



Meet Virginia

Longevity and creativity make Arlington's public art collection notable

BY JON SPAYDE

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA, IS AN ANOMALOUS CITY—in fact, it's not a city at all. It's a county that acts like a city, with constituent communities—Rosslyn, Nauck, Shirlington, and others—that are neighborhoods rather than towns. It's home to our greatest military cemetery, but it lacks the major historic architecture and center-of-the-political-universe charisma of its neighbor across the Potomac.

What it does have is lots of high-quality public art, with a core of some 60 permanent pieces by artists like Ned Kahn and Richard Deutsch. (Deutsch once told a reporter that he considers Arlington to be “really at the top of the list along with San Francisco, Chicago, [and] San Jose” as a public art community.) Its public art program thrives because of its strong connections with government, private developers, and major artists locally and around the country, as well as a funding structure that emphasizes partnerships with the private sector over the use of public monies.

And then there's continuity: The director of Arlington Public Art (APA) has been at the helm since 1998, cultivating all of these

relationships and working to strengthen and consolidate a program that began in 1984. Angela Adams and her colleagues are also charged with keeping this well-established program growing conceptually and artistically, through a constant effort to give artists as much control over projects as possible while also finding ways to incorporate newer approaches like temporary installations, public-practice strategies, and site activation.

The initial impetus for public art in Arlington was a remarkable work commissioned in 1979 and completed in 1984, one that was at least partially prophetic of the way the county's relationship with art would evolve: Dark Star Park, by New Mexico-based artist Nancy Holt.

It's a green space whose central element is an arrangement of big spheres and rods. “Shadows” of the sculptural elements are inset into the ground. But there's only one day, hour, and minute all

The Still Point (2013) by J.J. McCracken was performed in Nancy Holt's Dark Star Park in Arlington, Va. The park was completed in 1984, the year Arlington Public Art began. It inspired the city to include artists on design teams.

year when the actual shadows and the constructed ones coincide: 9:32 am on August 1—the day, in 1860, when William Henry Ross acquired the land that became Rosslyn. Dark Star Day has become an annual local holiday, with crowds jamming the park to watch the shadow convergence.

The project began when a citizen volunteer on the county's planning commission decided that the Rosslyn neighborhood needed public art. An art-loving developer donated a portion of a property to the county as a park, and with the help of an NEA grant, Holt was hired to create the work for it.

"This was the era when artists were thinking about land and space in a very broad way," says Adams, "and Nancy said, 'Why don't you let me create the whole park?' What this tripped off was the idea of artists on design teams helping Arlington design, in an integrated way, other county facilities." It also set the precedent for Arlington Public Art's close relationship with developers.

The county's Public Art Policy (2000) and Public Art Master Plan (2004) laid out a unique funding structure for APA. In place of the traditional one-percent scheme, there's a dedicated public art fund. The county makes modest contributions to the fund, but the bulk of it comes from private developers, who have the choice of contributing to it as a part of the site-plan approval process, or of commissioning and funding public art on their own initiative, with the aid of APA. (Grants from local and national funders also contribute to individual projects or the fund.)

APA can then combine contributions from more than one developer to fund a more ambitious county-initiated project than they might be able to back otherwise—although the project must be in the same neighborhood/community as the contributing developers' projects.

Working closely with county planners, APA concentrates its commissioning in corridors where there's plenty of ongoing private development, like the high-rise Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, Columbia Pike in the southern part of the county, and the Jefferson Davis Highway (US 1) in the east.

For Adams, working closely with county planners and private developers in ways that integrate art and infrastructure has become second nature.

There can be occasional glitches, she says, such as when official lowest-bidder policies result in the choice of builders or contractors who aren't up to the standard of execution needed for projects. But on a daily basis, she adds, "we try to stay in dialogue with the other agencies in the county and with our local developers' association. We listen to them. It's a small enough community that you see the same faces again and again, and there are long-term relationships." It helps, too, that Arlington is a basically prosperous, well-educated community where public-private partnerships are well established in many areas and "planning is the basic lingua franca," she says.

Yet Adams and her team are striving for a major unmet goal, one that they see as keeping the program both fresh and true to its roots.



Photo by Hoeschelder-Davis Photography.

“We’ve yet to achieve again the benchmark that Nancy Holt set for us,” she says. “An artist being able to control the whole design of a project. The design lead is still usually a non-artist.”

Adams feels she’s come close to her artist-led ideal in a couple of completed projects. Artist Jesús Morales, for example, had a free hand in designing a portion of the plaza in front of the County Courthouse, the seat of Arlington’s government, giving it a primordial-feeling boulder-and-river treatment.

Her best hope for taking the ideal to the next level, however, lies in Arlington’s biggest upcoming project, dubbed Nauck Town Square. Arlington received an Our Town grant to do a major work in Nauck, a historically African-American neighborhood. At press time, APA was finalizing its contract with Berkeley-based Walter Hood, whose credentials as both an artist and a landscape architect recommended him as design lead.

“If we pull this off,” says Adams, “and I’m sure we will, it will basically be the first time since Nancy that we’ve found a way to get the artist at the top of the heap.”

Nauck Town Square is also going to be something of a laboratory for APA’s future. The program, focused on large permanent projects, has done temporary ones too, ranging from small sculptures to dance performances, but the Our Town venture presents opportunities for further engagement with newer, less object-oriented public art ideas.

“Despite the working title, we’re not sure yet if it will actually be a town square,” says Deirdre Ehlen, an APA project manager.

“What we know is that we have design money and outreach money and money for something temporary, some elementary expression that can somehow be integrated into the final product. We want community engagement to inform that elementary expression of what’s ahead.” A proposed renovation of Courthouse Square that will take years between the completion of planning and execution, she says, will also spark “small, artful site activations that remind people of what’s to come.”

These are all part of “many conversations we’ve had about how to integrate more social practice and community engagement,” says Aliza Schiff, another project manager and the third member of the APA team, “to make more room for that in what we do, while still dealing with the fact [that] our main emphasis is on improving the physical civic infrastructure of Arlington.”

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OPPOSITE: *Untitled* (2007), a suspended sculpture by Kendall Buster, consists of an intricate metal framework over which greenhouse shade cloth has been stretched. BELOW: *Echo* (2012) by Richard Deutsch provides a modern interpretation of Arlington’s significant contribution to the history of communication. The concave elliptical parabolas carved into each monolith reflect and project sound, allowing words spoken into one stone to be heard by listeners at the other.



Photo by Jesse Snyder.