

## Public art should reflect diverse voices: forum



Ensuring diverse voices are represented will be key in developing Aurora's Public Art policy.

Last week, the Town held a public forum at the Aurora Armoury for community members, particularly members of the local arts community, to not only share their views on what public art means in Aurora but to hear the views of industry leaders.

A panel discussion opened the communication lines with guest speakers Queen Kokoyi and Nico Taylor sharing their experiences in person, while Catherine Dean, Public Art Officer for the City of Toronto and Collin Zipp, Public Art Manager for STEPS Public Art joined remotely.

“Often when we're using buzzwords like ‘inclusive’ and ‘equity,’ we're not actually putting it into play,” said Kokoyi. “Whatever you [the Town] do, get BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) to be a part of the decision-making process, even if they're not necessarily experts in public art.”

This, cautioned Taylor, “might take some work.”

“It is going to take effort because these are spaces they might not normally attend. You're going to have to knock on doors, you're going to have to entice them and continually reach out to say we want you here and to be able to get you there.”

Ensuring communities like Aurora have an environment that fosters artists was a message delivered uniformly by panel members, including cutting red tape and providing spaces for artists to work.

While there is still much work to be done in drafting Aurora's Public Art Master Plan, last Thursday's forum provided Phil Rose, Manager for the Aurora Town Square Project, with plenty of food for thought.

Also tasked with steering the development of the plan, Mr. Rose says one of his takeaways is Aurora is interested in a variety of forms of public art, from murals, to permanent and temporary installations, and even sculpture. Participants also drove home the idea that public art can foster community dialogue.

“We expressed themes we might want to address through public art, everything from just celebrating the community and having something joyful to celebrate to more substantial issues like racial justice [and] Truth & Reconciliation,” said Rose. “There were some folks who raised the need to address climate change and the environment through public art. What we were left with in that regard was a number of different perspectives on what people would like to see.”

?The other questions we asked is where people would like public art to go. There was actually a lot of diversity in the responses but? a lot of people thought they should go on major transit corridors and hubs like Yonge Street, the GO Station, the bus stop out at the 404 and Wellington, and the other one that people thought would be of interest was gateways into the community; having something that welcomes people as they come into the community that is artistic.?

In this context, gateways include ?highly visible intersections? like Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad, Yonge and Bloomington Road, and near the 404 interchange.

?In a way, I thought that was kind of surprising ? I thought there would be more interest in having them at key civic sites like Town Square, Town Hall and the Library,? said Mr. Rose. ?One thing that came up [which was also surprising] was the idea for smaller-to-mid-size communities [having] temporary public art and mentoring emerging artists. Temporary public art is oftentimes easier to create. It's less expensive than, say, a sculpture by a world-renowned artist that the City of Toronto might be able to afford. Temporary public art can be anywhere from a year up to 15 years, but it allows us to give the public something that changes and they can expect to change. It's not just a frozen moment in time that lives in the community forever like monuments; I think temporary public art is a way to address contemporary issues.

?There is [also] the need for emerging artists to have some kind of mentorship through the process. That can be a disincentive or a barrier for participation for a lot of artists. We want to be able to mentor artists through their process but give them art that changes and could be in different locations in the municipality.?

One tangible piece of public art to come out of last week's session will take the form of a ?little free art gallery? concept, similar to ?little free lending libraries? that can be found on the lawns of homeowners and other locations. Last week's session included a chance for participants to get their hands dirty on various small pieces of art, the results of which will be found next month in a tiny gallery set to find its place at Town Park.

?We had artists and sculptors in the room and they were able to create some unique pieces of miniature art,? said Rose. ?Our plan is probably in the middle of May when I think the ground should be thawed enough that we can install the first art gallery at Town Park and there will be more information coming out about that. It's a cool way of introducing some public art that is participatory, interactive and really easy to get involved in.?

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