

Art remains fixture in public spaces

But some critics object to the price, or just the piece

BY MARIA RECIO
McClatchy/Tribune news

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 neighbors, with local critics dubbing the artwork “the gurgling toad.”

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

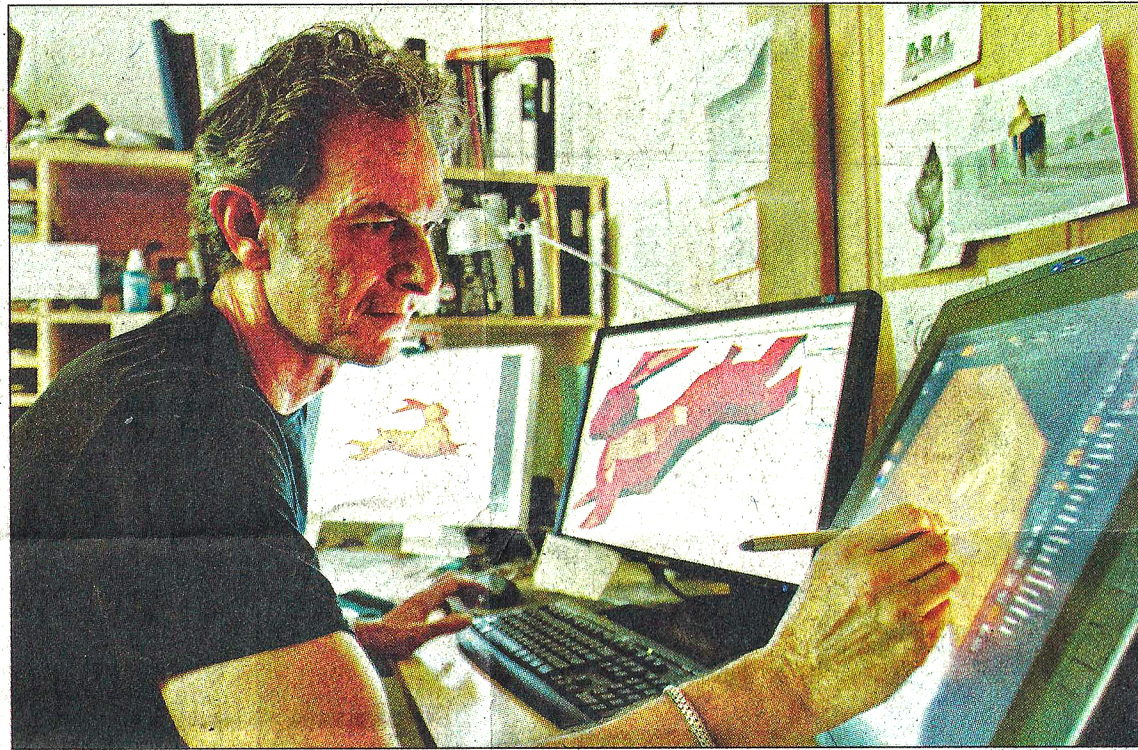
In cities around the country, art at public buildings and public spaces is burgeoning, sometimes generating controversy and sometimes becoming landmarks.

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, Texas, and Sacramento, Calif., 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, public art program

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



WERNER R. SLOCUM/MCT PHOTOS

Artist Lawrence Argent is designing a red rabbit — 56 feet long and 19 feet tall — for an atrium in a new terminal at Sacramento International Airport. He has already attracted attention for his immense blue bear sculpture, which peers into the Colorado Convention Center in Denver.



questionable way to spend \$600,000.”

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

“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,” he said, “the concept of something greater than myself.”

Miami is a hotbed of public art, with 30 active projects, five of them — at a cost of \$72 million — in the new Miami-Dade County-owned Florida Marlins baseball stadium, which is under construc-

tion and due to open next spring.

Brandi Reddick, with Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places, said that precisely to avoid the kind of controversy that dogged the Mark Center sculpture competition, Miami did not 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,” she said. “We rarely do a sculpture. It kind of makes art a emitting diode, 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, 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 price tag:

\$340,000.

Presenting art in new ways is the trend. Kansas City, Mo., 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 also is 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: \$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 Argent's work “is a larger view of our travels and our lives,” the artist said. “It's not just ‘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 & Tarrant County. “You're giving a city a sense of place.”