Understanding Public Art Space through Montreal’s Sculpture Gardens

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As a metropolitan city rich with cultural and art historical significance, Montreal is invested in contributing to contemporary discourses occurring within the global art sphere. The city possesses numerous resources and institutions dedicated to the preservation of Montreal’s artistic history and the promotion of its ongoing artistic development. There is an emphasis placed on celebrating art and making it accessible to the community through the presence of festivals, educational programs, galleries, and museums, which provide an opportunity for art of various types to be discovered and experienced by all.\(^1\) Montreal’s pride in its artistic culture is evident in the utilization of art and design throughout the city. The metro system, for instance, is one of Montreal’s most elaborate and available collections of art, as each station comprises a unique artistic feature and theme that is incorporated into its very structure. The presence of public art in Montreal is undeniable and has become an essential element in establishing the city as a cultural and artistic force in Canada, worthy of recognition. Many of the city’s museums have demonstrated their interest in public art by providing an alternative viewing experience; the placement of artworks outside creates a public environment – separate from that of the traditional gallery – in which these art objects become more accessible.

This essay explores how these attempts to expand the context of art appreciation in relation to exterior space inform and problematize notions of public art. I will begin by determining what constitutes public art and go on to examine how notions of public art are applied and promoted by the sculpture gardens of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) and of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Although both spaces exhibit a collection of sculptures in a public environment and in association with their respective museums, the sculpture gardens serve and perform understandings of public art differently. The MMFA struggles to establish its pieces as veritable works of public art within their fabricated context, while the CCA successfully creates
an interactive space through the presence of cohesive and effective public artworks that engage an audience. The analysis of these public spaces will be achieved through a consideration of where the works are located, how they relate to the space, their intentionality, sphere of influence and their relationship to a public audience.

Theories of public art have been widely investigated, as it exists in an ambiguous dichotomy between private and public. The idea of “public” art necessitates the presence of “private” art, as one categorization cannot exist without the establishment of the other. Scholar and theorist Hilde Hein explores this co-dependence of terms with regards to philosophy and experience in *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently*. She explains that the relationship between the two is complicated when examining art constructs, as all art is made to be seen by some sort of audience (making it undeniably public), yet the production of work is essentially an individual practice, occurring solely in the privacy formed between artist and work.² Though art-making may come from a private space, all exhibited art is definitively public as it is made accessible to an unrestricted audience through conduits such as museums and galleries. However, public art – as it is understood in contemporary discourses – is seen as an alternative to institutionalized work, which operates within an officially determined “private” space. Moving away from the regulated artwork of the private realm allows public work “to escape the constraints of the pedestal, the gallery, and finally of art itself.”³ Public art defines itself through its intention and site-specificity in a way that private art cannot, as the latter is generally made to exist and be viewed on its own and apart from its surroundings, yet always within a standardized context.

When it comes to principles of exhibited art, the need for two separate spheres of art-making becomes essential in engaging with works, as the distinction between public and private lies significantly in the work’s physical and societal context. Generally, private and public can also be separated into understandings of interior and exterior.
Thus, art that is created in an alternative or outdoor environment, apart from the gallery context (which is considered restrictive, formal and authoritative) is awarded a freedom and accessibility that is not attributed to “private” works held by institutions. These private works serve a different purpose than public ones; they function within a specified context where collections and exhibitions are comprised of numerous works to form a theme or connection. The objective and controlled uniformity of the gallery space gives these works significance while allowing them to stand out and be viewed individually and in their entirety. Public art is held at different standards than private art, Hein argues, as “the aesthetic dimension that sanctifies private art is pushed to the background by the social and other short-term factors involved in creating and protecting public art.” The question of location is extremely important in the identification of public artworks, as the context in which they are established informs their purpose such that formal and traditional elements, which are essential for private work, become irrelevant for public work. In her article “Charting public art – a quantitative and qualitative approach to understanding sustainable social influences of art in the public realm,” associate professor Dr. Cameron Cartiere categorizes public art as either a place that influences the people, is “maintained for or used by the community” or is publicly accessible and visible. Public art must connect with an audience or a community and the most straightforward way of ensuring this relationship is to have the work occupy a communal space that is frequented by the general public.

While the distinction in space occupied by these artistic realms must be noted, the true difference between public art and private art lies in the intention of the work’s presence and the function it serves, regardless of whichever public or private space it occupies. In his introduction to Service Media: Is it “Public Art” or is it Art in Public
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Fig. 1: Robert Burley, photographer. The Canadian Centre for Architecture Garden by Melvin Charney: View, Looking from the Arcade Across the Esplanade Showing Columns Six, Seven, Eight, Ten, and Eleven, 1990. Chromogenic colour print, 35.6 x 44.7 cm. CCA Collection. PH1990:0163. © Robert Burley. Allegorical Columns © Estate of Melvin Charney / SODRAC
Space? curator and researcher Stuart Keeler coins the term “Service Media,” describing it as “a more engaging and collaborative form of art in public space.” There is an emphasis placed in this text on public art as an active participant within a community. Public art in this sense is not meant to be decorative or commemorative, but vibrant and communicating with the space and public that it encounters. In “Just art, politics and publics: Researching geographies of public art and accountability” cultural geographer Dr. Martin Zebracki brings up the “subject of accountability, whereby ‘accountable public art’ means that it is socially inclusive.” The work must be made accessible to a diverse community and must not hinder one’s appreciation or experience of the work by claiming superiority of knowledge or status over the viewer. The work acts as Service Media by “reanimating public space without an air of authority.” It creates openness and the opportunity for exploration, contemplation and discovery, as the artwork has been made to serve the public and thus belongs to it in all its individuality: to everyone, regardless of background, age or education.

The audience that experiences public art is different from that which pursues private art; its encounter with the work is not necessarily deliberate. Though viewers may very well have found the work as a result of curiosity or in response to having seen it advertised or promoted in some way, public art nonetheless always creates a public that is circumstantial and becomes implicated whether it wants to be or not. Keeler examines notions of “relational” art as having to do with the relationships between people that may be established by the work as well as those formed between the work and the space and how this transforms the space for the public. The public arises from its sometimes spontaneous and unprecedented encounter with the work, something that does not happen with private art, which the audience is
always expecting to see. Successful public art creates an incidental and participatory audience out of the public, constituting a relationship between itself and its viewer by prompting the subject to engage with the work. Once the public viewer has noticed the public work and the individual has been affected by it through experience, the public work has succeeded and is officially deemed art. This developing relationship between viewer and artwork and the versatility offered by art intended for the public realm are not concepts easily accessed by private institutions. Thus, these public spaces and constructs become valuable in their potential to create dialogues between the public and private as mediated through the perspective of museums.

The Max and Iris Stern sculpture garden at the MMFA consists of twenty-two pieces distributed around the museum’s four pavilions. There are currently four works from artists around the world placed in front of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion and the Claire and Marc Bourgie Pavilion, which was converted from a church in 2011 to house the museum’s Canadian and Quebec art collections. The sculptures are presented alongside trees and some are mounted on limestone blocks that are scattered around the space and “seem to emerge from the concrete sidewalks.” Those works found on the avenue flank the road on each side, allowing visitors to wander along the middle of the street, contemplating the sculptures as they pass. Some of the works are on loan, while others, including numerous works by Montreal artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, are gifts to the museum and part of their permanent collection. The turnover of works allows for the sculptures to be moved around and arranged differently from time to time. This freedom is refreshing and ensures that the space remains dynamic, as the formal and linear presentation of the sculptures has the potential to become stale.

For a few years Quebec artist
Claude Cormier constructed a beautiful and innovative summer installation which occupied the asphalt of Du Musée Avenue, linking the two pavilions and bringing the sculptural space together through the grid of markers or “flowers” as they have been referenced in previous manifestations of the work. The most recent edition of this work was “Mirage – TOM III” (2014), in which the markers were coloured in different palettes on each side so that a certain visual pattern was experienced when looking at the work from one end of the street and another effect was seen from the other. The effectiveness of “site appropriateness” is placed in evidence here, as the quotidian and constructed industrial road, meant to convey cars, has been intercepted by the suggestion of a field of colour that forbids the passage of cars, while encouraging the presence and involvement of pedestrians. The road is reclaimed by the artwork and given to the people to be enjoyed and experienced in a new way. This imposition on public space and transformation of it is at the core of this work – something that would be entirely lost in the constraints of a gallery context.

While its diversity is intriguing and the museum’s interest in promoting public art is evident, the sculpture garden does not altogether succeed as a cohesive and functional public art space. The deliberate selection of these works and their arrangement suggests that this is an example of artwork in public space and not one of public art. The dichotomy referenced by these terms is described by Hein as “‘public art,’ which [...] constructs a public, and ‘art in public places,’ which, while it may have public value, is characterized chiefly in virtue of its location and bureaucratic legitimization.” This fabricated and contrived public art space at the MMFA is problematic as it forces works to exist alongside one another in an environment that does not provide them with the space they require to succeed individually. At present, they are very close
to the museum and seem to be relying on its presence for their significance. The works fail to stand alone – they are simply not permitted to do so. They are placed under the shadow of the museum, becoming a decorative allusion to the work that can be seen inside: an advertisement rather than an independent exhibition.

The majority of these sculptures are made of bronze, which creates a visual unity between them, yet the ubiquitous material makes a coherent reading of the works difficult. They remain so distinct in style and content that knowing the title and artist of each sculpture becomes necessary in trying to understand the work’s significance and why it has been specifically selected to occupy this space. The only commonality between these works is found in their materiality, which serves to emphasize the individuality of these art objects and their vast differences. This disconnect makes it difficult to accept this as a cohesive instance of public art where pieces work together to form a space of experience. While Cormier’s piece is an exemplary form of public art that gives meaning to an otherwise insignificant space by interacting with it, the installation is not permanent and cannot support the other sculptures during the off season. This is unfortunate as the garden functions much more successfully with the road activated as part of the space, preserving what unity the area has. Without the committed appropriation of this space, the sculptures simply line the road, emphasizing the way for passing cars, which are distracting and disrupt attempts to view the work. They normalize and trivialize these important works, completely negating the significance and purpose of this space. The garden is forced to compete with its surroundings instead of the two working together in a celebration of shared public space.

The dialogue created between the juxtaposition of these works is interesting nonetheless and reveals much about the museum’s history and relationship with the international art scene. This garden space and assemblage of works should not be discarded but improved. The works need to be spaced out with more consideration so that
they may occupy a full space where they can be viewed individually from different perspectives. The space should be entirely converted to ensure that contemplation of the work is an immersive experience. At present their placement is linear, which forces the viewer to read them in a progressive fashion, creating a measured and predictable experience of the work. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts boasts that this is “one of the largest collections of public art in Montreal,” yet these works cannot be considered public art simply because they are placed outside. The quantity of works is not relevant either, as these have not been properly integrated within the space and in context with one another. None of these works, save for Cormier’s installations, engage in any significant way with the public or the space. Thus, it becomes nearly impossible to categorize this as a public art space.

Alternatively, the CCA sculpture garden, designed by Montreal artist Melvin Charney, utilizes artwork to activate public space, while successfully uniting notions of Montreal’s architecture, environment and history in accordance with the project’s original intention. The garden is located on René-Levesque across from the CCA museum and was created to coincide with the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 1987. It is comprised of green space that surrounds an architectural wall, which playfully mirrors the CCA building across the street and utilizes levels, openings, and overlap to obscure the nine Allegorical Columns (1989) in the space from view outside the garden. The sculptures are placed in two rows at the top of a slope, which overlooks the highway and offers a spectacular view of the island’s southern edge. The works present in the garden become part of the landscape by referencing its architectural history. In On Architecture: Melvin Charney, A Critical Anthology Charney explains how “the narrative presented by the columns is intended to capture and objec-
Fig. 2: The MMFA sculpture garden featuring Claude Cormier’s installation TOM I (2012). Photo: Guillaume Paradis
tify an architectural discourse derived from distinctive buildings, as befits a museum of architecture. They have been produced to link sculpture and structure, buildings and artworks and achieve this effectively, establishing themselves as relevant public artworks of value and significance.

Everything about these works is deliberate and has been calculated with care to ensure absolute unity between the form, content and context of the entire space. The arrangement of the works from East to West reinforces the historical progression referenced by the use of specific materials and forms that link the sculptures to the architectural remnants of the city’s past. The open-air arrangement of the space allows the works to become monumental; they are encouraged to be sculptures and have been given the appropriate public framework in which to do so. This garden space is interactive and creates an environment of public art to be experienced by participants. The columns rise at different levels from the ground, echoing the trees of the garden and the people who wander between them. This space is transformed by the presence of the public, as the viewer is placed in dialogue with the columns and is encouraged to contemplate the narrative of this work and of its context. As discussed by literary critic Dr. Michael North in Art and the Public Sphere, “as the aesthetic focus shifts from the object to the experience it provokes, the relationship of the two goes beyond mere implication: the public becomes the sculpture.” The audience becomes implicated as the play between small people and tall structures develops, furthered by the contrast established between the organic, living public and the inorganic, industrial forms and materials of the columns.

There is a unity established in this space that is emphasized by the presence of the public in connection with that of the sculptures, as both come together to fill the space. Certain vantage points reveal different relationships be-
tween the works, as some appear larger than others and others become more complex or are simplified by their linked presence to the others. This playfulness and variety ensures that the garden is fully experienced by a public. Contrary to the stoic placement of the MMFA sculptures, these columns can be viewed from numerous perspectives with the mountain and the downtown skyline forming one backdrop, or in front of the expanding view of the lower city. While this space is interactive and audience-based, the MMFA sculptures do not establish a public community, nor are they transformed by the presence of an audience or influenced positively by their environment. These objects are lost and disjointed, as they are not equipped with the same cohesion that ensures the successful placement of the CCA garden within the city’s structural and public art dynamic.

The sense of connectivity in this space formed between viewer, sculpture, and environment is not present in the sculpture garden of the MMFA; the sculptures, arranged in such a way, do not belong in that space. Hein concedes that “excellent private art can fail as public art,” which can be accurately applied in this instance. Some of the smaller works, such as those by Riopelle would be more effective if located within the consistency of the museum’s private space where they would not be swallowed by the vast and engaging surroundings in which they presently find themselves. Unlike the works in the MMFA space, there is no doubt that the sculptures of the CCA garden are meant to function in a public space. These would never be placed inside, as this would so evidently contradict their entire purpose. Where some of the works included at the MMFA would feel more comfortable in the private space of a museum, the columns would feel trapped, as their size, materiality and exterior-based content could never be conducive to being placed within an interior.

The vast outdoor space of the CCA garden permits the creation of a gathering space for the public with art as the instigator. Without the assemblage of sculptures this would merely be a dull and open combination of green and
paved space in proximity to the highway, displaying a beautiful view of the southern part of the city. The sculptures and architectural elements establish this as a public space of significance, where people can congregate and experience the work in tandem with the city. The space occupied by the MMFA sculpture garden is a previously constructed space – a city street that continues to serve this function during the winter season. Without the sculptures the space would remain relatively unchanged, as the presence of the buildings would continue to dominate the space, providing their own beauty and intrigue in their varied juxtaposed architectural styles. The buildings are beautiful works of art in their own right and cannot be upstaged by a smattering of sculptures at their base. The art in this garden does not transform or engage with the space; rather the environment imposes itself on the work, reducing these sculptures to decorative and ornamental works instead of active objects of significance. This collection of works does not sufficiently engage with the public audience or the public environment and thus cannot be considered influential or relevant within this space as a legitimate demonstration of public art.

While both the Canadian Centre for Architecture and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts support notions of public art in Montreal by the implementation of respective sculpture gardens, only the former sculpture garden truly succeeds as public art. The sculpture garden orchestrated by the MMFA falls short in establishing significant connections with the city's public art communities and thus must be considered an example of artworks in public space. The sculptural works at the CCA participate within the Montreal environment, responding to its architecture and design thematic through an exploration of space and ideas. The presence of cohesive themes and aesthetics is an essential aspect of the work's success, as all elements depend on each other...
to integrate the space within the public sphere. The construction of the space and arrangement of the sculptures allow for a critical engagement to occur between the viewer, the artwork and the city’s infrastructure. While this sculpture garden functions well as a public art space, the MMFA garden is more of a decorative avenue, placing various artworks in an unresolved spatial and relational context. The works lack a significant connection with one another and are not permitted to fully engage with their surroundings as they are placed in such close proximity to the museum’s pavilions that they cannot be disassociated from them. There is no opportunity for these works to engage with the public or participate in any sort of public art discourse. The presence of a multitude of artworks in the same outdoor space does not constitute a collection of public art, as notions of purpose, engagement and exploration must be considered above mere locality and institutional merit. Ornamentation, decoration and artwork that occupies public space are all appropriate descriptions that can be applied to these works, however propagating the MMFA sculpture garden as a demonstration of public art is completely inaccurate and lacks an understanding of the relevance, significance and consideration which validate the CCA garden as public art.
Endnotes


6 Stuart Keeler, introduction to *Service Media: is it Public Art or is it Art in Public Space?* (Chicago: Green Lantern Press, 2013), 1.


8 Keeler, *Service Media: is it Public Art or is it Art in Public Space?*, 3.

9 Ibid.


12 Ibid, 65.


15 Ibid., 53.


19 Ibid., 403.

20 North, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 10.

Bibliography


