

## Public Art and Design in Transit

### Overview

Over the past 20 years, a trend has emerged of incorporating public art into transit operations. Cities and transportation agencies are coming to understand the many benefits of public art, which range from increased ridership through improved aesthetics and increased vibrancy, to improving relationships with the community. Funding challenges can be overcome by establishing public art policies based on contributing a certain percentage of capital projects budgets to public art. Including artists in construction project teams from the outset enables design to be incorporated in the functioning of the transit system and maximizes the opportunity for creativity and art in transit.

### Selected Resources

Sound Transit Public Art Policy (Seattle)  
<http://www.soundtransit.org/documents/html/board/resolutions/html/Reso98-01.html>

Main Street Public Art Plan (Vancouver/TransLink)

Calgary Public Art Policy  
[http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/recreation/public\\_art/public\\_art\\_policy.pdf](http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/recreation/public_art/public_art_policy.pdf)

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*Art on Main* brought Afghan wrapped buses and sandwich board art installations to a busy transit corridor in Vancouver.

*Image source: Instant Coffee Artist Collective*

### Context

Over the last two decades, the climate for public art has changed dramatically. Cities have begun to invest in strategies which bring art and creativity to the forefront of their identity and public art is being included in many projects.

Incorporating art and design into public transportation projects is not entirely new in Canada. For example, public art has been an important part of Montreal's Metro system since its inception in the early 1960s. The last few years, however, have seen a dramatic increase in public art and design elements in transportation projects across North America. The following cases illustrate the diverse opportunities to incorporate art and design in transit projects: Sound Transit's STart program in the greater Seattle region; TransLink and the City of Vancouver's 88 BLOCKS Art on Main project; and the City of Calgary's 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue Refurbishment.

## Policy context

There are a variety of policy angles that support the inclusion of public art in transit projects. Most of these policies are ultimately aimed at increasing ridership in order to decrease greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Additional policy goals include:

- improving rider experience;
- improving connection with the community; and
- enhancing an agency's identity.

**Seattle:** Sound Transit, the Central Puget Sound region's transit authority, established a one-percent for art policy in 1998, which requires 1% of the capital costs, excluding tunnelling, of all major construction projects to be devoted to public art. Sound Transit's policy is in keeping with several of the region's municipal percent-for-art ordinances (the City of Seattle and King County were the first local governments in North America to adopt such a policy in 1973). In addition, the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) has developed a Public Art Master Plan for the City's entire transportation system.

**Vancouver:** The 88 BLOCKS – Art on Main project was a component of the larger Main Street Transit and Pedestrian Improvement Project, which was one of Transport Canada's 'Urban Transportation Showcase' projects. The public art element, which included the Main Street Art Plan, was a pilot project at TransLink, the regional transportation agency, which currently does not have a public art policy. The City of Vancouver, a partner in the project, already has a public art policy whereby all private sector zoning changes greater than 100,000 square feet are required to contribute \$1.81 per buildable foot.

**Calgary:** City of Calgary's Public Art Policy has made public art and design integral to Transit Calgary's refurbishment of the busy 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue transit mall. This policy was adopted in 2004 and sets aside 1% of the total capital costs for City of Calgary projects over \$1 million. Eligible capital projects include all upgrade and growth budget items over \$1 million. Public art also plays an

integral role in many other City initiatives and plans.



“SWARM” by Stuart Keeler in Calgary's 6<sup>th</sup> Street Station  
*Source: Calgary Transit*

## Rationale and objectives

As transportation authorities seek new and innovative approaches to getting people out of their cars and into transit, the recognition of the need to create a more inviting public transit environment has led to including public art in transit projects in North America. In the United States (US), federal policy set out in 1995 by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) encourages including art and quality design in mass transit projects in order to “improve the appearance and safety of a facility, give vibrancy to public spaces, and make patrons feel welcome”<sup>1</sup>. The FTA's policy and related publications encouraging art in transit have been a major catalyst in the development of public art programs within transit agencies across the US, and the leveraging of funds for art.

For local and regional transit agencies, including public art and design considerations in projects can:

- provide an attractive environment for business and the public;
- increase public safety;
- add vibrancy to streets, stations and vehicles;
- improve passenger travel experience;

<sup>1</sup> Federal Transit Administration, Design and Art in Transit Projects,  
[http://www.fta.dot.gov/laws/circulars/leg\\_reg\\_4129.html](http://www.fta.dot.gov/laws/circulars/leg_reg_4129.html)

- highlight local culture and heritage; and
- offer an expression of the city's and transit agency's identity.

**Seattle:** Sound Transit’s public art policy primarily aims to contribute to a positive experience for system users and communities affected by transit developments. At Sound Transit, public art is seen to help make patrons feel welcome by improving the appearance and safety of transit facilities through enhanced lighting and aesthetics. In addition, some of the artwork in Sound Transit’s Express bus system also contributes to how the transit system functions. For example, different types of artistic paving materials are used to warn vehicles and pedestrians to be attentive to shared space.

**Vancouver:** The 88 Block - Art on Main project was primarily focused on making Main Street more welcoming for pedestrians and transit users, with the ultimate goal to reduce GHG emissions by increasing ridership. One of TransLink’s overarching goals is to provide pedestrians, cyclists and transit users with a safer, more enjoyable, higher quality built environment to encourage the use of transit and active transportation.

**Calgary:** At the City of Calgary, public art is recognized as an integral component of creating a more vital, liveable and healthy city, and is considered essential to Calgary’s development as a creative city. In addition to creating an engaging aesthetic in the city, including public art in capital projects is also seen as creating art that is freely accessible to all, enhancing the experiential nature of the city, contributing to the City’s diverse cultural character and heritage, playing a role in attracting creative businesses and workers, and encouraging the development of a culturally informed public.

## Actions

**Seattle:** Since its inception, the Board of Sound Transit has been committed to the integration of public art in the region’s transit system. Staff was directed to develop a master plan for art, establish

an art advisory group, and prepare a resolution for the adoption of an art budget, which ultimately became the ‘one-percent for art’ policy.

Artists and designers are included in the development of every capital project at Sound Transit from the outset to bring “an artist’s perspective to what is mainly an engineering and architectural domain.”<sup>2</sup> Sound Transit also has an artist residency program which allows artists to gain a better understanding some of the challenges of transit provision and given an opportunity to come up with creative solutions to some of those challenges.

Early in the program’s development, a *STart* Public Art Advisory Task Force of representatives from each regional jurisdiction and was formed to ensure that the program represented the interests of the entire region. The Task Force works to shape the program’s master plan for art. Throughout the planning effort and in the implementation of projects, affected communities are also directly involved in deciding the locations and types of art that would be appropriate in their communities and in selecting artists to execute the artwork.



“Somewhere between here are there” temporary construction wall artwork by Evan Blackwell for *STart*  
Image source: Sound Transit

Recent artworks include installations throughout the Sound Transit *Link* light rail system, *Regional Express* bus system (in transit centers, park-and-

<sup>2</sup> Sound Transit, <http://www.soundtransit.org/Projects-Home/STart-Public-Art-Program.xml>

ride lots, high-occupancy vehicle access ramps, overpasses and walkways), and at *Sounder* commuter rail stations. In addition, the *STart* program includes temporary installations such as artwork at construction sites in impacted neighbourhoods.

**Vancouver:** To complement the general streetscape improvements in the Main Street Showcase, the public art initiative, 88 Block - Art on Main, comprises a series of four art exhibits over three years installed on the buses and along Main Street, one of Metro Vancouver's most heavily used transit corridors.

A public art consultant was commissioned to produce a public art plan "Art on Main" which defined the process and identified the art opportunities along Main Street. A selection panel of art professionals then identified suitable artists and invited proposals. An artist collective, called Instant Coffee, was contracted for the first exhibit, which ran from January to April 2009. Works on the street have included a series of colourful sandwich boards permanently installed on the sidewalk and a temporary full spectrum light therapy bus shelter. Three buses were deployed on the route with artworks: a temporary bus wrap in a collage of afghan designs, a graphic piece on the outside of a bus, and 20 art pieces in place of a bus' interior ads. Two more exhibits by individual artists and a group show will follow.



"Light Bar" bus shelter by artist collective *Instant Coffee*  
Image source: *Instant Coffee*

**Calgary:** In 2004, Calgary Transit and several other City of Calgary departments commissioned a design team to develop a comprehensive urban design plan for 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in response to functional, capacity and aesthetic issues along this busy transit corridor. Public art has been integrated into some CTrain stations as part of the *7<sup>th</sup> Avenue Refurbishment* project, in keeping with the City's percent for Public Art Policy.

Calgary's Public Art Policy recommends that artists collaborate with architects, engineers and designers wherever possible during the early stages of infrastructure design to identify opportunities for public art in the overall design. Collaboration with stakeholders, including the local business, community associations, and the City's Public Art Board has also been a key component of the City's public art initiative.

## Results

Because of the subjective nature of art and design and the difficulty in isolating the cause and effect of changes in ridership and rider satisfaction, transit agencies do not tend to monitor and evaluate public art programs quantitatively. That said, public and political response to improving transit aesthetic has been positive and including art in transit has been deemed a success overall by those involved.

**Seattle:** Positive feedback from the public and elected officials shows that including public art in transit in Seattle has been a success since Sound Transit's inception in 1997. The *STart* program has involved over 85 artists in over 100 permanent and 60 temporary works, with many more art projects planned for the future.

*STart* has also won awards in the region for its work. The public art collection for the *Tacoma Link* light rail line received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Tacoma Arts Commission and was named the American Institute of Architects Project of the Month for April 2006. The *STart* program has also been honoured in four different years by the American for the Arts' Public Art Network for having one of the best

projects of the year. In addition to the intended objectives of the program (such as improving the appearance and safety of transit facilities), Sound Transit reports that the *STart* program has been an important means of helping patrons feel welcome and enhancing linkages with the community.

With the further expansion of the region's transit system, the *STart* program will be continued; however, the Sound Transit Board has yet to establish the policy for the level of calculation for the art program as it applies to the second phase of expansion.



"Landscape Memories" by Fernanda D'Agostina at Union Station on the Tacoma Link.  
*Image source: Sound Transit*

**Vancouver:** Although the Main Street Showcase project did include monitoring and evaluation, specific feedback on the 88 BLOCKS - Art on Main project was not included so it is difficult to single out the public art's effect on ridership or rider satisfaction. Some of the rider and resident satisfaction survey results speak to support for the aesthetic improvements along the bus line. For instance, the larger Showcase project had a substantial positive impact on perceptions of the overall pedestrian environment, with the largest improvement in 'visual appeal and attractiveness of walking area'. In addition, almost half of riders and residents polled in an evaluation survey reported that the renewed transit and pedestrian environment makes them more likely to take transit. Over 90% of respondents also supported implementing similar measures in other areas. Concerns about the project by residents and

riders related mostly to the cost of the improvements and to the effect of new bus stop design on traffic flow (the project also included new bus bulges at several locations along Main Street).

**Calgary:** Support for the inclusion of public art in capital projects in Calgary has been strong politically, publically, and within City Departments. There have been 10 projects installed by the City's Transportation Department and many more are planned. Calgary Transit has installed public art at several transit stations along the 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue transit mall, with more public art planned for many of the remaining stations on the line.

According to the City of Calgary, the value of public art is much more than an "assessment of completed works, but must include its impact as a significant economic driver, its collaborative and complementary value as a component of public spaces, and its social value as a means through which to express, reflect and enjoy [the] city."<sup>3</sup>



Arrival Time – Departure Time by Living Lenses in Calgary's 7<sup>th</sup> Street Station  
*Image Source: Calgary Transit*

## Challenges

Some of the challenges faced in developing and incorporating public art in transit facilities include:

<sup>3</sup> City of Calgary Corporate Art Policy: [http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/recreation/public\\_art/public\\_art\\_policy.pdf](http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/recreation/public_art/public_art_policy.pdf)

- **Interagency project management:** The inter-departmental and inter-jurisdictional nature of including art in transit can create challenges for program implementation. The materials and processes involved in an art installation must comply with safety and operational standards of transit operators and the City and be coordinated throughout project construction. Unless this has been considered from early on, delays and increased costs are a likely outcome.
- **Reduced budgets:** In times of funding shortfall for transit, the incorporation of art and design can become uncertain. Because art is secondary to the core business of a transit system, it can be seen as superfluous and an easy choice for budget cuts. Even with “percent for art” policies, the percentage allotted to public art is susceptible to cuts in tough times. This is where a policy which secures the art budget at the point of capital budge approval is important. Leveraging funding from a number project partners reduces the cost to an agency which is attractive in lean financial times.
- **Opposition to artwork:** Because of the subjective nature of art and the public role it plays in transit, there can be opposition from businesses and the community over the artworks. Thought provoking art can upset some members of the community. However, most public art professionals believe that art is meant to engage and challenge people. It is therefore important to have an expert curator select quality art.

## Best Practices

- **Secure sustained funding:** Like any long-term project, including public art in transit projects requires steady funding. The “percent for art” policies that some local governments and transportation agencies in North America have adopted are a valuable approach to ensure that art and creativity features in our cities. This funding model is successful because it does not add to the project budget, but simply allocates a percent from the existing capital project budget

to public art. However, it is still important to secure the art budget with the capital budget approval. While “one percent for art” policies have mainly been adopted in major cities, the straightforwardness of these policies make it transferable to any smaller centres.

- **Plan for maintenance:** A maintenance plan for the installations should be included from the outset of any public art program. In Seattle, 10% of the public art budget is set aside for maintenance, including labour and materials. In addition, throughout the design and installation of artwork, detailed records are kept about the materials and procedures used in the creation of the artwork to ensure that maintenance is undertaken in the correct manner.



“Shift” by Claudia Fitch helps identify a hidden transit centre, while the paving patterns below communicates warnings to drivers and pedestrians.

*Image source: Sound Transit*

- **Include artists early:** It is important that art and design are integrated into transit projects from the outset in order to allow for increased artistic possibilities and overall cost effectiveness. Concerns regarding safety, operations, maintenance, vandalism, and pedestrian flow often preclude the inclusion of art and design in construction projects. Therefore allowing artists to participate in the design of transit facilities and public spaces

maximizes the opportunities for integrating art into construction. Also, the infrastructure required to support the artwork can be installed at little or no extra cost if it is anticipated during design.

- **Public art should reflect the local community:** Artworks should reflect their surroundings, or celebrate the local history, culture. Keeping the local context in mind is important because public art must resonate with the community in order to meet the many objectives related to increasing ridership and rider satisfaction. Successful public art becomes a landmark or focal point in a neighbourhood and can support community dialogue and reflection.
- **Collaborate with the community:** Collaboration with the businesses and communities affected by transit development is key to a successful public art project. When communities are included in the process, they become invested in the success of a project and will work toward implementing rather than opposing it. Through increased involvement in the process, the community can also develop a sense of ownership and pride in the project that can lead to partnerships for maintaining the project.
- **Use a Professional Curator:** While it is important that local stakeholders and communities have input into the public art in their communities, having a professional curator select and administer the public art project can help ensure that the artwork is of the highest standard.

## Resources

**Seattle:** Sound Transit's *STart* is an \$18 million program that does not add to the agency's capital budget. The program is funded entirely through the agency's "percent for art" policy. Funds are pooled to allow for more flexibility. Program administration is also funded from the 1% allocation and there are currently two full time employees working on the initiative. In addition, the artwork's maintenance is also included within

this 1% allocation, with approximately 10% of the art project's budget pooled for future upkeep. The *STart* budget was set 11 years ago and was based on the projected cost of above-ground construction of the region's light rail and express bus systems.

**Vancouver:** The *88 Blocks - Art on Main* project was a partnership between Transport Canada, TransLink and the City of Vancouver. The budget for *88 Blocks - Art on Main* was \$220,000 for four exhibits and a public art consultant who prepared the art plan, liaises with artists, and oversees project installation and documentation. Planning staff from TransLink, and Vancouver's Public Art Program helped co-manage the project as well.

**Calgary:** The public art component of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Avenue Refurbishment* is a collaborative initiative by the City's Public Art Program and Department of Transportation. The cost of the first two artworks installed was \$89,000 and more artworks are planned. The artwork is funded by the City's "one percent for public art" initiative, which applies to all City of Calgary capital budget projects over \$1 million. The funding supports: implementing the policy; planning, designing, fabricating, installing and purchasing public art; managing, administering, and programming the Public Art Collection; and maintenance and conservation.

## Lessons Learned

The following lessons were provided by staff from Sound Transit, TransLink, and the City of Calgary.

- **Stakeholders on board:** Public art by its very nature involves the community. It is therefore fundamental to include all stakeholders in the process of public art installation from the inception of the project. Local businesses and communities as well as elected officials should have input into where and what public art is installed.
- **Inter-departmental collaboration:** Ensure that inter-departmental collaboration occurs early on so relationship and trust is built.

Technician and artists must be included from the outset to minimize later conflict.

- **Define roles and responsibilities:** Identify the roles and responsibilities of each agency involved in operations and maintenance early in the planning process. Failure to clarify roles and responsibilities will slow the process and add to costs.
- **Communication is key:** Engaging the community and local media at project outset is key. The public generally supports art and design improvements in transit, but providing rationale for the investments can reduce potential opposition and build additional support.



A TransLink bus is covered in an afghan blanket image.  
Image source: TranLink.

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