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Creating a Sense of Purpose: Public Art and Boston's Orange Line

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During the 1980s, throughout the U.S., public art policy and funding focused on the big names and singular visions of a handful of artists. Their products, even when performed or installed in publicly accessible places, were often conceived and realized in isolation from the users of those places. Public reaction, as often as not, was one of disinterest, dismay, even rage.¹

In Boston, during this same period, a very different kind of public art engendered very different reactions. *Arts in Transit: The Southwest Corridor* officially began in 1984. But its true beginnings go back to the sixties, when work crews began to slash their way through the heart of many of Boston's oldest neighborhoods to make way for an extension of a major highway, Interstate 95. As the inexorable destruction continued, outraged citizens took to the streets.

In 1970, in the midst of a recession that might have been eased by the many jobs provided by the project, Governor Francis W. Sargent declared a moratorium on the planned highway construction. In 1975, Sargent's successor, Governor Michael S. Dukakis, responded to the continued protests of citizens, and, for the first time in U.S. history, abandoned a major highway project in favor of alternate uses.

These uses would include relocating one of the city's four major subway lines (the Orange Line), constructing new commuter rail and Amtrak lines, creating a park that would provide critically needed open space and natural and recreational resources for communities located along the 4.7-mile length of the project (the Southwest Corridor) and a comprehensive public art initiative.

A longer version of this article will appear as a chapter in the forthcoming collection edited by Donna Graves and entitled Shared Spaces: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Public Art and Public Space Design.

Top left: Artist Susan Thompson presents a proposal to the Roxbury Crossing Station site committee and arts panel. Photo by Pamela Worden.

Top right: Thompson's "Neighborhood" banners installed at Roxbury Crossing. Photo by George Vasquez.

Center: Poet Sharon Cox and her poem, "Drum," engraved on a pedestal at the Massachusetts Avenue Station. Photo by George Vasquez.

Bottom: Resident Roland Peters with his portrait and oral history, collected as part of the Orange Line arts program. Photo by Pamela Worden.

Background: Orange Line elevated before demolition and made as part of the Orange Line arts program. Photo by Lou Jones.

Photos courtesy UrbanArts.



*Let your head be your drum
 Let your heart be the strings
 And your whole body the winds
 Listen to the music of your mind
 Find serenity in the total sound
 Make no room for the melodies of
 those who never could carry a tune
 Or hear the sounds of love
 Hope to have the words of your heart
 turn your song to gold
 And the music the music
 of a world at peace.*

*I'm a frustrated chef. I used to be a
 chef on the railroad. I like to cook for
 large parties of people... This is what
 my children want to see me do now,
 my grandchildren, is to flip the pota-
 toes. Because I can take a whole pan
 of hash brown potatoes and flip them
 up in the air, and bam! And just
 catch them. No, they're going to be
 there. They just sit and wait.*





Dan George's "Transcendental Greens" transforms the Forest Hills subway station into a forest of abstracted trees, responding to the site committee's wish for an artistic representation of the natural environment surrounding the station. Photo by George Vasquez.

The project directly affected more than one quarter of Boston's population, including the ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Chinatown, South Cove, South End, Back Bay, Fenway, Mission Hill, Fort Hill, Roxbury and Jamaica Plain. Economic hardship and racial tension in many of these neighborhoods had been aggravated by the lengthy and disruptive process of this enormous construction project. Even after the highway was abandoned, citizens' fears of land speculation, displacement and negative economic impact motivated many to actively monitor critical land use, urban, park and station design decisions.

Public art came on late in the design process, after construction was already underway.² When UrbanArts, a small non-profit agency, came on board to administer *Arts in Transit*, community expectations were high while the transit agency's tolerance for additional community input was low. The Metropolitan Boston Transit Authority (MBTA) was eager for a quick and easy fix to the community's latest demand, this time for public art. If there were to be art, its role would be to enhance the beauty of its stations, reduce vandalism and help erase memories of the past mistakes of urban renewal. Art might also revive images of a more prosperous past and generally improve the MBTA's public image.

Southwest Corridor residents wanted the permanent installations to help create a sense of place within each neighborhood. They also hoped to incorporate citizen participation and public education into the art program so that public art could help achieve the goal of reducing tensions that had long existed in many Southwest Corridor communities, tensions that often were the result of racism and the negative impacts of economic restructuring.

UrbanArts developed a multidisciplinary program. Working with community representatives, the agency lobbied the MBTA to expand community involvement in the selection process for permanent works and public art in each of the new transit stations. In an effort to further community participa-

tion, UrbanArts also invited artists and neighborhood groups to develop ideas for temporary and off-site art projects.

The permanent art program, based on established federal guidelines, called for a professional arts panel to select artists to be commissioned to create work for the new stations. UrbanArts expanded this process to include a standing 10-member site committee of community representatives who served as the client for each station's art program, often meeting for several months to develop a community profile and give direction.

Professional arts selection panels, chosen for demographic representation and their ability to offer professional perspective and expertise, worked with information provided by the community to site committees to select artists to develop proposals. When artists finally presented their proposals at a joint meeting of the site committee and arts panel, there was typically a high level of consensus regarding the most appropriate artwork for each site.

The final artworks reflected Southwest Corridor communities in a variety of ways. Some, like Susan Thompson's banners, "Neighborhood," represented a specific community's history in a traditional, literal, narrative way. Others, like Dan George's "Transcendental Greens" and John Scott's "Stony Brook Dance," expressed material relevant to the community in relatively abstract ways.

Concurrent with the selection process, UrbanArts requested and received proposals from artists and community agencies for a series of temporary and off-site projects. Funding for the implementation of these projects initially came from the private sector.

The first of these, a photography project called "The Artist's Lens: A Focus on Relocation," documented the changes taking place as the old elevated Orange Line along Washington Street gave way to the newer transit system along the Southwest Corridor, some distance away. Professional photographers, paired with high school students from the Hubert

H. Humphrey Occupational Resource Center in Roxbury, formed teams that worked together for more than a year to capture the architecture, people and feel of “The El” prior to its demolition.

Increasingly, some team members committed themselves to the politics of change, using their images to encourage people to think about the impact the upheaval would have on their own lives. As bonds between artists and residents grew, so often did public debate regarding the social and economic needs of neighborhood residents and the fear of imminent displacements associated with the Southwest Corridor project.

While “The Artist’s Lens” used visual documentation to express community history and to engage people in discussion of the future, a second project, “Boston Contemporary Writers,” used the written word to capture diverse authors’ experience of urban life. In 1986-87 UrbanArts held a statewide competition to solicit works in poetry and prose that would be inscribed in granite and permanently installed in the new Orange Line stations and adjacent parkland. This anthology of work by urban writers went far beyond the expectations of the MBTA for its art program. A large community advisory group had worked with UrbanArts to launch this project and had helped with extensive outreach in established as well as informal literary circles. The selection panel conducted a blind review of manuscripts, and there was no way to know whether authors were male or female, black or white, young or old.

In the end, the 18 selected authors reflected the diversity of the Southwest Corridor’s residents as well as a range of literary experience. For one author, Jeanette DeLello Winthrop, her work on granite was the first piece she had ever published. For others, like Gish Jen, the project represented a unique opportunity for her to have her work read and experienced by people for whom it had particular resonance. Jen’s prose lines the long entry corridor into the South Cove station in Chinatown. It is a piece with humor, sympathy and understanding for all of us who are engaged in the struggle between individual behavior and cultural expectations, a struggle that is particularly poignant to the recent Asian immigrants who often use this station.

Finally, UrbanArts launched an oral history project, called “Sources of Strength,” in collaboration with Roxbury Community College. The program offered students and residents an opportunity to learn the techniques of collecting oral histories and provided a way to interview and collect stories from Southwest Corridor residents.

People were pleased to talk about their lives, often sensing that their stories might help to break down the isolation many felt within their urban neighborhoods. Some felt that the extraordinary quality of many ordinary lives might put to rest

I was my father’s favorite, growing up — the oldest, smartest, most morally upright of the children, perfect except that I should have been my brother. So cruel a confusion! It was as if in some prenatal rush, we had been dressed in one another’s clothes. With the direst of consequences for him, certainly: In the China of 1948, a scholar’s son could bring honor to a family, or else shame, nothing else; there was no room in that small country for a good-natured boy with a fondness for duck noodles. And as for his brainy sister, who would marry me?”³

— Gish Jen, from “The Great World Transformed”

the unremitting, negative stereotypes of urban America generated by the media.

The stories were an inspiration to artists and became the material for new work. “Sources of Strength” was produced as a theatrical performance at Massachusetts College of Art hosted by Northeastern University in 1988, using oral history text for the script. In 1991, an exhibition of text, accompanied by photographic portraits of the story tellers, was hosted by Northeastern University. In both the theatrical performance and the exhibition, the presentations were greeted with “Oh, that’s you, isn’t it” or “I remember that” and clearly had resonance for their audiences.

Nearly 800 people participated actively in the design, production and presentation of *Arts in Transit* projects. Each per-



Left: Student photographer Ziad Aoude on location along the elevated Orange Line. Photo by Lou Jones.

Below: Photographer and "The Artists' Lens" Project Coordinator Linda Swartz reviews work. With her are Fred Richlin, visiting curator, and Elise Katz, photo researcher.

Opposite page: Old Dudley station before demolition. Photo by Lou Jones.

son came with different objectives. Together, advisors and panelists, interviewers and story tellers, scriptwriters, photographers, students, artists and administrators, created a unique snapshot of a particular place at a particular time in history. Their contribution established a foundation for a public art program that reflected the special character of many Boston neighborhoods without compromising artistic integrity. Many participants also forged a partnership that led to ongoing efforts to rebuild and determine the future of their communities.

Process Over Product

Public art is rarely, if ever, subjected to environmental impact studies to determine how it affects the public. When an interdisciplinary study group⁴ began its assessment of *Arts in Transit* in the summer of 1991, we discovered how few methodologies there were to accomplish this task and how many choices of focus could be made. We soon concluded that evidence of the effectiveness of the project in meeting community goals would best be understood if the focus of analysis shifted from an assessment of the permanent installations to the methods of their selection and to the impact of accompanying off-site educational programs.

*By defining their individual and cultural identities as well as producing end products, ... collaborators and audiences are neither consumers of the works produced nor merely protestors of the wrongs they might want to right. Their creative process catalyzes reclamation and repossession of self, in art/work and the building of community.*⁵

Arlene Raven's observation that certain forms of public art can begin to empower communities by opening up a dialogue and inviting critical as well as creative imaging to take place, is shared by many practitioners.⁶ When members of our study group met with participants from the Arts in Transit project, we discovered that many felt more invested in their community through their participation in the selecting and planning for art to be installed, especially because these are neighborhoods that rarely get to see their environments enhanced. As one resident observer of the Orange Line art declared, "We deserve art just as much as anyone else." This is

especially the case when, as poet Sam Allen eloquently observed, urban residents are surrounded by pathology and need so desperately to create counter forces that "revive their spirit and feed their humanity."⁷

The photographic documentation and oral history projects also actively stimulated residents' awareness of the changes that had been introduced historically into Southwest Corridor communities and were continuing to be introduced by economic and political forces beyond residents' control. When our study group listened to Arts in Transit participants describe these learning experiences, we sensed the effect they had on motivating an even deeper interest in pursuing new research endeavors and forms of artistic expression.

The content of the information uncovered through personal stories as well as the many techniques utilized by Southwest Corridor residents to research their communities may finally have had a more sustained impact on a process of community development than the permanent installations themselves.

Choosing a Past, Creating a Future

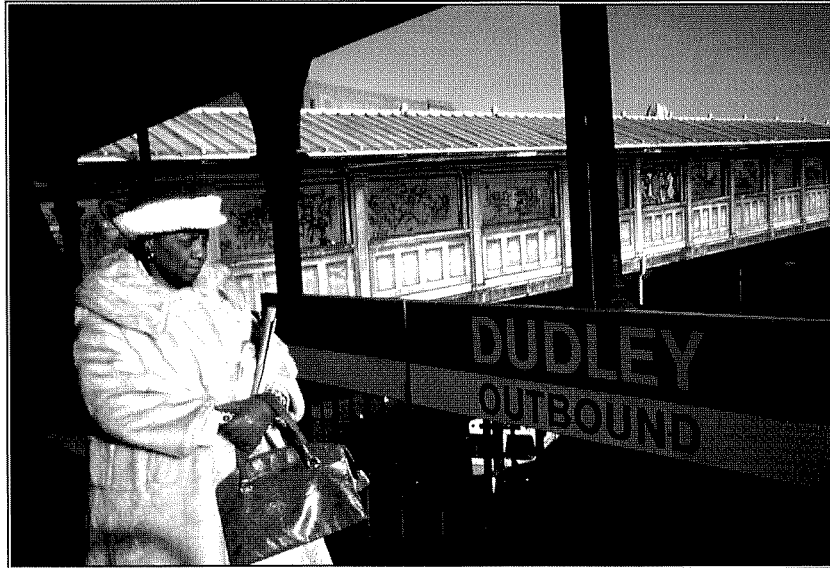
Involving the general public in sharing memories and feelings about their neighborhood surroundings through art does not necessarily evoke happy or soothing themes. Nor does it necessarily generate consensus on how that community wants to be represented.⁸

In the Southwest Corridor, mass transit stations with spaces predicated on motion provided challenging sites from which to begin to establish any enduring vision of the present or future of the surrounding community. High unemployment, racism and the accumulated effects of years of unequal treatment also restrained hopes for creating a more liveable environment.

Given these obstacles, our study group wondered whether, and if so, how, local site committees managed to "choose a past," in Kevin Lynch's words, so that they might "construct a future"?⁹ Did

Southwest Corridor neighborhoods use the public art process to re-present themselves to the larger public in the community profiles, which focussed on diversity and history?





Using an art program to begin a process of healing and regeneration in diverse neighborhoods that were experiencing differing measures of political and social conflict was not easy. Most site committees discussed the cultural diversity of their neighborhoods and the difficult transitions they went through over time. Rather than emphasize the conflicts, however, they chose to emphasize the melting pot qualities and residents' common goals or shared values. The stress on common themes suggests that site committees were, perhaps, more interested in constructing an alternative future than in resurrecting these past struggles, and that they deliberately chose one past from many possible pasts to attain that goal.

Most of the Orange Line site committees described their past communities as vibrant places in which to live and work. They emphasized the multitude of contributions made by ethnic groups through work and community life. Though the negative effects of urban renewal, highway construction and recent gentrification were discussed, site committees chose to remind the public of an earlier time when Southwest Corridor communities provided many positive working and living experiences for their residents.

The juxtaposition of a vibrant past with a more problematic present could have been utilized as a call to activist arms for neighborhood residents. The themes, which spark nostalgic memories and emphasize the positive aspects of diversity in the present, however, are benign rather than provocative. Or so they seem.

Current residents, however, may share an interest in this skewed presentation. Negative depictions of the area focussing on crime and violence already receive enormous attention in the media and have justified public intervention in the past (e.g. urban renewal) that displaced residents without addressing their problems. Many *Arts in Transit* participants believed

that those outside their neighborhoods ought to be presented with a view of Southwest Corridor life that was more balanced. The picture that site committees presented to the arts panels thus contrasted with that offered by the media or the more multi-dimensional perspectives portrayed through oral history and photographic imagery.

The political intentions of the site committees are, however, apparent and highly correlated with the destruction wrought in the past by urban renewal and gentrification. Their aim was to be the autonomous creators of a sense of place in order to avoid having one created by others with more questionable intentions for the future of their communities.

Multiple Senses of Place with a Singular Purpose

As participants describe it, their involvement in *Arts in Transit* project and search for ideas to inform the content of the art selection was not a search for a special theme to represent each neighborhood. Rather, it was a search for a sense of efficacy and purpose, of thereness. Residents were less concerned about the content of themes represented through the permanent art than they were about whether the art communicated — to the broader public — that they were there, alive, important and very interested in staying on.

Permanent public art installations created through a participatory selection process, together with participatory projects involving residents in seeing their neighborhoods in new ways through theater, literature, history, and photography, generated a sense of ownership of place, the right on the part of residents to define and redefine themselves, and, most especially, to project their existence into the future.

Though multiple senses of place exist within each community surrounding the Orange Line stations, every neighbor-

hood expressed (through its participation in the art selection and oral history, photography and literature programs) a common desire to lay claim to its space and to control its future as well as to record its past. Such a vision could never have been expressed through the placement of a single art product in a public space, even one as central as a train station. It could only be defined through a process of community building such as that initiated through the many education projects that accompanied UrbanArts' art selection process.

Conclusion

Several months after *Arts in Transit* was completed, our interdisciplinary study group invited participants to convene to discuss the project and its impact. The large turnout confirmed the community's continuing interest in the project; conversation, however, tended to focus on the future, not the past.

The artists and residents who gathered that evening suggested a wealth of ideas for arts projects they wanted to see happen: community art publications, theater productions, arts journals, neighborhood architectural tours, ongoing history projects, afterschool programs in creative writing and visual arts, and the creation of cultural centers. People also talked about the connections between these activities and potential future economic development. Dozens of projects have grown directly from the *Arts in Transit* experience; among these is a major initiative to reclaim Blue Hill Avenue as Boston's Avenue of the Arts.

For many, the underlying message of the *Arts in Transit* project became clear that evening: the arts and humanities could serve a larger community agenda for neighborhood revitalization. The installation of the public art, literature, oral histories, theatrical performances and exhibitions that had been part of *Arts in Transit* helped give form to that agenda. Because of the "force of its imagination,"¹⁰ participation in creating art had helped residents to reclaim the cultural meaning of their lives. Having reclaimed abandoned spaces, residents felt more secure in their efforts to reclaim abandoned spaces and address other critical needs.

This focus on the future suggests new possibilities for public art. It also raises questions. How can public art move beyond the simple enhancement of public space to realize a more far-reaching role in the social and economic revitalization of urban neighborhoods.

What lessons can be drawn from *Arts in Transit*?

One lesson may be that public artists and arts administrators cannot assume the pre-existence of a public; instead, citizen participation must be invited and sustained. The project also suggests new indices for evaluating the success of cultural activity in public space. Instead of only asking "Do I like it?"

we may begin to ask more of our public art projects. How much discussion does it generate in the community? Is it ongoing? Can it sustain local involvement even after the project is completed? How many additional arts activities does it spawn? Is the art, and the process of its selection, responsive to change? Does it ensure community ownership, not only of the art, but of the community itself? Can that sense of ownership be sustained to prevent gentrification and displacement in neighborhoods upgraded through arts activity?

Along Boston's Southwest Corridor, many of these questions remain unanswered. It will take years to assess the true impact of *Arts in Transit*. That the questions were raised at all, especially by residents deeply affected by their engagement in the project, speaks to the reality that public art has gone beyond the elusive task of creating a sense of place. Public art in Boston has also helped engender a sense of purpose.

Notes

1. Jock Reynolds, "Introduction," in Myrna Breitbart, Wilfred Holton et. al, *Creating a Sense of Place in Urban Communities* (Boston: UrbanArts, 1993), 1-3.
2. Policies established during the Carter administration encouraged local transit authorities to set aside a portion of construction funds for public art, but Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) was slow to exercise this option for the Orange Line. Pressure from the community forced the bureaucracy to implement an art program that would reflect the diverse cultural identities represented in the communities along the Southwest Corridor.
3. Gish Jen, "The Great World Transformed," *Boston Contemporary Writers* (Boston: UrbanArts,), 2.
4. This interdisciplinary study group of scholars, artists, practitioners, and community residents was funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, the Boston Foundation for Architecture and the Rowland Foundation.
5. Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 10.
6. Lucy Lippard, for example, believes that art for social change must encourage people to become involved in "the making of their own society and culture." See Lucy Lippard, "Moving Targets/Moving Out," in Raven.
7. Sam Allen as quoted by Myrna Breitbart in Myrna Breitbart, Holton et. al, 43.
8. Raven, 26.
9. Kevin Lynch as quoted in Dolores Hayden, "Placemaking, Preservation and Urban History," *Journal of Architectural Education* (41:3, 1988), 45.
10. Malcolm Miles, ed., *Art for Public Places: Critical Essays* (Hampshire, U.K.: Winchester School of Art, 1989), 7.