

Public Art in Public Projects

BY WILLIAM LENIHAN, AIA

THROUGHOUT HISTORY ART has always played a key role in our built environment. This trend began more than 44,000 years ago with cave paintings and remained in the forefront of structures including the hieroglyph carvings of ancient Egypt, religious sculptures of Classical Greece, and ceiling paintings of the High Renaissance, such as the Sistine Chapel. While incorporating art into architecture has not stopped it can be argued that it has greatly diminished over the last Century.

Some may ask “Why is it important to maintain public art?”. Since art is subjective it can be difficult to argue, but as recognized in the examples above art is a vehicle to capture a particular society’s beliefs, accomplishments, memorialize a tragedy, or pay tribute to the past.

Therefore, allowing art to exist in a public forum instead of just preserved in a museum allows us to experience it with others in our day to day lives.

Governments have recognized the importance of public art in projects and began a Percent for Art principle that began in Finland in the early 1930s. Philadelphia was the first City to adopt a municipal ordinance that requires one percent of the total dollar amount of any construction project that includes City funds be devoted to commissioning site-specific public art. Today, the majority of major cities including Baltimore, Chicago, New York, New Haven, and San Francisco have implemented a Percent for Art principle.

While Delaware does not currently have any mandates to include Public Art on publicly funded projects, our government leaders are stepping up to support this initiative. Delaware Transit Corporation & DelDOT are incorporating art into the new Claymont Regional Transportation Center, and the Wilmington Transit Center. The City of Wilmington is also working with the Rodney Square Conservancy to integrate art into the renovations of Rodney Square. Details on each of these active and unique projects are as follows:

WILMINGTON TRANSIT CENTER

The public-private partnership (P3) which is comprised of DelDOT, Delaware Transit Corporation (DTC) and Wilmington Transit Center LLC



(WTC LLC) coordinated with Tevebaugh Architecture to solicit student artwork for the main Walnut Street façade of the new Wilmington Transit Center. The building design is an exposed steel frame with brick and cast stone accents which harken back to the historic Wilmington Train Station and surrounding railroad infrastructure. The 300’ long structure features a colonnade of brick piers and public art banners along Walnut Street. The artwork provides a dynamic experience for pedestrians and vehicles, as varied perspectives provide a unique experience.

The P3 group engaged local Delaware College of Art and Design (DCAD) which incorporated the banner design into the art program for the 2019 fall semester. Each banner is 24” wide and varies from 8’ to 15’ in height. The charge was to incorporate transportation icons and a theme that worked as individual banners and as a unified theme when the banners were viewed as continuous from certain viewpoints.

Four students from DCAD each developed initial designs and received feedback from the P3 team in an interactive critic session. In December the students presented their highly creative, well-composed graphic designs in the DCAD gallery. The P3 team then had the hard task of selecting the design which will be honored by being the display for the 300’ long building façade along Walnut Street.

WTC LLC and Tevebaugh Architecture are now working with the EDiS

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construction team and banner fabricator on the final installation details. The public art banners will be illuminated at night so that the public art is always a main feature of the Wilmington Transit Center.

RODNEY SQUARE STUDENT ART

The City of Wilmington and the Rodney Square Conservancy founded a student art project to engage City of Wilmington students with the history of Rodney Square. City Council President Hanifa Shabazz and City Council members engaged a number of City of Wilmington schools which are incorporating the student art project into their spring curriculums. The students will create public artwork to showcase the history of the city's central greenspace and community hub. Student art that is produced over the next few months will be displayed in a public art exposition later this spring. Jim Tevebaugh, who is the Rodney Square Conservancy Programming Board Chair, is planning a yearlong art program similar to the extremely successful Friends of the Furness Railroad District student art program which he chaired a few years ago.

The initial phase of the Rodney Square renovations will be completed this spring and planning for the next phase is underway. This initial phase will open the square to King Street, adding a splash fountain to activate the square.

It will also create a new location for the Jazz Festival stage along King Street which allows the full lawn and existing elevated areas of the square to become an amphitheater for the several day long festival in June.

The public art program is one of many planned programs to engage the community and return Rodney Square to the central green space for the health and wellness of the community, as originally intended when the square was created as part of the City Beautiful movement.

CLAYMONT REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION CENTER

On the site of the former century old steel manufacturing site in Claymont, Delaware, a new transit center is being developed to interface multimodal transportation at the new Claymont Train Station on the Northeast Corridor. This new Septa stop on the Amtrak lines will replace the existing neighboring train platform and is designed to handle the increased ridership. Wagman and their design team of JMT and LS3P was awarded the design-build contract.

DelDOT and DTC included public art in the development of this project. As one of the team members working with DTC, Tevebaugh Architecture assisted with a public art solicitation in addition to the architectural bridging documents for the new transit center. An artist selection committee of local stakeholders was established to shortlist the



numerous submissions down to three artists. After a rigorous interview and design competition process the two successful artists were Ray King Studio and Stephen Galloway.

Ray's proposed sculpture design harkens to the site's history with a "Phoenix" that represents a rebirth from an industrial past. The sculpture will be constructed of laminated glass, stainless steel, and concrete. Galloway is bringing nature and color to the new raised platforms with colored ceramic frit, pigmented glass panels that will become the back panels of the train platform shelters, which will be visible from the platforms and the trains.

The Claymont Regional Transit Center will become the central hub for this region, connecting the Delaware and Pennsylvania transit systems. DelDOT and DTC should be congratulated for showcasing and incorporating public art into this and other new public projects. ■



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