

A Strategy for Integrating Public Art into Greenway Planning: A Look at the Design Competitions for the Canalside Bike Path in Turners Falls, Massachusetts

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Introduction

Too often the important aspect of art fails to be included into the planning for the linear corridors of greenways. With a focus on the needed work to create the physical corridor itself and make it a reality, the effort to include public art into the process often does not seem essential. Efforts to safeguard ecological networks are often readily recognized as an important integral part of the greenway planning process, where the inclusion of art is often considered to be nonessential. However, several greenway researchers (Lewis, 1964), (Dawson, 1994) speak to the value of including cultural factors in greenway planning. Birnbaum (1994) underscores the importance of the historic cultural heritage in the planning process. In Turners Falls the value of cultural resource planning through public art as a primary foundation for economic revitalization offers a model for other communities. Part of the Town of Montague, MA, the Village of Turners Falls is an extraordinary historic mill town that is blossoming from its industrial roots to become a hub not only of recreational adventure, through a canalside bike trail, but also artistic inspiration through new opportunities for public art. In Turners Falls, after a 20 year effort to actualize a canalside trail bike path in 2005 (Figure 1), the value of including art also became recognized as an integral feature of the path thanks in large measure to a new project called RiverCulture. This paper will focus on the interconnected success of this project, highlighting public art competitions which relate to the bike trail.

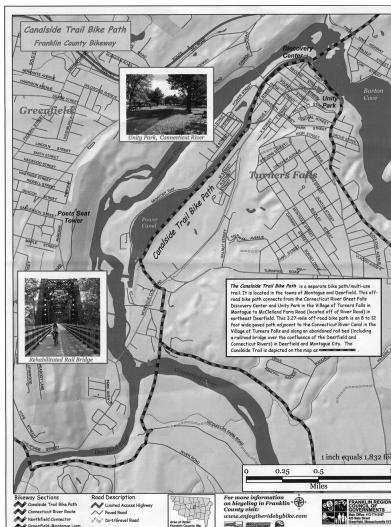


Figure 1. The Canalside Bike Path in Turners Falls, Massachusetts

The RiverCulture Project, a dynamic partnership of leaders from the Turners Falls arts, cultural and business communities joined together beginning in 2005 with state funding to promote and enhance the wide variety of cultural activities that has been helping this community realize a true renaissance. RiverCulture has been working to strengthen the creative and cultural industries in the Turners Falls area with a connection to the river. They believe that experiencing the arts and cultural activities significantly enhances quality of life and is a vital component to a healthy community. By highlighting the heritage and many local assets, they cultivate creative endeavors to engender a strong sense of place anchored to the linear corridor of the river and canal.

Background

In 2006 when a new project named “RiverCulture” began officially with funding from the John and Abigail Adams State Arts Program with \$42,500, new hope for the future of this struggling New England village came to life. RiverCulture, as a community and economic development organization designed to promote the Village as a cultural center by highlighting the importance of the Connecticut River through all stages of history, has fueled new energy into the community by generating a vision for an artful future. Among its many accomplishments to date this nonprofit organization has funded a part-time coordinator’s position, created an interactive website, produced a historic downtown walking tour map and a downtown attractions guide, and supported a diverse range of cultural activities attracting participation from community businesses and residents alike. Most importantly, this organization has galvanized the community in support of lively cultural events with impressive undertakings such as public art installations. After its inception the state chose the Village as the site for a workshop on the role of the creative economy in community downtown revitalization efforts called “How creative is your Downtown?” inspired by the process of Tom Borrup (Borrup, 2006). For this reason, the Village now has a newfound confidence in itself as a thriving cultural center. New restaurants, pubs, and a bakery have followed creating a spirited atmosphere.

Turners Falls, located along the Connecticut River, in the western part of Massachusetts is one of five villages that comprise the town of Montague. Native American tribes used to gather at the “great falls” to honor the bounty of the shad and salmon. Named after 17th century English colonist Captain William Turner and the “falls” along the Connecticut River, the village of Turners Falls was later founded in the 1860s as a planned industrial community. A canal that bypassed the falls was completed in 1867, and manufacturing facilities soon developed along this corridor, harnessing the water for power. Housing and commercial establishments for mill workers were then constructed within easy walking distance of the mills, with a continuance of small farms throughout the surrounding region. The arts played an important role in the history of the village and the community, with the Shea Theater and Colle Opera House occupying prominent places on the Main Street in the downtown. Turners Falls prospered through the 1940s, after which a loss of

manufacturing jobs created a cycle of disinvestment, blight and decline. The downtown area then became one of the most severe pockets of poverty in Western Massachusetts. According to the United States Census, median household income for the census block group incorporating the downtown was just \$17,538 in 2000, a dismal 35% of median household income for the state of Massachusetts according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Economic development efforts have been critical to increasing the quality of life for the residents. A revitalization effort to restore downtown Turners Falls began in the early 1980s. A success in 1982 resulted in the downtown designation as a National Register Historic District. In 1984 the historic streetscape with brick sidewalks and planters was restored. However, there was still a negative self-image connected with Turners Falls despite these improvements. Unlike nearby Northampton the economic recovery seemed to allude Turners. Plans to create a state Heritage Park in the town did not materialize.

Understanding Turners Falls' need for posted maps and information that visitors could easily access while touring through town, the idea of a public art program was born. Why not have several artists design and build interesting, sculptural art structures that could highlight history, culture and art while also providing a physical structure to post maps and information, thus eliminating the need for the standard, generic weather proof marquee. Lisa Davol assembled an impressive group of advisors and jurors including Hezzie Philips the Director of the Contemporary Artists Center in North Adams, Joseph Krupczynski the Chairperson of the Northampton Public Art Committee, James Florschutz a Vermont artist recommended by the board of the Brattleboro Museum of Art and Craft, town administrator Frank Abbondanzio as well as building inspector David Jensen, Northfield Mountain Director Bill Gabriel, and artists Jack Nelson and Chris Janke. A Call to Artists was sent out, bringing in a total of 12 detailed applications from artists throughout New England, including New York. Four local artists were selected and funded. The common link among all 4 works is their reference to the history and culture of the area. Two works directly on the bike trail will be described further.

Powertown

T. James Rourke interacted with town residents the most by assembling his project almost exclusively on location. Positioned by the bike path parking lot at the end of First Street, "Powertown" (Figure 2) is an art piece that pulls together Rourke's research on the town's industrial past as well as his own ancestral heritage working in the textile mills of Lowell Ireland. This is a very large, round and partially abstracted wheel. The upper portion is constructed of steel and made to mimic or echo the forms of the old water wheels used by the local factories along the canal to power their varied industries. The lower portion is constructed of bricks. Rourke chose this particular location because of his draw to the river. "The surrounding landscape and structures," explains Rourke "become materials to be explored so that we may gain a deeper understanding of the life of the past and possibilities for our individual and collective futures. The wheel is a universal symbol of man's

development over time and functions to visually draw a similarity between the recreational and mechanical uses of our earliest technology.” The stories and chatter from local residents as they walked by while Rourke was working were an added bonus and seem to be an integral part of the finished piece for him. A sense of time and a sense of the community are captured in this work.



Figure 2. Powertown by T. James Rourke on the Canalside Bike Path

Rock, Paper, Knife

Gary Orlinsky as an accomplished artist in the public art arena enjoys designing and constructing sculptures that deal with the relationship between nature and civilization. Orlinsky’s piece is situated along side the river on the bike path as well. Its exact location is by the parking lot that is closest to the Fish Viewing Facility. “Rock, Paper, Knife” (Figure 3) can be described as a structural collage. Using heavy beams and an arched top with a piece of copper sheeting and a small water wheel tucked into the underside of the arch this artwork beautifully mimics the massive structure and aesthetic appeal of the factory buildings that line the river canal. Housing three windows set in a column Orlinsky offers us a glimpse into the past and present of Turners Falls. Through the window closest to the bottom the viewer sees a collection of flat rounded stones Orlinsky found along the dry riverbed. Placed on edge each stone has a distinct physical and visual relationship to the stones beside it, through both their color and smooth texture. For the middle window Orlinsky visited Southworth Company, the one remaining factory in Turners Falls. It is here that a fine watercolor paper is manufactured. Orlinsky was intrigued with the beautiful deckled edges of the paper. Using small bundles, again set on their edges another relationship of like materials is born, not unlike the stones. For the top window Orlinsky used an old sepia toned photograph from the John Russell Cutlery factory, along with several bricks from the factory’s ruins. From the

photo stare the eyes of workers on an assembly line. The effect is both daunting and comforting. Orlinsky notes, "In some ways we are all here because of the river." Cultural memory is stirred by this piece.



Figure 3. Rock, Paper, Knife by Gary Orlinsky

Woven River

After these successful art installations RiverCulture has worked further with researchers from the University of Massachusetts to create an action plan for additional initiatives. One project initiated by a neighborhood for a troubled area up a hill from downtown and near the local schools has expanded the scope of work. RiverCulture ran another competition and selected a group of artists/landscape designers led by Sebastian Gutwein of Greenfield, to install his vision, entitled "Woven River," along a pedestrian pathway connecting the downtown section of Turners Falls to the upper hill section of the village. The installation completed in the fall of 2009 extends the canalside bike trail to the upland of the town where the elementary schools are located. Woven River which exposes some of the history of Turners Falls with its reincorporation of the past into the present weaves the elementary school population into the world of public art because this path is utilized by them so frequently. Stenciled on the sidewalk is a poem further deepening the experience. Each installation points to a hope and a lesson from Turners history useful in creating a vibrant future for Turners. "The history of Turners Falls revolves around the Connecticut River: No river, no town," Gutwein notes. As the Connecticut runs and is wearing through the rock beneath it, it is in a sense wearing through the past exposing it to the fresh light of today. People viewing the installation will gather, with their eyes, elements of Turners Falls past and carry it with them to their homes. With this view of present history, they will find the fertile foundations of Turners' future. Gutwein cultivates a deep fascination with the poetics

and politics of space and place. He utilizes his experience with conventional and organic farming, construction and stonework to help generate resilient and beautiful landscapes. The poetry incorporated in the project is by local Greenfield poet Maria Williams-Russell:

This is a village
We are woven bricks
Mudstone and fish
Train rails and intention
We are arrowhead and industry
Water flying over cliff
We are shad bush and oar
Artist and bridge
A village
A quiet cradle of churches
Chestnut and shoal
Lantern and flicker
We are sewn
Brothers and sisters
Soil, song and river

Youth Art Jam: In an effort to weave the teenage population into an engagement with public art, RiverCulture sponsored a weekend jam of rock bands while local artists worked with youth creating temporary sculptures utilizing recycled material in their work in September of 2009. Artists Jack Nelson and T. James Rourke were instrumental in constructing this program for teens in a sculpture park for youth near the bike trail. Resulting works include a “House of Records” created out of old vinyl records, as well as a gigantic pair of sneakers. This project not only weaves in a successful way of engaging teens, it also helps groom stewards for the future.



Figure 4. From the Art Jam a Temporary House of Records

An artful bike rack

The most recent design competition in 2009 called for a functional bike rack that would serve also as public art as well. Proposed in the cultural center of downtown in front of the renovated Colle Opera House serving as the Shea Theater and next to the new Gallery of the Hallmark Institute of Photography the bike rack will create an important extension to the canalside bike trail. It will invite connection between the canalside bike path and the downtown. The winning entry created by this researcher features the outline of two salmon. By placing the image of fish downtown awareness of their importance historically can be seeded. The fish-out-of-water theme is developed further by linking their images to Greek theater masks: Suggested are comedy and tragedy with smiles and frowns in the imagery. With the adjacent theater and nearby river as inspiration, this is a way to play with a theme of nature and culture. Where the earlier art installations emphasize the cultural history of the mills along the water, this work emphasizes more of the natural history amidst the cultural backdrop of its buildings. Installation is slated for the summer of 2010.

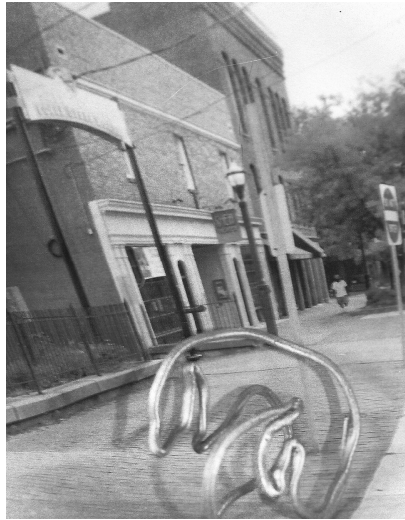


Figure 5. A Simulation of the Sculptural Bike Rack for Installation in Front of the Restored Colle Opera House, the Shea Theater, and the Gallery at the Hallmark Institute of Photography

Conclusion

RiverCulture is a model organization which has given birth to several new art initiatives that engage a sense of place and contribute to the sense of community with a focus along the river as a greenway. The article in the Boston Globe (Daley, 2007) promoting the opportunities in Turners Falls is one outcome of this new success of public art attracting tourists. A visitor impact study (Center for Policy Analysis, 2007) has documented that cultural events draw over 30,000 people per year and that in 2007, a total regional economic impact of \$785,399 was generated

as a result of such events. “Arts Bring in Dollars” demonstrates the power of harnessing creativity (Albertini, 2007).

By promoting public art along the canalside bike trail, it is interesting to see that the cultural history of the town is emphasized alongside nature there. And in the heart of the downtown where the cultural attractions flourish will now be a new artwork that speaks to the natural history of the area encouraging links to the bike trail. Other communities would benefit from this successful model of enriching the community through such a lively creative program for the arts calling awareness to the river interweaving art and nature into its greenway vision.

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