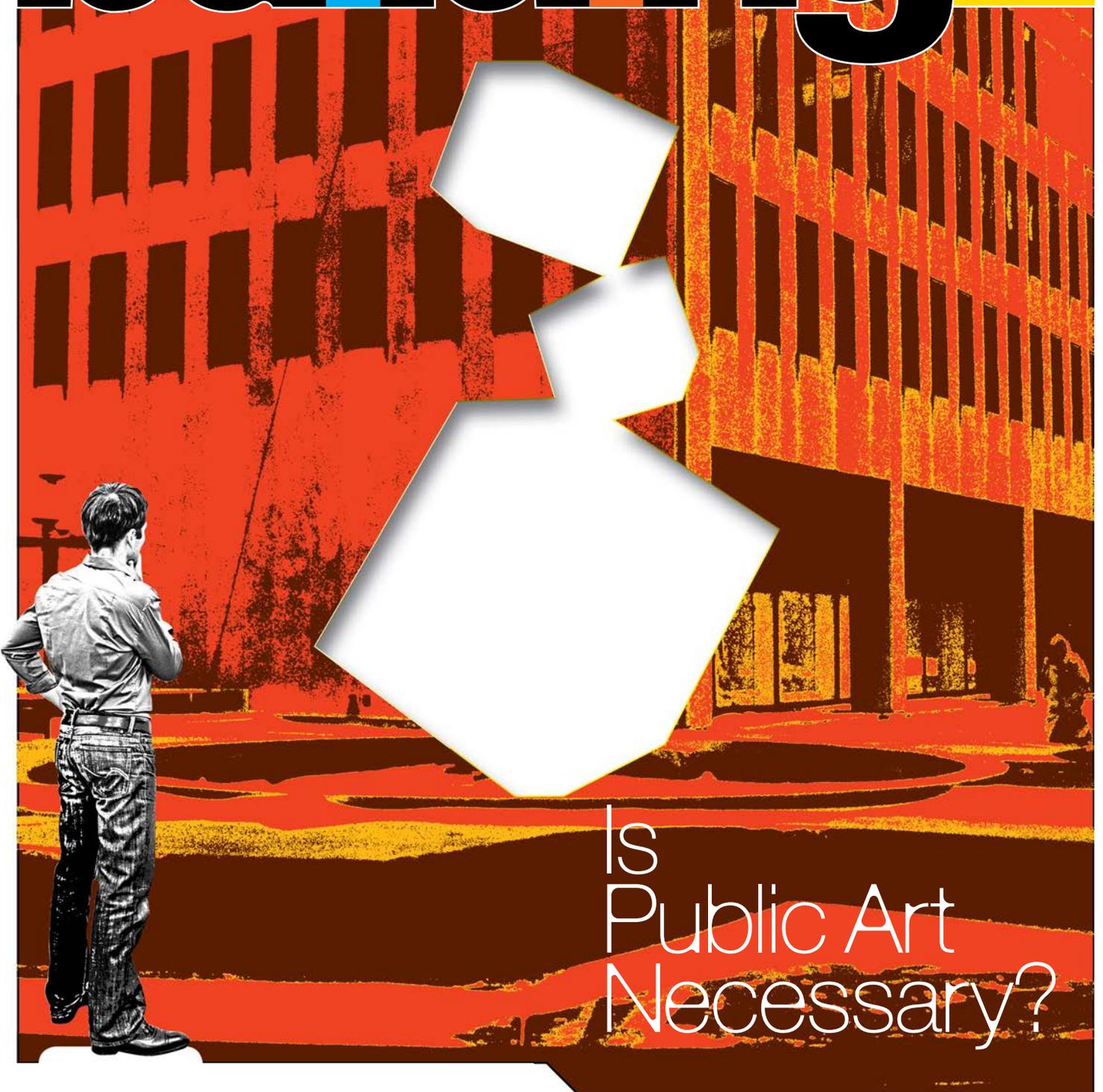


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Is
Public Art
Necessary?

Art Galleries Look To Condos
2014 Real Estate Trends



Public Art & Private Developer

Can the cost of contributing artwork to the community be justified?

How do you quantify quality of life? Can a spreadsheet measure human amusement, introspection, inspiration? Is a building just a building, or can it be something more? These are the type of questions that arise when you ask a variety of stakeholders if commissioned public art has an impact on a developer's bottom line.

The short answer, according to Paul Minz, president of Toronto's M&R Holdings, is no. "Absolutely not. It adds no direct, tangible, proven addition to your earnings," Minz says. "However, from a business perspective, public art makes you more notable, a more distinctive developer."

Contributing art to the urban landscape is new to his family-owned firm. Even though M&R has been in business for 50 years, it was not until the 2013 completion (in conjunction with Baif Developments) of a retail plaza on Toronto's northeastern edge that they actually took the plunge. Because of the site's positioning on the otherwise indistinguishable boundary between the cities of Markham and Toronto, they decided to commission a 16-foot-high sculpture spelling

out Toronto's name in a huge, palindromic circle of red-overlaid steel. The creation of the Cundari Group's Dean Martin and Stephen Richards of Streamliner Fabrication, "Toronto 360" now acts as a gigantic signpost.

"The gateway idea gave it a sense of purpose," Minz continues. "It's so big, it can be used as wayfinding and also as a meeting spot for people." He says he is pleased with the final effect. "Particularly when it comes to retail, so many stores have a predetermined, formulaic look. You get the same mix of tenants, the same look all over. Something that defines your place as different gives it more of its own identity, makes it stand out in the crowd."

Although he is only speaking of a single retail plaza in a single city, Minz's words could be extrapolated to include every urban space on the planet. Today's business travellers know the "if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium" feeling of being unable to distinguish

By Leslie C. Smith

one city from another. London, Los Angeles, Calgary, Montréal — wherever you go, you find interchangeable shops, offices and condo towers. The element of surprised delight as you turn any given corner can only come from a chance encounter with the uniqueness that is art, whether this is represented by a statue, a troupe of performers or a visible interior installation. Cities understand this and actively use art to distinguish themselves. Over 300 North American cities, starting with Philadelphia in 1959, have instituted programs to generate public art and other amenities from private development funds. For the most part, these programs suggest developers voluntarily contribute a minor fraction — usually one per cent — of their gross construction costs; in practical terms, necessary city rezoning or amendments to official plans may well hinge on how willingly developers participate.

Genteel blackmail or no, architect and urban designer Ken Greenberg, principal of Toronto's Greenberg Consultants and former Director of Urban Design and Architecture for the city, views such programs as vitally important to all

concerned. But the process must involve serious commitment. "The cities that do it well," he says, "have some kind of peer-review procedure to suggest or select the artists, which gives you more interesting results. If public art is reduced to a perfunctory gesture where somebody feels obliged to spend X amount of dollars and put a statue in front of a building, it's useless. The smarter developers realize this is not a burden but can actually be a great opportunity to do something

which will really call attention to their projects in a new way. Many developers are proud of what they do. They want to do something that will have impact, but it's often way out of their experience."

For such neophytes, the best way to go about sourcing public art is either to contact a city-controlled arts advisory committee, or to pair up with a local art college or gallery. As well, in larger cities, freelance art consultants are available and skilled at finding the perfect match between development projects and artistic expression.

Greenberg cites a number of instances where privately funded urban art has what he calls "a memorable, transforming impact." Among these are the statues of a giant

bird and another recalling a ship's hull that stood outside the Olympic Athletes' Village in Vancouver. Then there are Saskatoon's various art parks, which exhibit local works on a temporary, consignment-style basis; those that prove a hit with citizens and critics alike are blessed with permanent installation.

Another success story is Saskatchewan

artist Joe Fafard's 1985 sculptural grouping of seven life-sized bronze cows grazing on a patch of grass outside the TD Centre, in the heart of Toronto's financial district.

"You have to look beyond the obvious," cautions Greenberg. "Public art can become trivial if it just stays in the realm of the sentimental, the obvious, mere decoration. On the other hand, an artist and a company with real creative content gets everyone engaged and excited."

For this reason, larger developers often retain art curators on staff — not only to oversee the company's private art holdings but also to have someone on hand who understands individual project needs as well as the broader corporate philosophy. Debra Simon, vice-president and artistic director of Arts Brookfield at Brookfield Office Properties, New York, is one such person. After starting off with a career in performance, Simon switched gears to become head of marketing for the Wall Street Business Improvement Association. A self-proclaimed "voracious consumer of art," she says her combined artistic and real estate knowledge make her uniquely qualified for her present-day position.

Canadian-bred Brookfield has played a long role in fostering artistic talent across the spectrum, from permanent displays to temporary installations and performances in film, theatre, dance,

LEFT: Toronto 360 is an installation permanently located on the border between Toronto and Markham. Created by Dean Martin and Stephen Richards for Baif Developments, the five 16-foot steel letters spell TORONTO on an orbicular concrete stage.



music, photography, painting and sculpture under their Arts Brookfield banner. A recent press release celebrating the program's 25th anniversary quotes Mitch Rudin, president and CEO of U.S. Commercial Operations, as saying: "Free public art enhances a city's vitality... Arts Brookfield embodies Brookfield Office Properties' vision of creating progressive workplaces and our commitment to developing thriving communities." To mark the occasion, Arts Brookfield has just launched Art Set Free, a global art showcase that offers established, emerging and amateur artists a chance to display their work to millions of viewers online and on-site.

Debra Simon believes that, along with the excellence of a development's design, art is one of a handful of variables that can lead to the continuing success of a project. "I think of it as not just building a building, but building a community. Art's something we feel is important to give our tenants. A key component in our corporate culture and mission is giving back to the areas in which we operate. Working with artists in these communities, allowing them opportunities for their work to be seen by a wider group of people - it's how we actually form a community."

The idea is particularly impactful in today's global economy, she stresses, where people are working longer hours and many businesses operate on a 24/7 basis. "Public space and seating create a collaborative experience, and nothing engages there as well as art. It gives people something to think about, talk about, a kind of a time-out, and a spark for their own creativity and innovation.

"I think the criteria that we have for success is the belief that what we do is an enhancement of our space, which helps the bottom line. Like having a fantastic restaurant or beautiful architecture, a lively and engaging arts program is part of the story. It's an amenity."

Words like "amenity" and "community" crop up as well when you speak about public art to David Routledge, vice president of real estate management, Western Canada, for Oxford Properties Group, a division of OMERS



LEFT: In the lobby of Oxford Properties' Centennial Place in downtown Calgary is a large 1,200-sq.-ft. sculpture constructed of laminated glass triangles by artist Christian Eckart.

Worldwide. "We believe that art helps create a positive and welcoming environment that's part of the whole package for our tenants," he says. "It's highly competitive out there, so having a great employee workplace to offer is very important to our customers."

Oxford has just unveiled its latest installation in the visible-from-the-street lobby of downtown Calgary's Centennial Place, which itself debuted in 2010. The picturesquely titled "Di-

chromic Glass Hexagonal Perturbation Triptych - HAT Trick, 2010 - 2013" is the work of internationally renowned, Calgary-born sculptor and painter Christian Eckart, who also contributed a piece to the company's new Ernst & Young building in the same city. His latest creation - a 1,200-sq.-ft. wall sculpture built of laminated glass triangles that reflect a kaleidoscope of liquid, luminescent colours as the lighting and viewing angles change - can be viewed as an abstract representation of its site, both static and motion-filled at the same time.

"The art needs to be contextual. Every building is a little bit different. Hat Trick suited the project, which is very modern and built to LEED Gold standard with a glass exterior and now glass inside. The feedback from customers has been unbelievable, they really appreciate it. It's so striking, it starts to form part of the fabric of the downtown community," Routledge explains. "First and fore-

most, art allows us to animate spaces. It also contributes to brand loyalty, and it brings us into the community in a very positive way. The college of art, for instance, sends students to study pieces like this."

Routledge says his company doesn't follow the one per cent mark, preferring instead discretionary spending on its own terms, and usually going above and beyond what's mandated. He admits that such things as high LEED standards or artwork designed to stand the test of time require fairly significant resources but feels these help make a project successful. "The employees are proud and the customers are satisfied," is his conclusion. "Centennial Place is 100 per cent leased today. And that's the bottom line." **b**