

WHAT I LEARNED IN VENICE | THUNDER BAY'S WATERFRONT | 6 LESSONS IN CITY MAKING

PublicArtReview

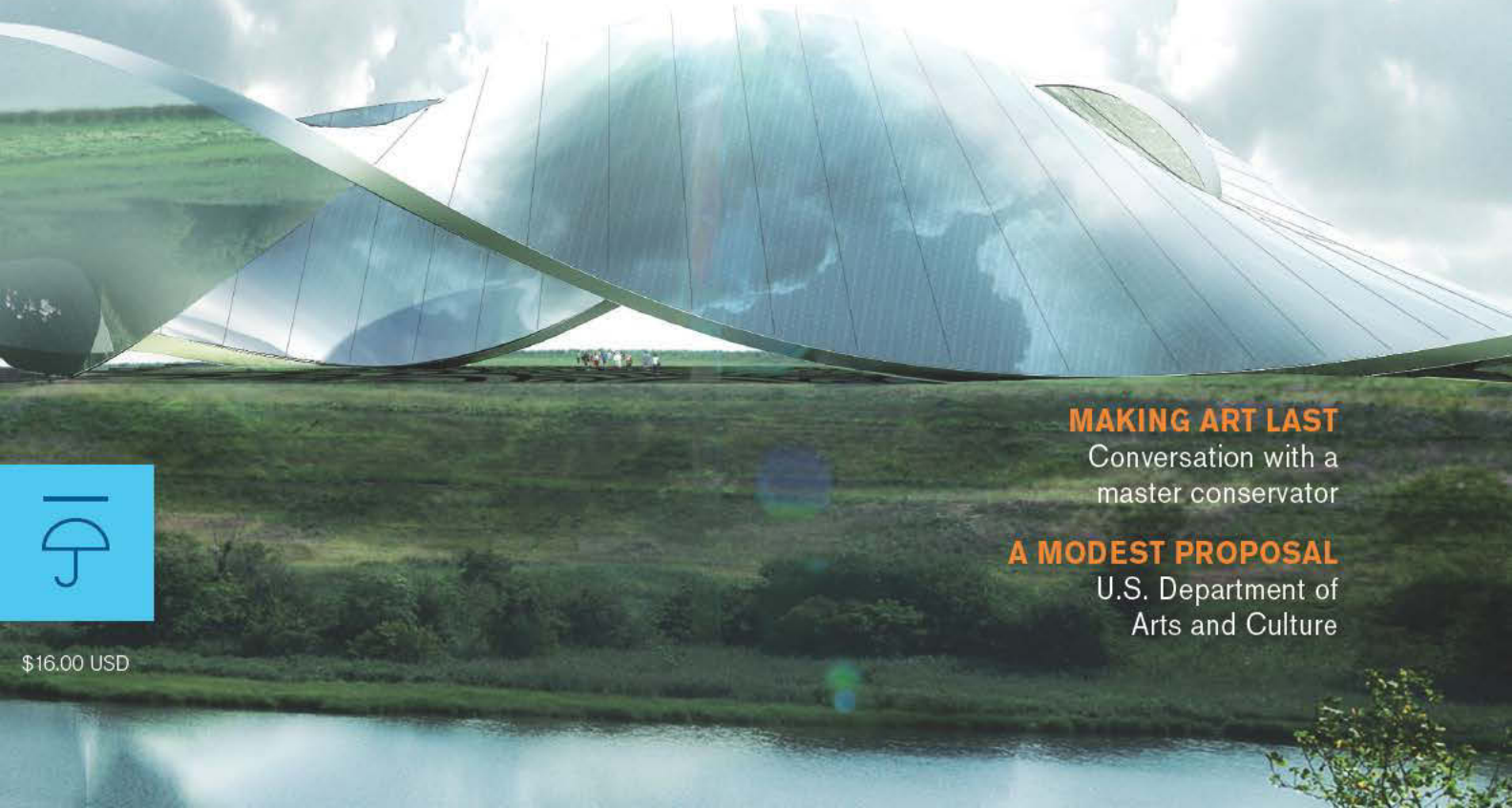
Issue 49 • Fall/Winter 2013 • publicartreview.org

TOWARD A

LIVABLE PLANET

Can public art change the world?

Meet the artists who think so.



MAKING ART LAST

Conversation with a
master conservator

A MODEST PROPOSAL

U.S. Department of
Arts and Culture

\$16.00 USD

The New City-Makers

*Six lessons public artists can teach us
about how to make our cities better*

BY JOE HART



Something strange is happening in our cities. Given the somber state of our economic, environmental, and social progress, one would expect cities to be in serious trouble. After all, a growing majority of the world's population lives in them (84 percent in the United States, according to the last census), where they consume an ever-growing share of the world's resources.

It's true that cities in the U.S. and abroad face a number of pressing problems. That's not surprising. What *is* surprising is that in spite of these problems—or perhaps because of them—pockets of innovation and change are springing up like grass in the cracks of an abandoned parking lot.

Take Indianapolis's Service Center for Contemporary Culture and Community. Behind the big name is a simple but powerful idea: Turn a semi-abandoned Firestone tire outlet in a struggling shopping mall into a multi-use community center. It serves as an art gallery, workshop, meeting space, music venue, library, and community garden (complete with chickens) for the Lafayette Square neighborhood, a struggling and blighted—but ethnically diverse—first-ring suburb.

"It's an oasis among miles and miles of suburban pavement," says Jim Walker, co-founder and executive director of Big Car, the organization behind the Service Center. "It's a space for all these cultures from around the world who live in this neighborhood to celebrate their cultures." It's also temporary—the shopping mall agreed to the plan on the condition that if it found a good-paying tenant, it could dismantle the Service Center.

Big Car describes itself as a "cultural organization," and it began its life as an artist collective. This fact, too, is emblematic of some of the most interesting work going on in cities today: In many cases, the leaders of the kind of change-making efforts that are really making a difference are public artists.

Artists have been involved in interventions and social practice on the scale of Big Car's service center for decades or more. But it's our view that the upsurge in such projects represents a fork in the road for the still-emerging field of public art. We're not suggesting that big-budget public art for new airports and hospitals is less valuable than the works of groups like Big Car. Nor do we expect large commissions to disappear.

But when it comes to creative placemaking—and by that we mean innovative, relatively cheap, community-minded improvements in the fabric of the modern city—groups like Big Car lead the way.

In putting this issue together, we at *Public Art Review* asked ourselves why and how such projects are coming together. Are there any kind of principles at work in innovative city-making? What common threads tie such works together? After more than a dozen interviews with practitioners, artists, and city planners and administrators, here are some tentative answers.

#1 Rule No. 1: Break the Rules

The last great attempt at city-making was New Urbanism, which bubbled up in the 1980s with a call for walkable, mixed-use urban development. While some New Urbanist principles (bike-friendly cities, for instance) have gained traction, the movement has bogged down, arguably because of its emphasis on central planning and revising codes—on inventing and enforcing new rules.

The new city-makers, in contrast, are moving more tactically within the rules—or finding creative exceptions to the rules. In Memphis, for example, certain neighborhoods are plagued by abandoned proper-

ties, many owned by absentee investors from out of state. According to the rules, these vacant buildings must be boarded up by city contractors paid and trained to do the job.

A Memphis project, 25 SQ public art initiative, however, paired citizen groups with public artists to tackle the work of boarding up abandoned houses. Local artists work with members of the com-



OPPOSITE PAGE: Inside the Service Center in Indianapolis, Ind. ABOVE: Service Center before (top) and after (middle) facelift by Big Car. BELOW: South Memphis residents paint panels that will be used to board up windows of abandoned homes in the area.



munity to make murals on the boards, and contractors train everyday citizens on how to do the work.

The project does more than prettify blighted property, says Dorian Spears, a project manager for the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team, the city branch responsible for the program. 25 SQ empowers those with the biggest stake in the neighborhood—those who live there—to solve problems and take ownership. “Once people who live in the neighborhood know how to properly board and secure the home,” says Spears, “they won’t have to call in and say, ‘We need this done.’ They’ll call in and say, ‘We’ll take care of it.’”

The success of 25 SQ points to another common thread among fruitful city-making projects—the willingness of city officials to try something new. “It’s the job of most city employees to say ‘no,’” says Stephen Zacks, the executive director of the Flint Public Art Project in Michigan. “There needs to be somebody there to say ‘yes.’”

#2 Use the power of the pop-up

While there’s certainly value in permanent public art infrastructure projects—new parks, sculpture gardens, transit stops—the new city-makers are increasingly exploring transitory spaces that respond to ad hoc needs.

In Flint, Michigan, for example, a large downtown parking lot has evolved into a public gathering space, home base for a classic car meet-up, a 10k road race, an electronic music festival, and countless other events. “Given the fact that that parking lot was already being used as a de facto public space, I thought a pavilion could serve to bring attention to these events,” says Zacks. In collaboration with other local groups, including the Flint chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Zacks launched an international competition to design a temporary pavilion for the parking lot.

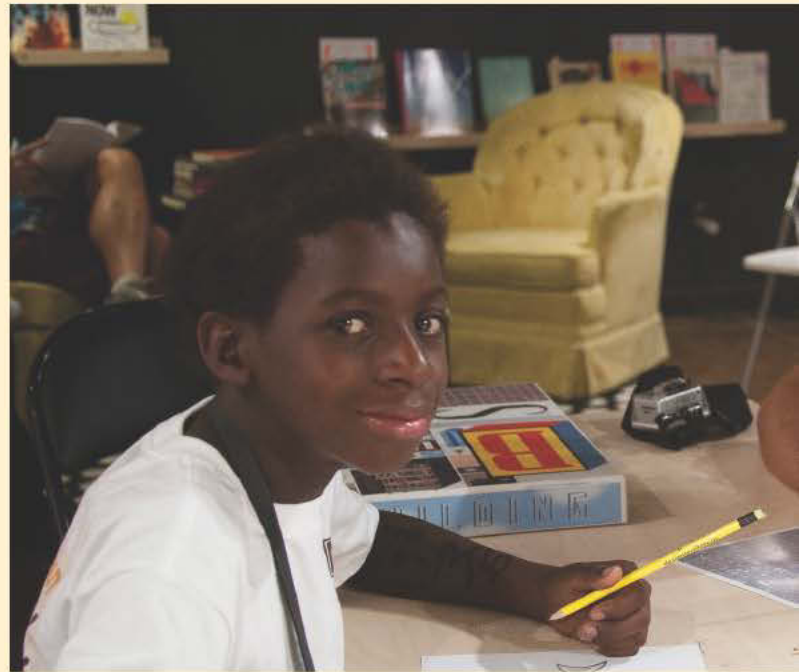
Big Car’s Service Center in Indianapolis takes a similar approach, occupying the building until a retail tenant comes along. “Because we came in here temporarily, we can use a lighter, quicker, cheaper approach,” says Walker. “We’re not spending a lot of money to remodel it. We’re making do with what we have.”

Interventions like these aren’t concerned with permanently altering the built environment but with cultivating a culture of engagement. In Flint, Zacks points out that the vibrancy of the parking lot serves as a counter-narrative to the gloomy perceptions typically associated with Flint. “It’s outside of the cultural narrative that people have about the city,” he says. By promoting the pavilion—the winning Flat Lot Pavilion design was by Two Islands—he’s helping to change that narrative. “Flint is a city that is incredibly active in terms of civic activity and cultural events—despite the economic woes.”

#3 Don’t follow the money—let it follow you

Before the economic collapse, Wiard Sterk focused on large-scale public art projects linked to major urban developments, like the Cardiff Bay waterfront redevelopment in Wales—a £650 million project with a £1.5 million budget for public art. Today, “It’s a very different picture,” he says. “With the economic collapse, development also collapsed, and funding for public art fell away.”

But he’s finding that municipalities are replacing cash with creativity. “Because there’s less money around, there’s less pressure to deliver against a budget. People are thinking more freely and creatively.”



For example, he’s recently started working with a housing authority in the cash-strapped city of Newport, South Wales, with a focus on the original neighborhood around the port. “It’s very interesting historically, but also in quite a dilapidated state,” says Sterk.

Perhaps the greatest asset in the neighborhood is its extremely diverse cultural makeup. And that’s where Sterk is focusing his work. “We’re looking at projects that will bring that diversity to the fore—temporary market places, places to grow garden produce.” Sterk stresses that the emphasis in Newport is not on “imposed civic art,” but on building and supporting the culture that already exists in the neighborhood.

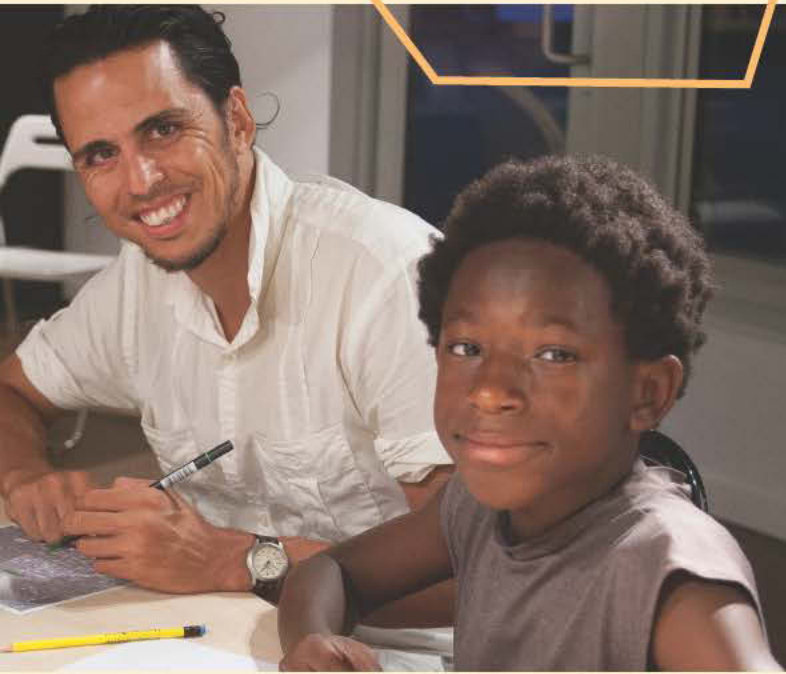
That’s a budgetary reality—the city doesn’t have the cash to invest in large-scale civic artworks. But it’s also the right way to do public art, according to Sterk. “It’s not quick in and quick out; it’s long-term planning,” he explains. “On the whole, clients are much more willing to look at the process of creative practice rather than just the outcome. The outcome is a bonus.”

#4 It’s the journey, not the destination

Sterk is not alone in arguing that process is at least as important as any given outcome—or, more specifically, that the best outcomes emerge from the right process.

Take the work of Lindsay Kinkade, a graphic designer and urban planner who currently works in Phoenix, Arizona. During the summer of 2013, Kinkade set up shop in a gallery in downtown Phoenix and invited the community—special guests from area universities, city employees, urban planners, artists, and passersby who stumbled on the events—into the gallery to help “map our assets, projects, organizations, and leaders.” This pop-up design studio was called Design Territory at Combine Studios.

Kinkade certainly has an outcome in mind: a more “user-friendly” city. But in rapidly expanding Phoenix, she understands that achieving that outcome requires a delicate and inclusive process. “I want to be careful I don’t duplicate the work of other people invested in



the future of Phoenix,” she says. “Instead, I want to build on it and support it.”

In addition to welcoming a wide variety of voices into her mapping project, Kinkade sees the planning culture of the city as another “process” that she can influence. “City hall is a planning culture; there’s no design culture and there’s very little conversation about the user experience,” she says. “It’s really good at making sure the water lines go out to the edge of town and at keeping everything orderly. But it’s not known as a hub of innovation. By bringing in a maker culture and temporary public art culture, we can enhance that capacity.”

#5 Work with others

Like Kinkade, virtually all the artists interviewed for this story are working in close collaboration with a wide range of other kinds of professionals—many of them in highly disparate fields. One of the more interesting examples is Marcus Young, one of two artists embedded in St. Paul’s Public Works Department.

Young’s salary is paid by Public Art Saint Paul, a nonprofit arts organization. But his office in the Public Works Department means that for the past seven years he’s worked alongside street workers, engineers, and city maintenance workers.

“There’s something unique about being a cubicle away from all those people doing the daily work of citymaking,” he says. “My ideas as an artist come from an understanding of what they’re trying to accomplish. I’m here to figure out, ‘how can I play in the sandbox with you guys?’”

Young’s latest project as St. Paul’s “City Artist in Residence” is a reinvention of the stop-sign post. “It’s really a defining element in the residential streetscape, yet it’s been overlooked. We said, ‘Let’s make something of it.’” With funding from St. Paul’s percent-for-art public art ordinance, Young brought on a local metal artist, Lisa Elias, to create a new design for the posts.

Key to the project’s success is the fact that its implementation will unfold over years to come. “On the one hand, it’s such a minuscule gesture in the grand scheme of things. People are redesigning plazas

and whole neighborhoods, while here we are spending all this time and effort going into a little post. But there are more than 7,000 stop signs in the city. That’s where the potential is.”

Young says that the stop-sign project is a direct result from his unique, collaborative position with the Public Works Department. It’s one thing to commission a mural on the side of a building or a sculpture for a public park. But traffic signs are a vital piece of the city’s safety infrastructure. Because he is deeply sensitive to the goals of city engineering, Young was able to work with Elias on a design that safely re-imagines a standard and pervasive element of city infrastructure.



ABOVE: Marco Perez and two of his photography students, Davion (left) and Desmonte (right), making maps at Lindsay Kinkade’s Design Territory at Combine Studios in Phoenix, Ariz. RIGHT: Prototype of new stop-sign posts in St. Paul, Minn.

#6 Proceed from the community

As important as cross-disciplinary collaboration is working with the communities that make up the city. “With our work, we’re always trying to open a space for people to connect,” explains Shanai Matteson, co-director of the Minnesota-based design and public art studio Works Progress. “We’re not making a judgment about what is the right kind of knowledge or creativity, or the right thing to do.”

In other words, one role of the public artist in city-making is to facilitate creativity in the communities where they work. “It falls under the banner of enabling rather than dictating,” says Matteson. “As artists, we can create platforms that enable or encourage people to be creative where creativity already exists. It’s an approach that acknowledges what everyday people already know, and one that assumes or acknowledges that those people already want to have better communities—and they are probably the best ones to determine solutions.”

Many of the Works Progress projects are designed to facilitate this idea sharing. Give & Take, for example, is a series of games and activities designed to help participants share knowledge and skills. Matteson and her colleagues have used Give & Take at community neighborhood meetings, nonprofit organizations, design and planning charrettes, and a variety of other groups, and they are developing a kit that anyone can use to put the principles into practice.

“Basically Give & Take is a set of social, interactive games that get people talking to one another,” explains Matteson. “They’re sharing what they know and they’re learning from each other—and over time, it’s a way for informal creative networks to flourish.”

JOE HART is the senior editor of Public Art Review and a professional writer, editor, and musician based in Viroqua, Wisconsin.



“With our work,
we’re always trying
to open a space for
people to connect.”

—Shanai Matteson



TOP: Attendees talking at Give & Take CRAFT in Minneapolis, Minn. CENTER: One person's nametag at the Give & Take CRAFT event. BOTTOM: Colin Kloecker and Shanai Matteson of Works Progress at Give & Take YOUTH event with Kulture Klub Collaborative at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis.