

Penland's Public Art Session

The third session of Penland's 1999 summer program was devoted to classes covering various aspects of public art. The idea was to explore and reinforce the connections between craft and public art, and to provide craft artists with specific skills needed to move from the studio into the public realm. This account of the session was provided by Regina Flanagan, who is the former director of the Minnesota Percent for Art in Public Places Program.

In the darkness ahead, the buildings of Penland shimmer through the trees as I round the last curve near the top of the mountain. The studios are still brilliantly illuminated at this late hour. Visible within a grove is the outline of a mysterious, red neon-lighted cube. The scene hums with activity.

I had been away from the campus for the first time since arriving ten days before to serve on the faculty of a two-week session on public art. In addition to visiting studios and providing critiques of design ideas and proposals, I was invited to open the session with a talk aimed at forming a conceptual framework for public art. In the audience were artists inquiring about public art, practitioners and art administrators, design professionals, and interested lay people.

Contemporary urbanist Richard Sennett, in his 1990 book *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, observed that the creators of public spaces cannot design something significant by creating immediate fullness. The most successful public places, he says, are those simple and flexible enough to permit alteration. By human improvisation and use, spaces develop a narrative quality—with memories and stories attached to them—that gives them character.

Using this as a framework, I presented a series of public projects, focusing on the physical object and then shifting to the social function of space

which must be understood as a place of social relations, rather than an empty, neutral vessel to be filled. We examined public art that creates flexible space with permeable borders, embodies narrative power that enables personal stories to evolve, and celebrates the touch of the human hand.

I also served as moderator for a series of salons on practical and theoretical topics. At the first salon, we talked about why an artist becomes involved in public art. Penland Director Jean McLaughlin, who previously administered North Carolina's Art in Public Places program, remarked that public art affords the opportunity to think conceptually about how people can touch others in the world.

Several in the group indicated socially-driven agendas for their work. One commented that public art is a way to loosen up and allow others to work with you, as well as feed you, so you do not stagnate. Another voiced dissatisfaction with the traditional art world; places like museums and galleries made no sense for her work.

The discussion came to a head when a young artist asked why so much public art seems to be of poor quality, and panders to the lowest common denominator. The instructors, who have a range of experience creating work for public settings, offered their insights. Elizabeth Busch explained that the artists and the community members who serve on committees choosing the art may have different ideas about what is right. They have to be able to make choices on their own about what is appropriate. Judy Byron concurred, noting that we may be expert about art, but how could we be expert about community members' lives?

A murmur went through the crowd when sculptor Ralph Helmick said that public art seems to have two divergent agendas: social work and aesthetic excellence. David Dunlap disagreed with reducing public art to these fixed categories; social work may redefine aesthetic excellence, he asserted.

At the next salon, Judy Byron remarked that public art has not had an idiosyncratic voice; it needs to be redefined and reconstructed to achieve a "facetedness" that is more dimensional and reflective of the diversity of people and viewpoints. Elizabeth Conner noted that artists may become obsessively client-driven, as occasionally happens with design professionals. We must remind ourselves why we were hired, she said.

When someone says they want a specific thing, this should not be the end of the conversation.

Student Kendra Brock perceived a hierarchy and a separation between the creators of large objects and artists who are involved in community-based art. Ralph Helmick wondered if it is even possible to talk about the issue of quality in art? "We are going to involve the community" has become such a catch-phrase—we need to ask harder questions of the work, he contended.

The intelligence and thoughtfulness of these discussions was also evident in the projects created by the studios during the

two-week session. Numerous ephemeral installations as well as several permanent additions transformed the campus. The studio directed by Ralph Helmick and Stu Schechter created a series of four canvas canopies for an arbor next to the dining hall. The students agreed they would "rather fail at a challenging site than succeed at an easy one," so instead of choosing a site of innate beauty, they focused on making a net improvement to the campus. First, they assessed the present function of the site, taking into account what people wanted, then they built a study model to test their ideas. Finally, they ordered canvas, and sewed and assembled the canopies.

Carlos Alves's ceramic students designed and fabricated a resplendent twenty-foot long ceramic mosaic mural on a retaining wall opposite one of Penland's flower beds. Ceramic tile signs were created by Angelica Pozo's class. Fiber artist Ellen Kochansky's group produced a communal quilt/sculpture featuring mementos wrapped and bound to its surface.

Elizabeth Conner's studio took on an ambitious project to determine a use for a prominently sited but condemned service station in the nearby town of Spruce Pine. The stone building appears to emerge from the rocky cliff face behind it, but boulders have broken away from the bank and rest directly against the building. People are not allowed inside, so the group could only work with the building's handsome facade and the space in front of it.

The students researched local history, interviewed town officials and community members, and examined planning and site issues relative to downtown development. They proposed a

gathering place oriented to local people as well as visitors. They decided that a series of windows could replace the service station's garage doors, and visible inside the building would be exhibits that honor historical events, including the mining industry, as well as provide information on local environmental concerns. The group photographed the building and its environs; constructed a detailed model and drew scaled plans for the plaza; produced prototypes of the exhibit elements showing imagery and content; and formally presented their proposal—all within two-weeks!

While many studios grappled with the dynamics of group process and decision making to produce one outcome shared by many, other classes worked through the creative process of preparing individual design proposals. Both Angelica Pozo's and Elizabeth Busch's students developed proposals responding to prospectuses and plans for actual buildings, while Judy Byron's drawing students created temporary site-specific installations located throughout the nearby town of Burnsville.

Of all the work produced during the public art session, the red neon-lighted cube glowing in the pine grove on the hillside that summer night came to symbolize its spirit to me. Resulting from a spontaneous collaboration between Sally Prash in the glass studio and movement instructor Kristine Lindahl, the eight-foot-square, open-sided cube was used for a dance improvisation one evening. It remained on the hillside for several days, illuminated through the night to greet us in the humid, foggy dawn; an imaginary vessel holding our cumulative energy within its physical space. —Regina Flanagan

Robin Dreyer



Regina Flanagan, instructor Angelica Pozo, and several class members listen while student Reggie Pointer explains his proposal for a site at the International Center for Water Resources in Ohio. Angelica's class worked from the same materials that were furnished to artists entering the competition for this site.

Robin Dreyer



A detail of the awning installation created by Ralph Helmick and Stu Schechter's students. Each student in the class made a pair of finials for the pipes that supported the canvas awnings.

Dana Moore



This is a temporary installation by students in Dan Engelke's class on environmental sculpture. The stalks were made of local plant materials and paper; the lights were powered by hidden battery packs.