

Animating Infrastructure

Weaving Art Into Everyday Life



Photo courtesy of Vermont Arts Council

Vermont Arts Council

Mission: To advance and preserve the arts at the center of Vermont communities.

History: Since 1965, the Vermont Arts Council has been the state's primary provider of funding, advocacy, and information for the arts in Vermont. The Vermont Arts Council is the only designated state arts agency in the U.S. that is also an independent, nonprofit membership organization.

What they do: The Arts Council envisions a Vermont where everyone in the state has access to the arts and creativity in their life, education, and community. Through its programs and services, the Council strives to increase public awareness of the positive role artists and arts organizations play in communities and to maximize opportunities for everyone to experience the arts.

Overview

The public spaces in our towns connect us to one another. It is on the sidewalk, at the post office and on the green where we connect with our neighbors. Repeated interactions turn strangers into friends and help build community. Placemaking is a hands-on approach where people collectively reimagine and reinvent those public spaces which are the heart of every community. Creative placemaking brings art and visual excitement into the realm of everyday life. Community members join with the private, public, and non-profit sectors to transform the physical and social character of a place. Residents take authority and ownership of the physical spaces in their community to create the amenities they need and desire. Weaving art into public spaces has many benefits. Art brings people together across differences, prompts conversation, creates spaces for people to gather and reboots the local economy. Infrastructure doesn't have to be boring or ugly, it can be a source of pride and part of the foundation for what makes a community unique.

The Animating Infrastructure Grant through the [Vermont Arts Council](https://www.vermontartscouncil.org) infuses art into the everyday make up of a community. Art and placemaking efforts can help communities reach their goals of economic vitality, community vibrancy, safety, livability and walkability. The grant takes the innovative approach of infusing art into the blueprint of the physical structures that make up a town, combining art with the day-to-day functions of a community.

For more information, please contact:

Michele Bailey m Bailey@vermontartscouncil.org or 802.828.3294

Website: <http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/grants-and-services/organizations/animating-infrastructure>



Public Art Projects Improve Three Communities

How the Grant Began

In 2008, the Vermont Arts Council connected with philanthropist Lyman Orton and the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) to create “The Art of Action: Shaping Vermont’s Future Through Art.” The project commissioned artists to talk to Vermonters and think creatively about issues Vermont would be facing in the next 10 – 50 years. Artists were challenged to create artwork that would reflect what they heard and broaden the conversation beyond the written and spoken word. The works of art were toured around the state and then sold at auction. The money raised launched the “Animating Infrastructure” grant program and funded the first round of projects.

In 2015, the first year of the program, the Arts Council received 43 proposals. Three projects were funded at roughly \$15,000 each. The goal of the art was to activate public spaces, foster partnerships and strengthen relationships while connecting people to the history and unique stories of the community.



Photo by Justin Marsh

“When you invest in beauty, aesthetics and people; they value their town more, and their individual place within it. This leads to safer communities and tighter relationships amongst neighbors.”

-Michele Bailey, Senior Program Manager, Vermont Arts Council

Cambridge

The [Cambridge Arts Council](#) wanted to focus on improving two unused silos on town land at a busy roundabout in Jeffersonville. The “Silo Sisters”, a sub-group of the Cambridge Arts Council, led the project into action. Twelve artists applied and the top three finalists had their proposals distributed to the entire community. Community members reviewed the plans, met the artists, and chose their favorite. New York based artist, [Sarah C. Rutherford](#), was chosen as the finalist.

Initially some people had negative reactions to the project proposal, the artist selection, and the funding of public art. Rutherford and members of the Cambridge Arts Council engaged the community in the design process through dozens of community interviews and refined the designs to reflect the story the community wanted to see. The designs were unanimously approved by those attending the Village of Jeffersonville Annual Meeting. At the unveiling one resident commented “You have no idea the impact that this has had on the community.” The town has now embraced the murals as a positive asset; something that makes Jeffersonville truly unique, attracting hundreds of visitors. The murals have transformed the silos from an eyesore to a beautiful source of pride for the community.

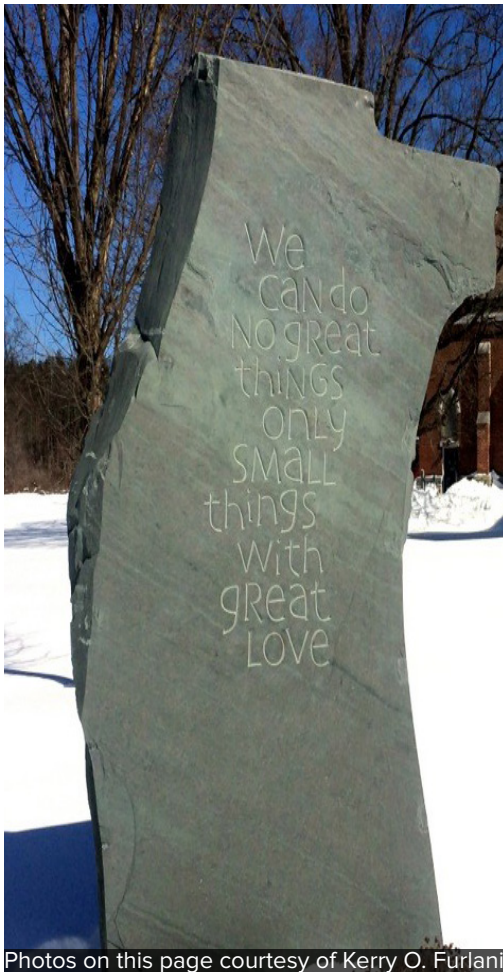
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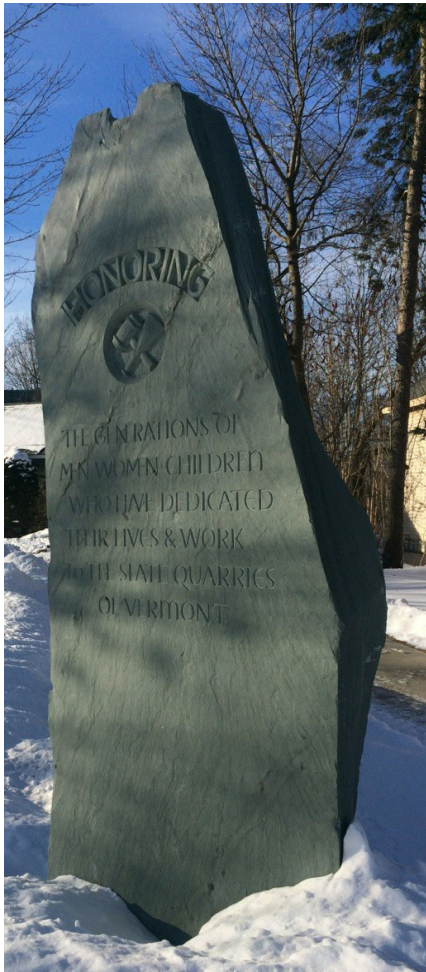
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The [Poultney Historic Society](#), and sculptor [Kerry O. Furlani](#) partnered to create “The Silent Friend Slate Project.” Two massive slate sculptures stand at the main intersection into Poultney, a visual reminder of the rich history of slate production which shaped the town. The 8-foot tall stones function as a gateway to the Slate Valley and to the town. One stone, on the town green, features an inscription and relief carving that honors the Vermont slate industry and workers. The second stone, on St. Raphael’s church property, features a poetic inscription that elevates the spirit of the community, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.” Furlani carved the stones on site allowing residents the opportunity to learn more about the process and watch the pieces come to life.

From the outset the project had the full support of the town manager and select board, but just before installation a few residents became concerned about the planned locations for the sculptures. A subcommittee of stakeholder groups was formed to find a solution. Eventually, a compromise was reached and new locations were identified that were slightly different than originally planned. Community engagement in the planning process for public art is an important element in fostering meaningful dialogue and developing a shared vision.



Photos on this page courtesy of Kerry O. Furlani



“Carving these inscriptions in downtown Poultney was one of the most rewarding and enriching aspects of this project. I had no idea how many residents would show up and visit me as I worked. It was quiet at first, but as the work progressed, so did the number of residents who appeared at my side. They were animated and curious, eager to share the colorful stories of their family members who had worked in the surrounding slate quarries.”

- Kerry O. Furlani, Sculptor

Morrisville

The [Town of Morrisville](#), [RiverArts VT](#), and [Morristown Alliance for Culture and Commerce](#), collaborated to create the Sculptural Trees Project. The grant supported a year-long planning and design process to create three sculptural trees designed to help endow a sense of place downtown and foster community dialogue. The group put out a call for artists and created a selection committee comprised of local artists and community members. Artist, [Gordon Auchincloss](#) was chosen to create three sculptures. One of the sculptures was installed downtown, the second is currently in production, and the group is securing funding for the final sculpture. The art is fulfilling the goal of bringing community together through art and public spaces.



Photo courtesy of RiverArts VT

Type of Project: Creative Placemaking

Length of Project: Permanent art installations in 3 Vermont towns

Funding Source: [Animating Infrastructure Grant](#) through the Vermont Arts Council

Award: \$43,930 total for all three projects. (Roughly \$15,000 per town)

Key Takeaways: These projects work to reinforce the deep sense of community and civic pride that is alive in Vermont towns. The art highlights the unique qualities of each town, and helps create public spaces that become community destinations. The projects have the economic benefits of supporting local artists and the affiliated suppliers and companies that the art helps support.

Conclusion

All three projects illustrate how public art can highlight the history of an area, and bring people together in dialogue about what they value about their region. The process of creating public art engages residents in celebrating what makes their community unique and creates a stronger sense of pride. The stories that shape our communities deserve to be told, and the people remembered - not only by residents, but by all who travel through. Public art is one way to share those stories, and continue to knit together the fabric of rural Vermont communities.

Resources

information on Placemaking
[Creative placemaking overview](#)

Funding Sources for Creative Placemaking
[Vermont Animating Infrastructure Grant](#)
[National Creative Placemaking Fund](#)

Written and designed by Lylee Rauch-Kacenski
MA Candidate, Tufts University
Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning



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