

**A Suggested Process For Successfully  
Realizing A Program Of Public Art**

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***The author believes that the often disappointing and frustrating process for creating and executing a Public Art program can be greatly improved through a coherent and well managed process. The steps recommended in this article can work to ameliorate the difficult and often contentious proceedings that accompany the creation and realization of a Public Art Program.***

Art is known to be an indispensable component in great civic places. Its importance has been recognized and understood for centuries. Recently the vital role of Public Art has been validated by the requirement that accompanies most public projects. Projects funded by governments usually stipulate that a percentage of the overall construction budget be directed towards a “Public Art” program of some kind.

Although this requirement is certainly laudable in its intent, the outcome is often less than successful. In a disappointing number of places, the art that is commissioned or selected and installed (often at great expense and after much debate) is little understood and even less appreciated by the very people for whom it was put in place. This shortfall of intent represents a great loss and a missed opportunity for the funding institution, the community of citizens and the community of artists and of course the individual or individuals that were charged with bringing the program into being.

What I propose below is a methodology that might be put forward as format useful to those who as a group, committee or municipality come together with the intent of realizing a Public Art Program.

## **Four Steps Toward Realizing Successful Public Art Outcomes**

A group of well-organized and directed individuals can create and realize a beautiful, appropriate and deeply inspiring program of both fine and applied arts and crafts. It is well known that Public Art is an indispensable component in the creation of meaningful and restorative public spaces. In order to achieve a successful program outcome that fulfills its promise, the author believes that four initial organizing steps must be taken.

1. Create an agreed upon set of **Principles and Outcomes**. The author has included a suggested P&O's list further in this article that can have surprisingly broad applications and utility, as it can be said that the outcomes a community seeks from Public Art are different than outcomes directed solely satisfying the artist's (or individuals who promote the artist's) need for self expression. This in no way forestalls or obviates great Public Art that fulfills its mission in ways universal and less idiosyncratic than the personal choices that individuals make to align with their tastes.
2. Assemble a **Selection Committee** that represents the constituencies the art is intended to serve. These candidate members should have the skills and dispositions that will ensure reasonable discourse over the course of the process.
3. Establish clear and deliberative **Criteria for the Art**. These criteria serve to focus the selection committee and the artists on both the stated principles and desired outcomes, as well as the particularities of site constraints, context, subject matter, budgets and other environmental and practical considerations.
4. The Selection Committee's choices are considered final Having demonstrated that they have assiduously complied with the first three steps,

There can still be debate, but the debate must focus on whether or not the Selection Committee adhered to and fulfilled the requirements of the first three steps.

### **A Note About “The Vote”**

*A process that puts the committee’s choices to a vote of a larger commission or worse, that of a popular vote has predictably poor results. The inevitable consequence of such voting is the selection of work that is least offensive to the most voters. The mediocre and puzzling results of this process can be seen everywhere in artworks that confound and confuse the public, disappoint donors and generate disdain for public art in general. The process suggested here is very difficult to invoke in a diverse and egalitarian culture where each person is expected to “have a voice”. It is important to note that a great many voices singing to their own tune results noise. Many voices organized in service to an agreed upon score is a chorus. The “Score” in this case is the Public Art Program Brief, described below.*

It is strongly suggested that any discussion and debate focus on the first three of the Four Key Steps--Principles and Outcomes, Assembling the Committee and Crafting the Criteria. It cannot be overstated that this is the place and moment in the process for vigorous and inclusive debate. The result will be a capable committee that can begin its work with clear direction and unambiguous standards that can guide them to a successful conclusion.

### **Creating A Public Art Program Brief**

The committee must work to succeed in crafting a Public Art Program Brief that explicitly seeks works of art and craft that are capable of a high level of intended expression. This Brief is the Summary Document that results from completing the first three of the Four Key Steps, and is the final checkpoint for

interested or responsible parties to “check in” with the Selection Committee prior to their setting out to begin their actual work.

**P&O’s – A Suggested Principles and Desired Outcomes:**

There is in the case of Public Art a kind of universality not typically seen in private collections. Privately collected and curated Art is assembled and selected by individuals who are in service only to a standard governed by the personal tastes and proclivities of that person or group. Public Art has a broader mission and when that mission is realized Public Art becomes an instrument for communicating the values and ideas of the culture to which it is in service.

- Public Art should be expected to integrate into the overall design of the larger civic context in which it is placed. It is never overlaid or imposed upon it. It is inextricable. The great parks, cities and institutional settings that are home to the most enduring programs are those in which it is difficult to remove or extract the art component of the project without doing violence to the whole. This seamless integration of the arts is found in all of the finest classical works and places and there is reason to believe that even in a very modern setting, those same objectives can be beautifully achieved.

- Great Public Art tells stories and seeks to illuminate and engage rather than mystify or confuse the viewer or visitor. Some of the work can be metaphorical and allegorical, some will be narrative, some will engage the viewer with the sheer virtuosity of material, form, color, pattern and context. All the works will be intended to connect deeply and meaningfully to the public to which it is in service.

- Over time, as its compelling presence becomes known, an exceptional

program of Public Art becomes in itself a reason for visitation. Great Public Art it is a point of pride, and to be affiliated as a citizen with a place that both possesses and expresses a strong system of values can strengthen community bonds. Public Art can transform a workplace, making it a more gratifying place to work. All of these outcomes have the direct and material benefit of elevating and enhancing a community's sense of itself to the highest level.

Public Art is in service to the Culture and the Community, not to the Artist. It has become a commonplace that art is now about self-expression, and at its best great art among other things exhibits the unique gifts, insights and intellect of the artist. In recent times however the art pendulum has swung dramatically toward an almost intentional disregard (some would say contempt) for the sensibilities and aspirations of the general public. This is of little or no consequence in the context of private art and private art collections, when the effects are visited on a relative few. In the Public Realm however, there is a larger concern and a broader responsibility. There must be a greater focus on works that are compelling, beautifully crafted, meaningful, transformational and accessible to the largest audience the artist is able capable of engaging.

Public Art Should Emerge from Experimentation Outside the Public Realm.

There are currently innumerable private and individual (and some government) channels, grants, patrons, collectors and other other resources available to artists wishing to experiment, explore ideas, techniques and concepts and audience reaction\*. *It is, in fact out, of these places and forums that artists capable of the kind of reach required by Public Art are discovered.* Like anyone who gradually builds audiences and a following, artists who can demonstrate their ability to reach beyond a small cadre of followers are likely candidates for inclusion in a search for public works of Art.

The Scientific and Cultural Facilities District in Denver Colorado successfully uses criteria such as this to determine whether or not a group or facility is deserving of its share of tax revenues intended to support such organizations, groups and facilities.

*\* Public Art is typically not ephemeral or transitory. It is usually permanent or nearly so, and as such it is not suited for works that are for the most part "experimental." Experimental ideas that have proven themselves over time are more likely to endure. It is possible (and desirable) to provide public art forums that are intended for experimentation. These venues can serve as a kind of art "incubator" out of which ideas that have proven themselves to have lasting and broad appeal may graduate to a more permanent place in the community.*

It is difficult to find a subject more open to discussion, debate, criticism, personal taste and controversy. Perhaps this is the best indicator as to how deeply we recognize the need for Art that can inspire, connect and engage our communities.

The process the author has outlined above is not flawless. The decision to place oneself in harm's way, subject to the criticisms and brickbats likely to be hurled at one volunteering for such hazardous duty is indeed admirable, if not downright courageous. Even with a coherent, agreed upon process the territory is fraught with subjectivity, complexity and unforeseen challenges. However, absent an orderly and transparent (up to a point) process, and without a clear mission and outcomes, the likelihood of eventual success is greatly diminished. My highest admiration and a fine regard is extended to all who enter into the service of providing great Public Art to our communities and our culture.

***A Footnote About Commissioned Work and the Role of the Artist***

*It is important to remember that until relatively recent times, virtually all works of art, including music, painting, architecture, sculpture were commissioned works. Creations by an artist working solely for purposes of self-expression is a modern concept—one that didn't begin to manifest itself until the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 100 years following there was still an overwhelming demand for commissioned works, particularly related to Public Art. This was true in every culture, not just America. Great works of integrated public art are to be found globally.*

*Over the last fifty years we have entered an era where the artist placing themselves in service to someone or something other than themselves is looked upon as “compromising” one’s work. Amazingly, in spite of thousands of years and countless examples of brilliant works of innovative art and creativity having been created in service to others, artists now believe that these constraints will somehow thwart their ability to invent and imagine great new work.*

*This is a great loss for cultures everywhere, and the artists themselves.*