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October 30, 2008

ARTS & THE ECONOMY

Public Project

Lexington Outdoor Mural Project calls attention to the experience of community art

by Christine Huskisson



A portion of the Southland Drive mural by Mike Burrell.

During a time when we are carefully examining what we consume, I wonder about art. Do you consume art? Do you buy it, look at it, listen to it, or experience it in some other way? Do you prefer that experience to happen in the privacy of your own home or business, in a more social atmosphere of a local gallery, or in a very public place like on the sidewalk of North Limestone at Al's Bar?

This past summer, LexArts and the Lexington Fayette Urban County Government kicked off the Lexington Outdoor Mural Project (LOMP) adding more opportunities for the public consumption of art in Lexington. The process and results provide some insight about consumerism and art.

First and foremost, public art and the consumption of it can burgeon the collective consciousness of the residents of Lexington. Secondly, we must be careful not to risk individual expression in the process. And finally, consuming the arts on this level alone cannot sustain a healthy arts economy.

From its inception, this public art project demanded public involvement. Members of an advisory committee assembled by Jim Clark of LexArts (see sidebar) worked with area neighborhood associations to select sites and artists for three wall murals located on Southland Drive, North Limestone, and Vine Street.

A collective conscience

The level of participation from each of these neighborhoods varied; the North Limestone residents devoured the project and, now that the mural is hanging, can't seem to get enough of it.

Mike Burrell, a local artist, won the North Limestone commission after extensive research into the history of music in this area. His mural pays tribute to a time when this neighborhood was a happening entertainment district. With lively representations of musicians like Charles Quillings, Les McCann, Duke Madison, Jim Rankin, George Gentry, J.D. Crowe and Byron Romanowitz, the artist has activated the space in much the same way the owners of Al's bar have done over the last several years.

Mounted on the south-facing wall of Al's bar, this 20 x 19' mural blends culture, music, creativity, tolerance, diversity, legendary figures and memories in the collective consciousness of the residents of the North Limestone neighborhood.

"We decided to apply for the moneys to complete this mural because we want to

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invest in the quality of life of the North Limestone neighborhood," stated Miller, co-owner of Al's Bar.

Now that the mural is complete, Miller says it provides not only a cultural reference to history, but also empowers the neighbors in the present and for the future.

"Everyone seems to view it as something they could do or be, an artist like Mike Burrell or a musician just like Uncle George or a teacher like Charles Quillings; the mural serves as a point of pride and inspiration even for people who are not directly connected to it," said Miller.

For too many years a similar consciousness has been lacking in Lexington. Could we take a lesson from the North Limestone neighborhood? Could public art and the public consumption of it move us in that direction? Yes, provided we do not lose sight of individual artistic expression.

The artist's voice

Burrell's mural is a document in some senses; the realistic renderings provide for easy consumption. Waseem Touma is a very different type of artist.

Touma won the commission for the YMCA mural located at the intersection of Quality and Vine Streets with a work titled "Mind, Body, and Soul." The content of this mural was, in Touma's words, 'driven by the commission' and the need to meet community expectations.

Touma's abstracted mode of artistic expression is powerful, remarkable, and has for years addressed the formation of identity and our individual contributions to the larger community (see "An Emergence Artist," Chevy Chaser, October, 2008).

In this mural, that is lost; Touma's voice does not resonate. Contrived, but hidden messages about the mind, body, and soul of the community coupled with literal references to our fertile land and blue cityscape diminish Touma's sophisticated and sensitive artistic sensibilities.

We had an opportunity to learn from Waseem Touma and missed it by overemphasizing the need to make this mural more palatable for public consumption.


A vital mix

Each of the murals commissioned for the LOMP cost \$15,000. The artists reportedly received a portion of this, less material and documentation expenses.

According to Jim Clark, "One hundred percent of the funds used to commission these murals came from a public art fund, established when the horses from Horse Mania were sold at auction."

The public consumption of art is necessary for Lexington to educate residents with the goal of developing a collective conscience. To that end public art projects like the LOMP can inspire and should continually issue an intellectual and aesthetic challenge.

Who knows? We could build a base of connoisseurs who might then opt to experience a little art in the privacy of their own homes or offices.

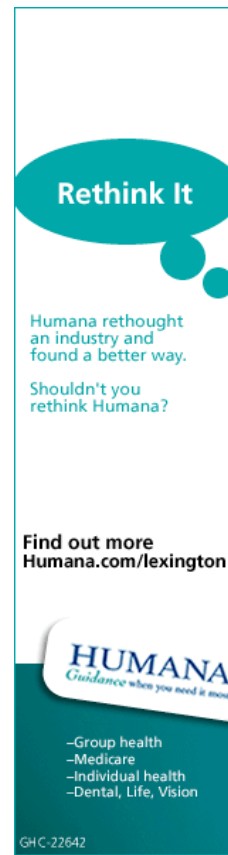
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Advisory board comments

Public art contributes numerous benefits to the well-being and quality of life of a community. Citizens can be elevated toward thoughtful discourse simply by seeing sculptures or murals as they pursue more mundane travel about town. It was extremely satisfying for me to see the interest from artists in the project. Then the best part was the partnerships of neighbors and artists to create meaningful stories through the murals.

I loved being involved.

Linda Gorton, RN

Council Member At-Large

The LexArts Murals project has truly proved to be a great initiative for Lexington to undertake. Public art can serve to be a huge civic motivator, energizing a burgeoning downtown area such as Lexington's. The entire process was geared specifically towards community involvement with an emphasis placed on neighborhood centers as urban engines. LexArts did a very impressive job compiling our team of qualified advisory panel members and identifying talented artists who could bring this vision to life. I could not be happier to have served on the panel but, even more importantly to see the work appearing in the neighborhoods as planned.

Darren J. Taylor, Assoc. AIA

Associate Director AIA Kentucky

GBBN Architects, Inc.

As an advisory board member, I was involved with artist and site selection. Proposals were received from around the United States and featured a variety of artist styles from naturalism to abstraction. In addition, the quality of the proposals that we reviewed was impressive -- reminding us of the wealth of talent in the Bluegrass and beyond. For me, the site selection was particularly key because several factors were under consideration, including: availability of wall, scale, visibility, community support, commitment to mural's longevity. Through the right mix, that is, the combination of these two elements -- the artist and the location -- the murals are individual, unique projects that function both independently and as a collection. They blend notions of culture, memory, and tradition of this region. My personal hope is, also, that by activating spaces the murals serve as agents or markers of identity and innovation while offering the public a window into one or many aspects of the local and regional arena. And, at bottom, the pieces challenge audiences to see a familiar location in a new way.

Dr. Juilee Decker

Associate Professor of Art History

Chair, Art Department

Georgetown College

The Outdoor Mural project is innovative and intriguing. By combining art and the community, we form a visual bridge linking what is and was to what could be. Viewing art, whatever our response to the image is, engages us in a visual dialogue, makes us pause and reflect. Murals and outdoor installations significantly change and improve the urban landscape, adding a human touch to what otherwise can be a somewhat cold man-made environment.

The murals are installed in neighborhoods who actively sought to be part of this project, areas seeking to establish an identity and a more engaging landscape. The artists selected were ones whose work, philosophy and talent were outstanding-the scope of the works they submitted provided concrete evidence of their skill in making art and perhaps more importantly, in matching art and the environment.

Murals convey a message-art is alive here. What neighborhood would not want to be part of this effort?

Deborah Borrowdale-Cox

Curator of Education,

University of Kentucky Art Museum



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October 31, 2008 | 12:52 PM

As a muralist and public artist, I believe in the power of community-based art and its ability to transform the individual, neighborhood and surrounding communities. With that said, my experience with the Lexington Outdoor Mural Project was a far cry from the supportive comments I have seen listed here so far. It is one thing to support a project based on its philosophy or supposed mission. It is another thing entirely when one understands how LexArts mishandled the administration of mural funds, subsequently devaluing the role that artists play in community building.

I began the process of applying for the Lexington Outdoor Mural Project last March. Following successive missed deadlines on the part of LexArts, I was notified in July that I had been selected to be the muralist for the Southland Association. From that point on, all my communications with LexArts were with an intern. The intern promised that I would be receiving paid travel to Kentucky and that he would go about procuring and shipping the necessary sign board. I never heard back from the intern. I contacted him several times to no avail.

The next communication from LexArts came in the form of a contract. The project dates as stated in the contract were beginning August 1st and continuing through October 15th. The contract arrived late on August 29th with no explanation. They did, however, mention that "time was of the essence" largely because LexArts had squandered six months spent in administrative limbo. The contract also failed to include the travel addendum. Finally, the contract stated that \$3000 had been taken off of the top of each muralist's budget to cover "documentation and publicity fees". There was no mention of this in the original RFQ, interviews or in subsequent communications. Muralists were told up front that materials were to come out of the artists' budgets, so why would they not divulge this added \$3000 expenditure in the six months leading up to the submission of contracts? It was clear to me then that the Community Arts Manager had simply forgotten to set aside funds for this at the onset of the project and expected the artists to cover their mistake (a common and reoccurring theme in my dealings with LexArts).

When asked about these contract issues, I was offered a vague statement supposedly in support of their assertion that LexArts had the right to arbitrarily reduce mural funds at their whim. When asked why we received a contract 28 days after the project start date, I was told that I should've already been working on the mural with no contract, no money, no sign board and very little communication with LexArts. When I forwarded my email correspondence with the intern regarding his insistence that he procure the sign board for me, my concerns were met with silence. This burying of one's head in the sand rather than communicating like professionals became commonplace in my dealings with LexArts. When I stated that I would not accept the \$3000 deduction in pay, there was no room for negotiation. I was to either accept the previously undisclosed budgetary deduction, or quit the project. Because I take particular issue with an arts organization undervaluing artists, and because LexArts offered no room for negotiations, I was forced to step down.

Following this debacle, I wrote a detailed letter to the President and CEO of LexArts enumerating my concerns. I was assured that my experience was exceptional and that he was not aware of any of the problems that had arisen with regard to LOMP. I was told that this was his fault for placing too many responsibilities on the Community Arts Manager and that he would get to the bottom of the situation by finding documentation funds elsewhere. I never heard back from Jim.

In my years working as a muralist and youth mural coordinator, I have never encountered such an extraordinary lack of professionalism as I have with LexArts. Ignoring obvious issues when they require attention and resolution implies faulty administration. This pattern of denial and the inability to acknowledge and correct mistakes suggests that it is time for the Board of Directors to review their policies to determine if their organization is adequately meeting its stated mission.

I have worked as a muralist and youth-mural mentor/coordinator for the Rural Murals project since 2003. I have successfully administered in excess of \$37,000 in mural funds from private, city and federal funding agencies. I have murals in Point Arena, CA, Gualala, CA as Santa Clarita, CA. I am currently building a 25' pebblestone mosaic for the city of Point Arena, CA.

Nicole Ponsler

Muralist originally selected for the Southland Mural Project

Nicole Ponsler

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