

Notes From Workshop #30:

"The Function of Public Art is To Transform the Way People Respond to Each Other"

March 22, 2017

FROM THE WORKSHOP ANNOUNCEMENT:

Some backstory.

We asked the following at an earlier Workshop on public art and urban design:

"How does or can public art transform the ways in which people use and think about public space? "

*The sculptor **Eric Sealine** defined one such transformation:*

"Art in public places has less to do with the object itself than with the community created by its effect on those who see/hear it."

Building and reinforcing community, in other words, through new "ritual spaces" in which (again from Eric) the "normal rules of (dis)engagement are changed."

Thus, this upcoming Workshop.

With Eric, we'll begin with an open discussion of some basic assumptions and ideas regarding these kinds of "transformation." We'll then spend the bulk of the evening in small groups brainstorming responses to opportunities for transformation: Where else? What else? Who else?

We want to hear from you -- your ideas, your "what if's...":

- Some examples of where and how these "ritual" spaces have, and can, come to life;*
- The conditions that make such spaces possible;*
- The design elements – visual, performance, both – and on the social elements – individuals, communities, groups -- that contribute to their creation.*
- Implementation roles and responsibilities*

San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' mission state that "we generate culture that moves people."

We invite you to join us in brainstorming – and collaborating on – ways to "generate culture that moves people." It's a pretty exciting goal.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This was one of the Lab's most idea-rich Workshops, with a considerable amount of additional post-event suggestions. We'd very much like to hear from you regarding these note – and the Workshop itself as outlined in the

announcement: questions, further ideas, comments – pro or con. And see the concluding remark: send those brainstorms to info@bostonapp.org.

SOME OF THE QUESTIONS/IDEAS RAISED DURING THE GENERAL DISCUSSION:

- How to engage/connect with – non-verbally and otherwise – the public more in sculptural/performance art; art being used for “social purpose”
- Can art create moments of safety, as well as moments of “shock”
- Impact of space on residents; how art plays into space
 - What brings us together?
 - Space in which we can feel vulnerable
 - Boundaries: conditions around the edge: good public space has an edge that provides that feeling of safety/interest/place we can inhabit
 - Rituals that allow us to engage with each other, whether we know them or not
- Can an artist predict how the people will respond to a work of art in a public place?
- Can such art be “transformative” in the long term?
- Who gives permission for “ownership” of that space?

THEME 1: Is there an “equation” or “prescriptive process” to creating a space that provokes civic/civil engagement?

- “Origin” stories: visual/collaborative ways for strangers to stop and answer the question: “How’d you get to this place?”
- Creating a “wow” moment that makes you stop
- Something about the piece that allows for “breaking the bubble” – permitting/prompting a conversation
- Provide a place/space that allows the “vulnerable” to be safe – somewhere relatable to the people of the area and the “outsiders”
- Have the power of the piece resonate to the moments beyond the time spent at the installation:
 - E.g., how can the moment you had speaking with strangers be brought into your everyday routine?

THEME 2: What could that process look like?

- Mapping, ping-pong, yarn, “draw” your route
 - On my way to..., coming from...homework...school...store...errands
 - Trigger question: focus on something the participant wouldn’t normally focus on
 - Bring you out of your routine
 - How does sharing a routine bring you out of it?
 - How would something like this provoke engagement with someone else?
- Central point: “you are here”

- Tool(s) to record not just personal “history,” but something about the culture within which personal history happens/exists
 - Drawing? Chalk?
 - Wall of to-do lists?
- Visual data collection
- Five major languages, with categories selected by language
- People doing the same thing: bond of commonality/common ground
 - Curiosity voyeurism (re others’ routines/watching others document their experience)

THEME 3 (summarized by Herb Nolan): How can public art turn those rules of disengagement around?

- We need invitations to engage one another. If a work of art is successful we first look at the art and then turn to each other.
- Public art that engages in this way: cf. the “Bean”; Ann Hamilton’s “Event of the Thread”; **Michael Alfano’s** chalkboards on hiking trails
 - Later comment from Michael: *My thought was to make the public as much a part of the creative process as I could. I want to go beyond interactive art to “changeable” art. I want the public not just to passively look at the art, nor interact with the art, but to be able to fundamentally change it and create new forms and images.*
- Public art does not need to be expensive cf. the Bean) to be successful in this way
- What qualities invite this kind of engagement? Art that is:
 - interactive
 - receptive (of our input)
 - immersive
 - disruptive (of our daily routines)
 - temporal (there today, gone tomorrow)
 - open ended (reflects back our
 - engaging (challenges the audience to do something or to collaborate)
 - asking (not stating a conclusion)
- A big snow storm that gets everyone outside has some of these qualities.
- How to create a safe space and state of mind that is receptive to new experience? Joy and surprise can create that space.

THEME 4: How, where, and with whom can one or another – or several – of these “concepts” be translated into actions?

- Answers to come...

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

- **From Mike Tyrrell on behalf of Brenda Be, LMerchie Frazier, Richard Youngstrom, William Bloomfield, and himself**
 - **FUNDING**

- One important sidebar centered on funding, and all agree it is vital to substantive visual impact, sustained programming (depending on the piece), and long-term maintenance. Funding is tricky and competitive. It's success is often tied to grant writing where given proposals are deeply synergistic with source programming/agendas. Perhaps "Funding" deserves its own charrette?
- **PERMANENT and/also TEMPORARY**
 - From here on, two "suppositions" emerged – not mutually exclusive, but certainly descriptive of range – between (1) the absolute need to invite and structure community input on permanent art installation initiatives, and (2) the desire for (and to some, the increasing need for) developing less prescribed methods for creating public art – a dynamic that encourages more trial and experimentation. Either approach should compel strategies whereby citizens can feel creatively engaged at maximum, and/or project aware at minimum.

Consensus formed where permanent long-term installations should typically require neighborhood review (avoiding "the bronze half-moon obstacle course," for example – the "we have to live with it" concerns), where conversely, invention and spontaneity in temporary work might better thrive if less beholden to prescribed review processes; i.e.: less prequalification and more risk-taking ("Here's a public art site -go to it"... and who knows?..."it might evolve into something less ephemeral; let's take a chance/we trust you").

- **MUTUAL TRUST**
 - Whether temporary or permanent, community input is necessary to a vital and enlightening process. In either case the artist's vision should be accorded trust and authority to the extent expected from any such leadership position. Hereby a magnanimous dialogue can ensue between the composer and his or her public. Again, the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and can play off each other. "All politics is local" ... "A well defined problem is half solved" ... "E Pluribus Unum!" ...
- **POTENTIAL SITES**
 - *Our group didn't discuss specific sites, but per Ron's request **we should nominate some (and please do so here, in response to this draft?)....** One area I always liked is the head of the Fort Point Channel. It's on the Harborwalk/Harbortrail, but there's much room for temporary waterborne or bank connected pieces; a good place to promote temporary, environmental art. The head of the Channel - including the water sheet- has long been the subject of speculation for improving the public realm in this area. We could potentially position ourselves at the forefront of making this place a significant*

and memorable gateway between Fort Point Channel and Boston Harbor, and the South End and Roxbury.

- **TO ALL READERS:**
 - **DEFINITELY DO RESPOND! WE'D LIKE TO HEAR YOUR SUGGESTIONS REGARDING ONE OR MORE POTENTIAL SITES FOR "PUBLIC ART THAT TURNS THE RULES OF PUBLIC DISENGAGEMENT AROUND." SEND YOUR IDEAS TO INFO@BOSTONAPP.ORG.**