How to Plan Public Art in the Public Realm

This walking tour brochure focuses on public art commissioned by private developers in the downtown core, from Union Station for Fort York neighbourhood. The majority of the works are privately owned, yet publicly accessible for the enjoyment of all.

The City of Toronto’s Official Plan includes several public art policies for private development and publicly owned lands. Recognized as an important aspect to city building, public art is a tool that reinforces planning objectives to improve the quality of the public realm. As the Official Plan states: “Public art has broad appeal and can contribute to the character and identity of a place by telling a story about the site’s history. It creates a landmark and celebrates the cultural diversity and creativity of our communities. A partnership between the public and private sectors is to be nurtured to transform Toronto into a large public gallery with installations throughout the City.”

Based in Urban Design, City Planning’s Percent for Public Art Program identifies public art opportunities in precedent and secondary plans, and urban design guidelines. Public Art is secured through development review and approval in official plan amendments and rezoning for major development proposals. On public lands, the City identifies public art opportunities in prominent capital initiatives. Since the program began in 1985 in the former City of Toronto, City Planning has secured millions of dollars in community benefits under the public art program.

City Planning identifies public art opportunities on both private and public lands, and oversees the approvals of the private developer public art program. The City’s Culture Division is responsible for public art on public lands. Developers who have committed to “on-site” public art produce public art plans that are reviewed by the City for approval. These plans identify the site opportunities, budget, schedule and method of art selection. The owners are assisted with input from city staff and the Toronto Public Art Commission (City Planning advisory panel). The commissioned art is always located in visually accessible areas of the development and is a public benefit for those who live, work and visit the area. In some cases, the developer commissions an artist as part of the design team for an open space, park, or part of the built form. Sometimes these parks are conveyed to the City and become publicly owned.

On the City Planning website, there are the Percent for Public Art Guidelines. In the summer of 2015, Urban Design created an online public art inventory, with over 200 public art installations. To learn more about the program, please see the following line public art inventory, with over 200 public art installations.
