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New•Land•Marks Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“To understand the community, not merely to decorate it.” This motto elegantly sums up “New•Land•Marks,” a program of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park Art Association.

For the past five years New•Land•Marks has been combining the talents of nationally recognized artists with the insight and energy of Philadelphia community groups. The aim has been to integrate public art into ongoing community development, urban greening and revitalization initiatives. The association hopes to use the creativity and care for place that public art can generate to leverage a greater level of community engagement and empowerment.

In selecting New•Land•Marks for a place planning award, jurors noted that while many cities now have “percent-for-art” programs, the directors of those programs rarely seek, in such a systematic way, to ensure that public art is more than private art in public places. Instead, New•Land•Marks encourages community groups and artists, under the guidance of a civic organization, to initiate their own projects.

New•Land•Marks is further distinguished because it re-examines the social purpose of public art. Several projects are concerned not only with embellishing public places, creating civic space or even provoking public thinking, but also with expressing community identity, providing a means of community organization and serving as catalysts for further community improvement.

The Fairmount Park Art Association is one of the nation’s oldest civic design organizations, with a charter that dates to 1872. According to its director, Penny Balkin Bach, a successful public art program today demands reconciliation between diverse and often conflicting political and managerial interests, and nonprofit groups are ideally situated to play an coordinating role in this process.

Analyzing typical programs for art in public places, the group identified several shortcomings. One is that such efforts are usually associated with new construction, generally benefiting only the wealthiest communities. Another is that when public art is added to a building or revitalization project after its planning and design is complete, it may amount to little more than window dressing.

Citing the “broken windows” research of criminologist James Wilson, the association is taking a more proactive social stance with New•Land•Marks. According to Wilson, urban despair festers in disorderly environments where no one appears to care how things look.¹ As a suitable countermeasure, the association has tried to model its effort after the interactive and participatory art practice identified by Suzi Gablik in *The Re-enchantment of Art*, which deliberately focuses attention on neglected spaces.²

The Process

Jurors based much of their praise for New•Land•Marks on its approach to the difficult process of eliciting community involvement in urban placemaking.

As the early stages of the program unfolded with funding from the William Penn Foundation, artists and communities were invited to respond to a novel “request to participate.” Afterwards, they were matched with each other and given a year and the full backing of the association to create proposals.

The process involved a tripartite contract between communities, artists and the association. Artists were obliged to engage in a serious dialogue with the communities they agreed to work with. In return, communities needed to commit to speaking through three official representatives who would advocate the artists’ ideas to other community members and city boards. For its part, the association promised to facilitate the entire process by providing resources, arranging professional consultations and eventually working to fund all projects which emerged from the development process.

Not all collaborations were successful, according to project manager Charles Moleski. Several artists withdrew after they found their ideas did not mesh with what the communities wanted, and several community groups withdrew when they found they could not sustain an adequate level of commitment. The association also maintained a “safety valve,” according to which no project would be allowed to proceed to the funding stage without the complete endorsement of the community.

Eventually, sixteen projects did emerge and were chronicled in a book and an exhibition that was put up in community buildings throughout the city.³ Of these projects, two are currently under construction and five more are in various stages of development. Although some projects may eventually drop out of the program for political, financial or community reasons, Moleski says the art association is working hard on coordination and fundraising to see the rest through to completion.

The Projects

The ideas that have emerged have been as varied as the communities that sponsored them. A deliberate ambiguity was embodied in the program’s title. According to the

Opposite: Pepón Osorio, *I have a story to tell you ...* (1999). The casita illuminated at night, elevation of community building where photographs will be mounted in window. Photos by Will Brown (above) and James B. Abbott (below), courtesy Fairmount Park Art Association.



significance as a community space, including carved quotations from community members, a sanctuary in the form of an altar–fountain and a nearby oral history room.

Several projects, though neighborhood based, take on broader themes of labor history. *Perseverance* involves street furniture designed by Todd Noe that celebrates activities that were once integral to the city’s industrial Kensington and Fishtown neighborhoods (he worked with the Kensington South Neighborhood Advisory Committee and the New Kensington Community Development Corporation). Among the activities were shipbuilding, hatmaking and the manufacture of baseballs. For *Labor in the Park*, John Kindness designed seating areas in South Philadelphia’s Elmwood Park that memorialize the role of organized labor. The design, developed with Friends of Elmwood Park, includes tables in the form of work buttons, enameled historic images and symbolic paving.

While many projects are based on the creation of specific objects, others represent a more open-ended engagement with place. One such project combines the efforts of Houston-based artists Deborah Grotfeldt and Rick Lowe and the Mill Creek Artists’ Collaborative. Their goal is to reassert what was once a popular pedestrian short cut, a quarter-mile-long section of May Street in West Philadelphia, as “a place of remembrance and honor.”

Depending on one’s point of view, this effort might be described as an ongoing multiphase environmental public art project or a work of community performance art. Among the activities proposed are restoring empty buildings for artist spaces; clearing out weeds, trash and abandoned vehicles and replacing them with community gardens, benches and places for play, contemplation and socialization; and installing murals and other “artistic touches” to bring color and meaning.

In such a situation, Grotfeldt says, “The art is the process—it’s the experience, it’s working with the community.” According to Lowe, “[it’s] the opportunity for the community to say it cares about this particular area. That’s the challenge. That’s where the art is.”

Notes

1. James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982, pp. 29–38.
2. Suzi Gablik, *The Re-enchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).
3. Penny Balkin Bach, ed., *New•Land•Marks: Public Art, Community and the Meaning of Place* (Washington, D.C.: Editions Ariel, 2001).

Jury Comments

Brown: They get artists to work with communities, with people, and they put art in places where you don’t find art. It’s not art as a band aid.

Rabaim: It is a program that makes public art happen that is meaningful to communities.

Quigley: There is a level of skill here that is far and away beyond what we saw in some of the other projects.

Brown: Usually you think of art as something that happens in the airport or is imposed on a community, and here they had a much more grassroots, collaborative process. I think that is a much more vital definition of art than what you typically get. And I think we all also wish we had more time to read the book, which is a compliment.

Fraker: This is actually an implementation process that tries to make sure that the intervention is positive and that there is community support and care as it goes on. It makes the idea of art as place-making more enduring, rather than a kind of one-off moment in time.

Rabaim: That’s what I liked about it. And it’s interesting that it’s a not-for-profit, not a city agency. It’s pointed out somewhere that this is what nonprofits are actually supposed to do—that is, support the relationship between planning and public art.

Calthorpe: I’m glad we included this. The other public art projects are personal, singular events. This is something that can be generalized.

Fraker: There’s a planning process here that can be exported to other cities. It’s just not an organization that is obviously well funded.

New•Land•Marks, Philadelphia, Pa.

Sponsor: Fairmount Park Art Association (Penny Balkin Bach, director)

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