WE BUILT THAT

By Edith Adams and Edward Lebow, Director of Public Art, Phoenix Office of Arts & Culture
More than 50 years ago, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority pioneered the nation’s first “percent-for-art” program, meaning that a percentage of any new building’s development and construction had to be dedicated to public art. Since then, public art has grown from a fractional investment in urban beautification into a potent catalyst for improving the look, feel, and function of our communities.

With more than 350 percent-for-art programs nationwide, the field has advanced far beyond its roots in murals, memorials, and monuments—putting artists to work designing just about every kind of community essential from highway and pedestrian bridges, streets, parks, plazas, trails and bus shelters to mass transit stations and systems, airport terminals, recycling centers, schools, waterfronts, and more.

Public art does more than make distinctive places for our communities. It produces a wide range of jobs for American construction workers.
Yet artists aren’t the only ones being put to work. Placemaking, it turns out, produces jobs and employs the same wide range of construction workers and trades that build the infrastructure of our cities and towns. Phoenix, AZ has discovered that the investment in public art—often overlooked in arts-related economic impact studies—can provide a significant boost to local businesses.

Over the past seven years, the City’s Public Art Program has tracked the flow of art funds into the economy and found more than 80 percent of the $31 million the city invested in 75 projects went toward local contractors and project management. That investment supported more than 1,300 design and construction jobs—architects, landscape architects, civil and structural engineers, masons, truckers, carpenters, cement workers, terrazzo specialists, painters, electricians, and a wide range of steel-working fabricators.

For some small construction and specialty fabrication firms facing the tough economy of recent years, public art meant the difference between staying afloat and having to cut jobs or worse. “There’s no question that public art enabled us to survive the recession,” said Bruce Thornham, vice president of Advance Terrazzo, a Phoenix firm that produced five artist-designed terrazzo floors for the stations and pedestrian bridges at the recently opened PHX Sky Train, which links the region’s light rail system to a major terminal and parking area at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. “Almost all of the private work for commercial buildings had stopped.”

Instead of having to lay off crews, said Thornham, his company had to hire 15 new workers to produce the Sky Train floors and pedestrian bridges. Each of the floors, covering about 11,000 square feet, involved up to 25 workers and thousands of hours of specialized, often meticulous, labor.

Across town, Magnum Companies, a Phoenix metal fabrication firm, clocked 839 hours of shop time to create a series of shade structures that artist Mary Lucking designed for two new Phoenix transit facilities. The company’s skilled force of metal shapers, cutters, and assemblers joined the ranks of truckers, cement workers, painters, electricians, and engineers who formed the full team of talent involved in building and installing the works. Magnum put another 702 hours of shop work into the fabrication and installation of a sculpture for a new addition to the Arizona Science Center in downtown Phoenix.

The Blue Line Light Rail Extension, scheduled to open in 2017, will draw on a $4.9 million art budget to incorporate the work of 16 artists at 11 light rail stations and along the alignment on walls, elevators, bike parking, and more. 3rd St Station, canopies, seating, and paving designs by Jody Pinto. Photo by JoAnn Sieburg Baker.
The most dramatic example of the diverse work force needed to build art into new city infrastructure is also the most visible. The design, engineering, fabrication, and installation in 2009 of *Her Secret is Patience*, the landmark sculpture that Janet Echelman conceived as a centerpiece for Phoenix’s new Downtown Civic Space Park, involved close to 150 workers from 25 different design and construction areas—engineers, architects, cablers, machinists, drillers, rebar installers, lighting designers, steelers, and more. The steel work alone required about 4,000 hours of labor. Engineers spent 400–500 hours designing the steel armature supporting the sculpture. The design and fabrication of the sculptural net involved more than 1,000 hours of skilled labor.

These numbers underscore a fact often overlooked in our highly automated age: we still build our art, cities, and infrastructure by hand. The involvement of workers in every touch and step of that is something Greg Brockman, president of Magnum Companies, sees as one of the deeper values of producing public art. “When we finish these projects, they become flagships for the company,” he said. “For our workers, they become a huge source of pride.” On most other production projects, said Brockman, the firm’s workers are often making only parts for things they won’t see whole. “But public art is tangible,” he said. “When it’s done, they can take their families to see it and say, ‘We built that.’”

**QUICK LOOK**

**Honoring Wendy Feuer**

- **2013 Public Art Network Award**
  During our Public Art Network Preconference, June 13–14, we honored Assistant Commissioner for Urban Design & Art for the New York City Department of Transportation Wendy Feuer, a 30-year leader of public art in transportation projects and policy.

- Feuer was also the founding director of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Arts for Transit office and served as Director of Art and Design and developed permanent and temporary visual and performing art programs for the subway and commuter rail systems including 600 stations serving 5 million users daily.


- For more information on public art at Americans for the Arts, visit [www.AmericansForTheArts.org/PAN](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/PAN) or contact Public Art Program Manager Liesel Fenner at [lfenner@artsusa.org](mailto:lfenner@artsusa.org).

---


www.AmericansForTheArts.org