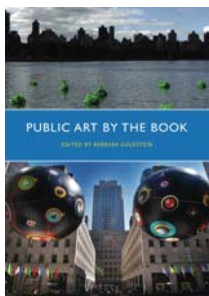


**Public Art by the Book** / Edited by Barbara Goldstein.--Seattle, WA: Americans for the Arts in association with University of Washington Press, August 2005.--376 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-295-98521-6 (pa., alk. paper): \$50.00 (pa.).



That public art defines the cultural and physical identity of a community, while simultaneously enriching the public it characterizes, is blandly assumed by many of the contributors to this book. One must look elsewhere for more than a hint of the controversy that has surrounded public art since at least the days of the Works Progress Administration. The work at hand does not include serious discussion of concepts such as community and audience, or a well-reasoned definition of “public art.” It is a working manual, light on history and devoid of theory or criticism. It is intended, and succeeds, as a handbook for practitioners, including artists, administrators and involved citizenry.

Thirty-two short essays from twenty-two authors comprise a taxonomy of recent American public art projects. The book also provides brief introductions to some of the noteworthy players and projects in the field, benchmarks for various stages of planning, and suggestions for overcoming the obstacles that may be encountered along the way. Approximately half of the writers are from the West Coast of the United States. Only one international (United Kingdom) contributor is included. Essays are organized into sections on planning, funding, categories of projects, best practices, legal issues and resources for further study. The liveliest articles are those written by artists. To quote Helen Lessick in her essay on *Artist-Initiated Projects*, “...today the flaming hearth of public art is in danger of being channeled into central heating....But artists start fires, not knowing where they will spread.” The artist’s chief challenge today may be to inject some creative uncertainty into risk-averse public systems.

Scattered throughout the book are many useful examples of forms, contracts, fact sheets, policies, and ordinances from various cities. Although some of these tools may rapidly become dated, they will still serve future organizers well as indicators of what to expect in municipal and organizational planning processes. All sections are not equally comprehensive, but taken together they should be of sound practical assistance to those working in the field. One notable omission is that only three (West Coast) “Public Art Study Programs” are referenced when, in fact, the curricula of art schools across the U.S. and Canada offer so much more of relevance. The content might also have been improved by more discussion of negotiation skills and pitfalls for readers who are uninitiated in the dynamics of prolonged committee work and bureaucratic conciliation.

These oversights are offset by an eight-page bibliography of scholarly and practical resources published between 1970 and 2004. The paperback edition features a well-made perfect binding, alkaline paper and good page pull strength. It is built for use. In spite of striking cover photography, most of the illustrations are of modest quality. Twenty-five black-and-white illustrations plus eight pages of color plates generally fail to convey the excitement of their subjects. Nevertheless, this new publication fills a gap where information has been needed. It offers a valuable compendium of first-hand experience and will be a welcome addition to any library collection serving practicing or aspiring artists and arts administrators.

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