

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

This dissertation attempts to contextualize public art within larger contemporary urban processes by using my role as a public art advisory committee member for selecting public art that will eventually be sited in an urban Philadelphia park, Schuylkill River Park (SRP). By examining the different interests that create public art, I underscore the complex web of social processes that bring together artists, art professionals, developers, designers, city boosters, and in some cases, local residents, in the planning of public art. Contributions are thereby made to the anthropology and sociology of art, urban anthropology and the anthropology of the built environment.

The literature on public art takes for granted the process which begets its object. For anthropologists, ethnography enables us to examine the core of this process, to sift through and sort out the various interests that converge and represent different and potentially conflicting visions about how art should be sited in urban places. Thus, ethnography offers insight into the social process by which decisions are made behind the closed doors of bureaucracy, before public art materializes in the varied spaces of its eventual location. While ethnography assists us in underscoring who the “players” are in the public art process, it also assists in framing, at least in some capacity, who the community of users of SRP are. Granted, while it is impossible to fully access the myriad people who live near and use the park, ethnography forbids us to make assumptions about community, without first entering into an experiential relationship with it. For anthropologists, community is a problem to be solved not a given. A chief flaw of the development and public art process I was a part of was the lack of providing residents (and anyone else) the opportunity to come together and forge a community voice. With no channel of participation, the Center City Residents Association (CCRA) had to complain to SRP’s administering organization, the Fairmount Park Commission, about Schuylkill River Development Council’s (SRDC) ignorance of residents, in order to be heard. In a sense, the ethnography related in this dissertation serves as the community study that perhaps SRDC should have conducted themselves.

Ethnography, in emphasizing process over product, elucidates the collective activity of the public art world. Using Becker’s (1982) sociological approach to art, in particular his notion of conventions and division of labor as points of entry for understanding the collective aspects of the

public art world, I reveal taken for granted elements of public art—the social structure of the public art process. The public art selection process has important ramifications in the future of Philadelphia’s built environment. This contributes to studies in the anthropology and sociology of art.

The public art world, however, is just one component of several, encompassing worlds. By contextualizing public art within the development process of an urban park, I must also examine the interests that converge in the social production of SRP. Here, a number of important contributions are made to anthropology.

The overarching contribution my dissertation makes is to the anthropology of the built environment, specifically under the domain of the social production of space, which, as Lawrence and Low maintain, is “the most promising new direction” within this area of research (1990: 491).

According to Lawrence and Low, social production theories,

seek to place their understanding of built forms within the larger context of society’s institutions and its history. As we continue to conduct more research on contemporary urban settings . . . we cannot ignore the complex forces and large-scale institutional forms that penetrate from every angle (1990: 492).

In focusing on the public art process, I have proceeded to step back from my object of study and provide historical and institutional context at each level. Public art in SRP is located within the larger context of the contemporary urban development of a Philadelphia park, which, in this case, has been commissioned by a small development corporation, SRDC; contemporary urban development is a part of wider attempts to economically revitalize urban centers as they continue to deindustrialize, which I have related in detail in terms of Philadelphia; the deindustrialization of cities and attendant sea changes in the way the built environment is produced is the result of major shifts within the capitalist system which have come about in the post-World War period. While I have paid attention to the historical, social, political and economic factors that converge to create Philadelphia’s contemporary built environment, I admittedly have not spent sufficient time examining how the global economy affects that environment. However, such high order contextualization also subsumes the public art process in just too many layers. Suffice it to say that the context I provide here is more than adequate for a coherent study of the social production of space, using public art as the focus of my investigation.

By underscoring not only the perspectives of public art advisory committee members, but looking at the larger context of the boosters who celebrate, market, and envision postindustrial

Philadelphia, I contribute to urban anthropology, specifically the anthropology of the postindustrial city. In particular, my dissertation builds on the work of Charles Rutheiser (1996 and 1999) on urban “imagineering.” Rutheiser uses this term to elucidate programmed, totalizing, tourist friendly environments, as well as how the language of boosterism and development socially produces them. In particular, Rutheiser has concerned himself with Atlanta, Georgia, and how its identity was repackaged for the 1996 Olympics. Using the public art and development planning process of SRP, and relating how boosters envision the development of postindustrial Philadelphia, I provide a Philadelphia example of imagineering.

In examining the different perspectives in the development of SRP, I highlight the contested nature of urban development. This builds on anthropological studies of the planning process (which fall under the categories of both urban anthropology and the anthropology of the built environment) such as Lisa Peattie’s (1987) analysis of the development of a Venezuelan city, according to planners, economists, and indigenous residents. My study, however, is more concerned with relatively empowered elites—represented by a development corporation and neighborhood associations. Still, I offer a contemporary North American urban case study that is an important addition to the anthropology of urban development. In focusing on urban elites I offer a variation on Nader’s call for “studying up” (1974).

Urban anthropologist R. Timothy Sieber (1991 and 1993) has underscored that urban waterfront developments are situated in spaces of former industry. They represent transitional spaces between the old industrial regime and the new postindustrial economy. Contemporary urban waterfronts offer recreational and consumer activities that appeal to “the new constituencies now inhabiting and visiting redeveloped downtowns: urban professionals, suburban commuters, and tourists” (Sieber 1993: 185). Sieber’s observations are nearly identical to my experience in conducting research on SRP’s development in Philadelphia. My work adds to the foundation built by Sieber and shows the relevance of studying waterfront development in order to better understand the social production of space in the postindustrial city, particularly how economic and social change is manifested in the built environment.

As one can now gather, this is very much an interdisciplinary study, drawing from disciplines outside the field of anthropology, including sociology, urban theory, geography, and philosophy. However, the unifying theme is that of the urban. Since public art is most often an urban phenomenon, that is, a part of the urban landscape, I suggest that we must examine how that landscape is formed by placing public art within applicable social scientific approaches to the urban environment. The remainder of this chapter serves as a summary of the dissertation. I provide a synopsis of my argument and then I show how SRP's public art projects may offer hope for Philadelphia's future landscape, despite shortcomings of the process, and despite the strong critique of postindustrial urban spaces waged by such thinkers as Sieber, Boyer, Zukin, and Deutsche—whose work, except for Sieber's, lies outside the domain of anthropology.

As I have argued in Chapter 3, public art potentially serves ideological ends when it is commissioned by private enterprise for a particular segment of the population, the professional class of the postindustrial city—those who “really” count. This compliments Sieber's argument, discussed in Chapter 2, that urban waterfront development strategies reflect the sensibilities of the ones who control development, perceiving urban space users as reflections of themselves. Zukin (1995 and 1996), and to a lesser extent, Boyer (1994), discuss how art, both outdoor, public art, and other aestheticizing impulses, such as gourmet food consumption, museum going, and fashionable shopping, and the built environments that accompany each activity, are symbolic aspects of postindustrial urban redevelopment in which the city represents itself as the site of consumption (where consumers not only buy goods, but images and lifestyles that convey a certain sophistication) rather than production.

In Chapter 4, Adams et al.(1991) convey a similar argument. In Philadelphia, post-World War II redevelopment—redevelopment driven, for the first time in its history, in the absence of industrial growth—sought (and continues to seek) ways in which to prevent Center City from being eclipsed by the suburbs. Aside from making Philadelphia more automobile and commuter friendly through the creation of new highways and rail lines, amenities such as sports facilities, museums, convention facilities and hotels, and shopping centers, were also renovated and/or built. The spaces of industrial Philadelphia are slowly being replaced with the spaces of the service economy. If the new service sector professional class will commute and work in the city, they must also be enticed to live there.

Redevelopment continues to try to increase the white middle class population and lessen the proportion of poor, unemployed, and minority residents. In recent years, attempts to attract outsiders to live in or visit the city have centered on building projects and marketing opportunities such as blockbuster exhibitions like “Cezanne,” the \$300 million Avenue of the Arts, the Regional Performing Art Center, currently under construction, an entertainment center under construction on the Delaware waterfront, and myriad new and renovated hotels, restaurants and apartment buildings. The development of SRP and its attendant amenities such as restaurants, boat rental facilities, and public art is a component of the same matrix that may (or may not) enable Philadelphia to survive as the city restructures from an industrial to a service-based economy.

Public art has often been a part of urban redevelopment strategies, as well. Percent-for-art programs were initiated in the United States during the post-World War II period in an attempt to enliven the “concrete jungles” of urban renewal, in which buildings created in the dominant International Style contributed to a bleak urban environment. Developers of both private and public building projects now had to offer a small percentage of their budgets for public art. Rosalyn Deutsche (1996b), as discussed in Chapter 3, argues that public art as an aspect of redevelopment has colluded with class polarizing strategies. In the name of the public, Battery Park City, in lower Manhattan, implemented an ambitious public art plan amid a residential and corporate center whose audience is the finance capital elite. The developers insured that all the proposed subsidized housing was eliminated from the site and transferred to the Bronx and Harlem. As Kim Babon (2000) argues in Chapter 3, public art is a pasteurizing process whereby harmful elements are removed through a standardizing process. In redevelopment, planners design places that will minimize the harmful elements of the urban environment such as the appearance of a disenfranchised population. Public art assists in this process by producing environments that convey harmony and wash over conflict.

Public art has also been used as a tool for the economic revitalization of cities and as a means to improve the urban image. The first public sculpture funded by the NEA’s Art in Public Places Program, Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* (1969), installed in the Grand Rapids, Michigan civic center, soon became the image of the city; a logo version of the sculpture adorns government stationery and garbage trucks to this day. Seattle, Washington initiated its percent for art program in

the 1970s as a stimulus for the economy and to initiate civic pride. Jerry Allen, founder of Seattle's public art program, discusses these issues:

The mayor and the county executive got interested in percent-for-art, as a way of creating opportunities for artists, and creating a more attractive downtown. The ideas associated with public art at that time were pretty rudimentary. People were thinking about 'placing' works of art, based on that notion that the city could become an outdoor museum. But the idea that was driving it initially was *economic*. It was part of a larger package of initiatives that the city and the county were undertaking to fix their image and fix their economy (author's emphasis) (Allen quoted in Finkelppearl 2000: 26).

How do such issues converge and influence the development of SRP and its public art?

SRP represents the development of urban space in the absence of industrial growth. On river banks where industry once dominated, a park is proposed. While development is still in the planning stages, the park is viewed as a site for economic revitalization in a number of ways. A 1996 Pennsylvania Economy League study shows that SRP has the potential to boost the Philadelphia economy through construction benefits reaped by the building of the park itself; by offering recreational amenities, which not only enhance the urban quality of life, but encourage consumer spending; through downtown revitalization, whereby the attractiveness of living near a park would serve to keep residents living in the area, attract new people to the city, and serve to encourage the development of apartments, retail facilities, and hotels—all of which would raise the property values of the surrounding residencies; through waterborne tourism opportunities; through educational opportunities that may enhance tourism; and by providing under-recognized public and commuter access via the river. Public art's role as a way to provide incentive for economic revitalization resides in its ability to define and create a place that may prove attractive to tourists, its potential as an educational resource, and its status as an amenity which enhances the quality of residential life. While the local residents I have talked with support the Levy and Lutz public art proposal (however, very few people have been privy to this knowledge since SRDC has not adequately informed neighboring residents), some are very concerned that SRP will be developed along the lines above as a destination park. This is the crux of the issue, but only time will tell, since the development of the park remains to be seen.

However, to represent public art exclusively as a cog in the machine of urban redevelopment is to misrepresent the field of public art, the public art process, and the artists who make public art. As I have shown in Chapter 3, recent trends in public art reveal attention to community process, audience,

and critical strategies. The public art advisory committee on which I sat did not necessarily represent the interests of SRDC and a civic boosterism to develop SRP. These were art professionals (granted, only a few of these arts professionals were representatives of the neighboring community) who had no particular vested interest in the development of SRP except—by sitting on the committee—a responsibility in selecting public art for the park. Furthermore, the artists selected propose promising projects, as discussed in Chapter 6. As social agents, the public art advisory committee and the artists represent potential “noise” in the system of urban redevelopment. As Lefebvre has argued, “Neither capitalism nor the state can maintain the chaotic, contradictory space they have produced” (Lefebvre 1979:290). In Lefebvre’s socio-spatial dialectic, the potential to critique or confront status quo conceptions of space, such as the postindustrial landscape of consumption on which SRP is at least partially predicated, exist within those very spaces. Although Lefebvre ultimately envisions the eradication of private property as a means to fully liberate space, he recognizes that resistance, or at least hope, permeates the privatization of space. The forces of domination are never complete.

Sometimes, even capitalistic revitalization planning allows channels for the “noise” of community voices (see Finkelpearl 2000: 43-44). In January 1999, the city of Portland, Maine unveiled its community cultural plan; its downtown plan, adopted a few years earlier, focused on an arts district as a tool for economic development. Perhaps aware that arts districts often focus on outsiders rather than residents, a means for community participation was incepted. The community cultural plan was developed through a community wide process that included personal interviews with scores of ethnic, religious, political, and neighborhood leaders, as well as open public forums. As opposed to the top-down approach in which experts selected art for the public, exposing people to the “best art of our time,” to borrow a phrase from the NEA’s Art in Public Places 1967 guidelines, the Portland plan assumes that art is already in communities, and will flourish with the support of public effort.

According to the report,

Far from the notion of elite culture, our aim has been to thoroughly democratize our cultural perspective and to empower communities that have previously been absent from public cultural discourse. At its core, this planning process has been an attempt to take a measure of our entire community and its constituent cultures, and to devise a set of mechanisms through which our representative civic government might address their needs and aspirations (quoted in Finkelpearl 2000).

According to Tom Finkelpearl, the recommendations of the report are not “gleaming concert halls and museums,” but more modest proposals such as a community arts center accessible to a wide range of groups and the suggestion that public art can play a role in the city by providing a way to create interconnections among the people of Portland.

In the end, the Schuylkill River Park public art advisory committee selected public artists of merit, so perhaps my critique of the fact that no avenue for community input was provided is ultimately invalid, as Penny Bach, a fellow advisory committee member, suggested. However, I still believe the ethnographic approach of the Portland model— interviews with people, open public forums—would have benefited the public art process. The development plan for SRP, although interwoven throughout this dissertation, is a much larger issue even beyond that of public art. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, some members of the Center City community endorse the art plan, but see the creation of a destination park, the ultimate aim of the SRDC, as a problem. The time is now to involve the community in the design plan for the park. As Malcolm Miles reminds us,

. . . the methodology of planning privileges the representations of space (in Lefebvre’s terms) of the expert, just as the law, according to [Ivan] Illich, privileges the dominant interests of society; yet if a doctor describes his patients as ‘experts on their own health,’ perhaps dwellers are also experts on their city and if so, their expertise begins in their awareness of the spaces around their bodies and the lattices of memory and appropriation they assemble as a personal reading of the city. From this, it follows that the role of the planner becomes that of enabler, assisting members of communities in acquiring the vocabulary and information, added to the empowerment of community identity, to affect planning outcomes. There is a parallel between planning which involves community participation and art which engages with defined publics in participatory work, such as Mierel Ukeles’ unfunded residency at the New York sanitation department . . . (Miles 1997: 200).

Once again, an ethnographic approach privileges the knowledge and experience of “real” people, rather than relying on the abstracted theorizations of planning and public art experts. Ethnography, then, offers much to both the planning and public art processes. Used to ascertain the beliefs of local residents, it offers entry into the expertise of the city dweller, to paraphrase Miles—those who know the spaces they inhabit, obviously, the best. It also can serve as an important methodology in the process of public art making itself, as Mierle Ukeles’ approach is an ethnographic one.

