

ABSTRACT
THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER PUBLIC ART PROCESS:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC FOCUS ON A PHILADELPHIA URBAN
PARK'S DEVELOPMENT

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The aim of this dissertation is to use my role as a public art advisory committee member for the Schuylkill River Park Development Council to elucidate the public art process at a particular place in a particular moment in time: Schuylkill River Park, Center City, Philadelphia, 1996-2000. The dissertation seeks answers to questions that have significance within the anthropology of the built environment, in particular, the social production of space: How does society produce the built environment? What roles do history and social institutions play in generating the built environment? What is the relationship between space, power, and politics? Who are the players and what interests are represented in the creation of urban space? Public art is just one aspect of the development of Schuylkill River Park and cannot be isolated from the grander development plan. The specialized discipline known as “public art” includes a myriad of practices and approaches to making and siting art outside conventional art spaces, such as museums and galleries. While public art would seemingly be an ideal place for discussion within recent debates on representation, public culture, postindustrial cities and identity, it has been relatively isolated from these critical perspectives. This dissertation addresses the dearth in the formation of public art knowledge by placing public art within a wider urban context. While it is impossible to analyze the actual built environment of the park, including public art, since it is still in the planning stages, it is possible to extrapolate (through ethnography, interviews with local residents, newspaper articles, census data, and secondary sources in disciplines such as geography, urban sociology, and anthropology) the direction development might take and the appearance of the park's built environment. In focusing on public art and the development plan for an urban Philadelphia waterfront park, the dissertation shows how public art and urban development are inextricably linked. It also examines how change in the urban economy has direct consequences in the way landscapes are developed—former industrial landscapes are supplanted by landscapes that are purported to offer leisure-based services to both residents, as well as tourists.

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