

Inside the box

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Who will curate this D.C. public art project and its diverse private visions?

When they were replaced in the 1970s by the new 911 system, the ornate, wrought-iron emergency call boxes that still grace the streets of the District were an unwanted remnant of old infrastructure. Too heavy and burdensome to remove, they became increasingly derelict until many of them were weird windows on the city. Devoid of any mechanism or purpose, they were like faceless clocks, or little streetside shrines with no idols inside.



Inside the Box: Design Your Own D.C. Firebox

Since 2002, however, the Art on Call project, created by Cultural Tourism D.C., has turned 122 of the 1860s-era fire and police call boxes into public pedestals for local art and quirky history markers. More are coming this summer, even as the project, funded by the city's Commission on the Arts and Humanities, is losing its original leadership, far short of the more than a thousand call boxes that still dot city streets.

In Mount Pleasant, the boxes host small sculptures by Michael K. Ross, who has depicted historic scenes dating back to the time of the Nacotchtank natives (18th and Newton streets). In the embassy-dense Sheridan-Kalorama neighborhood, the boxes hold everything from sculpture and paintings to Arabic calligraphy (southeast side of the Islamic Center at Massachusetts Avenue and Belmont Street). And in Cleveland Park, visitors can get a history lesson on architecture and urban development.

It is a diverse and motley project, and as budget issues force Cultural Tourism D.C. (a nonprofit that serves a large membership of historical and cultural organizations) to hand off the project to the city -- which is not committed to curating it in any meaningful way -- it's worth looking at what has been accomplished so far. The results are uneven, sometimes fascinating, often dull. In some neighborhoods, where there are larger budgets (to supplement city funding) and more engagement with the project, the call boxes leap out at you, little surprises lurking in a busy, buttoned-down city. In others, they sink into the ho-hum background of newspaper boxes, bus stops, street lamps and other urban furniture.

They also reflect the resources available in different parts of the city. Despite concerted efforts, the project has played out almost entirely in wealthier neighborhoods and on the west side of the Anacostia River. As conceived by Cultural Tourism D.C. founder and former executive

director Kathryn S. Smith, Art on Call was based heavily on community participation. Not surprisingly, the best results are often the product of a few intensely engaged individuals.



Michael Ross created this fire box art in 2005.

One of them was artist Ross. The best value, for anyone who wants to see a lot of Art on Call quickly, in a quiet, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood, is a cluster of boxes Ross designed for Mount Pleasant. His art is basic, figurative stuff, but he knows how to make the most of the medium. Ross's designs use negative space -- the view through the open back of the box -- to create theatrical effects: a contemporary street scene with a shop window (Mount Pleasant and Kenyon streets), a breezy old trolley car (Mount Pleasant and Hobart), and a Civil War scene with a rearing horse pulling a wagon loaded with casualties (Mount Pleasant and Park Road).

Ross drove the call-box project in Mount Pleasant, which didn't have the same resources at its disposal as other areas dense with public art. His work is enhanced by smart presentation, including helpful maps that direct viewers to nearby boxes. And because the series is all from the hand of a single artist, it has a coherence lacking in some neighborhoods. You leave with the sense that Ross was genuinely interested in the public side of public art, and a good-enough artist to pull it off.

In Tenleytown, the boxes display the work of Lena Frumin, whose paintings are fast and sketchy, with a computer-aided look and a bright, bold, color-printer palette. Nice enough, but unlike Ross, whose sculptures sit inside their boxes as if framed by a theatrical proscenium, Frumin uses the box only as a basic frame, without taking advantage of the iron sculpture, or the serendipity of location. Her work, shielded from the elements behind plastic screens, feels like private art on public display. And you wonder: Why this artist? Why not something better? Which shows the potential of public art to backfire, to raise hackles and reveal the fissures of competitiveness and egoism in the psycho-cityscape.

Like all art, public art has a very high failure rate. Professional artists, if they are any good, hide or destroy the misfiring and imperfect realization of the creative impulse. But public art is founded on the arguable assumption that art is fundamentally a good thing (and good for you) and that artists should be empowered relatively equally, without too much concern for what is good and bad art. And so projects like Art on Call tend to put the whole iceberg of art on display, not just the tip of excellence.

Which leads to a strange dissonance in the downtown neighborhood known as the Golden Triangle. Mary Grigonis has contributed some moody paintings that capture city life (a street scene outside a Metro stop, a restaurant interior). They aren't bad paintings -- in fact, they are better than much of what Art on Call puts on display -- but because they depict city life in the

midst of real city life, they invite invidious comparison. And the art seems less lively, less engaging, than the world around it. In this case, the actual form of the call box works to the disadvantage of the artist. These little iron sculptures are reminders of an age of design when things were meant to be beautiful and long-lasting, which makes a strange contrast with art that feels more ephemeral and passing.

The project was originally meant to include both a historic and an artistic component. In Dupont Circle, that original intent was realized, literally and quite thoroughly, though not necessarily with success. These boxes, which include reproductions of works by local artists, along with short bits and squibs of historic information, smell like they fell into the hands of an all-powerful graphic designer who cared more about a visual consistency than the actual purpose or content of the information he or she was formatting. Text is sometimes run vertically (does anyone outside of Asia read vertically?) and the artwork is so small that it is an afterthought.

Dupont, however, did the best job explaining the purpose and function of the boxes. The fire boxes, originally painted red, sent a telegraph message with the street-corner address to dispatchers, who called out the trucks. The police boxes, originally painted blue, were operated by beat cops who carried a special key (now a collector's item, according to text found on some of the Dupont boxes). Another nice touch, often ignored in other neighborhoods: information about specific emergencies called in from particular boxes. At 21st and R streets we learn of a June 2, 1919, blast from a bomb set off by an anarchist outside the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the same defender of the Constitution who launched the infamous Palmer Raids a few months later, incarcerating (often without trial) thousands of suspected communists and labor activists.

The Woodley Park call boxes, which state that they were "developed by the Woodley Park Community Association," feel very much like a committee product. There is no art to be found here, just historical information, which is sometimes useful. But the lack of art or surprise or whimsy is a lost opportunity, given that the city isn't exactly devoid of historic markers.

Dupont Circle and Woodley Park are put to shame by the work found in the Sheridan-Kalorama neighborhood, one of the wealthiest in the city, and surprisingly hip, if one judges by the work it has fielded for Art on Call. Peter Waddell, who has painted images for six neighborhood boxes, offers up a mildly racy snapshot of artist Alice Pike Barney in her studio (22nd and R streets) painting a naked male model playing a flute. The same box makes mention of other artists and creative types who lived in the neighborhood, including abstract painter Willem de Looper and classicist Edith Hamilton, author of the 1942 classic "Mythology."

The presentation of art in Sheridan-Kalorama is cruder than the hyper-designed style of next-door Dupont Circle, but it is more artist-friendly, and the works selected run a wider range. A surprisingly touching little contribution is a painted tile with an image of a religious brother (near 23rd Street and Kalorama Road). No artist is listed for this work, and the anonymity is refreshing, given how public art sometimes functions as advertising for private artists.

Not many neighborhoods can compete with Mount Pleasant and Sheridan-Kalorama. In many cases, Art on Call shows the tendency to reduce urban imagery to a handful of repetitive, familiar icons. In Dupont Circle, you soon tire of images of the Dupont Circle fountain. In Southwest, the project has been turned over to poster art created for the Cherry Blossom Festival, dominated by pink blossoms, visions of the Jefferson Memorial or Capitol dome, and a few generically Japanese touches. Some of it barely rises above corporate-logo-style design work. Georgetown, obsessed with its image and mired in bureaucratic process, has barely begun its realization of Art on Call.

Before then-Mayor Anthony Williams "broke ground" in 2002 for Art on Call by sloshing some primer onto a fire box in Southeast, the District's Department of Transportation surveyed the city and found about 1,100 of the old emergency stations. By the time the project winds down this fall, only a fraction of these will have been decorated. Community groups or artists who want to continue the project can do so by applying for grants through the Commission on the Arts and Humanities. But no one will be shepherding it as a separate public art endeavor. Now, it's up to individuals to keep it alive.

That may be a de facto referendum on the subject. Does the community-engagement model work? Or does it work only in communities with leisure time and money? Does Art on Call beautify the city in a broad, collective way, or does it promote the "art" of a wide and uneven range of private artists? Is it even art, or should we invent some new term, such as civic decoration? The best hope for more Art on Call will come from artists who have seen as much of it as possible, who can identify and reinvent the proper spirit of the project, which is only rarely (but rewardingly) anarchic, interventionist, clever and modest in spirit.

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