



By Mickey Shields | Iowa League of Cities

Art *changes* **a community**

Drive through any Iowa community and you are likely to find some form of public art. While they may not always be obvious to the eye, art installations can be found in parks, city halls, libraries, open spaces, sidewalks and more. Public art can include sculptures, murals and paintings as well as performances, concerts or lectures. These various forms of art can have a lasting impact on a community, enhancing its aesthetics, bolstering economic development, shaping a positive identity and improving the overall quality of life.

The benefits of public art are many, but it may not always be easy to find ways to bring art to a community. In Washington, community leaders found success in partnering with Arts Share, an outreach program offered by the University of Iowa (UI). This partnership has brought an amazing mural to the city library, concerts, performances and educational opportunities while providing artists a new platform to share their talents. >

Before



UI Arts Share artist Erin Rappleye painted the three-story mural *Katamari Bungaku* (“Clump of Literature”) on the back of Washington’s library.

Why Public Art is Important to a Community

< As with any use of city resources, questions will arise over whether it is wise to invest city funding or staff time in bringing public art to a community. City officials and residents should have an open conversation about the need for public art, what sort of art would fit the community and how fundraising will be handled. Many cities have found it beneficial to incorporate public art into formal planning processes, which can include implementing a stand-alone public art plan or adding to an existing community development plan.

The Knight Foundation’s 2010 “Soul of the Community” study, conducted in conjunction with Gallup, surveyed over 40,000 people to determine the factors that attach residents to a community. A key finding of the study noted social offerings, openness and aesthetics are most related to community attachment, with respondents placing those factors ahead of education, economy and safety, among other things.

Many cities point to providing cultural amenities and building a positive community identity as driving factors in making the decision to invest city resources. Residents, business owners and visitors will appreciate different forms of public art, which promotes an image of a city that is fun, welcoming and interesting. That image can help spur development as businesses and residents look to locate in such a community as well as boost support for other cultural amenities and improving the quality of life.

Arts Share and Washington

Some may ask, how can we bring public art to our community? In Washington community leaders formed a partnership with the UI’s Arts Share outreach program that has proved fruitful. The city’s library director, Debbie Stanton, met with Washington’s chamber of commerce president and officials from the university who asked if there were any projects that needed help. Stanton pitched the idea of a mural painted on the back of the library. After two years of planning and working, the three-story mural was finished by artist and UI student Erin Rappleye.

*“Libraries are conservators of the thoughts, day-dreams and experiences of humankind. When we are young, a story opens our imagination, giving us the potential to alter our perception of ourselves for the better. It is my hope, every reader will discover their fullest potential as they prepare to roll off the page, beginning their own story that starts here: Once upon a time in Washington...” Excerpt from artist statement by Erin Rappleye for the mural *Katamari Bungaku**

With the mural project underway, the city and Arts Share found other ways to bring art to Washington. A concert series was developed that has featured graduate student artists, writers, ensembles and musicians ranging from woodwinds to steel pans. Theme events have been held that pair a writer from UI's International Writing Program with a musician.

A writing workshop was also established and is open to teens and adults. Three times per semester a writer from the famed UI Writers' Workshop attends a meeting to talk about their work, writing style and process, and then contributes to the workshopping of 2-3 members' pieces.

Stanton says the community has had overwhelmingly positive reactions to all of the projects the city has worked on with Arts Share. "We have been incredibly lucky to

have connected with the group – it's really been a boon for our library and our community," she said.

The partnership has also been beneficial to Arts Share and the students that participate. "We love collaborating with Washington because they are a culturally vibrant town, and it's good for our artists to get outside of the university and get outreach experience!" said Leslie Finer, Arts Share administrator.

Cities play a central role in enhancing a community's quality of life. As more citizens look to connect with a city through its cultural and aesthetic offerings, public art stands out as a potential investment for city officials to make. Doing so can bring many returns

as community bonds are strengthened and a sense of place is built.



Community leaders from Washington worked with Arts Share to develop a popular concert series, which included this performance titled "Panrimba".

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Learn more about public art and how it can enhance your city with "Placemaking: Building Your Community Identity," an upcoming League webinar on May 16.

