

Troubled Times for Art in Public Buildings

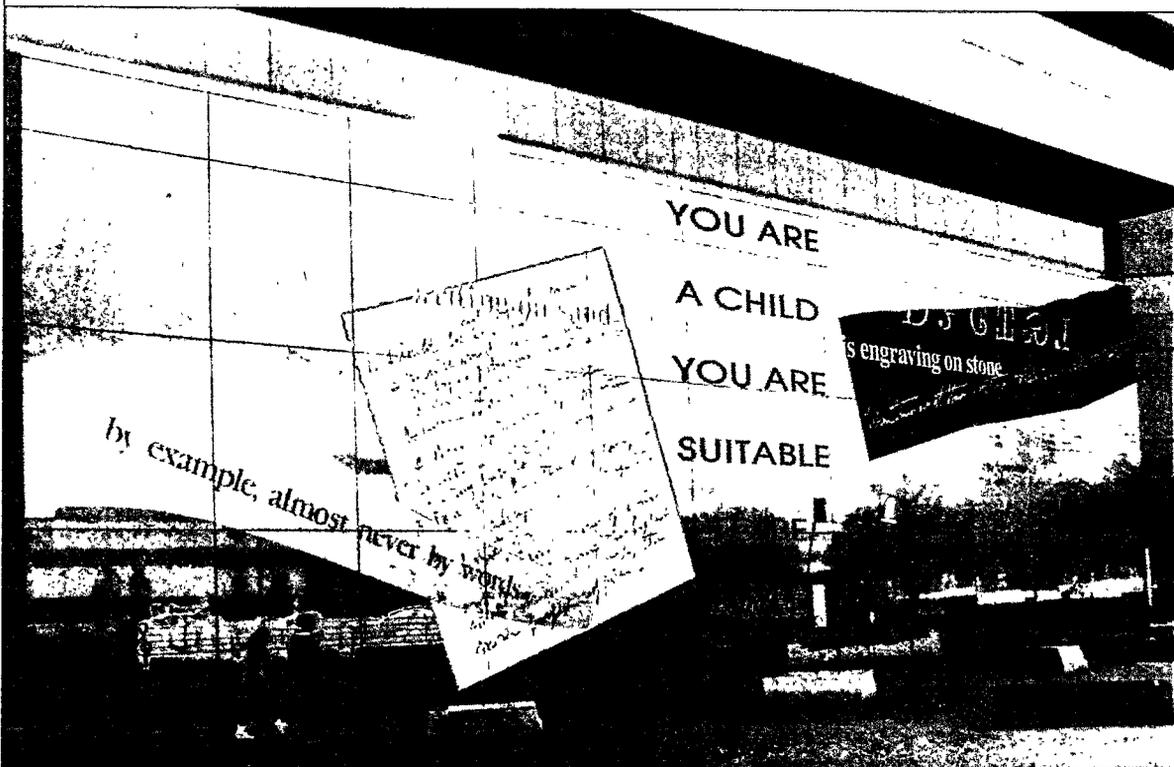
Despite cutbacks in federal funding for the arts, the N.C. General Assembly has boosted its support for the arts in recent years — with one notable exception: the Artworks for State Buildings Program. In 1995, legislators repealed a law that had required public art for major state construction projects because of controversies surrounding some of the first artworks commissioned under the program. The law, enacted in 1988, had required the state to set aside money — 0.5 percent of the construction costs — to acquire art for new or renovated state buildings and their surrounding grounds.¹

But the program quickly became a target for some legislators who disliked two of the program's earliest and most visible projects:

- **The Education Wall**, which features drawings and quotations about education from North Carolina writers, artists, leaders, and

educators. The project, which is sandblasted into the red granite walls of the state's new Public Education Building north of the Legislative Building in Raleigh, was completed in October 1992 at a total cost of \$119,538. It includes a Braille inscription, a child's sketch of a schoolhouse, excerpts of verse from North Carolina poets, an illustration showing the hydrological cycle, and notes from a speech by former Gov. Charles B. Aycock.

- **The Spiraling Sound Axis**, a "sound sculpture" that features man-made and natural sounds recorded throughout North Carolina. The work, which is played through speakers installed in the rotunda and entryways of the state's new Revenue Building in Raleigh, was completed in October 1993 at a total cost of \$142,250. It includes recordings of sounds such as honking geese, croaking frogs, waves striking a beach, and the chants of a tobacco auctioneer.



Karen Tam

"The general perception of the General Assembly is that we don't want any more sound sculptures or any more graffiti on public buildings," says John Baldwin, an aide to House Speaker Harold Brubaker (R-Randolph). "This is an example of the arts community being totally out of touch with the average taxpayer."

Republican leaders in the House killed the public arts program, Baldwin says, because they had been bombarded with phone calls and letters from constituents who viewed the projects as a waste of taxpayers' money. Legislators also received calls, he says, from citizens opposed to the "Light + Time Tower," a public artwork that was commissioned by the city of Raleigh. (See discussion on p. 35 of the main article.) "A lot of people thought the light tower was funded by state money, and we had to go to a lot of trouble to show them otherwise," Baldwin says.

But public art has its supporters as well. "It's very important for cities and towns in North Carolina to have public art," says Myrick Howard, executive director of Preservation North Carolina, a nonprofit group that promotes historic preservation. "When you think of cities that people admire and respect, whether it's Florence, Italy, or Portland, Oregon, they are places that have promoted public art. Public art is what distinguishes a city from being a good place to live to being a great place to live."²

Joseph Covington, director of education for the N.C. Museum of Art, says it's a "great shame" that the legislature killed the Artworks for State Buildings Program — despite controversy over some of the works. "Take any great work of public art through the ages, and if it does anything at all new, some people are going to have a problem with it," Covington says. "That's to be expected; it's not unusual. But it is important to do these projects. Because without art, without something special in our lives, what's to

"The Education Wall," by artist Vernon Pratt, is cited by some legislators as a reason for killing the Artworks for State Buildings Program. The mural is located on the west wall of the State Education Building in Raleigh.

relieve the everyday reality?

"In North Carolina, there is a political view that nothing that is not strictly utilitarian is worthy of public expenditures," Covington adds. "But I think that is a very narrow-minded attitude. We wouldn't have a state museum of art or a state symphony today if we had always had that attitude. . . . It's just not good enough to say that we have lot of paved roads in the state. People want more out of life." To support that view, Covington cites a recent article about a visit to the Triangle by members of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce. One of the visitors' key impressions was the lack of artwork in the Raleigh area. "There's no public art around," said Ida Cole, the owner of a Seattle-based technology company. "There aren't even pictures on the walls in these places."³

Supporters of the Artworks for State Buildings Program also point out that most of the projects completed so far have been well received. For example, visitors at the North Carolina Zoo have responded well to the *Zoological Egg Rest*, a marble sculpture that features larger-than-life carvings of eggs of animals that live in marshy habitats, says Ellen Greer, curator of design for the zoo. "The artwork enhances the zoo experience as well as the environment," Greer says. "I see parents and children approach it, delighted by the size of the eggs as well as the fact that they can climb on and even hug them. The accessibility of the sculpture allows our visitors to make a connection to the natural world."⁴

Nevertheless, even some proponents of public art agree that the Education Wall and the Spiraling Sound Axis undermined support for the Artworks for State Buildings Program. "The public was just not ready for it," says former state Rep. Marie Colton (D-Buncombe), who sponsored the legislation that established the public arts program. "I did plead with the arts people that they should choose art that would go down the palate easier. 'Please, please don't go charging in with some avant-garde art,' and they did. . . . I think that's what doomed it."⁵

Since its inception, the Artworks for State Buildings Program has completed works of art for 14 construction projects. The program,

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although administered by the N.C. Arts Council, was not funded through the council's budget. Instead, it was funded within the capital appropriations for state agencies with construction projects totaling more than \$1 million. The program's total funding for FY 1995 was \$156,593, and overall appropriations for the program totaled \$1.7 million from FY 1990 to FY 1995. (See table on p. 13.) By law, administrative costs were set at 8 percent of the total funding for the Artworks in State Buildings Program until FY 1994. That year, the legislature increased the portion of funding for administration to 20 percent of the total costs and earmarked an additional 2 percent for maintenance costs.

Mary Regan, director of the N.C. Arts Council, defends the way art has been selected for the Artworks for State Buildings Program. The program uses a two-tiered selection process, she says, that involves "ordinary" citizens in each step. First, staff of the Arts Council meet with the users of the building, arts professionals, and designers of the construction project to establish guidelines for the artwork and review proposals from artists. The final approval of the artist and artwork is made by a five-member committee that includes the project designer, a building representative, the chair of the N.C. Arts Council's board of directors, and two citizens appointed by the chair.

"The whole point of selecting art for this program was to get art that reflects the people and history of North Carolina and to say something about what goes on in the buildings," Regan says. "This is art about North Carolina. The Artworks for State Buildings Committee thought that these artworks would be understood. In one sense, the program was a success because the whole point of public art is to get people involved, to get people talking about the artwork and their environment. With this program, we got art that you *can* get involved with."

Despite such public involvement, Regan says that it often takes the public a while to appreciate public art. As an example she cites the Washington Monument, which Congress temporarily stopped funding during its construction in the 1800s. "The Washington Monument, you

look up a certain number of feet, and the stone changes," Regan says. "That's because it was stopped while it was going up — it was so controversial." Covington agrees. "Public art is a relatively new idea for a lot of people in North Carolina," he says. "It takes some time and familiarity with several projects for people to catch on — for people to encounter these projects and realize what a delight they can be. . . . I predict that the "Light + Time" tower will become one of the most popular structures in the city of Raleigh. In a couple of years, people who looked at it with maybe a sideways glance, will be really disappointed if it went away. It will become the kind of thing that people drive visitors by to see when they come to Raleigh."

Meanwhile, the Arts Council is continuing to complete artwork for state construction projects funded prior to the 1995 session. "We still have about 40 projects underway," Regan says. "But the [program] won't apply to new buildings." With the completion of those projects, Regan hopes that support for the public arts program will grow — convincing legislators to restore funding for the program. "We hope to be able to reinstate the program in future years," she says. "I think once we get a few more projects completed, and the legislators see the breadth and quality of the work, the program will be reinstated. . . . It might just take a little time for people, the legislators, to recognize the real strength of this art."

House Speaker Brubaker, however, is not likely to be among those who change their minds about the worth of the public arts program. Brubaker maintains that the Arts Council should not even complete artwork it commissioned prior to the FY 1995–96 budget, even though the state Attorney General's Office has told the council it could proceed with those projects.⁶

"As far as having a requirement for public art, I don't see that coming back under the current House leadership," says Baldwin, the speaker's aide. "There might be some support if somebody comes up with a proposal for a sensible project. But it's going to have to be on a project-by-project basis. Because, very frankly, the arts community has hurt itself with the General Assembly by promoting things that the general public finds ridiculous."



"Sky Dancing," a mobile by artist Mary Ann Mears, is located in the Student Recreation Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. The project was funded by the Artworks for State Buildings Program.

Before the legislature's repeal, North Carolina was one of 30 states with "Percent-for-Art" laws that dedicate a portion of construction funds for public art.⁷ In addition, more than 200 cities in the United States have public arts programs similar to the one responsible for the "Light + Time Tower" in Raleigh.⁸ As in North Carolina, some of these public arts programs across the country have generated controversies. For example, a five-story, stainless steel sculpture that depicts the tree in the city logo for Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has spurred objections from some residents — who have likened it to a head of broccoli or a giant toilet brush.⁹

"Much of this art is approved and installed without any public rancor, and some of it ends up being quite popular with the public," says Alan Ehrenhalt, a political commentator with *Governing* magazine.¹⁰ "The truth is, though,

that percent-for-art is always going to generate more than its share of controversy.

"Most government art subsidies in this country are targeted to individuals, museums, colleges or other willing users. They don't force themselves on the public. . . . Percent-for-art is, by its very nature, different. It places artistic creations on sites where passersby — most of them with no particular interest in art — can't really avoid them."

Nevertheless, there also are plenty of examples of successful public art. In Raleigh, a 10-foot-tall copper sculpture known as "The Acorn" has become a popular attraction in Moore Square. In St. Louis, Mo., the Gateway Arch attracts millions of visitors each year to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial along the banks of the Mississippi River. One of the

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best examples of public art is the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, the black stone wall that slopes into the mall near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Although veterans' groups stridently opposed the design for "The Wall" when it was chosen in the 1980s, the memorial is now one of the capital's most popular attractions for visitors — including veterans.

The key to successful public art is public involvement, observers say. That means involving ordinary citizens in the process of selecting artists or projects, publicizing proposed arts projects through the news media and public meetings, and selecting art works that reflect the history, culture, and diverse tastes of a community.¹¹ A good example of that is the process used to design and create sculptures for the Thomas Road Overpass in Phoenix, Arizona. In that project, the artist spoke to nearby residents when seeking ideas for her design, which was inspired by a Native-American burial ground discovered near the site. Later, the artist invited the public to help apply the adobe mud used to sculpt the wall panels, and some residents embedded personal mementos in the wall.¹²

"Governments really shouldn't launch these exotic projects, even if they have the money, without traveling the extra mile to secure some acceptance from the ordinary people who will be the front-line consumers day in and day out," Ehrenhalt says. "... The public can't be taken for granted. It has to be included.

"That may sometimes mean pulling unsophisticated citizens off the sidewalk and asking them to serve on selec-

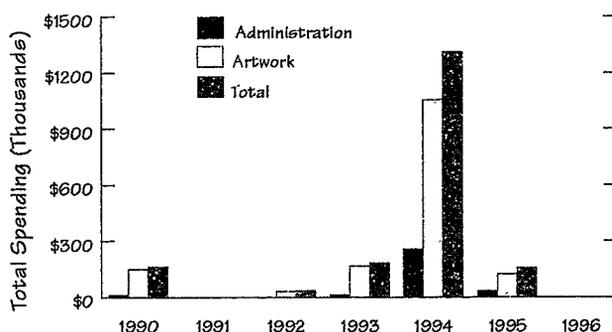
tion panels, however awkward that feels. Or it might just mean bombarding the media with details about the selection process for a big project, so the talk shows can't suggest at the end that unwanted art is being dumped on the community by stealth."

Nevertheless, involving the public more in the selection of artwork also tends to increase the proportion of funding for administration — which could limit the amount of money available for purchasing art. That could lead to criticisms about excessive administrative costs.

— Tom Mather



Legislative Funding for the N.C. Artworks for State Buildings Program, FY 1990-96



Costs	Fiscal Year End							Totals	Percent of Total
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996		
Administration	\$13,136	\$0	\$2,670	\$15,961	\$258,773	\$34,449	\$0	\$324,989	17.5%
Artwork	151,058	0	30,705	168,415	1,054,966	122,144	0	1,527,288	82.5
TOTAL	\$164,194	\$0	\$33,375	\$184,376	\$1,313,739	\$156,593	\$0	\$1,852,277	100.0%

Source: N.C. Department of Cultural Resources. Funding for administration also includes maintenance costs. By law, administrative costs were set at 8 percent of the total funding for the Artworks in State Buildings Program from FY 1989 to FY 1993. In FY 1994, the legislature increased the portion of funding for administrative costs to 20 percent of total costs and earmarked an additional 2 percent for maintenance. In 1995, the legislature repealed the law establishing the Artworks in State Buildings Program, but the program is continuing to complete projects funded by appropriations in previous legislative sessions.

FOOTNOTES

¹ N.C.G.S. 143-47A (1988, revised 1994) established the Artworks for State Buildings Program to acquire works of art for state construction projects exceeding \$1 million. The N.C. General Assembly repealed that law as a special provision in the Continuation Budget Operations Appropriations Act of 1995, Chapter 324, Sec. 12.2 (House Bill 229). The Center has criticized the use of special provisions in budget bills to amend state laws, beginning with its 1986 report, *Special Provisions in Budget Bills: A Pandora's Box for N.C. Citizens*, by Ran Coble.

² As quoted in "A tower of grace?" *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Aug. 24, 1995, p. 3B.

³ Sally Hicks, "Triangle struts as Seattle leaders-size it up," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., May 23, 1996, p. 1A.

Detail, "Stream Garden Gate," forged steel by artists David Brewin and Joseph Miller. The gate, located in the N.C. Arboretum in Asheville, was funded by the Artworks for State Buildings Program.

⁴ As quoted in "A Guide to North Carolina's Artworks for State Buildings," a pamphlet produced by the N.C. Arts Council, Dept. of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, 1996, p. 3.

⁵ As quoted by Kirsten B. Mitchell in, "Tower becomes a symbol in debate over public art," *The Dispatch*, Lexington, N.C., Sept. 28, 1995, p. A8.

⁶ Joe Dew, "Money cutoff demanded for arts program," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 4, 1995, p. 3A. Also see Under the Dome (column), "Interpreting some artful politics," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 12, 1995, p. 3A.

⁷ Unpublished data from an annual survey of the 50 states by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Washington, D.C., November 1995.

⁸ Chuck Twardy, "We're not alone in art debate," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 8, 1995, p. 3G.

⁹ Charles Mahtesian, "The Art Critics of Cedar Rapids," *Governing*, February 1996, p. 12.

¹⁰ Alan Ehrenhalt, "When the Art Critic Is the Taxpayer," *Governing*, June 1994, p. 9.

¹¹ Twardy, note 8 above.

¹² Nancy Rutledge Connery, "The Added Value of Art," *Governing*, April 1996, pp. 55-57.