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What is public art?

The next step is to move from a description of our Chinatown Park Site to the concept of public art in general. Before we do that, however, I'd like to ask that you withhold any questions or comments you may have until the end of my presentation, when there will be time for them.

What is public art? What can it do, and how is it produced? My goal tonight is to answer these questions as they relate to our project. Public art fits a far broader category than art in a gallery or museum. It includes any work of art created for a public space.

What can public art accomplish? For the individual, it can broaden our ways of thinking and feeling. It can transform a public space, one where we work, play, or just pass through every day, into a more welcoming environment. Public art can slow us down, bringing about contemplation, or it can encourage conversation with others, even strangers. Good public art, over time, has the power to transform a city's image: it creates a sense of place, expresses a community's values or identity, and adds to its sense of worth as well as its wealth.

To emphasize this last point, public art appreciates in value over time, the way that a secure bank account does. It adds to the economic value of its site, attracting visitors, improving neighborhoods, providing a focus of interest and beauty. (For many of these ideas, I give credit to a public art website sponsored by the Newport News Public Arts Foundation.)

Now let's look at some examples. The Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome, London Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the pyramids and the Sphinx in Egypt, and **the Great Wall of China (1)**, are all famous monuments and structures. Built back in historical times, they function today as public art. Kings and emperors used their power to impress their subjects, commissioning the best artists, architects, and engineers to build great public works that have endured through time.

Recent examples of public art, starting in Barcelona, Spain, include **Las Ramblas (2, overhead view; 3, street level)**, a pedestrian mall lined with trees on both sides of a long street. The surrounding buildings provide sidewalk cafes, kiosks, and shops. There are monuments at intersections, and a rich variety of stimuli, including street artists attracts crowds of tourists and local people. One characteristic of good public art is that it provides a place where people want to go.

The second site is the fantastic **Parc Guell (4, 5, 6, 7 8)**, designed by Antoni Gaudi, a sculptor and visionary architect who began work on this park in 1900 **(4)** shows the park entrance. It is designed to take advantage of a **(5)** hillside location, **(6)** plantings of palm trees and other interesting vegetation, **(7)** animal sculpture in mosaic, and **(8)** imaginative architectural shapes are among the features that create a magical playland for visitors. Throughout the park, forms and textures are unique to their creator

Great public art also connects people. A wonderful example for the Chicago community is '**Cloud Gate,**' **(9, 10, 11)** by Indian born artist Anish Kapoor.

(9) You can walk underneath the central curvature of the monumental form and find your own reflection. Commonly referred to as 'the bean', the sculpture resembles a huge drop of mercury, **(10, 11)** mirroring the skyline of the city at all times of day and year. These photos show the crowds of people that the piece attracts, and a video recording on YouTube captured the buzz of excitement in their voices. Designed as public art, this piece was completed only a few years ago.

Memorials represent public art that performs a particular function. They refer to an important person or event in the history of the community. **(12-16)** The **Vietnam Memorial** in Washington D.C is one of the best known examples. **(12)** The structure of the memorial is simple, a vertical wall in a shallow V shape, shown here in bird's eye view. **(13)** The list of names of all the Americans who lost their lives in the war is etched onto the polished granite surface. **(14, 15)** show how people interact with the memorial: first, keepsakes left by visitors & 2nd, a gathering of veterans taking rubbings of names.

Its creator, Chinese American artist Maya Lin, hoped that it would have the effect of "helping those who visit to come to terms with the death of loved ones." The wall brings people together; in this case they include those who have lost friends or a family member, and they gather to find consolation in this place.

Another project by Maya Lin is a garden for the **Aerospace Engineering Building of the U of Michigan (17, up close; 18, aerial view)** It's so inviting that I'd like to visit Ann Arbor, MI, to sit among the still, grass covered sculptural forms resembling wave patterns in water.

Let's now turn to some local examples of public art (there are too many to choose from!)

(19) Three Boston Women Writers, on the Commonwealth Ave Mall. A bronze memorial in a traditional medium, although the inclusion of three figures is not at all traditional and yields many more interesting views than a single figure would have provided. (Abigail Adams, Lucy Stone, Phyllis Wheatley.)

(20) Harvard Science Center Fountain, Cambridge, with its spray mist and boulders furnishing seating, is appealing to children of all ages.

Artist Mags Harries created this memorial at the site of the famous open air market, **Haymarket**, near the North End, **(21, 22)** Banana peels, cabbage leaves, and other discarded items were cast into bronze and embedded in the pavement— Playful in spirit, the piece demonstrates that monuments do not have to be solemn, nor do they have to sit like a statue on a pedestal.

University Park (23-27), located in Cambridgeport, south of Central Square. One of the purposes of the park is to trace the history of this area, from tidal marshland to its development as a commercial center. A variety of goods such as wire cable were manufactured nearby. **(23)** Spool for cable; **(24)** This view shows the seating and the model telescope. Note the new housing at the back of the park. **(25)** Close-up of the model telescope. **(26)** The fountain, with spray mist and chromosome shapes etched into its base. These features refer to scientific research going on at MIT nearby. **(27)** Close up of chromosome designs. On the economic side, how the park got built represents an interesting example of collaboration between public & private entities.

- The housing development that abuts the park was built at about the same time as the park. The developer agreed to fund a portion of the cost of the park because it was to his advantage: it would help him to sell apartment units.

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Community-based art

How is public art produced? Aside from the economics, it sometimes happens that the artist comes in from outside to produce the artwork. A newer model for carrying out such projects is called community-based public art. It involves the community working together with the artist in the initial planning process. This participation is a positive force, empowering community and creating a sense of pride and ownership in the project. This is the type of project we will be involved in.

Some fine examples of community art of recent vintage in different cities include:

- **(28) The Japanese American Internment Memorial**, by artist and political activist Ruth Asawa, located in the square in front of the San Jose, CA Courthouse. It commemorates the detention of Japanese Americans at the outbreak of WW II.

- **(29) Tomie Arai** created Philadelphia's Chinatown Monument. The artist took the traditional form of the jade disc, the *bi*, and expanded it in scale. It bears snapshot images of individuals in the community in black, and, in gold, leaves and forms from nature, all on a green background
- **Boston Arts Academy Facade (30-32): (30)** The shapes of bronze figures and animals from myth and legend cavort on the façade of an ordinary building.
- **(31)** The nighttime view is especially beautiful, with haloes of light silhouetting the forms. Artist Wen-ti Tsen worked with students at the academy in the early stages of the project. By transforming this very plain building, **(32)** the art has improved the neighborhood (located across the street from Fenway Park.)

Let's look next at community art in several Chinatowns :

- **In San Francisco (33-35):** a large, heavily used park on the edge of Chinatown has public art. **(33)** shows pavilions where people gather to hang out.
- **(34)** shows a colorful mural at a playground
- **(35)** This sitting area with tables has beautiful red columns with wisteria on a trellis--a more subtle approach.
- **In the second locale we visit, in Los Angeles (36-39), we see:**
 - (36)** A pair of dragons on a gateway spanning a busy avenue where it enters Chinatown
 - (37) The Gateway of Filial Piety**, a ceremonial gateway
 - (38)** ..beautiful in neon at night

Although not shown here, there is a **statue of Dr. Sun Yat Sen** in the park named for him.

 - (39)** A **pedestrian mall** with traditional Chinese architectural shapes, ornamented by hanging lanterns.
- **Finally, in our own Boston Chinatown**, 2 large murals (time constraints):
- **Oak St. mural (40)**, now destroyed, showing the Chinatown community in daily life, at work or play, gardening, or going to market. Fabric stitched by the seamstress forms a background that cascades downward , connecting the scenes in the mural.
- **Oxford St. mural (41)**
- A representation of a Chinese landscape painting, but transformed by its enormous scale. Both of these are by artist Wen-ti Tsen.
- **Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Chinatown Park:**
- The next slides show our park site and some of its existing features.

- The more traditional Chinese structures are found at the southern end of this long strip of land, among them, the ceremonial gateway (42, 43), flanked by 2 stone lions at the eastern end of Beach St. (44). There is a giant modernistic mural of a stylized sampan, (45) a seating area with a small playground, and finally, in these warmer days, the place where men gather to play games in the shade along the southern margin of the park.(46, 47)
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- The northern end of the park, designed by Carol Johnson and Associates, Landscape Architects, mixes contemporary & traditional art influences. First, (48-49) in the design of the dramatic red metal gateway and stylized metal sampan. The gardens (50) feature plantings of bamboo and grasses; natural stones form the waterfall and the watercourse (51 -53). Finally, the concrete pavers (54) that bring everything together are patterned to suggest dragon scales. Each element of the park has been designed to refer to Chinese aesthetics.
- I want to end the slide show with an image of people using the park for martial arts demonstrations.(55)

After viewing all this public art, I'd like to emphasize two points : first, we hope to throw open as far as possible the process of community involvement, with thanks to you who are present here tonight; and second, we hope the art that results will transcend time, that it will remain something meaningful that people will want to keep looking at.

In order to get discussion going on the issues I've just introduced, let's try the following: Think back to one example of art from among those presented, that you particularly responded to. Which work was it?

Think about the your choice with regard to the following questions:

- What was the piece about? What do you think the artist was trying to say?
- How did the artist convey the message--if there is one--to you, the viewer? Finally, did you like the art?
- Try to give a reason why, or why not?
- Keep in mind that there are no wrong answers!!
- Observers bring their own unique personalities and backgrounds to looking at art, and of course, there is no expectation that everyone will respond in the same way. That said, good public art is usually of wide appeal.