

CONSTRUCTION ZONES, SCAFFOLDING AND VACANT LOTS

case study author: Betsy Imershein

Definition

In an effort to clean up construction sites and turn a blight into an asset, individuals, communities and organizations are creatively re-using/re-purposing containers, construction sites, scaffolding and vacant lots into opportunities for public art and, sometimes, public engagement.

Key components

- Frequently, there is no warning prior to the sudden appearance of construction equipment in a neighborhood; the construction debris can become a long-term presence and a neighborhood blight.
- Each art project is different and time frames for installation and duration vary, even within each site.
- Due to the unplanned nature of these projects, artists are frequently asked to donate their time, although their materials are usually covered.

Key Learnings

- A primary aspect of all projects is the partnerships that develop and support them.
- Most projects impact the neighborhood positively, with a noticeable decrease in graffiti, public urination and garbage and an increase in street traffic.
- Some projects have found City agencies difficult to navigate, providing a barrier to their work; others have not. It would be helpful to streamline both the paperwork and number of applications necessary for public art projects on these sites.
- Guidelines and best practices would be helpful to individuals and organizations/groups wanting to do similar work.

Open Questions

- It seems that the use of outdoor spaces for art encounters less interference as long as owners and communities don't object. Is this true? Has this evolved over time? If so, why is this change is happening?
- Has the city become 'unofficially' more supportive of street art or at least more accepting of it and/or turning a blind eye?

Case Study Example

In 2007, **Fourth Arts Block (FABnyc)** led a participatory streetscape design process with residents, merchants, and artists; one community recommendation was for more public art. The

renovation of several arts buildings, which necessitated long-term scaffolding bridges, presented a perfect opportunity. FABnyc approached and received permission from the owners of the building (Downtown Art and Alpha Omega Theatrical Dance) and the owners of the scaffolding bridge to exhibit on the construction site. Once permission was granted, FABnyc worked with ArtForward to curate and present 3-4 month exhibits that showcase local artists and community partners. Exhibits have included painted murals, sculptural pieces and printed vinyl. The opening of the FAB Café helped make the exhibits more visible through opening receptions and joint programming. In 2011, FABnyc expanded public art sites to include several metal construction containers. In both cases, staff from the NYC Department of Design and Construction helped make introductions and encourage contractors to collaborate.

Additional Examples and Reference Points

- **NYC Department of Transportation, Urban Art** (http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/sidewalks/urbanart_prgm.shtml) program of site-responsive art created in collaboration with community-based organizations along construction sites and street barriers.
- **Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, LentSpace**, NYC (http://www.lmcc.net/cultural_programs/lentspace), at the intersection of Canal Street and 6th Avenue in lower Manhattan, is a project created and programmed by LMCC in partnership with Trinity Wall Street and Hudson Square BID. LMCC is licensed to create and present artistic activities for the vacant lot during specific times during the summer months.
- **Groundswell Community Mural Project**, Brooklyn, NYC (www.groundswellmural.org) does collaborative site-specific and community-specific artmaking that honors and engages the individual, group and community during the making of a mural or other artwork.
- **No Longer Empty**, Coney Island & Dumbo, NYC (www.nolongerempty.org, <https://vimeo.com/23049330>, <https://vimeo.com/15965173>): While engaging communities, NLE brings art to communities such as scaffolding and construction site projects in Coney Island and DUMBO, Brooklyn.
- **ArtBridge**, Brooklyn, NYC (<http://www.art-bridge.org>) transforms construction scaffolding into large-scale art galleries, with site specific exhibits and community engagement by local emerging artists.
- **Eastern Minerals**, Chelsea, MA (<http://www.chelsearecord.com/2012/02/16/innovative-park-new-salt-pile-to-work-together-on-waterfront/>), where PORT will become an innovative park alongside a working industrial port, incorporating vestiges of an old industrial port in the public access portion of the property.