

Repurposing Urban Space: Arts as the Catalyst for Change

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Abstract

Parks throughout the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, have “field-houses” where on-site caretakers formerly resided and over time, have become vacated. Having a surplus of these unused facilities, the Vancouver Park Board explored options to repurpose these spaces. As part of the Cultural Plan, the City and Park Board sought to provide artists free space, in exchange for 350 hours of their time engaging the community and having opportunities to develop artistic practices.

The Field House Studio Program places artists with community-engaged and social practices into neighbourhoods to create work *in and with* community. The program brings the arts as an integral part of everyday life, into Vancouver neighbourhoods. It creates space to invite community, colleagues and curious visitors to share in intimate creative processes with artists through daily, shared arts experiences that are social, cooperative and collaborative.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the importance of building arts communities, while emphasising its importance in emerging multi-disciplinary discourse related to urban futures.

Keywords

Vancouver Park Board, Artist Field House Studio Residency, community-engaged art, urban space.

Introduction

Even today the realm of public space in the City has been considered to be the “physical connection that binds it together,” because “parks and open spaces do not only adapt to forces of change, but also have the power to guide, shape, and curate the evolution of cities as the most effective catalysts for urban transformation” [1]. Engaged public art in urban spaces is one such example of a catalyst and a means of building social constructs since it involves “shaping the space or providing a powerful backdrop” thereby creating space as subtle, elusive, and capable of sustaining return visits to discover more about them [2].

Since public space “is always in the process of being made [3], the “recycling” of space is “not an incidental process, but rather, a deliberate and creative act. In regard to the efficacy of such programs and the importance of

such partnerships, there are mutually beneficial relationships, in that, a non-profit or arts group can gain “legitimacy and clout by aligning forces with a government agency, while an over-stretched municipality is revitalized by the influx of energy from a public-minded private sector,” especially since “in an age when vision is unlimited but funds are tight, such public-private partnerships may be among the most feasible ways to commission, maintain and restore works of public art” [4].

Recycling Space

The unused field houses scattered throughout the City of Vancouver, have been repurposed for the artist studio program. By creating these art zones, the implementation of an affective model of emphasizing the building of a community of shared identities and interests emerges. We are reminded of Joseph Beuys’ influences of “social sculpture” and by borrowing the words of urban planning to bring further insight of the importance that ‘livability’, along side ‘identity and control’; access to opportunity, imagination, and joys; authenticity and meaning; open communities and public life; including ‘self-reliance and justice’ are goals for future urban environments [5].

The Process

Several hundred artists and artists groups were interested in the residency program and undertook an extensive application and review process. Twenty-seven personnel, including arts programmers, supervisors, board members of community centres and professional artists, reviewed each application and then short-listed several artists for in-person interview presentations. From that short list the finalists were awarded residencies that run from eighteen months to three years to carry out their proposed projects. Such projects ranged from dance, music, theatre, visual arts, digital arts, sound, film and interdisciplinary projects.

The Vancouver Park Boards, Arts, Culture and Environment (ACE) team, which manages the Field House Studio Program, considers art as a social process, and sought to construct imaginative spaces of cultural diversity. ACE sees artists as collaborators with community members-who may not see themselves as artists. In working together as

creators, producers, performers, the artists and their projects activate audiences. Through a creative process consisting of workshops, discussion groups, open houses, events and exhibitions, they make and present artwork exploring issues and concerns that respond to the community. The work promotes diversity, innovation and collaboration. Because community art projects are often interdisciplinary and ephemeral they don't necessarily fit easily into traditional gallery or theatre settings, and access to community, recreation and park spaces is essential. At the end of the day, ACE is redefining and converging old models of public art with new models, which seek to be inclusive of community and the non-artist's sense of creative expression.

The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, confirms its mandate in recognizing that the arts are an essential element in a vital, creative and balanced city and seeks to actively facilitate participation in and access to the arts for all. The Park Board holds a vision of a city where the arts are an integral part of everyday life; where community cultural development processes strengthen civil society, where parks and community centres reflect the cultural vitality of the community and where people are able to learn and express creativity in ways that build healthy communities. By widening the multi-disciplinary urban discourse of community centered planning, by infusing art in "everyday," the Artists in Field House Studio program advances Park Boards art policy that considers public space in terms of urban futures. [6] [7].

The Artists and Studios

Over 50 artists have participated in the program since the 2011 pilot program created work in parks. The program in 2015 has seen an increase in the release of nine more field houses. <http://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/field-house-studio-residencies-in-parks.aspx>. Limited space dictates we name only a few herein:

Aberthau/West Point Grey artists 2013-2016, is a group of multi-disciplinary artists, LocoMotoArt, which developed unique indoor and outdoor arts experiences, interactive video and sound installations, real-time computer graphics displays and live soundscape performances at various parks throughout Vancouver. During the residency one event worth noting is *Oscillations*, produced in partnership with ISEA – Vancouver, and the Vancouver Park Board. In response to the awareness of the oscillation between physical and electronic space and place, Giorgio Magnanensi (Vancouver New Music) and Laura Lee Coles (Founder LocoMotoArt) curated twenty-two electronic artists to install works in Charleson Park, which is situated along the waterfront of False Creek.

The Charleson location was once the site of a thriving salmon stream harvested by local First Nation tribes. At the turn of the 20th century, the forest was felled by the logging

industry and False Creek became a bastion of logging mills and industrial warehouses. The park was rebuilt and now serves in part as an off-lease dog park during the day and has several ponds, a waterfall, and a meandering stream. In his curatorial statement, Magnanensi stated that, "With this project we wish to invite affective responses while confronting the complex considerations of our predicament in the disruption between *nature* and *place*. We also wish to ignite imagination and stir emotions, while acknowledging the limitations of what is possible as art." With this approach, the works assembled emphasized the electronic and physical space and place by oscillating between the two perceived realms. *Oscillations* pushed traditional boundaries of urban public art to be more socially interactive, immersive, and inclusive of place. For more information, please refer to the following website: <http://locomotoart.weebly.com/oscillations.html>.

Elm Park Field House artist 2012 to 2015: Germaine Koh, visual artist, used the field house both as a studio and as the home base for the community-based project League. League was a weekly gathering of people who came together to play sports and games that they invented together. It is problem-solving as play. <http://league-league.org>

Falaise Park Field House artist from 2012 to 2015 was Mark Haney, composer / double bassist. Mark used the field house for daily practice and a rehearsal studio for various projects including regular open-studio hours to encourage and invite the public in to the creative processes of both performing and creating. The community surrounding the field house had been built after WWII for returning veterans. Haney developed a composition for Remembrance Day titled "11" that grew out of the veteran's individual stories. Each story was played by a different brass instrument. Twenty-five hundred people were observed streaming from the neighbourhood to enjoy Hayne's concert.

One individual stood out in this community process as Haney notes, "Edmond Champoux was our only living veteran, 99 years old at the time now 100. We visited him several times at the George Derby Centre, where he lives to learn about his life and experiences in WW2. Seeing how proud he was to attend our event was the highlight of the day, especially since Edmond's son Perry told us that Edmond usually would not attend any kind of Remembrance Day activity and until the last decade never spoke of the war at all. The biggest effect it had on me was to make me really see that with community engaged art the best you can hope for is to really touch someone in a way that is very important to them, but with it comes a big responsibility to treat them and the subject matter with absolute respect." For more information please refer to <https://markhaneyblog.wordpress.com>.

MacLean Park Field House artists from 2012 to 2015 were the Urban Weavers (Sharon Kallis, eco-based com-

munity artist, author and weaver and Todd DeVries, Haida cedar weaver). These local artist-weavers together with an ecologist explored the creative repurposing of green waste. In the Urban Weaver Project, invasive species are substituted for traditional weaving materials that are difficult to harvest sustainably in the city. Kallis describes her arts practice approach as one leading to the discovery of the inherent material potential in a local landscape. There are several parallel areas in her arts practice; indoor-studio based, outdoor-site specific response as well as in a community engaged installation practice that responds to seasonal shifts and change.

In her community outdoor work, Kallis states that the “creative process begins with a harvest principal that embraces communal stewardship of the land; weeding, invasive species removal, coppicing, gleaning and gathering. Oral traditions of knowledge sharing occur; my own experience with plants and their uses are exchanged with those familiar to a place through close investigation of the surroundings, walking, sharing stories about the landscape and observed shifts in eco-systems. Further she notes that, “Installation ideas spring forth through conversation, idea sharing, identifying what materials are suitable for harvest and the consideration of the inherent physical properties of both place and material used.” Please refer to: <http://sharonkallis.com>.

Conclusion

The definition of community-engaged art is rapidly shifting towards the inclusion of non-artists in professional artistic works. Professional artists and arts organizations are finding it difficult to afford studios, creative and production spaces in urban spaces. They are also faced with a shortage of space inventory due to development so they are seeking immediate alternatives to sustain their art practices. In doing so, these artists include collaborations with the non-arts community to augment their growing arts practices, and develop specially valued creative and collaborative relationships that emerge overtime, fostering the urban environment.

Sociologist and author Sacha Kagan reminds us that local “community art” initiatives, are pointing at a shift towards a culture where the creatives take responsibility and work together with the social and ecological communities in which they are embedded. Out of this an aesthetic “sensitivity of patterns that connect” and an “artistic rationality” (Dielman 2010) become qualities shared with communities and not the exclusive domain of a creative social class, sector or system.” [8]. More telling for artists is that several funding entities have dedicated specific grant support for this changing genre, defining “community engaged arts,” as a form of cultural mediation. A report by Canada Council for the Arts, notes that in other countries the definition of community engaged art varies, “English Canada, the United States, United Kingdom and other

English-speaking countries, the terminology is generally focused around the idea of arts participation or audience engagement, while in Quebec and France, there is a greater usage of terms such as democratization of culture, cultural citizenship and cultural mediation. Other European countries use a mix of both. Most use these terms to illustrate a commonly desired end result of many publicly funded interventions in the arts: a public engaged with the arts. [9]

Grant funders, city programmers and planners are tasked with exploring new options that will transform, support and expand cultural experiences for both artists and audiences. It becomes apparent that collaboration between artists, cities and citizens is necessary. As “tactical urbanism”, and as authors Lyndon and Garcia claim, “[I]t makes use of open and iterative development processes, the efficient use of resources, and the creative potential unleashed by social interaction.” They further comment that “For citizens, it allows the immediate reclamation, redesign, or reprogramming of public space.” But most importantly, it “Reaffirms and invites a new conversation” cities and citizens together explore long-term transformation but also adjust as conditions inevitably change. [10]

The Vancouver Park Board Fieldhouse studio program is one such innovative effort that emerged because disparate factors came about at the same time that there was an awareness that a solution was possible through the recycling or repurposing of the former caretaker field house system. The inventory of field houses for creative purposes will be increasingly taking into consideration environmental, recreational, First Nations and scientific communities. There are currently nine new field houses under development for release in the near future.

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Authors Biographies

Ms. Jill P. Weaving is the Vancouver Park Board Coordinator for Arts Culture and the Engagement. She has a Bachelor of Arts and an Interdisciplinary Master's in the Humanities. She also was a member of the BC Arts Council Community Arts Advisory Committee during the creation of the provincial 'Arts Based Community Development Funding Program.' She has developed and managed numerous programs and projects for the Vancouver Park Board including the "Art, Health and Seniors Project" in conjunction with researchers at UBC and Vancouver Coastal Health Authority; and the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project in collaboration with the Stanley Park Ecology Society and the Community Arts Council of Vancouver.

Ms. Laura Lee Coles is an arts-based researcher and published author with interests in human, technology, nature interaction and the re-visioning of urban space. Her arts practice involves photography, site-specific interactive and contemplative video installa-

tions, (Exhibition style and *in situ*) and nature collages. She is the founder of LocoMotoArt. Laura Lee has a Master of Arts from Simon Fraser University School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT).