

Ann Arbor Public Art Commission (AAPAC)

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Decision-Making Steps for Public Art Projects at the Ann Arbor Municipal Center

Why Public Art?

Public art is the best way to bring art to the most people. Communities around the country have incorporated public art into their schools, libraries, and public spaces for the last 30 years. Public art becomes part of a city's infrastructure, just like bridges and substations, and that's why setting aside money from capital projects, known as a Percent for Art Program, is an excellent way to fund the initial expense. Especially in times of financial stress, public art benefits the largest population for the least amount of money in the long run. For thirty years, cities like Seattle, Austin, Santa Fe, Charlottesville, and Madison have benefited from public art funding. Even states facing financial challenges, like Maine and Ohio, established Percent for Art programs that benefit small farming communities as well as cities that know the meaning of "Rust Belt." Many of these programs were put in place in the 1980s, during the last big recession. Around the country communities have found that public art becomes an economic development tool that helps attract and keep the best industries and workers.

The Planning Takes Years

Thanks to eight years of planning by City Council and the Public Art Commission (first known as CAPP), the Percent for Art Program was put in place in November of 2007. We're now ready for our first set of projects, which will be at the new Ann Arbor Municipal Center. Here are the steps that led to our work on those projects.

Percent Funds Build Up

Since 2008, one percent of funds from large capital projects built by the city has been building up in the Percent for Art Fund. The money set aside does not have to be used in a given year, but it cannot be used for any other purpose besides public art. Funds can be pooled within departments or can be used on other sites as long as projects reflect the theme of the funding source.

First Annual Public Art Plan

Each year AAPAC makes a Public Art Plan that prioritizes how Percent for Art funds will be used for that year. The process is based on guidelines from other communities, like Seattle, that have had successful public art programs for 30 years. In the plan for 2008-9, the Municipal Center was selected as the best site on which to concentrate our time, effort, and Percent for Art funds. Since this is our first year, we wanted to choose one project and do it very well. The Municipal Center was considered the best site because public art there will be seen by the most people and will enhance public life in our city for the next 50 years.

Public Art Task Force Formed for Municipal Center

Stakeholders in the Municipal Center site were pulled together to form a Public Art Task Force with members representing city departments that will use the building, such as Police, Courts, and Public Services; the arts community; major local organizations and institutions; and the community at large. The mission of the Task Force was to prioritize sites, project ideas, and funding within the Municipal Center. Task Force meetings started in August of 2008.

First Site Selected – The Rain Garden

The central theme of the Municipal Center's design is environmental excellence, aiming for a LEED Gold Standard. At the main entrance on Huron Street, a rain garden was planned by Architects Quinn Evans and landscape design firm InSite Design, both of Ann Arbor. This outdoor open space was designed to become a focal point for community engagement – a demonstration project for how to recycle storm water on-site in a safe and beautiful way. The Task Force deemed this the most publicly accessible site and decided to find public art that would integrate storm water into the very structure of the design. With a public art project based on water, several large Percent for Art funds could be pooled to pay for a significant project.

Looking for Artists of Water

Starting with its landscape architects, InSite Design from Ann Arbor, the rain garden will be designed by people from Michigan, recreating Michigan wetlands. For the storm-water demonstration project portion of the site, we looked at Michigan artists like David Barr, whose large stone structure graces a fountain in Warren, Michigan, and is attracting new interest in that community. We also looked at American artists like Lorna Jordan and Ned Kahn, as well as more than twenty other artists from around the country. We consulted with Americans for the Arts, a national organization, to broaden and deepen our artist search. But none of these artists integrated storm water into the very art piece, and in a very small urban setting.

Storm Water Mitigation in Germany

Germany has been legislating storm water mitigation for more than 20 years. This federal mandate has generated stunning projects that combine urban planning, permanent hardscape like carved stone runnels, and human interaction with water. One of the top designers and public artists whose work is all about water is Herbert Dreiseitl. See his website for pictures of his work: www.dreiseitl.de.

Dreiseitl Comes to Ann Arbor

In September of 2008, Dreiseitl was invited to Ann Arbor by the Huron River Watershed Council as the keynote speaker for its annual State of the Huron Conference. He stayed for three days and spoke at the University of Michigan Taubman School of Architecture and Urban Planning and at the U-M School of Natural Resources. The city and the DDA invited him to look at 5 upcoming projects – all of which need to consider storm water mitigation in their designs. At that time he also met with Municipal Center architects Quinn Evans and InSite Design to discuss the Municipal Center, and then with the Public Art Task Force to discuss our ideas and to show us his work.

Artist Selection for the First Project

Because the water-related project had to be designed in time to be incorporated into the basic infrastructure of the building, the Public Art Task Force decided to commission one artist to begin working on a design immediately. It recommended Herbert Dreiseitl because of his mastery of complex water engineering systems; his impressive decades-long record of successful projects in urban planning, landscape architecture, and public art; and his magical use of water. To our great delight, he has accepted our invitation. He will complete the first design steps for 3 interrelated pieces, one on Huron Street, one in the Atrium of City Hall, and one in the Court/Police lobby. All of these will involve storm water captured from the building site.

Next Steps

More public art is being planned for other parts of the Municipal Center. For those projects, Michigan-based, regional, and national artists will again be considered, and there will be more time for the selection process.

Please stay tuned for more public art to come to our city!

See “**From Rust Belt to Artist Belt**” for more information about public art and economic development (http://www.cpacbiz.org/ftp_file/08-09/RB2AB--exec%20sum.pdf).