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Integrating Art into Places in Transition - Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston as a Case Study

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Abstract. Among the many projects realized in public spaces, some are truly unique – and these are the ones that build the identity of a place. The aim of this paper is to examine how integrating art and cultural strategies into public space can enhance and reinforce the sense of a place. Particular attention is devoted to urban spaces that we call “places in transition”, where public art improves the city’s imaginative capacity, enlivens neighbourhoods, and sparks civic exchange. Research methods include multidisciplinary literature studies and a detailed case study of the Rose Kennedy Greenway (RKG) – a contemporary urban park in Boston, USA, intended to stitch together the various neighbourhoods surrounding downtown. The Greenway is also a place in transition, to which the Conservancy introduces innovative and contemporary art through temporary exhibitions, engaging people in experiences, interactions and dialogue with art. The five-year Public Art Strategy was supported by Fund for the Arts, a public art program of the New England Foundation for the Arts. The main vision of the project is to amplify the Greenway’s unique characteristic through art that is connective, innovative, and celebratory. There are the two main types of projects within the Public Art Strategy for the RKG: short-term projects called “Platforms” and long-term projects called “Magnets”. The particular conceptual framework is being developed to guide proposals: connection, interactivity, civic dialogue, ecology, and the environment. The article examines the case and analyses the important issues related to implementing art into a public space such as re-imagining places, short-term and long-term artistic interventions, arts and cultural programming.

1. Introduction

Public spaces, as constituting a very particular essence of a city, are a relevant subject of urban scientific studies [1, 2, 3]. Among the diversity of public space projects there are those unique ones that become the real arena for urban life, characterized by aesthetic and compositional attractiveness and the potential to build the identity of a place. This group includes the innovatory, experimental projects built on the assumption that art should contribute to shaping public space. This contribution could be understood as a displaying a piece of art in an urban gallery, but at the same time it could constitute an important tool for the revitalization of degraded areas. New art and cultural activities could serve as bottom-up revitalization tools helpful in initiating the process of change in the areas affected by crisis [4].

According to M. Miles, public art in the public realm has to fulfil two main roles: serve as a decoration within a re-visioned area of urban design and as a social process of criticism and engagement [5]. Public art can be interpreted in different ways and cannot be simply equated with outdoor art. It is guided by a desire to engage with its audiences and to create spaces – whether



material, virtual, or imagined – within which people can identify themselves [6]. Moreover, public art not only contributes to the visual attractiveness of the city, but as Sharp, Polloc, and Paddison emphasize, it can also be a tool through which authorities can signal their willingness to deal with social and environmental problems [6].

According to Hall and Robertson, the claims of public art in an urban environment are as follows:

- developing a sense of community,
- developing a sense of place,
- developing civic identity,
- addressing community needs,
- tackling social exclusion,
- educational value,
- promoting social change [7].

Public art that enhances city's imaginative capacity, enlivens **neighbourhoods**, contributes to economic vitality, and sparks civic exchange should be treated as an important element in **place making**. As Hodgson points out: "Unlike art in private spaces, public art is ideally site-specific and attuned to its social, economic, and environmental context. Public art can contribute to urban design and the revitalization of civic infrastructure; enhance and personalize public space; comment on environmental and social conditions; and activate civic dialogue" [8].

2. Arts and cultural programming

Arts interventions in a public space can be a part of the strategy of city development and public art master plans. According to J. Hollinger, public art master planning for municipal government is the process of strategically planning the placement of public art objects, and the processes used to administer a public art program. This process combines urban design and planning not only with artistic practice but also public policy, local government management, and many other elements [9]. As Hollinger underlines, the plans usually consist of such elements as: goals and visions, integration with other planning, creating a public art authority, funding, artist and site selection, documentation, as well as maintenance and removal of public art [9].

Moreover, the development and adoption of a public art master plan provides an opportunity to establish a shared vision for a community's public realm. A public art master plan also coordinates the activities of stakeholders such as planners, artists, as well as arts- and culture-related nonprofit organizations [8].

Cities undertake public art master planning for different reasons. These are usually expressed in the goals of the plan. Broadly, strategic planning can be defined "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it" [10]. Public art planning can also concern the allocation of resources for public art. Cities have a number of goals for their public art master plans, which pertain to such areas as: open space or parks planning, economic development, cultural tourism, and quality of life [9].

The first citywide public art plan in the USA was adopted by the City of Phoenix in 1988. It primarily gave the city a clear vision of how to use public art as an effective tool of urban design. Since the implementation of the plan, public art has been playing an important role in shaping the city [8]. Other interesting examples of public art master planning can be found in New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, Oregon, Arlington County, Virginia, or Boston, where a public art vision has been formulated for the Rose Kennedy Greenway (RKG).

3. Case study: The Rose Kennedy Greenway

3.1. The Rose Kennedy Greenway: A major urban park

The Rose Kennedy Greenway is a linear park in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, that connects different neighbourhoods. The realization of the Greenway project was connected with stopping the negative effect of the Central Artery Highway (I-93). In the 1950s, this road cut off the city from its harbour.

As stated in a study under the title *Greenway District Planning Study: Use and Development Guidelines*, prepared by the Boston Planning & Development Agency, formerly known as the Boston Redevelopment Authority: “The Greenway is the result of a dramatic transformation of a transportation corridor into a major urban park and civic asset. This transformation has created the potential to exponentially increase the local and regional value” [11]. The role of the park is to stitch together old neighbourhoods and to create connections between previously remote districts [11].



Figure 1. North End Parks, part of the Rose Kennedy Greenway – a “front porch” and pergola, serving as a spatial extension of the lively streets

According to EDAW’s guidelines, the main goals of the Greenway project was to create an open space corridor as a bridge between city and water, connecting to the urban fabric on the city side, opening to the expansive views on the water side. The project was completed in 2008. As noted by Helen Graves [12], the Greenway was established as a part of environmental commitments for what has been billed as the most ambitious highway project in American history. Simultaneously, in 2004, the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy was established as an independently incorporated non-profit organization. Its goal was to guide the emerging park and raise funds for an endowment and operations.

The Greenway in Boston consists of: North End Parks, Wharf District Park, Four Point Channel Parks, Dewey Square Park, Chinatown Park, and Armenian Heritage Park. It includes such elements as landscape gardens, promenades, plazas, interactive fountains, art, and a special lighting system. Within Greenway, each park has its own character and features [13], from Chinatown Parks, containing design elements drawn from Asian traditions and art work, to North End Parks, reflecting their neighborhood, and Wharf District Park – an attractive green space expressing the multi-dimensional complexity of the district through time and space.

3.2 Public Art Strategy for the RKG

In 2012, the Public Art Strategy for the Greenway [14] was completed. The document was based on the research and recommendations of two consultants, Renee Piechocki and Jennifer McGregor, who collaborated with the Conservancy staff and the Public Art Working Group to develop a strategy for the Rose Kennedy Greenway. The five-year Public Art Strategy was supported by Fund for the Arts, a public art program of the New England Foundation for the Arts, as well as by Robert and Doris Gordon. The main aim of the document was to bring innovative and contemporary art to Boston through free, temporary exhibitions, engaging people in experiences, interactions and dialogue with art.

The strategy consists of four conceptual frameworks meant to guide proposals: connection, interactivity, civic dialogue, ecology and the environment. Thus, the public art projects implemented

along the Greenway should unite the segmented parks and connect the individual communities, at the same time engaging the visitors with park and one another and fostering civic dialogue by promoting freedom of expression, freedom of speech, diversity, and other civic and community issues. Finally, the projects should refer to and deal directly with issues of sustainability and the environment.

Within the Strategy, two main types of projects – short-term ones, called “Platforms”, and long-term ones, called “Magnets” – were determined. The main aim of the Platforms is to take advantage of existing park conditions and to support diverse artworks over time. The long-term Magnet Projects bring local, national, and international attention to the Greenway, attracting residents, visitors, and public art pilgrims to the park. Magnets make the Greenway a destination and are impressive in scale, interactivity, and artistic excellence. Among the Magnet Projects we can list Sculpture+, Artists-in-Residence, and Design Team Projects.

As stated in the Conservancy’s Public Art Strategy, it shifts its role from receptive to proactive, taking upon itself to guide the calls produced by the Conservancy’s public art project plan as well as unsolicited proposals. Four distinctive artist selection processes were also developed, namely: open selection (widely-posted calls for artists to apply for opportunities), invitational selection (inviting a limited group of artists to submit their qualifications), direct selection (selecting a specific artist directly to create a proposal), and guest curators (engaging a guest curator, either through a call or directly). In order to structure the approval process, specific guidelines were also established regarding unsolicited proposals, moratorium on permanent works, and public engagement. Greenway Conservancy Public Art Staff, Greenway Art Advisory Committee, MassDOT, and Boston Art Commission are all involved in the process of selecting and approving the works of art.

3.3 Selected art installations on the Greenway

Among the many works of art of open gallery on the Greenway, we can find some that specifically fit into the overall strategy of revitalizing space through art. These include the works by Janet Echelman, Carolina Aragón, Gianna Stewart, Mehdi Ghadyanloo, Matthew Richie, Os Gémeos, and others. In different parts of the Greenway, multi-year installations could also be found, such as the “Harbor Fog” (Wharf District Park), the “Abstract Sculpture”, or the “Labyrinth”.

3.3.1 Multi-year installations

The “Harbor Fog” was created by the Bostonian artist Ross Miller. Located in the Wharf District Parks, this interactive, sensitive to movement artistic installation is inspired by the Boston Harbour navigational buoys. This unique sculpture activates the space and makes it a great place to play and relax [15].

The second multi-year installation, the “Abstract Sculpture” by the architect Don Tellalian, can be found in the Armenian Heritage Park. The sculpture has been described by *The Boston Globe* as being “designed to be reconfigured each year to represent the shifting immigrant experience” [16].

The “Abstract Sculpture” was dedicated to those who lost their lives during the Armenian Holocaust (1915–1923) and represents the immigrant experience. It consists of two mobile halves mounted on a reflecting pool. The sculpture is reconfigured each year, as a symbol of all who left their countries, came to Boston and had to adapt to the new reality.

The last multi-year installation, the “Labyrinth”, is also located in the Armenian Heritage Park. It is a gift to the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts from the Armenian-Americans. This work of art takes the form of a green labyrinth paved in granite and is meant to celebrate the journey through life. The center of the sculpture is marked by a jet of water and the symbol of eternity.

3.3.2 Janet Echelman’s aerial installation, 2015

The aerial installation called “As If It Were Already Here” by Janet Echelman is one of the most poetic art installations that can be found on the Greenway. Jesse Brackenbury, the executive director of the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, said: “Janet’s work is ambitious, dramatic and

accessible. Her work allows Boston as a community to dream bigger about what we are capable of”[17]. The work was displayed in the park from May 3 to October 25, 2015.

The artist, who was called an Architectural Digest Innovator for “changing the very essence of urban spaces” is known for her soft, billowing sculptures, changing along with the wind and lighting conditions. Her works are associated with lightweight, colourful fibre sculptures which “shift from being objects you look at, to something you can get lost in” [18].

Because of its enormous size, the sculpture can be seen from far away and from many directions. It weighs approximately one ton and is illuminated by 32 individually programmed LED lights. It is suspended over the central part of the Greenway, close to major destinations, such as the Children’s Museum, Tea Party Ship Museum, Freedom Trail, and Aquarium.

Before installing the piece, the artist conducted an extensive research about the RKG and its neighbourhood. Together with her interdisciplinary team, she had to determine where and how the structure was to be attached to the buildings. For this purpose, the team also conducted an initial building analysis and selected final attachment buildings and points (125 High Street, One International Place, and InterContinental Hotel) as well as lighting locations.

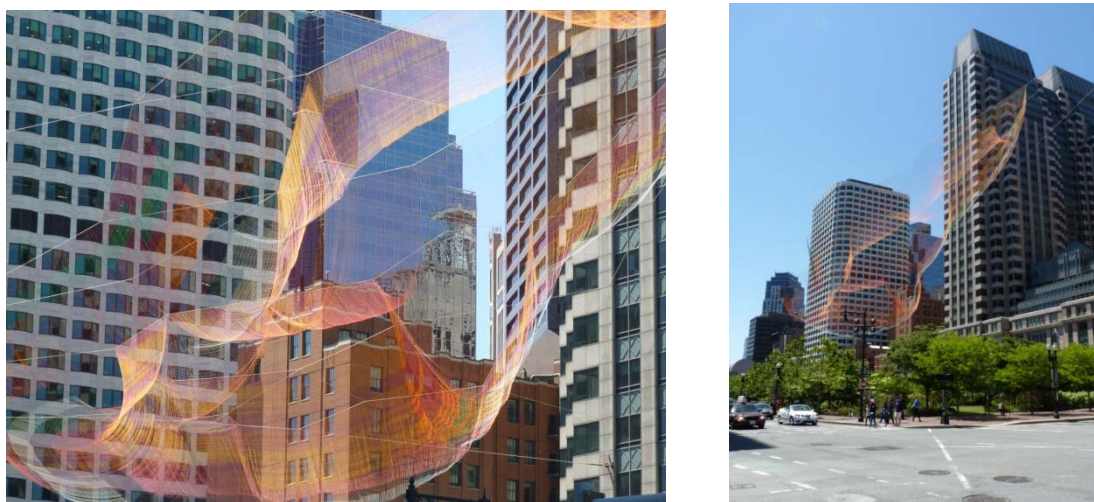


Figure 2. Janet Echelman’s aerial installation, the Rose Kennedy Greenway

In this particular case, it is worth mentioning how the whole process of introducing the artwork into the public space was organized. The interdisciplinary team consisted of the artist Janet Echelman as well as aeronautical and mechanical engineers, architects, lighting designers, landscape architects, and fabricators. In addition to the Smith Family Foundation, the installation has received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, New England Fund for the Arts, and ArtPlace America.

3.3.3 “High Tide”, Carolina Aragón, 2016

“Hide Tide” by Carolina Aragón is a site-specific, kinetic, temporary art installation placed along Cross Street at the corner of North Street in North End Parks. The installation consists of 500 fiberglass rods and 1600 dichroic plexiglass circles. Aragón’s installation represents an abstract marsh landscape and its goal is to provoke a discussion about the shifting boundary between land and water in Boston in various contexts: daily tidal fluctuations, the history of man-made land reclamation, and the possibility of future flooding due to sea level rise [19].

As the artist herself stresses, the installation speaks of the city’s changing shoreline and is also embedded in a broader context related to the climate change and its effects. Like other of the artist’s works, this interactive installation acts as an environmental sensor, reacting to the atmospheric conditions – the changing light and wind. It inspires us to think about and understand the changing

world that surrounds us. When designing “High Tide”, the artist had two main goals: to create a site-specific installation that would connect the park and its local communities; and to create a strong gateway to the park system [20]. “High Tide” transformed an empty lawn into an engaging art space. It creates a physical, emotional, and intellectual gateway into the park, engaging the public at the same time.

3.3.4 “Midden”, Gianna Stewart, 2016

The next interesting piece of public art is “Midden” by Gianna Stewart, a locally-based Massachusetts artist. This outdoor public display near South Station Boston was created using casted clear urethane resin, painted steel, and solar LED lighting. This is how the artist herself describes her art: “When The Big Dig was underway in Boston, several midden were unearthed. The ancient trash heaps revealed much about those who roamed these sites before us. Often the shells grew larger towards the bottom of the piles, artifacts from before oysters were harvested as abundantly. Left alone, an oyster never stops growing”. As the previous examples, “Midden” speaks of both the history of Boston and the contemporary changes. It is an inspiring installation created by a young artist.

4. Conclusions

Art remains an important tool of urban regeneration. It acquires a particular meaning in places under transformation (places in transition), where it can significantly influence their nature and involve the local community in the processes of change. The undertaken transformative actions should constitute a part of shared vision. The solution implemented in the US, for example, is a public art master plan designed to determine in what way public art is supposed to emerge in the city and how to manage this process.

The introduction of public art to the Rose Kennedy Greenway is designed to shape its identity and public image. This corresponds very well to the Project for Public Spaces guidelines, which proposed nine strategies for creating great parks: use transit as a catalyst for attracting visitors, make management of the park a central concern, develop strategies to attract people during different seasons, acquire diverse funding sources, design the park layout for flexibility, consider both the “inner park” and “outer park”, provide amenities for the different groups of people using the park, create attractions and destinations throughout the park and create an identity and image for the park [21]. The Rose Kennedy Greenway, with its special artistic character, became an urban park where people discover beautiful public spaces, human connections, and engaging experiences.

The whole Public Art Vision for the RKG affected the efficiency of the implementation of public art and also helped it to become an effective tool of urban design. Creating the Greenway’s new identity using art has met the expectations of its potential users, who expected public art to be of high quality, interactive, and engaging.

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