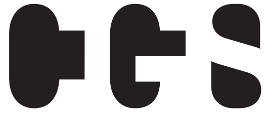

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Who Are We? Where Do We Sit?

Reflections on Public Art on the New American Frontier

TODD BRESSI and MERIDITH McKINLEY

Robin Brailsford, *Double Play*, 2007, Bacchus Park, Frisco, Texas. Commissioned by the City of Frisco, Texas.

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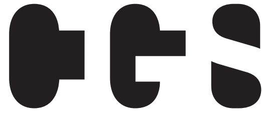


The archetypal notion of a suburb is that it is a place apart from the central city but part of it—a place that offers a healthful, wholesome respite from the city, while providing easy access to the economic and cultural advantages of the nearby urban scene.

Today, however, the mix of places one finds in the sprawling precincts outside the central city is far more complex. Yesterday's bedroom community is tomorrow's New Urbanist town center. Historic streetcar corridors are now dense zones of transit-oriented development. Mixed-use redevelopment is on the horizon in office parks and shopping strips. The suburbs we've come to know are by no means monolithic or static—they surprise always in terms of their development patterns, landscape, and culture. And they are constantly evolving.

Everywhere, suburban leaders are rethinking their locales as places that offer diverse opportunities for living, working, and leisure—including arts and culture. Assets like repertory companies, orchestras, and even public art programs are regarded by suburbs as critical components of the infrastructure now required to be viable places for "live, work, and play."

So it is no surprise that public art programs are gaining an increasingly strong foothold in the suburbs. Suburban communities are turning to public art as a means to craft their identities as unique places and to project these identities to the broader world. Often, absent other means of building good public places, suburbs look to public art as a means of solving urban design problems. Consequently, both public art program coordinators and public artists have been thrust into the forefront of these community issues, sometimes quite unexpectedly, and are being asked to take a leadership role in addressing them.

We have worked as public art planners in suburbs of all types, and have found that these communities constantly challenge us to rethink our expectations of what public art can contribute to the visual environment. Certain questions, however, always come to the fore: Can public art reflect contemporary life in a way that helps people feel more connected to their community? Can vital artworks be created within a concept of the public realm in a community that is only emerging—one that is not clear about itself conceptually or culturally, nor clear in terms of when or how the public art project will be built? Is it possible to encourage artistic independence and excellence, while simultaneously creating artworks that have intrinsic meaning to places where they are located? As public art programs in the suburbs evolve and mature, in what ways do they innovate and break new ground artistically?

The following case studies provide an opportunity to reflect on these questions and examine a range of issues faced by three very different communities: Frisco, Texas, growing rapid-fire on the fringes of Dallas; Arlington, Virginia, a streetcar suburb turned edge-city, turned exemplar of transit-oriented development; and Reston, Virginia, a carefully designed community with a master plan that includes the revival and expansion of a former commitment to anchoring its important places with public artworks.

Frisco, Texas

Frisco is a Texas boomtown twice over. It was incorporated a century ago when the railroad pushed through on its way from St. Louis to San Francisco. Now, subsumed into the orbit of suburban Dallas, it is growing at a staggering rate: From about 6,000 people in 1990 to more than 100,000 now, with an expected build-out capacity for 280,000. According to *Forbes*, it is the seventh fastest growing suburb in the United States.

Via Partnership prepared a public art plan for Frisco six years ago, not long after the city passed a percent-for-art ordinance as a means of enhancing its burgeoning public works program. When we asked people what they thought public art could accomplish for the community, they said that artworks could help create a sense of identity. Frisco is growing so fast that it is still coming to grips with what its identity actually is. Consequently, the public art program's role has been to stimulate a conversation about what Frisco is becoming, rather than to project a settled image.

Before Frisco's public art program was launched, developers commissioned public artworks that examined the identity of the city—mostly bronze representational sculptures depicting life on the Texas prairie and in the old railroad town itself. In essence, the artists reached back into Frisco's history and drew on generalized themes and iconography that few people had experienced, but everyone could understand. This approach remains popular, but does not always address the city's complexities or the desire many people had for commissioning challenging artworks.

Slowly, as a result of community conversations that began during the master planning process and continue with every commissioned public art project, Frisco is finding new ways to explore its identity through art. Works like *The Thin Red Line* at Fire Station No. 5 by Mario Echevarria and Chris McIntire and *What We Do* by Stephen Farley celebrate Frisco's civic institutions by depicting the people who work hard to serve and

protect the city, or the people they are serving. Other artworks, such as Eliseo Garcia's *Texas Splendor* and Robin Brailsford's *Field of Play*, depict contemporary images of people at play. These artworks tell the story of Frisco as it is today, and move away from traditional sculpture towards media and/or approaches better suited to integrating artworks into public architecture and spaces.

Other public art projects are exploring the nature of the new places the community is building to define its civic future. Larry Kirkland's *Golden Goal* and *Frisco Flyer* adorn Frisco's soccer complex (where the FC Dallas professional soccer team plays) with color, light, and playful forms; Jim Bowman's glass sculpture *Celebration* marks the entrance to the Frisco Conference Center. These projects, which are neither literal nor narrative, have become landmarks for places that are characteristic of and essential to the success of the suburban edge city.

These artworks, all commissioned over the past few years, raise questions that can only be answered as time goes on: Will a public art collection created over such a short period of time continue to have relevance to Frisco as it grows and evolves? Can the city reach beyond its focus on projects that interpret its character and, instead, cultivate a collection that reflects innovative approaches by artists working in the public realm?

Reston, Virginia

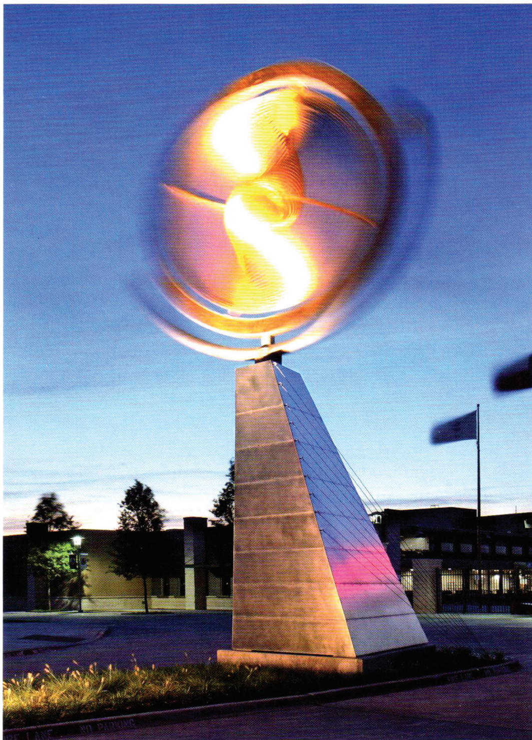
Reston, Virginia, is a visionary kind of place. For nearly five decades, its villages, open spaces, and town center have been built by many hands according to seven principles that were set down by its founder, Robert Simon, including several that speak to providing residents with access to arts and culture as part of their everyday lives.

Reston's longstanding traditions of thoughtful urban design and open-space planning have resulted in a landscape and building pattern that stand out dramatically from those of its Fairfax County neighbors. Moreover, Reston's unincorporated status has resulted in a proud tradition of creating civic organizations to manage many of its needs.

Currently, we are helping Reston create a public art master plan whose goal is to inspire the community to commission artworks that rival its planning, urban design, and civic accomplishments. As in Frisco, concerns about identity are in the forefront. Despite the fact that Reston has a distinctive visual character and a strong framework of community institutions, its visual and political identity have become the central issues in our approach.

For example, we were urged to consider a range of artist-designed gateways—iconic markers at the entries to Reston and its various neighborhoods—as a means of giving clear visual expression to its identity. Usually, we are reluctant to commit public art resources to such projects, and in Reston, after mapping everyone's suggestions and studying those locations, we concluded they were not optimal places for displaying sculpture or creating landscape projects.

Instead, we pursued and deepened conversations about Reston's long-held values and traditions and helped the community imagine how artists could give visual expression to Reston's history and identity. Those conversations elicited key opportunities. In Reston's earliest days, for example, sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca worked side-by-side with architects William Conklin and James Rossant to create a series of playful sculptures (1965) in and around a village center—sculptures that have been animated by generations of children to this day. That effort inspired the belief that Reston should create new places anchored by playful artworks—artworks that could be fresh and inventive, yet firmly grounded in important aspects of the community's history.



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OPPOSITE PAGE: Larry Kirkland, *Golden Goal* (left, in motion) and *Frisco Flyer* (right), 2006, Pizza Hut Park, Frisco, Texas. Commissioned by the City of Frisco, Texas.
ABOVE: Gonzalo Fonseca, marker at the entrance of *The Underpass*, 1965, Lake Anne, Reston.
RIGHT: Gonzalo Fonseca, *The Sun Boat*, 1965, Lake Anne Village Center, Reston, Virginia.
In the background is James Rossant's *The Lookout*, 1965.

Reston's history of environmental management is one of its most strongly held values; its open spaces include ponds, streams, woodlands, and meadows that have been guarded carefully as preserves. Environmental artworks seemed to be a perfect means of exploring this value, but the community was reluctant to commission artworks that would disturb sensitive lands. Speaking with environmental leaders, we explored how artists could address such important issues as water quality, invasive species, and soil degradation in a collaborative manner. Consequently, an environmental artist residency will be an important recommendation in Reston's public art plan.

The fact that Reston is not incorporated has resulted in a unique planning mechanism that could serve as a model for established urban programs. In Reston, the civic organizations, developers, and government agencies that build and manage its public landscape—from parks to pools, from urban streets to village centers—will be charged with developing their own plans for art projects. New community entities consisting of a nonprofit organization with a public art committee and a full-time staff member will provide supplemental funding and professional support towards realizing the community's public art vision.

Reston's plan is in the process of being adopted and the first few art projects are getting started. We will know our effort has been successful if the artworks continue to help Reston explore its complex identity, reach beyond simple landmark gestures, work collaboratively with artists to create significant artworks that evoke the community's embedded wisdom, and reflect the stories people tell about themselves there.

Arlington, Virginia

Quite often, conversations about public art in the suburbs become subsumed by people's broader concerns about the design of their communities. What can we do about cluttered commercial corridors? Why are there so few good gathering places, no places to sit, and no shade in the places we have? Why is the design of parks and transit facilities so utilitarian?

Inevitably, public art is seen as a means of solving these problems, saddling artists with challenges they cannot address on their own or with projects that don't provide great artistic opportunities.

On the other hand, public art programs can't ignore broader design issues. In our planning, we constantly argue that great artworks require thoughtful integration into their sites. Moreover, linking public art commissions to broader planning strategies can be a means of generating resources and support for art, especially in fast-growing suburbs that are investing heavily in infrastructure and private development.

Arlington County, Virginia, where we consult with both the county and private clients, is tackling this challenge head-on. Arlington's public art program is known for its commitment to integrating artworks into county infrastructure, the public realm, and private development. Director Angela A. Adams is a forceful advocate for improving the design quality of everything the county builds, which creates the best opportunities and cultural environment for artists. Arlington's master plan, approved in 2004, enables the public art program to consolidate public and private art funds and allocate them to artist-designed improvements in the public realm.

One of Arlington's biggest challenges is a lack of design leadership. There is no definitive voice for the design of Arlington's public realm. Responsibility for design guidelines, projects, and approvals is split among four agencies as well as business improvement districts, none of which takes a com-

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Cliff Garten, rendering for *Corridor of Light*, 2008, Arlington, Virginia.

prehensive view. The public art program has become not only the visioning mechanism but also the instigator of design strategies in important pedestrian, transit, and riparian corridors identified as focal areas in the public art master plan.

The program is spearheading its first urban infrastructure project: a half-mile-long streetscape that will link two iconic, historic features—the Iwo Jima Memorial and the Key Bridge. It will also anchor the revitalization of Rosslyn, a redeveloping "edge city." The streetscape, designed by Los Angeles artist Cliff Garten, features monumental light sculptures at key gateways and intersections, pedestrian lighting, and seating.

Another key challenge in the city's public art program is time. Time frames for public and private investment are unpredictable, which makes planning, design, fabrication, funding, and contracting for such projects more complicated. Garten's *Corridor of Light*, for example, will piggyback on the construction of several private development and county infrastructure projects that stretch over several years. This necessitates that the project be planned for incremental implementation, in any area at any time. Even as Garten was developing his conceptual proposal for Lynn Street, the first phase location for the project changed from a county bridge location to a private development site two blocks away.

Elsewhere in the county, we have been preparing a concept plan for a multiphase, decade-long private development. County leaders have asked us to consider how the project's artworks will relate to transit upgrades and adjacent private development that will occur within 10 to 20 years. Everyone would like the art to be part of a seamless, pedestrian-oriented urban fabric, but the variables of county priorities and the pace of private development make that notion daunting: What if an artwork is commissioned for a place where the vision will change? Will the public be willing to wait a decade for art that will enhance an important public space?

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What we find most intriguing about Frisco, Reston, Arlington, and the other suburbs in which we work is that citizens there are looking at public art not only to address their identity and character, but also to reinvent the ways they build their public realm and how they think about themselves as cultural entities. The implications of this process are far reaching—involving the way public art is funded and commissioned, the role of the artist in the community, and how art programs dovetail with planning and capital project management.

We are addressing these questions, eagerly and with open minds, in nearly every project we undertake. Potentially, this process will evolve as a dialogue. Clearly, these suburbs and others will generate new paradigms for how public art programs shape our public spaces and our communities. We hope, in the long run, this investigation will make room for more suburban public art programs that foster innovation and break new artistic ground.

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