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 Public art and civic life
 Guest Column

BY SCOTT RADWAY

With the creation of the Chapel Hill Public Arts Commission in 1992 and the adoption of the Percent for Art program for public facilities in 2002, the Chapel Hill Town Council reaffirmed the principle that art in public places and art visible daily to Chapel Hill residents and visitors are important elements of our engaged, educated community.

Building upon the tradition of publicly commissioned and displayed art that has proceeded from ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome through today in cities such as Washington, D.C., New York, Paris and London, the Town of Chapel Hill joins with Charlotte, Raleigh and more than 200 other local and state governments that have chosen to expand the visual and civic environment by including art within public development.


Chapel Hill devotes approximately 1 percent of the cost of selected projects to the public art component. Nationally, the percent for art set aside ranges between 1 percent and 2 percent, while some cities have a capped dollar amount. Many cities (San Diego, Calif.; Santa Monica, Calif.; Pasadena, Calif.; Austin, Texas; Boise, Idaho) also require a percent-for-art component of private developments, particularly within their city-center areas.

The importance of these commitments by both the public and private sectors cannot be overstated. Strong public leadership raises the standard for community values and expectations. Yet, it is private enterprise that designs and builds approximately 80 percent of our constructed environment.

The Chapel Hill Percent for Art program requires the incorporation of public art within public projects. Since 2002, the town's commitment has resulted in a variety of arts projects in divergent facilities. These include mosaics at the Hargraves Community Center; public benches on Franklin Street; the Promethean Honor Guard Sculpture at Fire Station 5 that honors firefighters around the country, commissioned shortly after the 9/11 World Trade Center attack; the library expansion and Prichard Park developments currently in design; Southern Community Park and the Homestead Aquatic Center, each under construction; and the recently completed Town Operations Center for Public Works and Chapel Hill Transit.

Each of these facilities provides valuable public services to Chapel Hill residents. Some of us will use all of these facilities; others will use only one or two. Nevertheless, the incorporation of art in each of these locations enhances the life of the residents and employees of the town.

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RAM Development and the Town Council of Chapel Hill have created a joint-venture, mixed-use development plan for the current town parking lot 5 on the north side of West Franklin Street at the intersections of Church and West Rosemary streets, across the street from University Square. For me and perhaps others who are actively engaged in the field of designing and building communities -- and more importantly, for the people of Chapel Hill -- this is another significant step toward rebuilding portions of our wonderful town.

A centerpiece, and perhaps one of the most exciting parts of this private residential condominium and retail development, will be the artwork and public space that are key components of the overall plan. Working together with a selection committee, RAM Development and the town selected highly acclaimed public environmental artist Mikyoung Kim to develop an Arts Master Plan for the development, and to create one of the two public art components of the plan.

The Chapel Hill Public Arts Commission and RAM Development invite all interested residents to preview the artwork design for the RAM development on lot 5 at a community meeting on Monday from 5 to 6 p.m. in the Downstairs Meeting Room at The Chapel Hill Public Library.

During the community meeting, Mikyoung Kim will present the Arts Master Plan and a preliminary artwork design for lot 5. Kim's plan, which identifies two areas for public art, envisions artwork that responds to the life cycles of light and water -- universal elements that will contribute to the creation of this community space in Chapel Hill. Kim also will present her design for a sculptural rainfall retention and water flow feature for Public Art Area 1.

Scott Radway serves on the Chapel Hill Public Arts Commission.

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