Notes From Workshop #4: The Intersection Of Arts, Politics, And Economics

APRIL 18, 2013

How can public art transform the ways in which people use and think about public space? What are some of the new models for private sponsorship of public art? How do we foster these new partnerships? This workshop addressed these and other questions surrounding the role of public art in urban design.

The panel included David Feldman, Feldman Advisors/Studio Echelman; Marggie Lackner, Director of Design and Architecture, MDOT; Rob Trumbour, assistant professor of urban design at Wentworth Institute of Technology and founder of Artforming, a design and research collaborative.

The following are admittedly a set of subjective impressions of the 90-minute session – impression that I invite everyone to contribute to, contradict, or expand upon!

• From the T: The need for “creative partnerships” in the face of severely constrained financial and human resources

• Does this open up new opportunities for community-based groups to work with the T – and if so, how can those constraints be overcome? What does – and what should – such partnerships look like?

• Speaking of partnerships, WIT’s project at Atlantic Wharf involved the participation of Boston Properties: still to be explored is the degree to which that kind of participation might serve as a model for ways in which to engage the development community.

• Partnerships again underlay Janet Echelman’s work – whether with the engineers or with the Mayor of the city or Porto

• More specifically about Echelman’s Phoenix project, David made the following points regarding partnerships in a note to me:
  o Public art is political even when there's the money. Public art is a risky venture for politicians. [The] Phoenix [project] got through bruising political context because the coalition that got Phoenix done was broad, including the usual urban-focused art/architecture crowd but also the business community. It was quite a close-run thing. Funny anecdote: Janet was invited to keynote at Int’l City Manager’s Conference in Phoenix last year, introduced to the audience by the Phoenix City Manager who admitted that he’d been in the opposition camp prior to her project but now he’s the biggest fan. That’s what happens when the work finds a warm reception from the community.

• We didn’t spend nearly enough time examining funding strategies, a shortcoming
I’m hoping to alleviate through the next several Lab sessions, and beyond.

At the March Lab session, Conrad Crawford, Director of Partnerships for the Department of Conservation and Recreation talked about ways in which DCR can function as a kind of clearing house, with DCR staff knowing “the arts and permitting/funding players in government agencies.” He encouraged artists and planners to get with DCR staff, underscoring how “it’s a relationship-based business…show you’re aware of what they need…If you’re doing sensitive stuff in public space be careful and considerate…; be thoughtful of the real needs of public security.”

At the end of the session, people were asked to send along responses to a kind of assignment regarding the “function of public art.”

The first arrived from Eric Sealine, and I include it here. I’m sending this – and the preceding notes – as a Google Doc, so that it’s possible to start a conversation. Once the website is more functional than is currently the case, we can take this further. In any event, I hope everyone will take up the invitation to speak his/her mind! Thanks.

From Eric Sealine:

I appreciated your 'assignment' and have been thinking about it, and the idea of community, all this sad day. How about this:
The function of public art is to transform the way people respond to each other. It has less to do with the object itself than with the community created by its effect on the people who see it. If it is successful, they look at the object and then turn toward each other.

In the case of Echelman's piece in Porto, people cross a busy intersection to spend time with each other in the space created by the sculpture. Her "1.26" to me is an even more successful piece, even harder to read, even more unexpected. Her pieces create what I think would be called in anthropological terms "ritual spaces", spaces in which the normal rules of (dis)engagement are changed. When the gentleman asked "What are we transforming?" I was stumped. Maybe the answer is, "We are transforming ourselves."

I was recently in Chicago and saw Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate". It has been renamed "The Bean" by the locals, and for very good reason; it is now theirs. People who have no other connection to the art world know exactly how to regard the piece. They play with it, and with each other.