



Public Art and Design checklist: What is public art?

The following information is an extract from *Public art making it happen: a commissioning guide for local councils*, produced by formerly Arts SA (now Arts South Australia) with support from the Local Government Research and Development Scheme in 2006.

A copy of the booklet can be obtained from Arts South Australia upon request.

What is public art?

Many outstanding examples of public art can be seen throughout South Australia. Project outcomes are varied, so too are the processes and commissioning models through which they have been achieved. The goals and objectives informing the creation of these works differ from project to project as local stories and histories are reflected and contemporary artistic expression comments on issues of our time. The urban realm is enhanced and a sense of place and local identity is created through the realisation of artists' work.

Public art is regarded as the artistic expression of a contemporary art practitioner presented within the public arena, outside the traditional gallery system, where it is accessible to a broad audience. Contemporary public art practice involves a diverse range of activities and outcomes. In this text the term 'public art' includes 'design', where the elements have been designed by an artist, or design team involving the creative input of an artist.

The public arena refers to both indoor and outdoor spaces that are accessible to a wide public and includes parks, open plazas, road reserves, civic centres and library foyers. Works of art in the public arena may take on many forms; including paintings, prints, murals, photography, sculpture, earthworks, details in streetscapes, performance, installation, sound works, text, audio or multimedia. They may be permanent, temporary or ephemeral.

Public art - some examples

- a decorative detail or a work of art integrated into the fabric of a building
- a sculptural installation located in an open space
- text or poetry inscribed in a footpath or park bench
- an environment where one can sit and contemplate
- a sculpture commemorating an event
- an image on a billboard or a neon sign
- a mural, a footpath design or a wall relief
- a garden or landscape which reflects or interprets broader concerns
- a fountain or a specifically designed water course
- interpretive signage reflecting the past or present
- a subtle intervention in an unexpected context
- a performance or multimedia presentation

Describing public art outcomes

Artwork resulting from the various commissioning approaches may not always be readily identified as art. An artist may have broad design or conceptual input into the overall presentation of a public space, for example, the landscaping, paving details



and furniture may be conceived by the artist, perhaps in collaboration with other design professionals.

The following descriptions explain the diversity of approaches to, and outcomes of, public art projects. A functional furniture item may also be decorative and integrated within the environment, for example. This overlapping categorisation promotes an understanding of what can be achieved and may assist when determining the objectives of a public art project.

Public art projects may result in works that are:

Functional: where the primary purpose of the art or design element is utilitarian such as seating, lighting, furniture, bollards, signage, rubbish bin surrounds, window treatments, reception areas, door handles and carpets, for example.

Decorative: where the primary purpose is to aesthetically enhance an environment or structure. For example, outcomes may be rainwater heads, furniture, paving elements, and lighting. They may also be functional, iconic, integrated, or site specific.

Iconic: a stand alone or significant work, where the artist's approach is largely independent of other considerations. An 'art-for-art's-sake' approach. Examples of iconic works include sculpture, water features, lighting or multi media. The response is often site-specific.

Integrated: works that are fully incorporated within the design of the built or natural environment. Integrated works may include floor and window design, lighting, landscaping and associated elements. Integrated works may also be decorative and/or functional.

Site specific: designed specifically for, and responsive to, a particular site. Could apply to all listed categories. Work responds to the site through scale, material, form, and concept.

Interpretive: where the primary purpose is to describe, educate and comment on issues, events or situations. They may be functional, decorative, iconic, and site-specific. Examples include signage, pavement inlays, sculpture, seating, landscaping, murals, text based work.

Commemorative: where the primary purpose is to acknowledge and recall an event, activity, or person, important to the local community and its visitors. Commemorative artworks may be sculpture, murals, pavement details, and gardens.

Temporary: where the work is not intended to be permanent. A piece or event may be momentary or remain for a fixed time. Wide-ranging outcomes are possible and include performance, garden planting, text, installations and multi media.

What can be achieved through public art?

Public art can assist commissioning agencies to address their broader policies and strategies as they relate to the community, social development, the environment and planning.

- Agency objectives and strategies can be met through public art projects, which present a different aspect of Local Government to the public.
- Public art helps create an urban environment that reflects pride in who we are. Artworks can become familiar features that generate a sense of ownership, a sense of place and help cultivate community identity. Through public art, children and young people may come to love their city and appreciate art.



- Public art can increase individual awareness and promote expression within the community through public debate. It can encourage the viewer to understand and respect various community members and groups.
- Public art enables people to recognise and respect links between each other and the environment. It can interpret issues and address concerns.
- Community involvement in public art projects can deliver a range of outcomes including increased community participation and engagement, opportunities for creative and practical skills development, and increased social capital.
- Artists offer insights into issues through their communication, research and expression. The ideas presented in artworks can enrich our cultural experiences whilst providing interpretation and access for people with disabilities.
- Unique connections between works of art and their environments can offer visitors insights into regional identity, creating regional distinctiveness. Local materials and imagery can become features. Local traditions and communities can be celebrated. Cultural tourism benefits can be realised.
- Art in the public arena can be chanced upon by accident, it can be part of the every day experience. It is free to observe, there are no class or social barriers.
- Public art can provide meeting places and focal points. It can enhance public spaces, making them more attractive, and encourage people to experience and enjoy them.
- Public art involves the viewer in interpreting and understanding. It provokes thought. The ideas of the artist can refer to the site, the community, the past or future. Public art can communicate many things and create meaning within the urban environment.
- Public art creates diverse employment and professional development opportunities for artists, fabricators and associated professionals and adds value to the built environment.

Examples of places that may benefit from public art

- city squares, town halls, community and civic centres
- gateways, entrance routes and transport corridors
- main streets and shopping precincts
- parks, recreational reserves and swimming centres
- hospitals and research centres
- law courts, correctional facilities and police stations
- schools and educational institutions
- railway stations, transport hubs and car parks
- theatres, markets, churches, libraries and other major public spaces

The artist or designer

An artist or designer may be commissioned in a variety of ways to participate in a public art project. Depending on the nature of the project, artists may work largely independently of others, or they may form a selective team involving colleagues with complementary skills.

Some approaches to public art projects are:

Individual artist: where an artist is engaged to develop a concept in response to the brief. The brief may be conceived as a component of a broader redevelopment project undertaken by other design professionals. Often the artist will sub-contract



others to assist them fabricate and install the work. Projects may involve artists engaged as members of, or consultants to, project scoping or master planning teams, where their contribution may be to identify potential art and design opportunities, and themes and approaches within an overall plan.

Collaborative: where the project is realised by a design/artistic team, rather than the creative vision of an individual artist. The design team may involve other design professionals such as architects, landscape architects, or graphic designers, or may be a team of artists working in collaboration. The process undertaken is important in achieving the outcome.

Community consultative: where consultation with relevant community members informs the project. Community may refer to the broader public users of a space or a more specific section of the community such as a local school population. The extent of community consultation can vary as can the degree to which it influences the outcome. The process informs the resulting work of art.

Community participatory: where members of a community actively participate in the design and fabrication of public artworks. Generally such projects are regarded as community art and are guided by an experienced community artist.

Where projects employ the community participatory model they are usually conceived with broader objectives relating to community engagement, participation and benefits. The process undertaken to realise the outcome is as important as the resulting artwork, if not more so, in community art projects.

While community participation and/or consultation may form an important part of the concept and design stage of a public art project, the implementation tends to focus on achieving a high quality artistic outcome, which is informed by the artist's vision in response to the brief. Achieving a quality final product is generally the major project objective.

The artist's brief

The development of the brief for the artist, which outlines the objectives for the project and sets the framework to which the artist responds, is the first step in achieving a successful project. The requirements identified in the brief will inform the commissioning process, from the artist selection to the concept design and the artistic outcome. Many public art projects address broader agendas and may be informed by commissioning agency strategies.

A commissioner may identify that community consultation and engagement is a significant factor in the development and realisation of a project. This criterion will be included within the brief. It will impact on the selection of an artist and it will inform the design development and the fees paid for this stage of the work. It will influence the way in which the artist approaches the project and the resources that are required to conduct consultation with the community. The final design will reflect the community consultation.

On the other hand, the commissioner may wish to commission a significant work of art in conjunction with an urban design project aimed at improving amenity in an area. The brief for such a project would require the artist to have diverse skills and undertake a role vastly different to the community consultation model.

When defining a project and writing the brief the fees to be paid to the artist will need to reflect the complexity of the tasks to be undertaken and the extent of the artist's role in developing and delivering the project. There is also a need for staff time and resources to coordinate a complex project with diverse partners and requirements.

See Public art and design - Developing an artist's brief checklist.



The role of the artist

The artist's role in a public art project can be extensive and multifaceted. Many projects have a number of parties involved from concept development through to the realisation and installation of the work.

Projects initiated by Local Government often involve advisory panels, which may include representation from community and interest groups, government departments, developers, architects and planners.

The artist may be required to:

- consult with, and involve, the community in the project realisation
- respond to numerous issues defined in the brief, such as interpreting history or responding to local community values
- manage large budgets
- liaise with engineers and fabricators in the design and costing of the artwork
- consider risk management and assessment issues
- manage fabrication and installation with sub-contractors
- make public presentations to community groups, stakeholders, staff meetings
- work in collaboration with other artists or design professionals, such as architects
- undertake project evaluation and report writing
- complete funding applications or seek project sponsorship.

When defining a project and establishing the brief it is crucial to determine the scope of the artist's role in the design and delivery of the project. This will assist in articulating the role of commissioning agency staff and elected members, if the commissioner is a Council, in the commissioning process. It will also assist to define the selection criteria for determining the participating artist. This information, when incorporated within the artist's brief, will assist artists to identify whether they have the skills required or whether they may form a team or partnership with others who bring complementary skills and experience.

The National Association for the Visual Arts has produced a Code of Practice that includes information concerning project commissioning and advice regarding fees for artists.

Arts South Australia's Public Art and Design staff provides guidance and support in the development of innovative public art projects. No liability is accepted for projects commissioned with the assistance of Arts South Australia.

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