January 2008

Art for All, Northern Iowa Today, Fall 2008

C.J. Hines

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/artcampus_documents

Part of the Sculpture Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you
Art for all

By CJ Hines

“Public art is an investment like a new streetscape is an investment, adding elements that go beyond lights or storefronts.”

—Steve Dust

Tom Stancliffe’s “To Wing,” 2006, is by the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids.
It's along interstates, on gates, bridges and buildings, in parks, college campuses and along walkways and trails.

It can be commemorative, historical or symbolic.

It can create a public identity, provide a sense of place, reflect community or enhance public spaces.

It can be realistic, abstract, monumental or functional.

Art is everywhere.

Public art has been around for centuries, and around 1960 public art programs exploded.

"It began as a knee-jerk reaction to the austere aesthetics of urban architecture. Barren expanses of concrete plazas surrounding high-rise glass and steel boxes seem to need a more human-scaled interface," says Tom Stancliffe, UNI art professor, who has worked in the public-art arena for 20 years. "Early public art efforts became formalized into Percent-of-Art programs in a big way by the mid-70s. Public art is now a studied and important quality-of-life element that has proven economic impact and returns much more to the community than it costs."

Steve Dust, CEO of the Greater Cedar Valley Alliance, agrees.

"Public art shows we're open and welcoming to everyone, including artists, a group we're trying to attract. We can be successful economically when artists feel welcome. It gives a feeling of community," Dust says. "Public art is an investment like a new streetscape is an investment, adding elements that go beyond lights or storefronts."

Public art also reveals a lot about a community, says Cary Darrah, general manager of Cedar Valley TechWorks and former executive director of Cedar Falls Community Main Street.

"It creates awareness and provides distinction. It helps a community rally around," Darrah says. "Technology has removed people; art brings people back together."

Public art has long been part of UNI's landscape. The first piece, "Symphony in Three Forms," created by then art professor Don Finegan, was installed in 1960 in front of Russell Hall.

In 1979, the Iowa Arts Council established the Art in State Buildings program, requiring that one-half of 1 percent
According to the Iowa Arts Council, public art:

- Is artwork designed by an artist and located in the public realm.
- Can be permanent or temporary. Public art takes many forms, including freestanding sculptures, murals, fountains, kinetic pieces that move and react to the environment, and artist-designed functional elements such as doors, gates, fencing, lighting fixtures, street furniture and bridges. Public art can be artwork that is integrated into landscape treatments, sidewalks, trails, street intersections, terrazzo floors and walls.
- Often involves a process that builds relationships, solves problems, interacts with the public, and builds consensus. It is a special type of engagement, often affecting a very broad and diverse spectrum of people.
- Has the potential to reach new audiences and engage the public in ways that traditional art forms simply cannot.
- Adds value to civic and private development and infrastructure projects, increasing their value to the public and the community.
- Can include place-specific installations responding to elements or characteristics found in a particular location.

UNI alumna Stephanie Sailer's "Natures Legacy," 2005, is located outside UNI's Student Health Center.

of a building's construction budget include a public art project. UNI established the Art & Architecture Committee in response to the program.

"The university commissions works of public art to celebrate new buildings and major renovations. These works of art generally complement the purpose and ideals of the new construction," says Steve Taft, committee chair.

A walk through the campus reveals more than 48 installations, from "The Acrobats" in Redeker Complex courtyard to a more recent installation: the 80-foot-long mural featuring athletes and intercollegiate sports by alumnus Gary Kelley (B.A. '68), connecting McLeod Center to the UNI-Dome.

Stancliffe, who serves on the Cedar Falls and Waterloo public art committees, likes making art that endures, unlike in his studio days when someone would buy his art piece and it would disappear.

"Public art remains alive; there is a gratification there. The trade-off is there is an imposed set of problems, whether it's the location, theme or whatever,” he says. “What keeps me going is the satisfaction of solving a problem.”

Stancliffe has 20 art pieces displayed throughout the country, including "Harvest,
1999" at the Wilton (Iowa) Rest Stop on Interstate 80; “Colloquy” at Appalachian State University; “Carousel,” at Cedars Station in Dallas; and “To Wing” at the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids.

“Public art doesn’t have to be driven by function. At the ‘Harvest’ sculpture, people are always stopping and taking photos in front of it. It becomes part of people’s experience. I love making it.”

Stancliffe, who has been at UNI since 1988, also enjoys teaching and mentoring students.

“There is a long list of students who have gone and done remarkable things. I would like to take complete credit for it, but they’re a product of our program,” Stancliffe says. “To have so many come out of UNI says a lot for our program as a whole; it doesn’t seem to happen in other places.”

Read more about the Art & Architecture Committee at www.uni.edu/artarch/index.html. For information on the Iowa Arts Council, go to www.iowaarts council.org.

The impact of public art

According to Jack Becker, artistic director of Public Art Review, a national public art journal, the impact of public art is tremendous:

- An average of 55 million people experience public art every day
- Artworks in airports, subways and other transportation venues are seen by more than 5 million people each day
- Public art receives 10 times the media attention of other art forms
- An average public art project provides 50 times the economic impact of arts events in traditional venues (Cost to the taxpayer was less than 50 cents a year)
- Public art has low overhead when compared with theaters and museums
- Most public art is funded through churches, schools, hospitals, corporations, individuals and non-profits