

PUBLIC ART IN NEW YORK CITY

Sister City Program Public Art Summit
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Public art is an integral part of New York City's urban landscape. In a city known for its dynamism, artists are challenged to make works of art that are practical within the realities of construction, and that respond to the needs and values of New York's diverse and changing communities.

Public art has changed dramatically over the past several decades. In the early part of the nineteenth century, traditional monuments, such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens' tribute to General William Sherman in Central Park



(shown right), defined the type of public art commissioned and sited throughout the City. The concept of public art evolved in the 1930s when the Works Projects Administration, established by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to combat widespread unemployment, commissioned thousands of artists to create public artwork that represented their own ideas and creativity. More than 10,000 drawings, paintings and sculptured works were produced through the WPA, many of which are still visible in public buildings throughout the City. In 1982, as the City emerged from a financial crisis, Mayor Edward I. Koch initiated the Percent for Art law,

which was then passed by the City Council and put into effect in 1983. Administered through the Department of Cultural Affairs, the program directs one percent of the City's budget for eligible construction projects toward funding public artworks in public schools, courthouses, day care centers, police precincts, firehouses, hospitals, transportation terminals, detention centers, parks, and other sites throughout the City.

Percent for Art

To date, the Percent for Art program has commissioned nearly 170 artists who have completed 189 projects at City-owned buildings. Fifty new Percent for Art projects are currently in progress. By their very nature, these public artworks serve as both landmarks and expressions of the communities they inhabit, and allow New Yorkers to appreciate art outside the traditional museum or gallery setting.



In collaboration with other City agencies such as the Department of Education, Libraries, the Fire Department and the Department of Design and Construction, the program commissions artists from all

regions and backgrounds and brings them into the design process of site-specific projects. Artists experience both the benefits and challenges of



working closely with architects on large-scale projects and play a meaningful role in the creation of a functioning building. For example, Siah Armajani's *Lighthouse and Bridge on Staten Island* (shown above) is a functioning pedestrian bridge that connects a ferry terminal with the neighborhood around it, but also serves as a tribute to the lighthouse that stood on the site from the 1860s to the 1970s. Ursula Von Rydingsvard's *katul katul* (shown left) is another example of site-specific work commissioned by the Percent for Art program. The abstract sculpture is suspended five floors above a 40x40 atrium at the Queens Family Courthouse. The Percent for Art program commissions many artists who are new to the realm of public art and helps them realize their designs with materials that will enhance civic architecture throughout the life of a building.

City Agencies and Public Art

Following the example of the City's Percent for Art legislation, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) established a similar program in 1985 for its capital construction projects, Arts for Transit. This program aims to encourage use of public transit and enhance the experiences of its riders by siting permanent artwork in subways and transit centers throughout the City. The development of Arts for Transit has been a symbol of the general

resurgence of New York's transit system and has created a more comfortable and enjoyable environment for transit riders.

Arts for Transit projects often reflect the history and character of the



neighborhoods in which they are located.

Faith Ringgold's *Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines (Downtown and Uptown)* (shown left), located at the 125th

Street subway station, pays tribute to the famous African Americans who lived in this neighborhood. Another Arts for Transit piece which references its location is *For Want of a Nail...* (shown right), created



by

the Arts for Transit Design Team, and located at the 81st Street subway station, just outside the American Museum of Natural History. Originally installed in 1999, this is a work in continual progress.

The City's Department of Parks and Recreation also partners with

individual artists and organizations to showcase both temporary and permanent projects in parks throughout the City. One piece resulting from this



collaboration is Alice Aycock's *East River Roundabout* (shown right), an

80-foot long aluminum sculpture that was created as part of an initiative to transform a defunct garbage transfer facility into a public plaza.

Federal Government and Public Art



The General Services Administration's Art-in-Architecture Program provides the federal government with the opportunity to commission permanent public art for new federal buildings. Over the past ten years,

design excellence has been a priority in federal construction and has improved citizens' experiences in bureaucratic institutions. One example is Maya Lin's sculpture, *Sounding Stones* (shown above), at Federal Courthouse Plaza in Lower Manhattan. Water bubbles around and through four black blocks, creating what some viewers have described as a "Zen-like" experience.

Selection of Artists for Public Art Projects

There are a number of different processes through which artists are selected for public art projects. Government agencies must use a competitive process for selecting artists, as is required when using public financing. Such a process was established for



the Staten Island Memorial to Victims of September 11, 2001 (shown above). However, non-profit organizations often issue “requests for proposals” in order to allow a broad spectrum of artists to compete for the commissions.

Not-For-Profit Organizations Promoting and Producing Public Art

Many of the not-for-profit organizations that promote and produce public art in New York City present their work on City-owned property. This is a collaborative process with the City and the communities in which the art is sited.

The Public Art Fund, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to presenting contemporary artworks in public spaces, has been very successful in partnering with both the City and



private property owners. This partnership has resulted in a number of projects, including the most comprehensive U.S. exhibition of Julian Opie’s work (shown above), presented in City Hall Park.



The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which funds, promotes and presents art in Lower Manhattan, has also been

successful in presenting work on City-owned sites. The LMCC has sponsored several public performances, which require intricate negotiations with the City to ensure that issues of liability are addressed, along with the added concerns of agencies such as the Department of Transportation, which deals with issues of pedestrian and vehicle circulation. One of the LMCC's most popular projects was the *Freedom of Expression Monument* (shown above), a large-scale megaphone into which passerby could speak. The megaphone was situated in highly-trafficked Foley Square, near City Hall, during the fall of 2004, prior to the Presidential election.

Creative Time, another organization involved with the *Freedom of Expression Monument*, presents multi-media temporary public art, often using cutting-edge technology. Creative Time, with the support of several other not-for-profit organizations, produced *Tribute in Light 2002* (shown right) as a memorial to the tragedy of September 11th,



2001. First mounted on September 11, 2002, *Tribute in Light* has become an iconic symbol of remembrance and is now reinstalled annually.

Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center, also presents temporary works of art. Located on twenty-three acres of beautiful gardens overlooking the Hudson River in the Bronx, artists often find their source of inspiration in Wave Hill's stunning natural



surroundings. Annissa Mack's performance piece, *Something Borrowed, Something New* (shown above), was inspired by the many weddings hosted at Wave Hill. The artist's performance consisted of the traditional tossing of the bouquet over and over again.



Organizations that focus on showcasing temporary works of art often collaborate with young and emerging artists. This is the case with Socrates Sculpture Park, located on the East River waterfront in Queens, directly across from Midtown Manhattan. Socrates assists younger artists, usually new to public art, in developing and installing projects. Socrates supports risk and innovation, as with Alyson Shotz' *Mirror Fence* (shown above). This 2003 work consists of a large-scale outdoor sculpture that reflects its surroundings.

Other sites throughout New York City offer artists the opportunity to work in response to the site on a permanent basis. Battery Park, located in Lower Manhattan on the Hudson River waterfront, has worked to seamlessly integrate public artworks into the landscape

of the park. Martin Puryear's *Pylons*, two tall stainless steel columns (shown right), create a symbolic portal at the river's edge while also marking the entrance to the park by ferry.



The Municipal Art Society, a not-for-profit organization that supports many public art initiatives, has been instrumental in preserving works from the WPA era. Through its Adopt-A-Monument and Adopt-A-Mural programs, MAS has been able to garner

corporate and private support for the preservation of the City's most neglected public statues and threatened murals.



One of MAS' most successful preservation projects is Ilya Bolotwky's *Abstraction*

(shown left). This mural, commissioned in 1939 by the WPA/FAP, is sited at the Coler-Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island in Manhattan.

Public art in New York City has set a new standard for improving public space. It plays a distinctive role in humanizing our communities and in changing the way that we interact with our surroundings.

For more information about New York City's Percent for Art Program, go to: www.nyc.gov/culture