

QUICKNOTES

Public Art and Planning

Public art is any work of art situated in or visible from a publicly accessible space—whether the artwork is publicly or privately funded, or the space is publicly or privately owned. Public art includes artistic objects, experiences, and processes that consider the place and time in which they are situated, as well as their audience and cultural context. It consists of visual art, such as statues and murals, performance art, such as musical and theatrical events, and other creative practices that spur community dialogue, connect communities and issues, generate economic activity, or humanize the built environment.

Both public art and planning play an important role in determining the look and feel of the built environment by creating or enhancing a sense of place. Artist-led community planning processes can also incorporate artistic activities or components as an approach to involving a greater number and variety of stakeholders, surfacing unheard voices, and collecting valuable input.

PUBLIC ART IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Public art has been a feature of the built environment for as long as people have planned cities, from the pyramids and sculptures of the Bronze Age to the interactive pieces of today. Early forms of public art, such as public monuments, memorials, and murals, remain popular on public or publicly accessible properties such as shopping centers. These locations can also host other types of art that incorporate landscaping, light, water, sound, performance, or social engagement activities.

Hospitals have embraced public art for its demonstrated mental and physical health benefits, including decreased stress, a positive impact on mood, and promoting positive health behaviors.

Parks are a natural location for siting many types of public art as they offer an expansive, open setting as well as a natural community gathering space. The arts can play an important role in reinventing or revitalizing a park through the addition of performance spaces, serving as festival sites, hosting sculpture trails, and incorporating artist-designed benches, amenities, and other visual art pieces. Art along walking and biking trails can benefit community health by creating a sense of curiosity in their users, encouraging people to go farther to see the next piece of art.

The public right-of-way offers another opportunity for public art. Benches, waste receptacles, lighting, transit stops, signage, crosswalks, and other streetscape elements can double as public art pieces that integrate local cultural expression into people's everyday lives. Rather than choosing these functional elements from a catalog, an artist can be hired to create something special and reflective of the community.

PUBLIC ART IN PLANNING PRACTICE

There are many ways to incorporate public art into routine planning practice to articulate community identity and engage the public. A community's comprehensive plan may include a public art chapter or element, or it may recommend public art as a strategy to foster a livable built environment, healthy community, inclusive government, and equitable development.

As part of an economic development strategy, public art can be used to create wayfinding to promote and direct customers to local businesses. Permanent artworks, like sculptures and murals, can draw tourists and new customers to an area. Likewise, freely accessible performance art, festivals, and spectacles draw visitors and attention to a community. Fireworks, for example, are an effective form of public art as pyrotechnics typically attract a crowd.

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*Alleyway art in the Pullman neighborhood
of Chicago.*



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

Public art can play an important role in the community engagement and public participation elements of the planning process, using creative, unconventional engagement and feedback techniques. Artistic methods such as drawing, sculpting, and modeling can empower and engage citizens from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds who might not otherwise feel comfortable speaking up in a public meeting. Artists can create visual aids and storytelling within a visioning workshop to illustrate potential alternatives in a way that is more accessible to some audiences than a written report.

ADMINISTERING PUBLIC ART PROGRAMS

The design of a public art program should include basic elements that serve the purpose of the program, including management, governance, funding sources and disbursement mechanisms, and siting and selection criteria. Well-balanced public art programs should have policies and procedures that accommodate art initiated by the commissioning entity, as well as projects proposed by artists, the community, or independent organizations. A program should also clarify the roles and responsibilities of potential partners and stakeholders. Funding for public art programs often comes from arts-specific funding sources, such as percent-for-art programs, or budget line items.

Percent-for-art programs levy a fee, typically a percentage (such as one-half or one percent of the project's total construction cost) for the purpose of acquiring and installing public art. The percentage may apply to the construction costs of public buildings, or it may be applied to all construction within a jurisdiction (typically above a certain dollar threshold). Art installations funded through such programs may not necessarily be located at the site of a given project. Some cities and counties may allow a property owner to choose and install publicly accessible art in lieu of making a monetary contribution to the fund. In addition to municipal and county programs, most U.S. states administer percent-for-art programs, as does the federal government through the General Services Administration's Art in Architecture Program.

Alternately, communities may choose to fund public art through their budget process by allocating general funds to support projects throughout a jurisdiction. Others may use special assessments or a value-capture mechanism, such as tax increment financing, to target public art installations within a specific geographic area. Cities and counties may also include public art within private development agreements as a required community benefit or amenity.

Public art programs may also use strategies that require artist participation in public projects. One example of this is San Diego's policy to involve artists in the design phase of city capital improvement projects. Artist-in-residence programs are another way to incorporate art in public processes that can help cities and counties incorporate art and artistic approaches into their community engagement and outreach efforts, as well as their construction projects.

CONCLUSION

Public art can be an engaging tool for creating a sense of place that reflects the character, history, and values of a community. Communities can use public art to further economic growth and sustainability, cultural identity, social cohesion, and public health. There are numerous ways to incorporate art into the built environment and everyday planning processes in a way that engages diverse stakeholders. Communities interested in developing a public art program can find extensive online guidance to help them design an effective public art strategy that meets their unique goals and objectives.

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FURTHER READING

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