

# Public Art – Community Tool Box

## WHAT WE'VE FOUND:

Works of art have long enhanced our public spaces-- just think about fountains, murals and archways. Creative expressions help define a community's identity and evoke the spirit of place. Whether the unveiling of a piece is a one-time celebration or a utilitarian object along a trail, each encounter with the artwork becomes an event. Art draws people together and enriches their experiences.

## JUST THE FACTS:

Public art can have functional purposes like lighting, signage, paving and bridges, benches and furniture, drinking fountains, fences, amphitheaters, and shelters.

Or it can be commemorative or interpretive additions to the environment, such as sculptures, landscape and architectural treatments, and murals. Art may also be expressed in performances like puppet theater, dance, music, plays, or live demonstrations.



*On the Minuteman Bikeway in the Greater Boston area of Massachusetts, a young skater whizzes past a newly stenciled haiku. The haikus along the corridor were written by community members and express individual experiences on the multi-purpose trail. Photo courtesy of Cecily Miller, Arlington Public Arts.*

Artworks can be temporary or permanent, a regular series or a single occurrence. An activity or piece of artwork should be clearly aligned with the vision and plans for a community. It may be the end result of a specific action or a single element in an overall design.

Creating public art often attracts new partners who would not otherwise get involved in a planning process. For instance, a project that is addressing shoreline erosion would interest landowners and users such as boaters and fishermen. If the improvement efforts called for the creation and installation of unique benches and signage, designers and fabricators would find they have a stake in voicing their ideas.



*Dancers use the Immigration Station on Angel Island State Park in California as a stage, captivating audience members in Lenora Lee Dance's "Within These Walls." The performance received a Special Achievement Award for Outstanding Production by the Isadora Duncan Dance Awards Committee. Photo courtesy of Robbie Sweeny, Lenora Lee Dance.*

## **GET STARTED:**

### **1. GET FOLKS INVOLVED**

Bring together a diverse group of citizens, businesses, government agencies, architects and planners, practicing artists, art teachers, and others to form a special committee. Make sure this group is as representative of the community as possible. They might be a subcommittee of a planning project's task force or a stand-alone group. Their first efforts should be to define the scope, set a budget, and estimate a timeline for completing the work. Ongoing maintenance requirements also need to be considered.

### **2. SELECT A SITE**

Decide on a location or locations for public art. This may be defined in a site's master plan, but if not, brainstorm a list of different areas. Keep in mind that art can have functional purposes. Consider roadways that enter the community, areas in front of public buildings (libraries, police and fire stations, town halls), and parks. Decide whether the art should be a destination or an element along a path.

### **3. BRAINSTORM IDEAS FOR PIECES**

Visit other communities and see what they have done, research images, and interview different artists. Collect as many ideas – both in regards of art and the mediums – as possible. Then prioritize the list based on what is feasible and affordable. Also be sure that the art reflects the unique character and history of the community and the resource where it will be placed.

#### 4. RESEARCH FUNDING ALTERNATIVES

While an artist may be willing to do a piece or hold a demonstration or performance for free, most likely there will still be costs for materials and installation. There are several innovative programs that advocate and fund artists and public art including government, private nonprofits, professional associations, developers and corporations, and foundations. Money from one or more of these groups may supplement a special fundraising drive. Another alternative is to approach art centers, public schools, and other education institutions for in-kind services or hold a design competition.

#### 5. WORK WITH THE ARTIST(S)

Once an artist is selected, involve him or her in the planning process. Talk through every step of the project from design, to materials and installation. Listen to the artist's opinion and advice. Have the artist submit a budget detailing fees and materials, building of models, travel costs, etc. To prepare for the installation, solicit the expertise of architects and structural engineers.

#### 6. PUBLICIZE THE DESIGN

Be sure to show the community designs before any work begins. At a public space like a library, town hall, or visitor's center, display a model, maps of location(s), and an explanation of the background and those involved. If time permits, and the artist and the overseeing committee find it feasible, consider asking for feedback or ideas such as through a suggestion box at the display or a public meeting. If this is done, be sure to incorporate, or at least respond to, any suggestions; otherwise credibility will be sacrificed.

#### 7. PLAN AN EVENT

Have a celebration for the unveiling of a new piece or performance. Issue press releases, pay for advertisements in newspapers or billboards, write articles, and send out invitations. Consider creating a special brochure to distribute at the event that describes the efforts that went into the artwork, the names of those involved, any appropriate background or history of the artist and the subject, photographs of the piece being installed, and other elements that can help people feel a part of what has taken place. Be sure to also give lasting credit to both the artist and any donors who made the work possible. This might be done on a plaque, bylines in programs, or text on a sign.



*"Spire" is a 90-foot-tall sculpture constructed from the trunks of 37 fallen Monterey cypress trees. The sculpture, by world-renowned artist Andy Goldsworthy, is part of the Presidio's reforestation efforts at Golden Gate National Recreation Area. National Park Service photo.*

## USE IT IF:

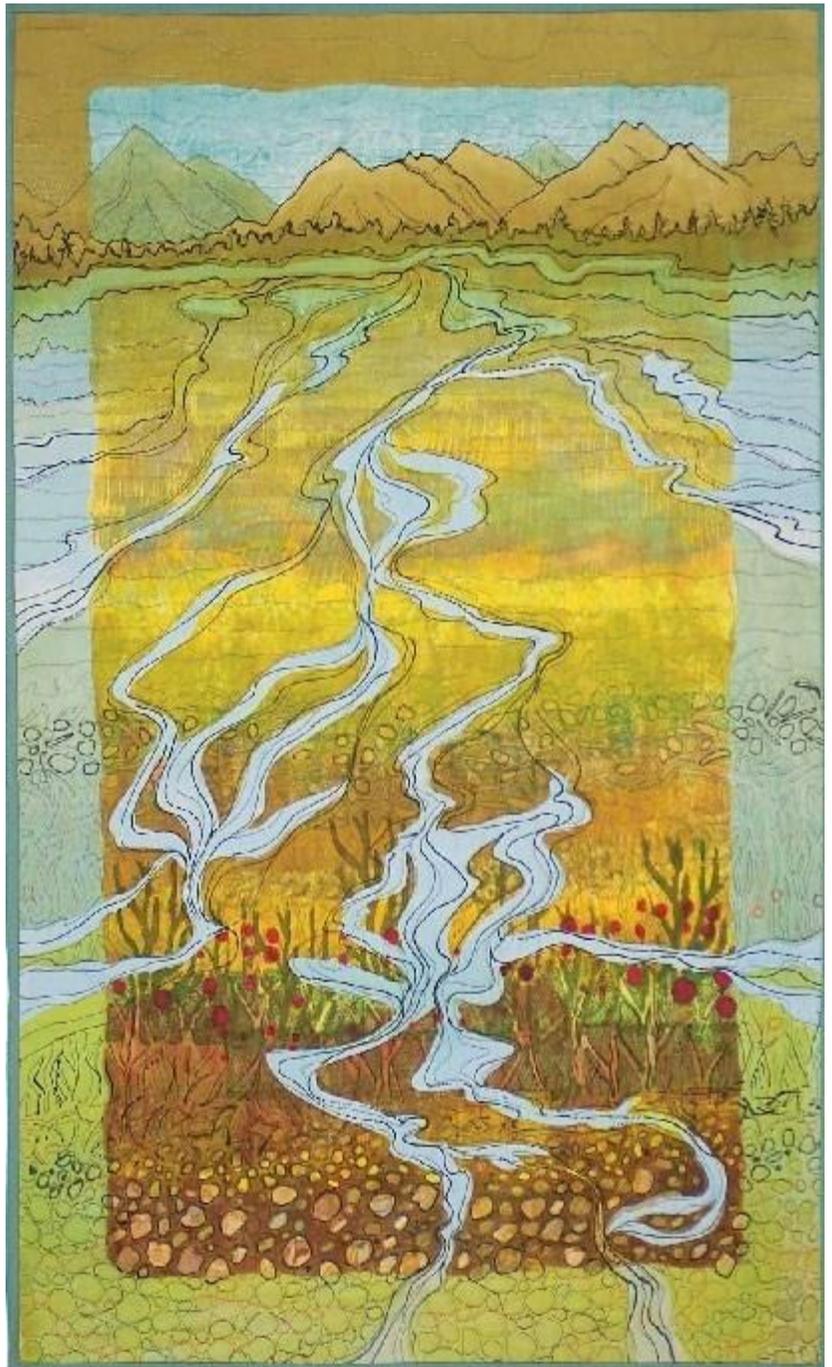
- You are trying to draw a lot of attention to a resource and its value in the community.
- You want to involve more people, and attract new people, who are interested in art.
- You want your community to form a unique identity and be associated with creative solutions.

## FORGET IT IF:

- You lack the financial resources to pay for a work, its installation, and upkeep.
- You have not defined a vision and thus cannot clearly articulate how the artwork correlates with broader objectives.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING:

- Although often one of the end results, public art can happen or be installed at anything during the planning process.



*"Glacial Run-off" by quilt artist, Ree Nancarrow.  
National Park Service photo.*



## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program  
1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240  
[www.nps.gov/rtca](http://www.nps.gov/rtca)