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Fieldnotes: Sustainable Practices in Public Art

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BEYOND A GREENWASHED CANVAS: CREATIVE PLACEMAKING AND PUBLIC ART STRATEGIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE

A solar powered sculpture made from recycled materials in Chingwaxway Park. This sculpture is part of the 2024 REC/LAW Public Art Residency with STEPS and the City of Brampton

Artist Credit: Sir Wagner
Photo Credit: Hermet Cumiale

This feature is part of Fieldnotes, a public art blog series by STEPS that promotes inclusive and innovative public art through interviews, storytelling, case studies, and knowledge sharing.

In the midst of an environmental crisis, public art needs a sustainable reboot. As the needs of the public respond to climate change, public art should shift to reflect climate justice and other environmentalist principles. However, while eco-friendly messages abound in art, sustainable practices are less common. Many default modes of artistic production are interwoven with unsustainable modes of consumption, ignoring the finite nature of our planet's resources. If public art is to promote environmentalist messaging, then it should also practice what it preaches, modeling sustainable creativity for an eco-friendly future.

But sustainable artistic practice is easier said than done. On one hand, public art tends to avoid some of the environmental pitfalls of other forms of art. One major sustainability concern for the art world is the carbon footprint of museum and gallery spaces. Since public art exists in public spaces—either outdoors or in buildings already serving some other public function—the maintenance of dedicated artistic space is not a part of the environmental impact. That being said, public art not only inhabits public spaces but also creates and defines them. As cities across the world go green, art has the potential to model sustainability for the public and transform our shared spaces into something more eco-friendly.

One complicating factor in our pursuit of sustainable cities is the material cost of revitalization. If the "left" order is what brought us to today's climate crisis, then the impulse to make it new, make it sustainable, is completely reasonable. From extreme weather events to decreasing biodiversity, the world is augmented by climate change in a new way and that reverse demands a unique artistic language that takes into account the devastating consequences of human impact on the environment.

A wall of vegetation in Pennsylvania's Longwood Gardens is an example of the living walls architectural trend
Photo Credit: Dickson Eziamadiegwu (CC0-1.0)

But even sustainable reinvention cannot be conjured out of nothing. The decree to create new artistic monuments or community spaces that appear eco-friendly risks becoming superficial greenwashing, hiding the unsustainable reality under the appearance of environmentalism. From building green spaces in rural/suburban public art, it's straightforward to make a seemingly greener world, but what carries the cost of this renewal? Will these eco-friendly interventions have the longevity or resistability to justify their manufacturing costs? In recent years, living walls of plants adorning urban buildings have become popular signs of eco-friendly architecture. However, their green appearance belies the potential ecological costs when improperly designed, living walls have issues of maintenance, irrigation, and short lifespans.

Creative placemaking with sustainable intentions can fall into the trap of overconsumption, resentfully using resources and producing emissions in the pursuit of creating something new. To foster meaningful sustainable approaches to activating public spaces, public art needs to shift away from a fetishism of the new to a cultivation of the present. It is not enough to be green a sustainable message, to take on a green aesthetic. Public art must do the harder, slower work of building sustainable spaces and artistic economies.

GREEN PLACEMAKING: THE ECOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC SPACES

While urban plant life appeals to our expectations of an eco-friendly aesthetic, the design of truly sustainable green public spaces must consider both the space's relationship to the local ecosystem and the environmental impact of manufacturing. Green spaces can provide a wide range of environmental benefits, from reducing urban heat islands to improving air quality, but not all green spaces justify their cost. Many public green spaces still maintain traditional turfgrass lawns, despite well-documented environmental drawbacks of low biodiversity and high water consumption. Green spaces can serve as carbon sinks, but that effect is debated if outweighed by the carbon footprint of construction and maintenance.

Pictured pictures draw attention to other greenery in Clarkson Village BIA (Mississauga, Ontario)
Artist Credit: Rose Judith Ann Lim
Photo Credit: Selina McCallum

Key to sustainable placemaking is an active dialogue with the biodiversity and ecology of the land itself, taking into account both the pre-existing ecosystem and regional issues of environmental injustice. In these conversations, the voices of Indigenous artists and stakeholders are crucial—with respect to both Indigenous sovereignty and ecological knowledge.

Created under the direction of Tsq'Ulnaxt Cultural Ways, a Skwxwú7mesh, Tsleil-Waututh, and Stz'uminus artist and stakeholder, Lynn Hilary Timoshenko's *Ollooh* (2022) is a cedar-bark formed garden in Vancouver's Chinatown, which is located on the unceded territories of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. Transforming vacant space into a hub of community and biodiversity, the garden reintroduces Indigenous plant species into Chinatown. You may the future ecosystem we want to live in." There is no one-size-fits-all solution to sustainable green spaces, and it's clear that *New Growth* (2022) offers an inspiring example of a greener ordered specifically to local community and ecological needs.

Thoughtful design is only one hurdle to making a sustainable green space. For production to be worth the environmental cost of labour and materials, planners must invest into the longevity of the project. According to a 2024 study comparing the carbon footprint of urban and commercial agriculture, non-residential urban gardens are on average six times more polluting than commercial agriculture. However, the research does not consider all community farms; instead, it suggests that more sustainable practices, such as long-term maintenance of established agricultural zones and the creation of waste products, can allow urban farms to contribute to environmentally-friendly food systems.

For projects that don't have the longevity of community gardens, the relationship to local ecology is still a key consideration. Traditional public art might not be able to serve as a carbon sink, but it can potentially design its environment. Historically, mud brick paints have been produced from materials like lead and arsenic.

Today, poison and pigment no longer go hand in hand, but many artistic materials still have toxic effects on the environment. Both natural and plastic-based paints can leach particles into runoff, having a serious impact on local ecosystems and waterways. In the case of plastic-based paints, the polluting potential of the artistic material is once the daily wear and tear experienced by outdoor art installations means that fragments of debris from the works will inevitably make their way into the surrounding water and soil.

REDUCE, REUSE, REPURPOSE: CIRCULATING ARTISTIC RESOURCES

Not all public art materials have an eco-friendly afterlife, and not all of them have eco-friendly origins either. Is it possible to opt out of unsustainable resource extraction, even in a limited artistic scope? We cannot always but we may into sustainable consumption, much of the carbon footprint of artistic materials comes from the moment of production, not their disposal.

Around the world, unrecycled bottles and other plastic waste accumulate
Photo Credit: Pixbay

Recycling promises a diversion of waste, but the reality of waste treatment is that very little of our plastic waste actually ends up recycled. As much as 91% of plastic in Canada ends up in the landfill, either directly through the trash or indirectly through improper recycling. Part of the problem is that recycling plastic is actually quite difficult. While the right type of paper is usually quite similar to another, plastic is more of a blanket category rather than a unified, interchangeable material.

To accommodate the resource limitations of our planet, the Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC) advises creating a circular economy for the art world, which subverts the default linear economic model that assumes the dispensability of resources. To implement a circular economy, the GCC emphasizes reuse, repair, and sharing of material resources before disposal. Of course, many of the tools and supplies of artistic art can be quite specialized and thus not necessarily beyond one or two uses. Therein lies the importance of sharing to take full advantage of the life cycles of our planet's finite resources, we must connect to our communities and allow resources to circulate to where they most needed.

Amid the growing push for sustainability in the arts sector, artists can take advantage of a variety of resource sharing initiatives, including several creative reuse depots across Canada. These include University Affiliated waste diversion programs, such as Concordia University's Centre for Creative Reuse (CCCR) in Montreal or the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD) University's ReUse Depot in Toronto. The CCCR and the ReUse Depot divert useful artistic resources from the waste of their respective institutions while also serving as a free and sustainable source of artistic materials. Also in Ontario is the Kiln Research Lab (KRL), a material redistribution project founded by curator Tamara Cizmic. AMF, which has operated several pop up reuse shops across Southern Ontario school institutions across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Creative reuse projects can also function as affordable second hand shops, bringing the thrift store experience to the arts sector. In British Columbia, the non-profit SUPPLY Project operates the Creative Reuse Centre, a low cost, sustainable supply shop for artists and creatives. The Creative Reuse Centre is a charitable organization in Winnipeg that sells reusable artistic materials on a pay-what-you-can basis, as well as organizes art workshops open to the community.

ONE ARTIST'S TRASH: CYCLES OF PRODUCTION IN PUBLIC ART

Shifting multi-coloured light pays off the reflective surfaces of upcycled AluFoam
Artist Credit: Rian Wild
Photo Credit: Raquel Paredes

What is the life cycle of public art? While artistic resources can be recirculated into the artistic ecosystem, the byproducts of public art can require some more creativity to upcycle. Rian Wild's *Composite Assemblage* is a dazzling 3D sculpture built from a curious material: AluFoam from construction site hoarding emeach. In the context of construction, hoarding refers to temporary walls erected as barriers between a construction site and the street, for both aesthetic and safety purposes.

As a social enterprise, STEPS offers the service of Surplus Materials (SM) (Public Art on Construction Hoarding) Exhibits—vibrant artwork to animate construction sites in the Greater Toronto Area. Hoarding is a valuable resource for public art in construction sites, upcycling can give these temporary artworks another use. *Composite Assemblage*, which showcases the STEPS Downtown Toronto office at Rm 142 Dr, draws out the second life creative potential of AluFoam and explores its reflective properties through a fighting element.

Composite Assemblage by Rian Wild
Photo Credit: Ayesha Khan

While sustainable life cycles for public art challenge the use of traditional artistic materials, they can also be a source of creative synergy. In partnership with the Victoria Park Library, STEPS facilitated the REC/LAW Public Art Residency in 2023 to provide participant artists with the environmental and artistic mentorship necessary to implement sustainable practices in their own art. Led by Vancouver based artist Genevieve Fung, REC/LAW provided artists with the capacity to engage in sustainable artistic production and to consider the complex underlying systems that create our material culture.

For participant artist Carolyne Tenhoy, the residency was an opportunity to explore environmental ethics through public art. The artist, who created the sculpture series Speculative Futures for REC/LAW, was set to explore "how we can engage the complexity of the climate emergency without omitting its scale or succumbing to eco-anxiety."

Accessible public art, the artist proclaims, "can't encourage the public to change their surrounding ecologies [...] while satisfying the production of new materials and thinking about the unique hybrid ecologies in an urban environment." Through Speculative Futures, Carolyne Tenhoy explores the fascinating potential of future geologists, speculating on "new taxonomies of rock records formed from the contamination of plastic, construction waste, stone fragments, and organic remnants."

Three sculptures from the Speculative Futures series, fabricated from recycled foam and objects, strap, screen printing paint
Artist and Photo Credit: Carolyne Tenhoy

Although it offers accessibility and public reach for environmentalist messaging, public art also presents its own set of challenges to sustainability. "The world of permanent public art commissions is quite resistant to sustainable and low-resource approaches," says REC/LAW mentor Genevieve Kah. The artist is informed by the production of public art and unsustainable practices in the industry, "[...] the lifespan that we expect from public art and social production processes, Genevieve proposes a positive direction of change in the public art world, hoping to see more temporary opportunities—"which sometimes have been requirements for ever-engineered materials and a smaller environmental footprint."

Despite these challenges in the realm of public art, a sustainable artistic methodology can also be a source of direction. "Limitations are a great prompt for creative practice," Genevieve Kah explains. "There's nothing as scary as a blank canvas, but working with existing materials is rich in possibilities." Indeed, sustainable artistic thinking can inspire us to reimagine what exactly counts as public art, thinking outside the box of our desire for novelty and consumption.

Apart from making more new things, what can public art do for communities? Germaine is currently exploring one possibility through a rural art residency focused on "land based, sustainable and community practices." The residency prioritizes practice over product, "new production takes a back seat to all of the other concerns that make for a sustainable artistic practice, like eating, wellness, and connection."

Visitors explore an exhibition of sustainable artwork by the artists of the 2023 REC/LAW Public Art Residency
Photo Credit: Victoria Park Library

Sustainability in public art is a challenging venture, one that must be fostered through a robust community of material circulation and knowledge exchange. There's no single, uniform solution for an eco-friendly public art practice, and our knowledge of sustainable practice is constantly evolving. By engaging in conversations about green placemaking and nurturing artist capacity for sustainable work, artists and stakeholders can pursue sustainability that goes deeper than a green appearance.

FURTHER READING

A Prefabs Are Waste by the Synthesis Collective, *Centre for Sustainable Curating, the Institute for Public Art and Sustainability (IPAS) at Evergreen Brick Works, and The Barnraiz*

ABOUT THE WRITER

Wenying Wu (she/her) is a student of English and Chinese literature beginning her MA in Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto in September of 2024. Her research interests include science fiction, body horror, and the representation of oceans. Wenying was the Cultural Director Writer at STEPS during the 2024 summer season.

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