

Public Art & RAC: A Historical Primer

This report examines the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis' (RAC) history with public art since its founding in 1985. The historical summary was developed through document analysis and interviews with more than 20 key organizational and arts and culture sector stakeholders.

Within the region, there has been great interest in and passion for public art. That passion has been curtailed by a few key factors, namely a context of cultural and political conservatism that has often viewed public art as risky and contentious, regional fracturing that has kept efforts disconnected, the influence of politicians, the prioritization of localized efforts over regional collaboration, limited institutional capacities and the lack of a regional comprehensive public art strategy.

Because RAC's primary focus has been on providing funding to arts and culture institutions and later to artists, it has been limited in its capacity to develop public art in the Region but has still made significant contributions. RAC has been involved in community planning for public art, the creation of the Arts in Transit program, integrating public art into the development of City and/or federally-owned buildings, funding public art projects, the 2011 public art ordinance, supporting the development of 2015 public art guidelines for the City of St. Louis and the development of the 2017 Downtown STL Public Art Initiative.

In 1995, RAC's founding director Jill McGuire proposed a percent for art ordinance to the city council in 1995. The effort gleaned mild public support, yet could not overcome the existing cultural anxieties and associated political impasse around public art at the time. Then in 2011, Ordinance #68793 pertaining to public art successfully passed through sponsorship by Alderman Antonio D. French. The Ordinance requires RAC to oversee a newly-developed Public Art Trust Fund for the City of St. Louis and the airport, formally approve and accept art gifts on the City's behalf, and provide a series of recommendations regarding budget, process, selection, and deaccession of public art. Additionally, the Ordinance outlined that the Public Art Trust was to be funded by requiring Art-Qualified public projects to include 1% of their budget to go towards the fund. It further stipulates the 1% funding would be divided into three categories, with half going to the development site, a quarter to neighborhood projects, and the final quarter towards art maintenance. The Ordinance also required that by 2012 the Commission provide a ward-by-ward survey of existing public art in St. Louis, and that neighborhood artwork projects be focused in wards with lower than average amounts of public art.

Though successful in formalizing a public art effort within St. Louis, RAC saw little change in proceedings following the Ordinance's approval. Challenges of the Ordinance include minimal execution of the Ordinance and its requirements, the copious restrictions embedded within the Ordinance, obsolete funding in the Public Art Trust Fund, lack of funding and focus around maintenance of public art and the lack of a central steward of the Ordinance. A positive impact of the Ordinance is that designated coordination efforts have ensued between RAC and the Board of Public Service and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry.

In the almost three decades since this first effort, RAC has made meaningful attempts to develop the city's public art infrastructure—including efforts for legislation, processes development, private-public partnerships, and temporary public art pilot programs—yet has not received the support necessary to realize a robust regional practice of growing public art. Most parties in our study have desired better coordination around and funding for public art in the region, and have been disappointed by how long St. Louis has faced an uphill battle building robust support for public art. There has been a continued desire to improve the public art infrastructure and resources to match the potential and enthusiasm within the region.

