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Public Art in High-Profile Projects

By Melody Finnemore

Both public and private owners are boosting funding for art as a way to focus attention on their projects, and to show appreciation to the community.

Public art has come a long way since Portland and Seattle initiated percent-for-art programs in the 1970s.

Recognized and respected as an essential part of the built environment, art is receiving more and more of the budget on public projects.

"A lot of the thinking about public art is that citizens deserve to have exposure to interesting art without having to buy a ticket," said Eloise Damrosch, executive director of Portland's Regional Arts & Culture Council. "In looking at the construction of new buildings, art is in keeping with good design and in making buildings more attractive to the public."



RACC initiated Portland's public art program in 1980 with signature projects such as the Portland Building, the Justice Center and the downtown transit mall. In early January, the Portland City Council voted to increase the amount each city bureau contributes to art from 1.33 percent to 2 percent for all projects with more than \$50,000 in public funding.

A trio of highly visible construction projects in Portland showcases a diverse array of public art. A streetscape improvement project along Northwest Third and Fourth avenues in the Old Town/Chinatown district incorporates sculptures and 20 large bronze plaques of lotus and other botanical themes.

The Portland Development Commission and the city's transportation bureau partnered with Nevue Ngan Associates and Suenn Ho to develop the plaques, which relate the history of the area and the many cultures that have left their mark on the neighborhood.

RCI Construction Group, Sumner, Wash. is scheduled to finish the \$5.35 million project early this summer.

Just west of the Old Town/Chinatown district, public art is helping revitalize West Burnside Avenue. A partnership between Civic Housing LLC of Portland, a subsidiary of Gerding/Edlen Development Co., and the Housing Authority of Portland will transform the rundown Civic Apartments into a mixed-use redevelopment designed to reenergize the area.

The design by SERA Architects of Portland calls for a 16-story tower housing 261 condominiums, 33,880-sq.-ft. of retail space and three levels of underground parking. A large pedestrian promenade will connect the tower to a six-story building with 140 affordable apartments owned and operated by the Housing Authority of Portland.

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General contractor Hoffman Construction Co. of Portland is scheduled to complete the \$95 million project in summer 2007.

Designed for LEED Silver certification, the project incorporates an ecoroof on the apartment building, a planted terrace on the tower's second floor and courtyard bioswales.

It also showcases regional and emerging artists by sharing space with rotating art exhibits in the nearby B Street Gallery. Artwork displayed in the Civic's showroom will explore the character of Portland's historic West Burnside Street.

Seattle's new Olympic Sculpture Park will transform the last undeveloped parcel of waterfront property from a former industrial site into a vibrant new greenspace for people to experience art. A team led by Sellen Construction of Seattle and Weiss/Manfredi Architects of New York will connect three parcels through "land bridges" that cross Elliott Avenue and the railroad tracks, providing safe access to the waterfront.

When the project is finished this fall, visitors will find a pavilion at the park's main entrance that houses flexible public event space, a café, underground parking and restrooms. An adjoining plaza and amphitheater will provide outdoor play space for children as well as a venue for movies and performances.

The park's gardens will comprise three native plant areas that represent Northwest landscapes. In addition, the park's artistic program and design will present permanent and rotating works, according to Seattle Art Museum spokeswoman Cara Egan.

Just north of Burnside, in the Pearl District, Gerding/Edlen has incorporated an exterior façade of cast art glass, created by Bullseye Glass Co. of Portland, as a major design element of The Casey, a 16-story building housing 61 condos.

Designed by GBD Architects of Portland and built by Hoffman Construction, the \$40 million project is scheduled for completion by August 2007. The quarter-block development, which incorporates solar panels and ground-source heat pumps, is the first condo tower in Portland designed for a LEED platinum

rating.

Mark Edlen, managing principal of Gerding/Edlen, said the company's determination to include public art in its projects is similar to its commitment to sustainable design.

"It's the right thing to do, and I really see the visual arts as a piece of the architecture that makes a building a more interesting place to work, live and visit," he added. "It's also an opportunity for us in the business community to integrate with the arts community through our buildings and public spaces and showcase the talent of Northwest artists."

Seattle's public art scene is vibrant as well. When the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center opens its 168,000-sq.-ft. Ambulatory Care Building in May, the public will see an ocean theme with Pacific Northwest Native American art.

Ruth Benfield, facilities administrator, said artwork is intended to inspire healing and positive mental attitudes throughout the hospital.

"We realize that the healing process for a patient must involve more than medicine and technology," Benfield said. "It is well documented that the environment can make a positive difference in a patient's recovery. We also believe it is important to utilize artists from the Northwest whenever possible, given our commitment and support from the residents of the Northwest."

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