

Public Art

PUBLIC ART HAS a tradition of thousands of years, and its value is often demonstrated through the cultural and social impact it has on communities. Public art humanizes our public spaces by bringing meaning, vigour, and agency to its constituencies. It offers a sense of place to sites that might be otherwise ignored or underused. It celebrates a moment in history, it contributes with new uses in the city like seating or gathering, or accentuates significant places with meaning, like the Golden Boy at the top of the Manitoba Legislative building.

A bonus of public art is the nature of free access, opening the opportunity

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to communities' cultural values and a sense of identity without the price tag of a ticket. Public art offers artists the possibility to bring different ideas and disciplines together, advancing artistic practice, capturing the spirit of local histories and energies in a common ground. Public art is a magnet inviting locals and tourists to reinvent urban life, making generic urbanscapes unique, increasing a sense of place with a distinctive character. The opposite is also true: lack of public art makes cities and urban spaces generic and lacking in spirit.

Public Art In Winnipeg

In our city, the City of Winnipeg's Public Art Program managed by the Winnipeg Arts Council (WAC) is the main channel to promote public art strategically



Mark Cohoe, Bike Winnipeg

Rooster Town Kettle

and comprehensively in the City. It is one of the most well-prepared and high-level programs in Canada for its diversity, responding to the needs of different constituencies in the City, through a wide range of artworks and variety in the public spaces it engages. Artworks range from significant public sculptures, site-specific projects, urban place-making, to more ephemeral community-oriented projects. The Winnipeg Arts Council works with City Administration, artists, and communities to develop and integrate art into our public spaces where ideas can be encountered daily. In addition to artist commissions, infrastructure design projects and residencies in City departments, the WAC Public Art Program facilitates community-based collaborations and public events.¹

Economics

Jane Rendell uses the term “acts of exchange,” borrowed from economics, to describe the double function of public art practices: at the same time that art instigates exchanges between people, it also generates “an alternative economy” of places and encounters.

Public art is a source of income to cities that invest and adopt policies to support it. Public art represents an important cultural contribution for the community, but also means a significant economic impact for cities. According to Williams, Shaw and Huber, the more evident direct effects include increased economic activity in terms of jobs, sales, and public revenues. As a study of the role of arts in community economic development in the UK indicated, most communities consider that the principal economic importance of the arts industries lies in their capacity to generate employment against a backdrop of recession and restructuring.² One consistent piece of evidence is the increasing number of public art programs in medium and major size cities across North America. By making a place active, it attracts people to places that otherwise would be overlooked, bringing economic benefits to nearby businesses and extended consumption in its vicinities.

The social value of public art promotes community regeneration, and the regeneration of urban spaces independent of the nature of the art: it could be a large sculpture or a community garden, it could be a permanent project or an ephemeral experience.

Public art matters because the rich experiences of people in public spaces matter. Beyond the activation of an immediate economy in the immediacy of the public art, there are other economic benefits including the creation of jobs and the overall stimulation of the economy.

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As it has been witnessed, especially from the postwar period on, that public art can be an essential element when a municipality wishes to progress economically and to be viable to its current and prospective citizens. Data strongly indicates that cities with an active and dynamic cultural scene are more attractive to individuals and businesses. Public art can be a key factor in establishing a unique and culturally active place.³ Public art can create civic icons, but it also can transform our playgrounds, bridges, traffic circles, parks, greenways, water treatment facilities, transit stops, and airports into more vibrant expressions of human imagination.

By building and reinforcing community culture, public art can act as a catalyst for community generation or regeneration. In this case, size does not necessarily matter. Public art can be very visible, large, permanent and unmistakable as an art experience; but it can also be very subtle, short lived or seamlessly integrated into one's experience of a place. That's why public art matters.⁴ It is also, strangely, economically viable, despite its often-high price tag. New York's Waterfalls by Olafur Eliasson cost about

\$15.5 million; they brought in, according to the Public Art Fund, \$69 million for the city.⁵

Public art can also play a role in furthering Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg. The WAC in collaboration with the City has developed major commissions with Indigenous artists and Indigenous communities. One such example is the Rooster Town Kettle and Fetching Water by Ian Angus developed alongside Winnipeg's new southwest rapid transit corridor. These projects assert Indigenous presence on the land and provide opportunities for learning about Indigenous experiences in the city.

Therefore, instead of viewing public art as a deficit to municipal purses, we could make the case here for the financial-economic benefits of developing stronger public art investment and policies in Winnipeg by increasing grant funding to the WAC's public art program. The WAC has faced sharp funding cuts alongside other community organizations who receive grant funding from the City. The WAC received \$500,000 per year in grant funding between 2004 and 2018, however this was cut to \$250,000 in 2019. In 2022 the WAC is allocated \$125,000 and funding is set to be phased out to \$0 by 2024. It is our recommendation that the WAC grant be restored to 2018 levels and increased by 25 per cent to bring public art funding more in line with other major Canadian cities.

The tradition of public art has been tested in other municipalities across North America and Europe, proving to represent a long-term significant source of revenue through activities connected to the local industry and tourism, through job creation and tourism revenue. Public art increases awareness of the city to locals and visitors, helping to transform Winnipeg into a national and international art destination. Other cities like Seattle, Toronto, New York, Ottawa, and Montreal, all with well-developed public art programs and policies, can attest to the economic impact and positive cost-benefit returns from public art.

While the Winnipeg Art Council's Public Art Program is relatively new it has become nationally recognized, attracting national artists to develop projects in the city. The extremely efficient and reduced professional staff has developed a series of diverse and ambitious programs, and a public art strategy that is innovative, challenging, and engaging. Comparatively to other programs, its low administrative cost allows for a bigger investment on the excellency of the art itself. However, there is also a need to build capacity in the program. Montreal has one of the oldest public art programs in Canada and should serve as an example to other municipalities. Public art

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in Montreal is a core municipal and provincial service. Dedicated budgets, a compulsory per cent for art program, and ample staff provide resources for the City to integrate public art into the texture and fabric of urban experience and to experiment with both traditional and novel approaches to doing so. Winnipeg must build up its capacity to do the same.

New expenditure:

- Increase Winnipeg Arts Council annual grant funding for public art projects – \$475,000



Percent for Art: New Funding Source for Public Art

Winnipeg’s long tradition for public art does not stop with the present efforts of the Winnipeg Arts Council. There is a collective desire to invite more imagination to our urban spaces. Historically we possess a considerable collection of public art objects developed over a long stretch of time. Other initiatives like the series *Stages* of the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art displaying temporary public art projects, tap into the cultural sensitivities of Winnipeggers and visitors for diverse public experiences. Increasing and maintaining the continuing support for these programs is an essential element for sustaining a vibrant, culturally rich, and economically smart creative city, helping to attract more investment and incentivize tourism in the process.

A more progressive step beyond increasing the WAC’s public art program budget, would be the creation of a Percent for Art public art program in the City. How does a Percent for Art program work? Whenever a city undertakes a capital building or improvement project, such as a bridge renovation or new firehouse, one percent of that project’s budget is reserved to create public art as part of the completed project. It could range from an outdoor or indoor sculpture, a mural, an imaginative display of lighting, an interactive educational display, even a fountain or creative use of water. One Percent for Art programs are already present in Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Ottawa, Mississauga, and among other Canadian cities.

How does a Percent for Art program work? Whenever a city undertakes a capital building or improvement project, such as a school renovation or new firehouse, a percent of that project’s budget is reserved to create public art as part of the completed project.

Bloody Saturday



Eduardo Aquino

Artist: Bernie Miller and Noam Gonick

Program: Collaborations, Commissions

Location: Pantages Plaza, Main Street at Market Avenue

Medium: Weathering steel, stainless steel, tempered glass, light

Date: 2019

Description

On Friday, June 21, 2019 on the 100th anniversary of Bloody Saturday, Winnipeg revealed a new artwork dedicated to climactic events a century ago. The final chapter of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, Bloody Saturday began as a silent protest led by returning WWI veterans protesting the arrest of strike leaders. A streetcar driven into the crowd by strikebreakers was rocked off its tracks and torched, triggering the deaths of two protesters and the hospitalization of 27 others at the hands of mounted police and private militia.

Artists Bernie Miller and Noam Gonick have created Bloody Saturday, a steel and glass ghost of the original tipped trolley rising out of the paving adjacent to the Main Street site of the incident, which was documented in 1919 by photographer LB Foote.

“So much that defines Winnipeg, its achievements and its rebellious core, was forged on Bloody Saturday,” state the artists.

Illuminated from within and situated in Pantages Theatre Plaza, the artwork is across from City Hall and nestled in Winnipeg’s entertainment district, alongside the Centennial Concert Hall, near the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre and The Manitoba Museum.

The intersection is a busy corner, visible to thousands of vehicles daily. With this exposure, the artwork secures a prominent place for the memory of the Strike within the citizenry’s consciousness for the century ahead.

“Bloody Saturday is a thought-provoking artwork that speaks to the unique history and character of Winnipeg. We hope that it inspires people to ask questions and talk about the complex issues of the Winnipeg General Strike and how they are still relevant today.” — *Carol A. Phillips, Executive Director, Winnipeg Arts Council*ⁱ

ⁱ <http://winnipegarts.ca/wac/artwork/bloody-saturday>

A cost example: if funding were approved for a \$20,000,000 new city building, the incremental cost (\$200,000) to taxpayers to provide one percent for art at that project site would be \$0.68 per year during the life of a 30-year bond. What does the money pay for? The designated percent would be used not just to pay for the artwork itself, but also for costs of the solicitation and jurying process, installation of the artwork, its maintenance and conservation over time, education of the public about the work, and administration of the program. Any leftover funds from the percent allocation to any eligible project (i.e., any building or capital improvement project over \$100,000 not requiring outside borrowing) could roll over into a Public Art Fund for use elsewhere in the city that would benefit from more public art presence.⁶

Recommendation:

- Implement a Percent for Art program for major construction projects in Winnipeg

Endnotes

1 Winnipeg Arts Council. “About The Public Art Program.” January 11, 2022.

1 <http://winnipegarts.ca/pubart-about>

2 Williams, A., Shaw, G. and Huber M. (1995) The arts and economic development: regional and urban-rural contrasts in UK local authority policies for the arts, *Regional Studies*, 29 (Fall), 73–80.

3 Americans for the Arts (Public Art Network Advisory Council). “Why Public Art Matters: Green Paper.” January 11, 2022, p.2 https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/PublicArtNetwork_GreenPaper.pdf

4 Ibid.

5 Laneri, Raquel. “Why We Love—and Need—Public Art.” *Forbes*, May 5, 2009.

6 Figures and language adapted from the Amherst Public Art Commission, in Théberge, René et al. “Article 26: 10 Great Reasons to Support Public Art.” The Amherst Public Art Commission, January 11, 2022. <https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/34719/Article-26--10-Great-Reasons-to-Support-Public-Art--Broudy?bidId=>