

# Building Healthy Cities

Urban planners are looking to artists  
to help shape—and heal—the city

BY JOSEPH HART

During the spring and summer of 2010, artist Adam Kuby began “treating” the city of Portland with 35-foot-high acupuncture needles. He placed each needle to draw attention to a particular neighborhood or environmental feature: Some sites posed challenges to the city and were in need of healing; others were assets, if neglected ones.

“I wanted to get people to see the city as a living, breathing organism,” explains Kuby. “The way a city grows, functions, lives, and dies has a lot of parallels to the human body.”

Kuby, a public artist with a background in landscape architecture, conceived of the Portland Acupuncture Project ([acuportland.org](http://acuportland.org)) during a stint as artist-in-residence for Portland’s rapidly developed South Waterfront neighborhood, but from concept to execution, he worked closely with professionals in the city’s planning department—“the people who really know the city like a doctor knows a body,” as Kuby put it.

In the early stages of the project, Kuby enlisted planning personnel, along with acupuncturists, in a mapping exercise to help refine the city-as-body metaphor. The timing was fortuitous: The department was in the midst of refining the Portland Plan, a major planning initiative intended to guide the city’s growth for the next quarter-century. “We saw a real connection between Adam’s work and the Portland Plan,” says Eden Dabbs, the communications and public affairs officer for Portland’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.

A collaborative relationship emerged from these early interactions. Kuby added community meetings with expert speakers and public comment at each site in his project; the planning department helped spread the word and used the Portland Acupuncture Project to draw attention to their comprehensive Portland Plan.

“It was a really interesting partnership,” says Dabbs. “My goal was to help Adam get the word out about his project and focus attention on it and maximize its impact. In so doing, we helped drive people to learn more about the Portland Plan. I think the Acupuncture Project drove at least a few people to the public meetings on the plan.”

## ARTISTS AT THE TABLE

Kuby’s work with Portland’s planning department is an example of an emerging imperative for collaboration among public artists, urban planners, and developers—an imperative that’s being encouraged by funding mechanisms and the current conversation around “placemaking.”

In the past, public art projects have tended to be driven either by artists, who must add administrative legwork to their creative impulse in order to achieve the project, or by private or public developers, who, all too often, think of public art as an after-thought adornment for a plaza, building, or park. Collaborative relationships like Kuby’s work with Portland planners adopt a more embedded approach, in which artists, architects, engineers, planners, and elected officials work side-by-side, and often start-to-finish, to achieve their ends.

Such relationships change the work of both the artist and the planning professionals. In St. Paul, Minnesota, for instance, “city artists” work in the Public Works department, attending meetings and helping to shape the cityscape on a day-to-day basis (see story on page 57).

Marcus Young, St. Paul’s City Artist in Residence since 2008, explains that one way to understand our urban infrastructure—streets, sidewalks, water treatment, police and fire protection—is to see it as a life-sustaining system. “The work of the city is the work of sustaining life,” he says. “Art in that context is really interesting, because it’s

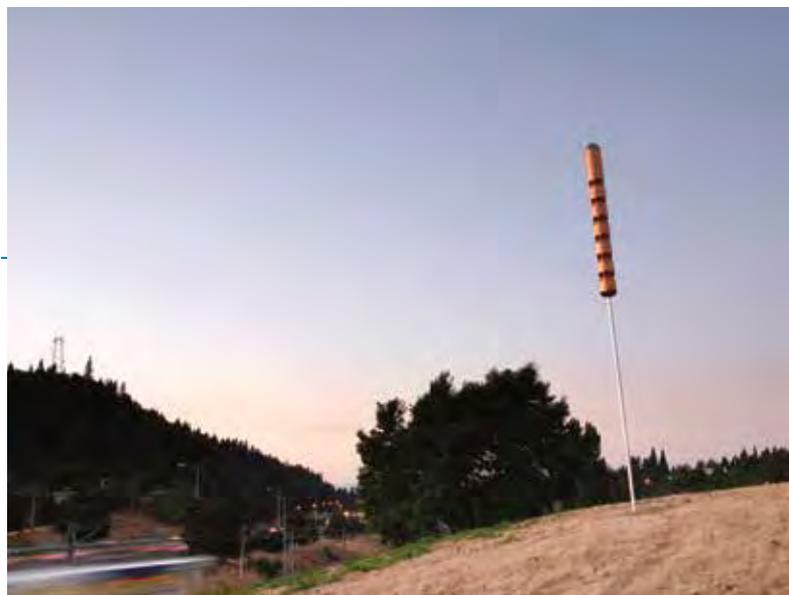
art that is as close as possible to sustaining life. It’s art that aspires to make the act of daily living and of sustaining daily life the masterpiece artwork.”

## HEALING THE CITY

Young’s concept of artwork that sustains life provides context for the Portland Acupuncture Project. Both the artist and his collaborators in the planning department are loosely interested in healing the city and its citizens. “When we think of our own health, we think of it as stopping at our skin,” Kuby says. “I wanted to blur that reality. What you’re eating, what you’re breathing, your stress level—all of those things related to the health of the city have a direct impact on the health of your body. There’s no separation.”

In choosing sites for the project, Kuby bore this healing mission in mind. A “needle” installed at Portland’s Waterfront Park, for instance, was titled *Swimmable River* and drew attention to progress toward reducing the Willamette’s toxic load. *Space In-Between* raised awareness of Gateway Green, a proposed 35-acre recreation area that neighborhood activists hope to establish on an abandoned tract of land that is encircled and orphaned by two major freeways.

Kuby sees a direct parallel between his work as an artist, drawing attention to such spaces and projects with sculptural interventions, and the work of the planning commission. “Planners are already thinking and looking at the connection between city planning, the



ABOVE: Adam Kuby’s *Space In-Between*, part of the Portland Acupuncture Project, highlights Gateway Green, 35 acres between two interstate highways. City officials and activists are working to incorporate the land into the region’s web of trails and green spaces. OPPOSITE: *Streetcar Desire* calls attention to the site of the future Portland-Milwaukie MAX Light Rail Clinton St. Station, slated to open in 2015, and how better public transit—and overall circulation—is essential to Portland’s health.

health of the city—the way it works and doesn’t work—and the health of the public. That’s really foremost for them, and this project was a way of making that connection a little more visible.”

An even more deeply collaborative project in Chattanooga, Tennessee, also focuses on the health of the city and its citizens. Main Terrain is a new park, built on a city-owned former brownfield, that links the

city's popular, redeveloped Main Street to its convention center.

The new park is but the latest chapter in a four-decade effort to reinvent the city. By the end of the 1960s, Chattanooga's industrial base had collapsed, leaving behind a polluted and struggling city. But since then, the city has rebuilt itself as a destination for mountain and river sports—and has drawn attention to itself with its redevelopment efforts, funded in large part by area private foundations. These include the restoration of an historic bridge over the Tennessee River, the construction of a popular aquarium, and the revitalization of the urban waterfront.

From the initial planning stages, Main Terrain was designed to do much more than link two successfully redeveloped neighborhoods: for one thing, it needed to incorporate a storm-water treatment function. Planners also wanted the park to serve as an adult playground for the fitness-oriented population of Chattanooga. And public art was incorporated into the redevelopment vision from the outset.

As a result of these required functions, according to Peggy Townsend, director of Public Art Chattanooga, which is a part of

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*—Peggy Townsend, director of Public Art Chattanooga*

the city's Parks and Recreation Department, a diverse and complicated team came together to work on the project: artist Thomas Sayre designed the park, in collaboration with an architect and landscape architect; local private foundations put up a portion of the budget and played a hands-on role in the development; Townsend helped win a \$250,000 ArtPlace grant for the project, and helped guide the process; the Parks and Recreation Department staff were key players; Public Works helped develop the water-treatment functions; and PlayCore, a national playground equipment manufacturer based in Chattanooga, contributed consulting staff to the effort.

“The partner list is huge,” says Townsend. “It was a diverse group, in that it wasn't only art-, park-, and landscape-oriented.” Her posi-

tion within the Parks and Recreation Department is key, not only because it gives the public art program access to the contract machinery of the city, but because “public art is seen as part of what the city does every day, instead of an add-on.”

## FUNCTIONAL AESTHETICS

The end result of the planning effort is a sculpture park that doubles as a cross-training outdoor fitness area.

Main Terrain consists of a long, narrow strip of land, and Sayre's design takes advantage of this shape by incorporating a running track around the edge of the park. The main sculptural feature is a bridge-like structure that can be manipulated by users of the park. “It spins on ball bearings,” explains Sayre, “and it takes some effort to move these 32-foot-long trusses. There's a very real exercise component to the artwork.” PlayCore, the playground equipment company, designed and installed prototype adult fitness equipment to round out the training offerings.

The storm-water component consists of shallow, slowly draining ponds that divert up to 1.5 million gallons of water per year out of the city's sewer system and help prevent overflow sewage from exiting the system into the Tennessee River.

“It's not just an ordinary park,” says Chattanooga Parks and Recreation Administrator Larry Zehnder. “We took a brownfield, and we looked at the cutting-edge issues facing the United States—storm runoff and water quality, health and fitness, specifically in terms of obesity—and then developed it into something aesthetically pleasing. It's an aesthetic project that's also functional.”

Incorporating the fitness components into the public artworks may be cutting edge, but it's well within his mission as head of Parks and Recreation, Zehnder says. “We have to look beyond just building greenery, and putting art into these green spaces,” he says. “We are the entity that represents the physical fitness of our population. We have a responsibility to provide for them in a way that's creative and inviting. Hopefully we'll [inspire] some of the couch potatoes.”



LEFT/BEFORE: A 1.72-acre tract of land that once was part of Chattanooga's industrial rail lines sat vacant. RIGHT/AFTER: Today, on the same site, Tom Sayre's Main Terrain provides a vital green space and fitness park for residents and local businesses. Sculptural trusses perched atop concrete pylons are reminiscent of Chattanooga's Walnut Street Bridge. Visitors get a workout by turning them with wheels.



ABOVE: In addition to being an art park, Main Terrain features several adult fitness nodes designed by PlayCore, making it an active and engaging space that helps Chattanooga residents get healthier. BELOW: Community members, civic leaders, and park enthusiasts gather for the grand opening of Main Terrain in January. This multi-functional space was designed to include a storm-water treatment function.

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## THE ART OF CITY-MAKING

St. Paul's Marcus Young makes a distinction between the functional aspects of city-making—street repair or wastewater treatment, for example—that speak principally to the external needs of the population, and the aesthetic or artistic aspects of city-making, which speak to their internal needs. But in projects like Main Terrain and the Portland Acupuncture Project, the lines between these different sets of needs are increasingly blurry.

It's also interesting to consider the notion of urban health—whether environmental health, the health of the citizens, or the overall health of the city—in terms of tried-and-true measures of urban development and public art, such as jobs created, increased private-sector investments, or economic growth. Artists may be uniquely positioned to contribute to a more nuanced “healing effort” in city-making.

For the moment, the collaboration that resulted in Main Terrain is having an impact on Chattanooga, measured in part by users who are coming to the park for lounging and for fitness. “When everybody comes together, and the foundations are putting money behind it, and the city is stepping up, it's a validation of what the arts mean,” says Dan Bowers, president of the organization ArtsBuild, Chattanooga's nonprofit arts council. “It's not just art for art's sake. It's making the city stronger.”

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