

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

Putting the Public in Public Art

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Public art is a new phenomenon in modern terms. To achieve truly “public art” we must understand how it differs from “art in public places.”

Since the early 20th century, “art” has been defined as self-assertion by an artist--the individual’s inquiry as sculptor or painter. These artist’s inquiries, thrust into the public realm, are what most of the public refer to as public art.

Alexander Calder’s *Flamingo* and other artworks like it, are often large-scale sculptures--gallery or museum pieces simply too big to fit inside--that have little or no relationship to their location. More problematic is that these artworks have little relevance to or understanding by the public for whose benefit they have been so placed.



Calder, *Flamingo*, Federal Plaza, Chicago. An example of genre of individual expression in a public space, where the organic profile and vermilion color of the steel sculpture serve as a counterfoil to the black geometries of buildings by Mies van der Rohe. Photograph: Commissioned by the U. S. General Services Administration, Art in Architecture Program.

Public Artist Jack Mackie’s cast bronze inlaid *Dance Steps on Broadway*, integrated into a neighborhood streetscape revitalization project funded through the Seattle Arts Commission and Seattle Engineering Department. Photograph: Art on File



Created by the artist and solely expressing the artist’s voice and intent, these works come with their meaning predetermined, and thus suffer no loss of meaning if moved to another site. These private artworks in our plazas are “art in public places.” But it takes more than a public location to make “public art.”

Thoughtful community involvement precedes, accompanies, and follows every public artwork. The citizens participate in the selection of the project and the artist. And the artist consults directly and frequently with the “owners” or users of a public space during development of the artwork. Such a process is inclusive and empowers voices in a community not otherwise heard.

The product is art whose content and context cross generational, ethnic, and class lines, and thus communicates with a broad audience. The artwork does not speak solely in the artist's voice, but translates into its audience's language. While the community does not say specifically what the art will be, their voices about a site--their experience of place--inspire the images and content of the artwork.

A particularly public avenue for public art is that which meets a public infrastructure need. Artists now design highway soundwalls and airport pavers, transit station canopies and tree grates, utility hatchcovers and screening for garages, gates and railings that reference local legends and histories, fauna and flora, symbols and aspirations. Such art thus presents a voice of local place, local experience and local vision.



The Prince, a mobile by Nashville artist Adrienne Outlaw, is in the children's area of the Main Library downtown on Church Street. Photograph (Top): Gary Layda; Photograph (Bottom), 2004 Raven Hardison



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