

An abstract painting with a textured, expressive style. The background is a deep, vibrant blue. Scattered across the canvas are several large, soft-edged shapes in bright yellow and red, some with green and purple undertones. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and color contrast.

JUSTICE, EQUITY + SUSTAINABILITY

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Tory Foster

**ART IS CHANGE :
PUBLIC ART AS A MEANS OF
ECOLOGICAL HEALING**

ABSTRACT

Public art provokes dialogue about environmental and social justice by focusing attention on issues of justice, equity, and ecological sustainability for a diverse audience. This paper explores the ability of public art to bring attention to these critical issues and to become a force of change by educating the public, promoting awareness of the actions necessary to stop major environmental change, and contributing to a sense of community that can motivate citizens to care for places.

INTRODUCTION

The role of public art in addressing justice, equity, and, specifically, ecological sustainability is worthy of examination by planners and policymakers. Public art provokes dialogue about social and environmental issues among diverse groups of citizens. This paper explores a “sense of place” that is tied to local history and culture, social and environmental justice, equity in the built and natural environments, and a rigorous public process as components of successful public art projects. Some of the ever-problematic issues raised by the subjective nature of art and the particular role of public art as sanctioned or promoted by state institutions are also briefly considered.

What follows is an exploration of some of the basic and evolving theoretical foundations of public art, particularly political public art; a discussion of the role of public art in “placemaking,” as defined by urban designer Ronald Lee Fleming; and two case studies (the “Cool Globes” exhibit in Chicago, Illinois and the “AMD&ART Park in Vintondale, Pennsylvania) which demonstrate the varying ways in which public art can be used to promote environmental action and restoration. Finally, the conclusion examines the idea of art as a force for change.

Problems, Solutions, and the Potential of Public Art

Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party, only gumption and persistence. It is not a liberal or conservative activity; it is a sacred act. It is a massive enterprise undertaken by ordinary citizens everywhere, not by self-appointed governments or oligarchies.

-Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (2007, p. 5)

Environmental problems such as loss of biodiversity, habitat destruction, and climate change threaten not only the wild plants and animals we humans think of as “nature,” but also our cultures, our societies, and perhaps even the very existence of our species. Increasingly, those involved in the environmental and social justice movements recognize that their concerns are tied to one another, that sustainability must be defined in terms of justice and equity within the built, natural, and social environments. As Hawken writes, “Social justice and attending to the planet proceed in parallel; the abuse of one entails the exploitation of the other” (p. 22). The solutions to these problems will depend upon shifting deeply embedded cultural norms and assumptions, and that shift will require individuals and organizations to work together, think together, and act together. Achieving social and environmental justice will depend on the inclusion and inspiration of many members of society; not only scientists, politicians, and activists, but also artists, whose work often critiques and affects cultural practices.

As artist and activist Beth Carruthers (2006) writes, “precisely because environmental problems are rooted in cultural practices and ideologies, it is artists, immersed in world and cultural practices, who are ideally situated to locate and develop effective responses” (p. 24). Artists, Carruthers says, have been doing this for years. But there is now “an increasing acknowledgment of the role of art and artists in bringing about change” (p. 24). If public art contributes to the cultural changes necessary to save our ailing planet, then planners and policymakers should recognize its role and commit to its promotion, not necessarily in terms of a specific agenda or ideology, but by supporting artists in creative endeavors that promote ecological healing and inspire public dialogues about these issues. Art can educate the public, promote awareness of the actions necessary to stop major environmental change, and contribute to a sense of community that can motivate citizens to care for places.

However, the power of art raises a critical concern, particularly in reference to public art: who decides what the “message” of public art should be? While the commissioning process is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that promoting artistic freedom, an open public process, and community involvement are essential components if art is to spark critical, uncensored dialogue. Art may inspire conversations and it may provoke more questions than it answers, but it must be viewed critically, for its very power to persuade and incite passion may be reason for both excitement and caution.

While the argument can be made that public art is a worthwhile component of any strategy to address social issues, public art can specifically address environmental problems in several ways. First, public art can contribute to heightened individual and cultural awareness of environmental problems, and then offer solutions: empowering rather than commanding individuals to change their behavior. In this way, art may serve as an educational force, a way to re-perceive the world and one’s role in it.

Secondly, public art may be used as a method for environmental restoration in projects that move beyond the science of, for example, water purification, to include the historical and cultural context of a community and its members. As a component of community revitalization, public art may serve as a starting point in restoring a sense of pride in place and history, which can, in turn, lead to continued stewardship of the built and natural environments.

Artists may interpret and translate information in a way that speaks to diverse groups and individuals, reaching a broader audience through an alternative means of communication. Thus, art may lead to an increasingly inclusive exchange of information and ideas, and that inclusiveness may promote a more just, equitable society. Furthermore, the success of movements toward environmental sustainability will likely be limited if the issues of social justice and equity – which ensure the sustainability of human affairs – are not simultaneously addressed. Public art offers a means by which to expand the dialogue of justice, equity, and sustainability within communities.

Public Art Evolving

A particularly useful definition of the purpose of public art can be found in *Making Places: Working With Art in the Public Realm*: “Public art is a principle. A principle of improving the changing environment through the arts. Public art is not an art form; it utilizes the arts to assist those involved with increasing the quality of the environment” (Powell & Stevenson, 2001, p. 1). “Environment” here refers primarily to the built environment, but that role can be expanded in terms of public art that carries a specifically environmental or social message. In such cases, public art may serve both to enhance the built environment and to raise awareness of environmental problems, with the hope of changing the individual and cultural behaviors that often contribute to those problems.

The concept of art as a catalyst for social change and a medium through which to address social issues has been steadily evolving in its contemporary incarnation since the 1960s¹. The value of this increasingly political role of art, writes Malcolm Miles (1997) is

...to initiate a continuing process of social criticism, and to engage defined publics on issues from homelessness to the survival of the rain forests, domestic violence and AIDS, whilst its purpose is not to fill museums... but to resist the structures of power and money which have caused abjection, and in so doing create imaginative spaces in which to construct, or enable others to construct, diverse possible futures. (p. 164)

If we are to change the cultural paradigms and practices that have led to the exploitation and degradation of the environment, and the concurrent violations of justice and equity towards all peoples, “diverse possible futures” must develop first in our imaginations, and then guide our actions.

Public art has the potential to serve as a key component of this shift. As Suzi Gablik (1991) argues,

the urgency of the current situation requires that the effectiveness of art needs to be judged by how well it overturns the perception of the world we have been taught, which has set our whole society on a course to biospheric destruction. ...I believe that what we will see in the next few years is a new paradigm based on the notion of participation, in which art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing. (p. 27)

In other words, both public art and the solutions it suggests may be a part of a participatory process, a cultural shift which begins to acknowledge the interrelatedness of both problems and people. Art provides a medium by which to address these problems and their solutions at a visceral, emotional level. Art is, of course, not the only or even the most important means by which to identify problems or work towards solutions; however, one of its roles may be the provocation that leads to the discussion and examination of issues, and perhaps even to changes in individual behavior.

Similarly, but less specifically, Powell and Stevenson (2001) state that “public art can, at its best, provide models and strategies that are useful well beyond the confines of what art and artists have traditionally been considered to be about” (p. 8). If one role of art is to speak for a ravaged environment, as claimed by Gablik (1991), then art may convey scientific information in order to promote the possible changes in cultural practices necessary for environmental sustainability. Likewise, as the concept of sustainability is expanded to include economic justice and social equity, art may provide a means to raise awareness of these issues as well.

The Art of Placemaking

In recent years, an increasing number of planners and urban designers have recognized the need to “create place” in America; that is, to emphasize various elements, such as architecture, public art, and other urban design features, that distinguish one strip-malled, subdivided place from another. As Ronald Lee Fleming (2007) writes, the increasing number of public art projects focused on placemaking is “evidence of a changing attitude, and the argument for increased policy attention to the problem of how to create ‘place’ in America” (p. 13). Fleming’s is not merely an aesthetic argument, for restoring a sense of place in a community may also contribute to the restoration of community pride and ownership within citizens. In calling for policy attention, Fleming specifically implies that those who make city planning decisions should be attuned to the importance of public art in shaping place.

However, Fleming says, these efforts cannot merely “pay lip service” to the importance of place, and to be successful, planners and design professionals must keep in mind that “place is not merely what was there [in the past], but also the interaction of what is there and what happened there” (p. 14). People’s memories of and attachments to places involve much more than mere scenery; the most critical public art reflects a sense of the history and the cultural context of a place. This history should not be confined to that which is written down in books; rather, public art projects are informed by the unique sense of place that only residents (often only longtime residents) of an area can describe, even if that description is often nebulous and personal. The sustainability of a place

requires equitable attention to the experiences of those who have contributed, and indeed created, that community.

Fleming also argues that “to create placemaking art, planning is almost a prerequisite” (p. 288). Planning for placemaking requires the collaboration of public agencies, an understanding of the commissioning process, and a commitment to linking people to places. Fleming goes on:

Planning for placemaking has two functions: the first is to foster the community’s investment in art as a fixture of the community. It is a process whereby people take ownership of their surroundings, staking a claim in the narrative that brought them to this point, and reclaiming both their visual environment and their community memory... The second purpose of public-art planning is to focus the art around stated urban-design objectives, which the planning process allows the community to define for itself. (p. 288)

This echoes Gablik’s (1991) notion that public art will increasingly involve public participation in community-building and problem-solving, and in particular, “ecological healing.” Furthermore, as Arlene Raven (1989) writes, “Public art isn’t a hero on a horse anymore... art in the public interest extends the possibilities of public art to include a critique of the relations of art to the public domain” (p. 1). Involving the public in the public art process at this level may increase the likelihood that an inclusive public art will indeed pay homage to the past and build pride in the future of the community. By extension, art that takes on an explicitly political purpose can involve community members in making the changes necessary to address social and environmental problems, as is demonstrated by the following case studies.

“Cool Globes: Hot Ideas for a Cooler Planet,” Chicago, Illinois

In 2001, Chicago resident Wendy Abrams read a Time magazine article on climate change, which warned that the Earth’s average temperature could rise by three to eleven degrees Celsius in the next one hundred years. As Abrams (2007) writes, “It then dawned on me that this was within my children’s lifetime. As a mother, I became increasingly concerned about the problems my children could inherit if we don’t act now” (p. 79). Abrams became an active member of environmental groups and began to educate herself, and eventually others, on the issue of climate change. When she spoke with people about the problem, many felt overwhelmed by its magnitude – what could just one person really do about a problem of such immensity (Abrams, 2007)?

Such conversations motivated Abrams to find another way to teach people about the issue, and her idea culminated in a public art project: the “Cool Globes” exhibit which ran in Chicago from June to September of 2007. “Cool Globes,” Abrams writes, “uses public art as a medium to get people to think about global warming and do something about it” (p. 79).

The exhibit consisted of over 120 globes, each five feet in diameter and decorated by a different artist to represent some solution to global warming: the globes “remind people of the many solutions to climate change they can easily adopt in their day-to-day lives, such as washing clothes in cold water, turning down the thermostat, using compact fluorescent bulbs, taking public transportation and walking or riding a bike” (p. 79). The globes were displayed along the Chicago lakefront, where bicyclists, runners, museum-goers, families, and tourists could discuss and enjoy them.

“Cool Globes” calls on the public to participate, at an individual level, in addressing critical environmental problems. These environmental changes are, as Abrams notes, potentially overwhelming, and part

of the power of this public art project is to portray solutions in a concrete, aesthetically pleasing, emotionally appealing form. The public was both delighted and indicted by the globes, for they were at once beautiful and provocative, suggesting the peril of ignoring the issue, even on an individual basis. Thus the problem is not framed only in scientific or in “doom-and-gloom” terms but in terms of positive solutions to what is ultimately a social and cultural problem (Abrams, 2007, p. 79). While change and leadership at all levels of society - whether governmental, grassroots, individual, or otherwise - is clearly crucial in efforts to address climate change, the “Cool Globes” exhibit served as a starting point for informing and, ideally, empowering individuals to implement small-scale solutions.

“AMD&ART Park,” Vintondale, Pennsylvania

Like many small Appalachian communities, Vintondale, Pennsylvania, was left economically and ecologically ruined when a coal company abandoned it. One of the most devastating environmental effects was “a poisonous discharge of sulfuric acid and iron known as acid mine drainage (AMD),” according to Erik Reece (2007), author of “Putting Art to Work,” an article profiling the Vintondale project. Furthermore, according to Reece, the phenomenon is so ubiquitous in the region that many locals don’t even notice that the streams run orange with acid – for many people, the landscape has always looked this way (p. 51).

In the case of Vintondale, T. Allan Comp, a historic preservationist working for the National Park Service and specializing in industrial sites, had been contemplating the idea “of a reclamation project that would actually call attention to the problem and its solution” (Reece, 2007, p. 52). But Comp did not want to merely swoop in with federal funding and a plan disconnected from the local people. Instead, he began talking to residents about their community. He quickly discovered that Vintondale’s citizens were disheartened, as he wrote in his AMD&ART founder’s statement:

These are citizens who rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to participate and learn from any kind of cultural or arts-related activities within their own town. There is little sense of being special in Vintondale, no particular distinction to boast of, only constant decline for half a century – typical for much of Coal Country, too typical. (Reece, 2007, p. 53)

And so, with public participation as a primary goal, Comp went to work. In 1995, he introduced the idea of cleaning up the polluted creek and surrounding area, and began talking to residents about their vision for the project. Ten years later, Comp and the community had created the AMD&ART Park, a public art and environmental restoration project that aimed “to re-create a sense of place by honoring the past and instilling hope in the future” (Reece, 2007, p. 52). The park includes a series of passive treatment ponds that remove the sulfuric acid and iron (acid mine drainage) from the stream, and the ponds themselves are treated as an environmental art piece. Park organizers created a sort of “litmus garden,” where the fall color of the trees would reflect the color of the acidic water as it turned from reddish-orange, to yellow, to silver green” (Reece, 2007, p. 54). Thus an environmental clean-up project creates an aesthetically pleasing natural environment and a place in which people can actually observe the treatment process as it occurs. At a microcosmic level, this makes the restoration of the natural landscape achievable.

The project reflects one of those essential elements of placemaking outlined by Fleming: it has acknowledged and incorporated the past into a contemporary effort at placemaking and environmental restoration. It honors the historical experience of the place, achieving what could be termed a sort

of historical justice, an acknowledgement of the complex factors that created and continue to create the community. The project has “transformed the town dump into what the AMD&ART mission statement calls ‘a public place in which to explore, learn, and recreate’” (Reece, 2007, p. 52). In doing so, it has contributed to restored pride in the past, present, and future of Vintondale.

Again, public participation in the public art and restoration process is essential. Comp is adamant in his belief that “good design must include public engagement,” and maintains that “designers who work in the isolation of their offices when doing community projects are designing in a vacuum” (Reece, 2007, p. 53). The lessons here reinforce the emphasis on public participation already present in much of planning literature. In particular, public participation is important when addressing issues of equity, justice, and sustainability, all of which have many potential incarnations and interpretations. Public art projects are unlikely to encompass all of these views even with a rigorous effort at public participation; however, public art, especially when controversial, may serve to further the dialogue surrounding such issues.

Other artworks within the park include a porcelain tile mosaic, created by artist Jessica Liddel, which envisions what the park looked like during the height of the coal boom, and the Miner’s Memorial, by Anita Lucero, in which the ghostly figures of miners are etched into a slab of granite. Both pieces pay tribute to the history of Vintondale, and to the often intangible nature of the feelings embodied by the vague term “sense of place”:

Through the ritual of art, these ghost miners have made the history of Vintondale real again. The social theorist Michael Mayerfeld Bell has written thoughtfully about what he calls the “ghosts of place,” defining ghosts as “felt presences” or “the sense of a presence of those who are not physically there.” In Vintondale, that dormant sense of being of a place – so characteristic of Appalachia – has been revived through a work of public art in order to celebrate it. And by laying claim to the past, a community has laid claim to a revived sense of place. (Reece, 2007, p. 55)

Are such musings too abstract, too emotionally-based, to be worthy of consideration in city or environmental planning practice? Perhaps the most convincing argument that such projects can provoke the fundamental pride in and concern for a place that motivates more traditional methods of planning is that in Vintondale, after thirty years of inactivity, the citizens have decided to restart the Town Planning Commission. While linked to many factors, this decision was at least in part inspired by the renewed interest in citizen participation stimulated by the AMD&ART Park project.

Art as a Force for Change

A common thread pervades the literature of environmental art: the idea that it is no longer enough for art to exist only for itself. As Sam Bower, the director of greenmuseum.org, an online environmental art showcase, says, “we urgently need a more constructive relationship between our species and the natural world. We can no longer afford the vacationer’s emphasis on art for art’s sake. The new catchphrase may actually be, art has a job to do” (Reece, 2007, p. 56).

The importance of using art to convey environmental messages or to translate scientific issues in a way that helps the public understand and care about them is highlighted by the AMD&ART Park. Sue Thering, a landscape architect who has spent significant time studying the project, “believes it was the artistic components of the park that brought locals – especially the men – around. As she sees

it, most people don't get too excited about the science of water purification" (Reece. 2007, p. 57). Rather, the men of Vintondale now have a place and an art that connects them to the past – they can show their grandchildren what the area was like when they themselves worked the mine, the legacy of which is at once cleansed and honored by the park. Their own history, and, because of Comp's focus on public participation, their ideas, are reflected by the public art.

Thus, one potential role of art in this context may be to educate, to motivate, and to affect change. At the theoretical level, Malcolm Miles (1997) goes so far as to indict art which is not publicly and socially engaged as a contributor to the problem:

Engagement means either resistance, through art which is social activism, or the building of new, perhaps very local, models of healing and ecology within the old order – models which may be small or ephemeral but at least do not contribute to the deafening noise. Non-engagement, as in art which makes the city an aesthetic object, by default, is complicity in further destruction.... (p. 187)

Miles argues that art can no longer be only an aesthetic object, nor can it treat the city as such. It must challenge cultural conventions to create alternative visions of the future. While this is just one role for art - and a controversial one at that - such diverse alternative visions seem necessary to the process of re-imagining issues of justice, equity, and sustainability.

Certainly there are artists and art-viewers who will take issue with such a claim. History provides numerous examples of the creative and political dangers of art that is solely ideologically driven, especially when it is state-sponsored or -censored. Additionally, the many views of what constitutes justice, equity, and sustainability may directly conflict with one another. Art focused primarily on a "message" may sacrifice creativity or full artistic freedom in pursuit of that message. In the special case of public art, and in light of the many important viewpoints that can never be equally represented, who is to decide what that message should be? The argument presented here should not be taken to apply to all art, but rather to the more limited scope of the possibilities that art offers to both enhance the built environment and serve as an opportunity for education and expansion, for a more inclusive dialogue regarding the issues that affect diverse members of society. Public participation and citizen initiative, as demonstrated by the above case studies, are ways of ensuring that, in a relatively free society, public art can be used to raise awareness of issues, to provoke contemplation and action. But at what point does such work become propaganda? What ensures that art will be used only for "good" causes? There is no assurance of this, as the creation and interpretation of art is as various as our definitions of what is good. Instead, the power of art may be acknowledged and the creative freedom of artists encouraged; the provocation of art may lead to increased education, dialogue, and perhaps even cultural change.

Collaboration across disciplines, between the arts and sciences, is essential if either art or science is to affect cultural change. Carruthers (2006) points out that "artists everywhere, but particularly in North America, are generally undervalued as participants in art/science collaborations," (p. 27) but T. Allan Comp (in Reece, 2007) emphasizes that he "feels more certain than ever that 'arts and the humanities are absolutely necessary to environmental recovery.' Science can change the water chemistry, but for Comp, it is art and history, combined with the science, that will ultimately change people's minds" (Reece, 2007, p. 57).

Planners, in their position to affect both policy and design decisions, should be increasingly attuned

to the value of public art in affecting change. Policy and infrastructure changes can only go so far in solving environmental problems; what is also needed is a change in the cultural and social practices that have led to the current state of environmental degradation, injustice, and inequity. While science can tell us what changes need to be made, art is an essential element of conveying those changes to the public, as the “Cool Globes” exhibit demonstrates.

A recent editorial in Orion magazine (2007) suggests that “the protection of our environment will be wholly embraced only when we understand as a matter of principle – not just by scientific evidence – the threat to all life, and then work to enact statutes that truly protect the environment” (p. 1). Art is one effective means by which to convey this principle. That threat to all life - which drives the current movement towards sustainability - can only be mitigated by addressing the related issues of environmental degradation, social injustice, and inequity.

The same editorial points out that Al Gore’s film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, which is widely credited with pushing climate change to the forefront of political discussions in the United States, “was not a government-sponsored program, nor the effort of a nongovernmental organization, nor a protest march, nor (apparently) a campaign platform. It was a movie” (2007, p. 1) – that is, a piece of art. Finally, write the editors,

The best art can rock our world, and that’s just what the times demand. The shift in consciousness that so many people have called for will not, we expect, be led by economists, lawyers, or politicians. It will be brought about by deep understanding, and the will to think and act out of inner conviction. And that, in all likelihood, will be catalyzed by the arts. Art doesn’t just bring about change. Art is change. (p. 1)

Those of us in the position to make planning decisions must keep this in the forefront of our minds. We must make it possible, through policymaking and through advocacy, for art to do its potential work.

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Tory Foster is a graduate student in the University of Arizona's Planning Degree Program. She is pursuing a Master's degree with a concentration in Land Use and Community Development, and is interested in the relationship between land use planning and cultural planning, among other topics.

[ENDNOTES]

1. Art has played this role in varying ways throughout human history; thus the scope here is necessarily limited.

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