwork was loved by the community. I remember cleaning graffiti from a beloved mosaic dog sculpture, and the outrage that the community felt from the damage done to the work.



Typically, while working in the field few members of the public approached me, but during the time I spent cleaning that sculpture I had several community members come to me and express how upset they were about the damage. They told me about their experience working with the artist and how they contributed pieces of porcelain and tile from their own homes for the mosaic. This type of dedication depicts the role that public art can play in the development of civic pride and care for one's environment, and how the community's engagement can help ensure the care of the artwork.

2. The Process is Equally as Important as the Outcome:

We all love to see the end of a project, and having an object that emulates the community can be a testament to the work accomplished during the process. How a public artwork is developed and implemented can have much bearing on the long-term success of a project. Take the example listed above. How would the reaction of the community have changed if they did not have an attachment to the work? What if the artist

Arts engagement with seniors as a part of “New Hampshire Ave: This Is a Place To...” in Takoma Park, Maryland.

PHOTO BY BEN CARVER

and artwork were selected from a catalogue and placed in the community without notice or engagement? Would there have been outrage toward the graffiti or perhaps instead a call for the removal of the artwork? Without a process to engage the community, to select an artist who can work with the public and is open to input from the public, the project, though well-intentioned, may never be embraced by the community.

This lesson is one of the most important I have learned over my ten-year career—hire a public art professional when embarking on a public art project.

3. Plan for the Care and Maintenance of a Public Artwork:

Over the years it has become more and more apparent that public artworks, like all public assets and facilities, need a plan and funding for long-term care. Planning for the care of the artwork can include annual maintenance, regular conservation efforts, and plans for repairs and other damage that can occur throughout the life cycle of the artwork. As mentioned above, even if an artwork is well cared for by the community, it can still be victim to damage. Hence, another consideration when looking at the care of an artwork is the expected lifespan. For the artwork mentioned above there was already a plan in place and precautions taken prior to the inflicted damage. Some of the precautions included covering the artwork in a sealant that worked as a graffiti abatement coating, consulting with conservators to develop a plan for the care of the artwork, and securing an emergency fund for artworks that may need triage work outside of their regularly scheduled maintenance.

- 4. Hire a Professional:** Community engagement, artist's management, fabrication, site installation, maintenance—much goes into the planning and implementation of a public artwork. There have been years of growth and understanding of best practices in the field of public art. This lesson is one of the most important I have learned over my ten-year career—hire a public art professional when embarking on a public art project. From understanding the funding to artist's management and the legal aspects of commissioning an artwork, there are professional consultants who can help you with your project.

An additional note on working with artists: Seasoned public art professionals can work with artists with varied degrees of field experience. This experience can be beneficial in a number of ways including training local artists to work in the public art field and attracting successful artists to complete new works.

5. Controversies are Opportunities: It is true that public art can be a lightning rod for discourse and controversy, however these issues are not reasons to shy away from a community engagement process or avoid public art altogether. It is an opportunity to further connect with the community and understand their issues. Each public art project is unique because of the collective efforts put forth to make the projects happen. Controversies can occur on multiple levels from community reactions and interdepartmental communication challenges to political movement from elected bodies. These challenges can kick up some dust, but know that you are not alone and this is part of the process.

For more than 15 years, the public art field has had a national ally from Americans for the Arts in the form of the Public Art Network (PAN). PAN is the only national network of public art professionals in the United States dedicated to advancing public art programs and projects through advocacy, policy, and information resources to further art and design in our built environment. Public art professionals have been working in and building the field for decades. PAN develops professional services for the broad array of individuals and organizations engaged in the diverse field of public art. To learn more about PAN please visit www.AmericansfortheArts.org/PAN and feel free to reach out to us at pan@artsusa.org.

Patricia Walsh is the public art programs manager at Americans for the Arts. Her background includes the conservation and maintenance of a public artwork collection, working on community engagement initiatives, and managing temporary public art projects.