

Just as Daviea Davis' "Neighborhood Mosaic" portrays the colorful vibrancy of many Pittsburgh neighborhoods, the new Temporary Public Art Project is expected to uncover the artistic inspiration at the heart of local communities. Ms. Davis and her assistant Rick Forman built the glass mosaic from salvaged materials and worked on it in collaboration with local students who ranged from pre-school children to high school teens.



Nathan J. Shaulis/Porter Loves Creative.



ART ON THE BLOCK

A NEW PUBLIC ART PROJECT IS SHOWING HOW THE ARTISTIC SPIRIT RUNS DEEP IN MANY PITTSBURGH NEIGHBORHOODS—NOT JUST THE TRENDY ONES. BY RENEE P. ALDRICH

“EVERY HUMAN IS AN ARTIST... HUMANS PERCEIVE LIFE AND TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF LIFE BY EXPRESSING WHAT WE PERCEIVE WITH WORDS, MUSIC, AND OTHER EXPRESSIONS OF ART.”

“The Circle of Fire: Inspirations and Guided Meditations for Living in Love and Happiness” by Don Miguel Ruiz

A new public art program in the Pittsburgh region will enable six local communities to develop temporary art projects that reflect their own unique legacies and artistic perspectives.

Coordinated by the nonprofit Neighborhood Allies and the Pittsburgh Office of Public Art, the Temporary Public Art Project is being piloted in the city neighborhoods of Homewood, Larimer, Hill District and Southern Hilltop, along with the boroughs of Wilkinsburg and Millvale. The program brings together community anchor organizations, residents and the artists jointly selected by the local groups to collaborate on art projects that, according to the initiative’s description, will allow the communities to “express what they perceive of life with words, music and/or other expressions of art.”

The intended outcome of the project, funded by The Heinz Endowments and the Hillman Family Foundation, is the production of a temporary art piece in each community that will become a lively focal point for residents and visitors, and accentuates the unique character of each area.

“It will serve as a way of celebrating the beauty, the potential, as well as the culture in each neighborhood,” said Terri Baltimore, director of community engagement at the Hill House Association in the Hill District.

“The public art project is premised on the basic assumption that culture lives in communities—it does not have to be brought to them,” said Janet Sarbaugh, the Endowments’ vice president of Creativity and the senior director of the Arts & Culture Program. “One of the goals of this project is to connect artists and residents to define and celebrate the unique characteristics of each neighborhood.”

Representatives from the six communities agreed that the program will provide them with the opportunity to present artistic beauty, culture and historical legacies within their neighborhoods.

“When one thinks about the legacy of art in the Hill District, you realize [culture] has always been there and has served as an integral part of who we are as a community,” said Ms. Baltimore. “A visit to the intersection of Centre Avenue and Dinwiddie Street will find a sculpture by Thad Mosley, ‘Phoenix Rising,’ and this is just one of the places where people are already gathering. What makes this effort different for the Hill District is that it is a part of a collection of neighborhoods who are doing this together, which in and of itself will call attention to the project.”

Tina Walker, president of the Millvale Community Development Corporation, described similar existing art attractions in her borough. They include the stained glass windows at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, and the church’s murals that are internationally known.

“Maksimilijan ‘Maxo’ Vanka created these, and people come from far and wide just to see them,” she said. “The Maxo Vanka murals are a reflection of how we perceive life, and were used to make social statements about war and other social situations of that time.”

Individuals with the different local groups also noted another common denominator among the communities: Each has experienced some degree of disinvestment but is working toward revitalization. The hope is that the new art pieces will give new life to an old building, create a centralized gathering place or make each neighborhood a destination location.

“At the same time, there is the potential for internal healing necessary because of destructive behaviors like drugs and crime, and external healing necessary because of turf wars that occur when one community has been at odds with another,” said Erin Perry, executive director of the Homewood-based Legacy Arts Project, which focuses on preserving the artistic traditions of Africa and the African Diaspora.

The Temporary Public Art Project’s advisory committee, made up of the community anchor organizations, conducted a series of meetings to talk about the project’s goals and objectives, discuss the call for artists’ submissions and determine project criteria. Eight artists from Pittsburgh and other parts of the country were selected this summer. Participants said the process was involving and arduous, but they all saw it as important.



THE ARTISTS

As part of the Temporary Public Art Project, eight artists have been selected by community-based committees to work in four Pittsburgh neighborhoods and two boroughs adjacent to the city. Representing different artistic disciplines, these individuals are collaborating with community organizations and residents to develop public art that has the potential to revitalize neighborhoods.

Seyed Alavi



Jennifer Chenoweth



◀ **James Simon**
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Mr. Simon is a sculptor and mosaic artist who is working with the Hilltop Men's Group in the city's Southern Hilltop neighborhoods. His "Welcome to Uptown" glass and tile mosaic, left, stands 25 feet tall and is just beyond the border of Downtown Pittsburgh.

Njaimeh Njie
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Ms. Njie is a multimedia producer who is working with the Hill House Association in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Daveia Davis, Jessica Rutherford and Shernise Allen
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Ms. Davis, a glass mosaic artist; Ms. Rutherford, a glass artist and jewelry designer; and Ms. Allen, a glass fusion artist, comprise the East End Art Team. They are working with the Legacy Arts Project in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood.

John Peña
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Mr. Peña is a multidisciplinary artist and illustrator working with the Larimer Consensus Group in the Larimer neighborhood.

◀ **Seyed Alavi**
Oakland, Calif.
Mr. Alavi is an interdisciplinary artist who is working in Millvale Borough with the Millvale Community Development Corporation, the Society to Preserve the Maxo Vanka Murals, and the Millvale Community Library. His "Room for Hope" sculpture, left, is in Sacramento, Calif., and outlines a house made of steel I-beams, with each of the four walls forming a letter in the word "hope." A live tree stands in the center of the structure.

◀ **Jennifer Chenoweth**
Austin, Texas
Ms. Chenoweth is a painter and sculptor who is working in Wilkinsburg Borough with the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corp. and the Community Art and Civic Design Commission. Her "Four Gates," left, has been displayed in several locations. It was inspired by a chapter in Mark Helprin's novel "The Winter's Tale" that described entering a city with different gates representing attitudes such as "devotion to beauty" and "selfless love."

"This process all by itself has been exciting and interesting," said Ms. Walker. "Usually people face meetings with dread, but I believe we all look forward to these get-togethers, or gatherings, because we are molding a piece of clay, one that will turn into something beautiful—but we don't even know what it is. In the meantime, we have a unified vision that fuels the effort to keep pushing towards our destination."

Ms. Baltimore agreed. "This is an exciting process because of the newness of operating within collaboration like this—the anchor organizations, the community, the artists we select and then the residents. The fact that we are all in discovery mode together, coming to the table with clean slates, adds a very special excitement to the process."

Ms. Perry added that, as an artist, she could relate to the way the project was unfolding.

"I find that the artist selection, in particular, is extremely important," she said. "Community engagement is heightened if residents see trusted, familiar faces at the table.

"Plus, this joint effort of bringing our neighborhoods together sheds light on our ability to bond, aids in getting past any tensions we may have faced before, and helps break down what separates us creating a greater focus on our commonalities."

The project also has the potential to be an ongoing force for enhancing their neighborhoods, representatives of the different organizations said. It could help improve public safety, support local businesses and empower residents to have a significant role in determining what comes into their communities. In addition, the project is designed to become a model that can be replicated in other underserved neighborhoods through the establishment of Placemaking Academies.

Mary Taylor, a former Placemaking Fellow at Neighborhood Allies and the primary writer of the Temporary Public Art proposal, explained that a Placemaking Academy will be part workshop, design studio and training session, and its purpose will be to train and coach artists and community-based organizations about the process of implementing a temporary public art project.

The academies, Taylor said, would be one way in which "all those who live, work and play in neighborhoods where there is limited capacity can be beneficiaries of what the art can bring—and not just those in communities that have the appearance of privilege." h