

Carving a Niche for Public Sculpture

Public art enhances our appreciation of spaces all year long - but summer is when it really becomes an intrinsic part of many of our outdoor experiences. We took a minute to chat with Charles Denby, MD, founder of the Denby Family Fund for Public Art in Providence, and Yarrow Thorne, whose Avenue Concept works closely with the fund and other funders to pursue avenues for public art in the city.

“We’ve done over 170 pieces of public art in Providence over the last two years. We’ve invested over \$850,000 into the local economy in the form of public art,” says Thorne of the Avenue Concept’s commitment to integrating art into Providence’s everyday experiences.

“There’s no one else that’s doing what we’re doing,” Thorne says matter-of-factly.

What makes The Avenue Concept projects different is the focus on infrastructure and sustainability. “When the city did all the recent downtown construction and bumped the curbs out, they didn’t have the funding to fill in some of the space. By working with Planning and Zoning, we were able to bring in private investment, which the city hadn’t done before, and create concrete pads where art can go. We used the leftover concrete from the construction. It saved the city and state money, and gave us a space that’s long-term sustainable for outdoor art,” explains Thorne, pulling up one recent example of big picture thinking.

This enabled the Avenue Concept and the City of Providence to start rotating art on some of those pads. “We put five in two years ago, and added another five last year. And every two years or so, we’re going to rotate in new pieces. We have a new pad near the mall, and another near WaterFire that was installed in the last eight months. We also installed a pad in Kennedy Plaza during its construction. We also funded and installed all the accessible power in Kennedy Plaza, setting the stage for a multi-use area of the plaza,” says Thorne.

Why rotate the art, instead of shooting for iconic, space-defining work like the “bean” in Chicago or the angry donut along the Providence River near RISD? Denby and Thorne have several reasons:

Denby: A lot of high-end art can effectively be rented for a very small price compared to its hypothetical purchase price. By rotating art, and having both internationally known artists and local sculptors in rotation, the local sculptors get the publicity and association. It’s often challenging for sculptors to get their work in galleries because of how much space they take up compared to 2D art. [We’re trying to help solve that.]

Thorne: Another unusual thing, with contemporary art especially, and large-scale outdoor art, is that there’s a lot of it in the world that’s sitting in storage or doesn’t have a home. It was commissioned for a temporary installation, or a collector had nowhere to put it ... no one can see it, and it can’t be put in place anywhere because there are no footings, or there’s no program or insurance in place to take care of it.

But our goal is to make it sustainable, make it part of our infrastructure. To do that takes years; years of planning, years of working with government, working through all of the challenges. We started with graffiti artists, looking at how to come up with positive solutions to negative art in the city. That led to working with mural artists to create work like the Dean Avenue parking lot murals.

We've been pitching the city for a while to fund and run an outdoor sculpture garden or park or facility. That would allow us to install a bean or an iconic piece of some kind. Those facilities require the support around it to make it work, though.

Motif: What do you need from the city to make that happen?

Thorne: Public art is very complicated. Even in museums, it's complicated. To raise funds for an installation, to hang work, even in a controlled environment, to handle and ship and insure and store and keep AC and lighting and security, there are a lot of moving pieces - and that's inside.

Any time you put something out in the public, even if it's a plaque or sign or garbage can, it creates an open canvas - an opportunity for people to take ownership, or not, or make comments. To date we've been very conservative in the nature of the work that we've chosen. Our goal is to show the city how art and design, when done properly, can ... create an opportunity for people to take ownership of an area, or to relate to an area they hadn't really noticed before. We want people to want to explore the city. [And we] want to build these avenues in ways that are sustainable - we don't want to ... build up and tear down each time.

Through the support of ambassadors like the Denbys and The Rauschenberg Foundation in New York City, and new funds being set up through the Rhode Island Foundation, we can look big picture.

There is a map in the "Influx" section of The Avenue Concept's website to guide you to installations: theavenueconcept.com/influx-2016. We asked Denby and Thorne for some of their favorites:

Thorne: Pentagon Helix by Kurt Snell, an RI artist, is at the corner of Empire and Fountain St (across from Trinity Brew Pub) and a bow-tie shaped piece made from rebar called "Insert Finger" is by RI artist Jerry Ehrlich (on Fountain St, west of Hasbro).

We have pedestals outside the Dean Hotel with tile work by local artists. That tile work tells a story in its own right, which is really fun and interesting. The figures on top of those pedestals are all made from local scrap metal by a local artist, Frank Barada, who works at The Steel Yard.

Where Lotus (an inverted cone of lumber by internationally known JaeHyo Lee) used to be (RI directions!) is now Cosmic Flower by Brower Hatcher. Take a flash photo of Cosmic Flower, because the whole sculpture is reflective and especially at night, if a car goes by, the whole thing lights up.

There's also a light sculpture in the middle of Kennedy Plaza. There are 15 trees in the center of the plaza that all have lights in the bases and they all change colors. We can pair it with music, we can make it go in different patterns. When the foliage comes out, the foliage lights up.

Motif: What about coming up?

Denby: There's going to be profusion of RIPTA buses with graphics on them - just wonderful, very intriguing, engaging paint jobs. That's coming soon.

We're also working on repainting crosswalks. There are some crosswalks that are particularly dangerous, with a higher chance of lethal accidents. If you paint them with something more dramatic, drivers are more likely to proceed through that area with caution.

Thorne: All of our plaques this coming summer will also be maps. You can walk up to any sculpture ...

and you'll know exactly where you are in the city and you'll see on the map where the next sculpture is, and hopefully that will encourage people ... to stroll through the city - get them further into the city.

We have a new mural that's going up (depending on weather, it may be there by the time you read this). An artist from Cambodia, Andrew Hem, is doing a brand new 50' mural. He's flying in this evening. It's a wall at 116 Orange St (check Instagram @avenuepvd) and it faces the 195 land.