Boston APP/Lab, March 26, 2013: Minutes

Creative Strategies, Practices, Collaborations to Enhance Art in Greater Boston’s Public Places

Panelists: Jason Turgeon, FIGMENT PROJECT/Bartlett Yards; Neil Horsky, artist; Conrad Crawford, Department of Conservation and Recreation

1. Jason Turgeon:
Three ways to make public art happen in Boston
• Make it yourself
• Make a space for it
• Be part of the culture change (most of audience can at least do this)

FIGMENT: held on the Rose Kennedy Greenway. Not heavily curated or juried. General acceptance of whatever is brought. Comment from passer-by during last summer’s event: “What is this, bring cool shit to the park day?”

Feels City of Boston employees, are overly concerned about dangers to people; Jason deals with city employees who don’t get art.

Advocacy action one: Encourage city officials to hire employees sensitive to art.
Learned from travel—In Bogota, murals all over city without permission. New Orleans has Art gates, Miami has arts district, holds multi-block parties with drinking and food. But Boston arrests Shepherd Fairey; doesn’t distinguish well between tagging and spontaneous street art.

Advocacy action two: Change the conversation from “artists are criminals” to “artists are rock starts.”
Working with Bartlett Bus Yard---8 acres. Owned by Nuestra Communidad CDC. Buildings will be knocked down in November for underground environmental hazard cleanup, then build public subsidized affordable housing. Architect Mark Matel is assigned to work with Jason and it will be used for art---temporarily.

Needs people to help, have 40 submissions for murals, 6 submissions for public art, will be venue of community art and events. Area is designated for public art.

Recommends getting other areas be designated for public art around city. E.g., why not project outdoor movies on blank building wrapping of Downtown Crossing construction.

Liberty Square triangle---how turn this into temporary art site? What does it take?

More advocacy ideas:
Put money where mouth is and support events. (check their list) Figment is non-restrictive; Bartlett Events also non-restrictive, they want proposals.

Advocacy action three: Use your influence to press for more flexible art funding.
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2. Neil Horsky

Wants to skip permitting, felt it was a big hassle. Gravitated toward temporary work because permitting easier to get around, less expensive.
Wants to speak about precedents for public art in Boston, which is not a total void.

Works with youth arts organization, after-school: e.g., Urbano Project in Brewery Complex (JP), contemporary art org for youth, facilitates youth activity around annual socially charged themes, e.g., civil disobedience, issues of exclusion. Program does unsanctioned temporary interventions along the Freedom Trail. Urbano has collaborated with Design Studio for Social Intervention, which often involves art projects in public spaces.

Other organizations in public space: Project Hip hop, teaching history of social movements; Spontaneous Celebrations, which has been around since 70’s.

Ron: We probably shouldn’t assume wide-ranging knowledge of these activities/organizations. Question is how to bring these things together so there’s a critical mass aware of what’s going on in region. Wants committee to look at this subject and come up with suggestions. There’s a “community” of “silos,” fragmentation, territoriality, keeping things close to chest rather than sharing.

Neil: This follows history of social political fragmentation in Boston. Lets not limit what we count as temporary/ephemeral. Buskers, Elma Lewis Jazz festival in the Parks

Action/conclusions: what to do?

What about a community art czar in City of Boston like the bike czar that Mayor Menino created: wrought transformation of understanding of problems, resulting in bike lanes.
Center for Art and Community Partnerships at Mass Art could become more involved, Figment, Bartlett Events; could social practice through art be taught in art schools? Is this a marketable skill?

Public advertising: Commercial ads dominate the art in public space. Why not make similar space for art? E.g. on T, at bus-stops.

3. Conrad Crawford

Manages 1/2 million acres of public space.
Respect that people who use the parks understand their needs better than the artists coming to impose events onto them. Arts programmers need to work within the community and befriend local uses. [Editor’s note: this is critical...]

Describing DCR successes: Manages activities on Boston’s Esplanade; agency owns a schooner and railcars in the Berkshires – items, among others, they can leverage to make grand gestures. They are enabler, host, platform for art.

Crawford’s job is to translate the mysteries of the bureaucracy for public and private partners. Matches privately raised money with public funds. Agency manages projects through public process of procurement, stakeholders meetings, landmarking, permitting, etc.—lots of levels of review.
Also works with temporary art. Charles River Conservancy has temporary programming, e.g., Tango on Weeks Footbridge; Riversing, others?

Occupy Worcester (emphasizing civil disobedience themes) in the park; DCR needs to work closely with them to get effective, creative dialogue, make sure art and environment in park not damaged.

They worked with MIT’s 150th anniversary, highlighting the Charles River as an “edge entity.”

Problem of Weekend Rangers? Like robots for park donations, found they were used for trash, not donation collection as intended; so put out call for artists to paint them. They review for culturally-, aesthetically-appropriate content. Not intimidating bureaucratically.

He recommends artists and activists call this office and their personnel will take artists through their process, will support them. Can help get for insurance requirements.

[Note: need full names of individuals at DCR in special use permits department]

Ron: you can only discover the problems of the neighborhoods by getting people of neighborhood to articulate them. Get their knowledge to create partnerships and “good design.”

Conrad: people at DCR all know the arts and permitting/funding players in government agencies. He encourages artists and planners to talk to one and they will know the other and be able to facilitate projects and ideas. It’s a relationship-based business. Show you’re aware of what they need. If you are doing sensitive stuff in public space be careful and considerate (e.g. civil disobedience); be thoughtful of the real responsibilities of public security.

Discussion:

Try to be efficient how to reach out and work with government agencies. Some people with clout work from top down, governor’s level, commissions, etc. That’s less exciting. Bartlett Yards is a freer environment.

Jason: there ought to be more process and less a system requiring time of building relationships. How can Boston initiate more of a process?

Conrad: it’s not so much about special relationships but it is about people; DCR is open to getting things done.

Ron: is it possible for DCR to be proactive? Can they allocate certain amount of resources for something like an equivalent of MoMA P.S.1? Could DCR get out in front of other agencies?

Conrad: would need support of planning office and operations; they’re focused now on branding, sponsoring, and civic partnerships, have budget challenges; good news is they have just gotten authority to retain revenue; $15 M/year was always going back into General Fund, now DCR has permission to capture revenue they generate and become more entrepreneurial. They are focusing on getting corporate branding in parks.
Dan Beyer, New American Public Art, is developing an infrastructure system to connect art to support structure in parks; has already developed one for the Greeway.

Jason: there should be public art pads around public parks with attachment and electrical, easy sign-ups and permitting. There needs to be some entry points for young artists.

Herb Nolan, Solomon Foundation: Suggestion: reclaim areas in transition. Lots of vetting of each site over and over. Maybe you could make a list and attract sponsors for permanent improvements. Temporary art gets attention. Get companies to invest in your park.

Ron: how to get on paper what’s talked about tonight, how to make it operational and get it to work through DCR? Would DCR consider this?

Conrad: Maybe, depends what’s proposed

Q: Have Boston officials come to Lab sessions?
A: Chris Cook from City of Boston will come to April meeting.

Ron: Artists need to keep trying to get through this bureaucracy and permitting stuff and get through to people.

Lillian Hsu (Cambridge Arts Commission): Recommends artists try to avoid an “us-them framework” going forward. Don’t look down on bureaucrats. Public servants have to take their responsibilities seriously. Recall the post 9/11 incidents of unidentified L.E.D. “lite-brite” images under the bridges; public safety officers found these seriously threatening. Public servants have responsibilities and also can make things happen. Everybody matters: fire, electrical safety, traffic, all need to “come to the table “ and work together to make public art work. We need an “art army”; how do you get people together to do simple public art activity. Problem there aren’t good distribution networks for art and community information. [Editor’s note: another critical issue]

Mark Matel, Bartlett Yards: CDC’s have mission to improve the neighborhoods they are in. He can bring groups together. Can build small local initiatives, build on small victories. Recommends bring city officials to HarborArts April 13 events to get these things happening, to understand resources and needs.

Ron: consider Project Rowhouses in Houston: important to get people to work on their own art ideas so they’re not imposed from the outside. Question: takes more than getting people in a room to activate city councilors. What can we do to communicate upward.

Next steps: What are next steps in advocating for public art?

Conrad: likes model of bikes advocacy; recognizes “it’s a long sludge.”

Jason: Boston’s changed to be more art-friendly, we need to capitalize on it.
Ron: How do we do that?

Philippe LeJeune, artist: Should go to the public, this group doesn’t include the “public.” Lousy spaces are given to the artists. People are focused on consumption, public spaces are total nonsense. Believes the society is dead, there’s no empathy for each other. “I’m losing money each time I get a commission.” Doesn’t want to sell in galleries but how do we (artists) exist?

Conrad: DCR trying to focus on civic space, not consumer side of public.

Ron: Where IS the public.

Herb Nolan: Parks are about bringing people together, slowing down, meeting people, not about consumerism. How do you bring political art like Bogota murals to a public park without offending large audience. Cultural message, paint, find one place that’s not way off the beaten track that could be reclaimed through public art, how do you establish a platform that deals with public safety and public taste issues, use as a test site.

Mass DOT, MBTA have lots of property.

Recognize there’s lack of staff hours and capacity in public agencies.

Conrad: DCR is happy to have interns, they can pay them. Northeastern has fellows in Urban Planning Program.

Ron: could there be ad hoc task force, with Conrad and Herb? Can you identify a place as a template, to propose to the T?

Conrad: the mission should be endorsed by the people in this room. Also, what kind of art would this involve?

Ron: does idea of identifying a few spaces make sense?

A: group seems to assent to this.

Herb: it’s not a lack of spots.

Conrad: there’s Paul Revere Park underneath the Zakim Bridge.

B: consider the criterion: does this project have capacity to build a community? Can it bring people together.

Ron: this needs to be discussed further in a working group. Tonight can resolve the goal – i.e., identifying and activating a place under DCR ownership or control that will respond to fractured nature of all discussed, work as a community glue to provide a template for going forwards.

Art, public and place, three components with interaction between them: what is place, who is public, what is the art.
**Turgeon to Conrad**: What about East Cambridge dead space?

**LeJeune**: Roxbury building next to T is abandoned, how could that be used?

Thurs April 18 program: When urban design meets art in public places

Speakers:
- Chris Cook, Mayor’s Office of Arts, Culture, and Tourism
- Rob Trumbour, Wentworth Institute
- Janet Echelman, artist
- Marggie Lackner, MBTA