Public art is getting bigger in Boston. Throughout Beantown, artists are taking to the streets, creating large-scale works that encourage citizens to interact with their city as well as each other.

If you download the brochure for the Public Art Walk from the Boston Art Commission website, you’ll see dozens of photographs of life-sized bronze sculptures. There’s the famed “Make Way for Ducklings” statue in the Public Garden, a statue of a grim Samuel Adams on Congress Street, a defiant Lief Erikson on Commonwealth Ave., and the Boston Women’s Memorial that has solidified the vacant stares of Abigail Adams, Lucy Stone, and Phillis Wheatley. These statues commemorate a rich history, certainly, but the works of art are cold to the touch and seem rather unapproachable.

Contrast this with the swooping, vibrant strings that compose the gigantic sculptures of Janet S. Echelman ’87 (GSD ’08) and one wonders if the two conceptions of public art even occupy the same category of aesthetic experience.

Broadly, public art is any artistic creation that interacts with the urban landscape and is available to the public, regardless of socioeconomic background. So how can we reconcile these two vastly different manifestations of public art in one city?

Boston is simultaneously the home of the American Revolution and the birthplace of Facebook. It houses thousands of current or recent college students and is also the site of the first apple orchard in America. There’s an incredible amount of national history in these streets, but there’s also a growing population of young people looking for a place to settle down. This dynamic is reflected by the city’s evolving public arts scene—Boston is shedding its bronze historical status in favor of more hip public art, bringing people together in the city in new and energetic ways.

PUBLIC CITY

For Jesse Brackenbury, executive director of downtown Boston’s Rose F. Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, public art and economic growth are tied up in the same question. “How do you get Harvard students to not go work in New York or in Silicon Valley or in Seattle,” he asks as we sit in front of Shiniique Smith’s newly-opened mural in Dewey Square Park. “Well, part of it is you make it feel like Boston is forward-looking and just as fun as any of those cities.”

And how does Brackenbury do that? By filling the city with exciting works of art available to the public.

Brackenbury has tinted orange sunglasses, and he’s wearing a suit for the opening of Smith’s mural “Seven Moon Junction.” The mural is a flashy display with splashes of bright yellow paint, swooping beads of black, and painted friendship bracelet braids drooping across the facade. An Ethiopian pop band is playing, children are running across the green space without shoes, classes of students are filing past a food truck. This is what Brackenbury envisioned for the Greenway Conservancy.

“Part of what will keep all of the people graduating from all of the colleges here staying here is feeling like there is real energy, real vibrancy, real new ideas, real innovation,” Brackenbury says. “And public art—particularly contemporary public art—can play a real role in making this a vibrant 21st century city.”

It seems that city administrators support this view as well. Last week Mayor Marty Walsh appointed a chief of arts and culture, Julie Burros. According to a press release from the Mayor’s Office, Burros will oversee the members of the Boston Art Commission and the Boston Cultural Council, as well as their $1.3 million annual budget. The administration filled this “Arts Czar” position after it had been vacant for more than 20 years, and Walsh has stated that he wants to integrate art and culture into the lives of Boston residents.

But what does that mean? How can we integrate “culture” into our everyday lives if it is an
inherent part of our existence already?  
Brackenbury sits back in his red plastic  
dining chair and tries to summarize  
Boston’s motivation for increasing public art: “There’s a recognizable  
urge to bring people to the public space.  
To me, the public space is like the public  
park area, it’s the public place to engage  
with art. People are going to go there  
whether they want to or not.”  

It’s not only Brackenbury who believes  
the public has a relationship with art.  
Boston has a long history of bringing  
public art into the city, and why not?  
When you’re in [an indoor] gallery I think people automatically  
engage with the art—when you’re in a public space you might just  
walk in the door to take a look.  

One of HarborArts’s newest pieces of  
art is within driving distance of Boston.  
They’ve put a huge metallic bean in Central  
Park. These works of art, even though they are not permanent  
installations that bring people out of their buildings  
for a while, they are thought to be part of  
the functional environment of a city rather  
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Feature  
you’re in the public you work however it naturally  
comes to you.

"Father,” “Clamsucker,” and “Brother."  
Tail Silverstein, project director at the  
Office of Fine Arts Public Art Program,  
notes that people might want to address  
themes of art that are present in the  
neighborhood. Silverstein says, “Large  
works of art like Michalka’s and Knep’s  
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