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Public art projects face budget woes, some controversy

MARIA RECIO - MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

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ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Maybe it was the fairy. Or it may have been the toad. But the combination of a fairy riding a toad as a finalist in a sculpture competition at a new federal defense complex — along with the \$600,000 price tag — set off howls of protest from disgruntled residents, with local critics dubbing the artwork "the gurgling toad."

It's the latest flap over public art — the movement born in the 1970s to set aside a percentage of federal, state and local construction projects for artwork — and it reached a fever pitch last spring in northern Virginia, stretching from a congressman's office to local critics to the blogosphere.

In cities across the country — from Miami to Kansas City, Mo., to Fort Worth, Texas, to Sacramento, Calif. — art at public buildings and public spaces is burgeoning, sometimes generating controversy and sometimes becoming instant landmarks.



WERNER R SLOCUM | MCT - "I see what you mean," a large blue bear sculpture created by Denver artist Lawrence Argent, peers into the windows of the Colorado Convention Center on Monday, July 25, 2011. The sculpture form and shape of the bear was extrapolated from three-dimensional digital files, and then created from composite materials and installed in 2005.

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Many federal projects, by policy, have 0.5 percent of their construction costs set aside for art, while 350 programs at the city and state level typically reserve 1 percent. Trend-setting Miami has a 1.5 percent set-aside, and self-described "artsy" Fort Worth and Sacramento top out at 2 percent, the highest rates in the country.

"Public art creates a sense of identity of places we inhabit," says Liesel Fenner, the public art program manager at Americans for the Arts, an advocacy group. "It is part of our cityscapes."

That wasn't the reaction that Rep. James Moran, D-Va., had to the project at the Mark Center, a multimillion-dollar complex that towers over Interstate 395, a few miles south of the Pentagon, and soon will be home to 6,400 employees.

"I consider myself one of the strongest supporters of the arts," Moran said as the issue exploded. "But at a time when we are fighting to prevent the traffic nightmare the Mark Center poses for Department of Defense employees, local residents and all commuters on I-395, this is a very questionable way to spend \$600,000."

The uproar led to millions of road improvements from the DOD and the state — and the axing of the sculpture component of the artwork, with the art budget cut to \$250,000.

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"Ultimately, I think there will be a very nice piece of artwork that the employees and the public can enjoy," said Alisa Carrel, the director of Alexandria's office of the arts. "I think every public art project has the potential for controversy."

Public art divides and unites.

"It is so politically charged," said sculptor Peter Frantz, an art professor at Towson University in Towson, Md. The point of public art, he said, "is to make it accessible to everyone who walks by."

"It's about the soaring possibility of man," Frantz said, "the concept of something greater than myself."

Miami is a hotbed of public art, with 30 active projects, five of them alone — at a cost of \$7.2 million — in the new Miami-Dade County-owned Florida Marlins baseball stadium, which is under construction and due to open next spring.

Brandi Reddick, who's in charge of Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places, said that precisely to avoid the kind of controversy that dogged the Mark Center sculpture competition, Miami didn't commission any stand-alone artwork, instead asking artists to incorporate designs into the architecture.

"We approach it as a value-added enhancement to the building," Reddick said. "We rarely do a sculpture; it kind of makes art a target."

Among the projects at the stadium is an LED light installation in the four columns that hold the retractable roof; flickering lights make the columns seem to disappear, giving the stadium the appearance of floating from the outside. The cost: \$900,000.

Miami-bred artist Daniel Arsham, who designed the lighting effect, also is re-creating the iconic "Miami Orange Bowl" lettering from the old stadium in a new way, scattering the individual orange letters along the public plaza, some on their sides, some partially submerged, to give the old sign a modern look. The lettering price tag: \$340,000.

This method of presenting art in a new way is the wave for public art and particularly true for Kansas City, which has commissioned three composers to create original music for . . . a parking garage.

The city-owned facility will provide parking for the privately funded Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, set to open Sept. 16. "It's kind of experimental," said Porter Arneill, the director and public art administrator for the Kansas City Municipal Art Commission. "We're not quite sure how it's going to play out."

The West Coast is also a little daring when it comes to public art. Sacramento International Airport's new Terminal B, due to open Oct. 6, has 13 art projects at a cost of \$5 million, including what's emerging as the signature piece, an attention-getting giant red rabbit — 56 feet long and 19 feet tall — in an atrium by the baggage claim. The rabbit appears to be leaping into its own suitcase, which has a distinctive "swirling vortex," suggestive of a rabbit hole. The price tag for the red rabbit: \$750,000.

Artist Lawrence Argent said he was inspired by what he felt when he traveled. "One of the dominant emotions in me is nervousness and security. Is my flight on time? Everyone has different emotions," he said in an interview. "The airport is a warehouse of emotional baggage."

Shelly Willis, the director of Sacramento Art in Public Places, asked all the artists "to bring the outdoors in" for their pieces, which led to the choice of the rabbit. But his work "is a larger view of our travels and our lives," Argent said. "It's not just about an abstract rabbit."

Donald Lipski, an artist who just had his work installed in Sacramento's new terminal, said he was consumed by bringing the feel of the outdoors inside. "It's really a grand arrival place," he said. "I was thinking of chandeliers." So he turned to the idea of natural grandeur.

The result was "a kind of imaginary tree" that consisted of three trunks with 5,000 Swarovski crystals for the leaves, which shimmer as they capture the sunlight. "A couple of times a day, it just dances with rainbows," Lipski said. "I didn't know how spectacular it was going to be." There also are embedded lights that illuminate at night.

In Fort Worth, a 39-foot orange Alexander Calder sculpture, "Eagle," was such a downtown landmark for more than 20 years that people used it for directions — "make a right at the Calder" — so its sudden sale and dismantling in 1999 shocked the city.

The loss of the privately owned sculpture spurred the city's arts and business communities in 2001 to back the 2 percent art set-aside.

"Public art is a way you can reflect community history," said Martha Peters, the vice president of public art at the Arts Council of Fort Worth and Tarrant County. "You're giving a city a sense of place."

The latest defining piece for Fort Worth will be dedicated Aug. 26: "Night Song," a radio tower inspired by the RKO Radio trademark of movie fame from the 1930s, '40s and '50s, with five graduated rings of LED lights with color palettes that will change with the seasons.

The 460-foot, city-owned communications tower sits on a hill in the southeast quadrant overlooking two highways; it can be seen for miles, a striking effect that cost \$68,695.

But art invariably will challenge the public, as well.

"Our ideas," Frantz said, "don't always fill what the norm is today."

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- Americans for the Arts
- Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places
- Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission
- Fort Worth Arts Council
- Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City
- Lawrence Argent
- Donald Lipski
- Peter Frantz

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