Everything is Relevant

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Some Reflections on Urban Public Art Today
Today, iconic public artworks, both permanent and temporary, are defining visual elements of many urban landscapes—from the LOVE sculpture (1976) in Philadelphia to The Gates installation (2005) in Central Park. This has not always been the case. While art in the broader sense has always possessed a public dimension due to its requirement of an audience, public art was not formalized as a category of discourse until the mid-nineteenth century.

From its inception, public art has been regarded as an instrument for public “good.” Yet for as long as there has been public art, there has also been uncertainty about how to define that public “good” and how to identify the kind of art that manifests such “good.” Whose interest does public art serve? Is it enough for a public artwork to be intellectually interesting, aesthetically pleasing, or to add to the character of a city? Or, in assessing the value of public art, should we consider the public “good” in a broader context?

**When Public Art Falls Short of Social Reality**

The relationship of public art to social reality is at the crux of the instrumentality of public art. All too often, the value of public art is unquestioned as long as it is “artful,” without a consideration of the public aspect of public art. In other words, public art is often considered, by its very nature, a public good. However, it not always clear in whose interest public art is meant to serve and, in fact, history demonstrates that when poorly planned or when divorced from the social or economic reality of the city or neighbourhood in which it resides, public art can be a cause of more public harm than public good.

The famous Gateway Arch of St. Louis (designed by the Finnish architect Eero Saarinen and officially known as the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial) offers a particularly glaring and unsettling example of this. Beginning in 1933, there was
The Basilica of St. Louis, King of France, formerly the Cathedral of St. Louis and usually called the Old Cathedral, was the first cathedral church erected west of the Mississippi River. The current structure was built between 1831 and 1835. The first recorded church on the site was a log house consecrated in 1770.

A drawn-out discussion among St. Louis civic leaders about what they saw as the problem of the historical waterfront district of the city. Their solution was the razing of thirty-seven square blocks.

The district in question fronted the Mississippi River and constituted the oldest part of the city with its original grid pattern designed by the founders of St. Louis, Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau. The city burghers deemed this a derelict area in spite of the fact that it constituted a vibrant neighbourhood for its many primarily African-American and working-poor inhabitants. At the time the destruction of the waterfront was approved, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that the area slated to become the grounds for the Arch contained 290 active businesses, five thousand workers, and a two-percent vacancy rate, with rents comparable to adjacent city neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the entire area was razed in 1939 except for a single cathedral.

To experience the Arch today is to experience a landscape void of the human activities that defined the area prior to the 1930s. The sculpture looms up like an enormous tombstone marking a grave travesty of dispossession and displacement. The Arch haunts the city with its long and curving shadow. Its aesthetic magnificence points to the contradictions between the sculpture’s intended purpose and the reality it brought to the city’s waterfront district.

While intended to invoke feelings of hope, divinity, and possibility, to many the Arch now serves as a symbol of lost potential and displacement. The logic of the Arch’s elliptical trajectory causes the viewer to peer into the sky only to be captivated by a ribbon that seems to narrow to a point at the sky’s endpoint, invoking in the viewer a generalized
sense of a divine experience. Wrapped up in this experience is the narrative of Manifest Destiny and the opening up of the West as a divine right of American settlers. To visit the Arch today is to feel caught between this symbol of possibility and the reality of a stark and struggling urban landscape.

Public Art Today

Public art today is increasingly linked to large-tract real-estate development in concert with major urban planning initiatives. Millennium Park in Chicago is one more example of this. Initiated in 1997 and completed in 2004, Millennium Park is actually a park built as a cap over the century-old Illinois Central rail yard, which cut off part of the downtown Loop District from Chicago’s most important park, Grant Park, with its access to the lakefront.

Public art was tactically employed to provide Chicago with a new identity as well as draw more people to the downtown core via the new park. One of the works commissioned is a water feature that includes a fifty-foot-tall video sculpture by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa, in which huge heads of various people give the effect of spouting water from their puckered lips.

Another work commissioned for the park was *Cloud Gate* by the British artist Anish Kapoor. The success of this work, colloquially referred to as “The Bean,” is a testament to the potential of public art to forge a renewed sense of place. The popularity of the work owes much to its universality, as its shape approximates the saddle shape of the universe itself. The signifier of the universe is converged with the convex and concave surfaces of its mirroric form, which demands interaction by producing multiple points of reflection of the viewer in the context of others standing underneath and around the work.

But the acclaim of *Cloud Gate* should not negate the questions raised by the backstory of its coming into being. While the City of Chicago covered half the budget for the entire park conversion, Millennium Park is a public park whose navigable spaces are entirely sponsored by private parties, from the Pritzker Pavilion to the BP (British Petroleum) Bridge to the McDonald’s Cycle Center to the Chase Promenade and the AT&T Plaza. Even the title of the video work by Plensa bears the name of the sponsor: *Crown Fountain* is named after the Crown family, one with significant holdings in everything from Hilton Hotels to Maytag.²

Importantly, not only did private interests fund the public art that defines Millennium Park, private interests selected the artists and the artworks within the park. In effect, the park represents a series of

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This reality significantly affects the tenor and character of the park itself. As Michael Lewis wrote in the *New York Times*, “a park financed by donors given the power to select objects and artists will look very different from one in which aesthetic or social concerns predominate from the first. It will tend to be less a unified landscape than a series of detached vignettes…. Millennium Park is indeed a handsome souvenir of the park, but somewhere between the lines is a cautionary tale of what happens when the fund-raising arm assumes aesthetic control by default.”

While Millennium Park is a popular destination for Chicagoans and tourists alike, and while it is often regarded as an unqualified success, it is important to consider the cautionary tale that underlies the project. As a venue for public art, Millennium Park certainly does offer a significant public good, but the public art in the park is perhaps a stronger reflection of private interests than of a cohesive, planned, public art venue.

**Is Public Art Dead or Alive?**

Though public art is so named as “art” in the service of the “public,” or “art” in the service of activating “public” space, there exists a great divide between a public alienated from an art that is supposed to address the problem of public alienation. This has led some, such as the Seattle artist Norie Sato, to ask the question of whether public art is dead.

I would argue that although it may be contested, public art is far from dead, as examples such as Chicano Park (1970) in San Diego, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) in Washington, DC, or Rachel Whiteread’s Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial (2000) in Vienna attest. These are public art pieces that were well planned and well executed, where the art is effective and compelling, and the works fit seamlessly into the social, historical, and economic fabrics of their respective urban landscapes.

Like all elements of urban planning, planning for and executing successful large-scale public art projects is complex, as is finding the delicate balance in which a public art project is successful both in terms of art and of urban planning. I believe that public art is very much alive in today’s world, but that we must approach it with the eyes of a critical citizen.