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Title

Radnor Gateways Enhancement Strategy...Building a Civic Framework [EDRA / Places Awards - Design]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39d959s7>

Journal

Places, 12(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

Building a Civic Framework

Percent for art programs, those that require a portion of the money spent on public or private projects to be used for artwork, often seem like belated acts of civic atonement.

These programs are often rooted in a simple rationale. Designers have done a terrible job of shaping our built environment—our streets, community spaces and important buildings. These places have little spirit, little about them that is memorable or enriching. Since architects, landscape architects, urban designers, planners and engineers have failed to create habitable cities, we need to bring in artists to fix things up.

The Radnor Gateway Enhancement Strategy is cut from another cloth. It reaches beyond art projects to landscape, signage and site planning, demonstrating how they can interact not to hide a problem but to uncover and advance community identity. And it does so at a scale that extends far beyond the visual impact of the freeway to which the program is reacting.

The gateway program emerged not from a percent for art requirement but a special community commitment. Leaders of Radnor Township were fearful of the impact

the Blue Route, a new circumferential freeway, would have. So they raised public and corporate funds to pay for beautifying the corridor and hired the Townscape Institute to coordinate matters. The design team also included the landscape architecture firm of Coe, Lee, Robinson and Roesch, and artist William Reimann.

Radnor, as Townscape Institute principal Ronald Lee Fleming has written, had been a place to pass through long before the Blue Route was built. A Conestoga Indian trail connecting the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers crossed the site before Europeans settled there. In 1794 a turnpike to Lancaster opened, and in 1832 the Columbia (later Pennsylvania) Railroad came through. Nevertheless, the Blue Route posed a challenge because it would divide the township, rather than provide a focal point for its activity.

The first critical decision was to look for opportunities beyond simply beautifying the freeway corridor itself (some soundwalls, interchanges and embankments have been embellished). Rather, the design team chose to organize the project along the town's main highway, which runs perpendicular to the freeway. Thus the intervention involves an integrated vocabulary of sculpture, street furniture, interpretation and landscaping along some four miles of U.S. 30 (Lancaster Pike).

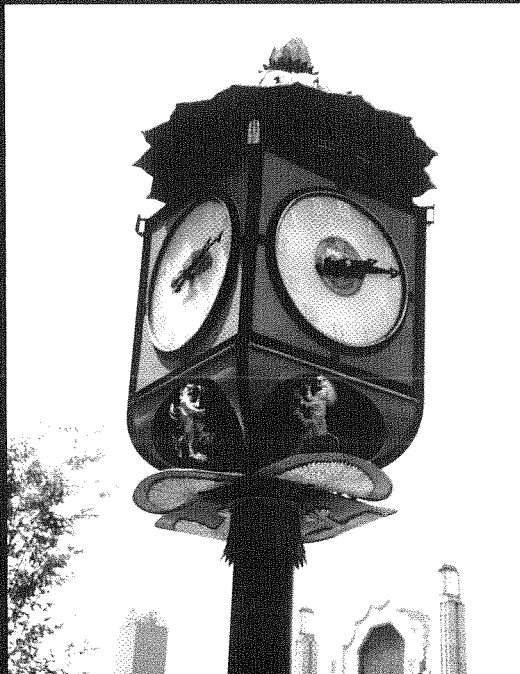
The vocabulary reveals Radnor's history by re-imagining the Neolithic stone landscape of Wales, home of Radnor's original Quaker settlers, as well as recalling the eighteenth-century stone walls and milestones of Lancaster Pike: large rocks excavated from the freeway cut were reused in the landscape in various ways. Moreover, the scale and placement of elements addresses the sequence of experiences people have as they drive through town.

The various visual elements include:

Unkefer Park entry. Motorists entering Radnor from the east encounter a park landscape with a circle of buried stones, which are embraced by a half circle of standing stones and two arcs of flowering trees.

Milestones and markers. Historic 18-inch milestones indicating the distance to Philadelphia were replicated as eight-foot markers. They punctuate movement along

right: The Radnor Time Piece, which Fleming refers to as a European glockenspiel, stands at the Four Corners of Wayne. William Reimann designed the clock and artist Dennis Sparling constructed it out of copper, brass, steel and aluminum. Photo: Ronald Lee Fleming





Left: Main Line Federal Bank transformed its parking lot into a Neolithic barrow. Photo: Ronald Lee Fleming

the street and reinforce the memory of the old stones. Elements of town seal (a lion, wheat sheaf, dragon and tree) were carved on back of markers. At key intersections, rough stones quarried from the freeway excavation are grouped around the cut stone markers.

Bridges and sound barriers. Elements of town seal are stenciled into sound barriers along Blue Route bridges over Lancaster Pike and Conestoga Road.

Wayne Center. At Radnor's main business district, the plan seeks to build an awareness of the facades of key buildings and to animate the streetscape. Benches will reflect details of building facades and the glockenspiel will incorporate elements of the town seal.

The cairn, obelisk and griffin. Three bold elements mark the entrances to the Blue Route. They strengthen the sense of township identity at the point where traffic is concentrated most highly.

A twenty-six foot high cairn, made of excavated rock, stands on a hillock adjacent to a freeway ramp. The griffin, a one hundred- by ninety-foot relief constructed of trap rock bound in wire, is located next to another ramp, and is powerfully visible to motorists along the freeway.

Just east of the freeway, a new park (on the site of a cleared gas station and tire store) incorporates some thirty large excavated rocks arranged in an undulating barrow design. At the apex is a twenty-foot obelisk, carved with the town seal and the quote from Euripides: "Child of a blind old man, Antigone, to what place have we come, and to what sort of people?"

Beyond Beautification

The improvements have given the township and local businesses impetus to make further changes. They served as the starting point for a broader design review effort that would give the town more leverage over corporate franchises.

That process has had several clear results. For example, Sunoco, headquartered in the township, agreed to change its signs and provide landscaping according to town guidelines. Owners of four local Sunoco stations have agreed to change their signs and canopies and to upgrade landscaping. Other chains, such as Urban Outfitters, Kenny Rogers Roasters, Blockbuster Video and Taco Bell, have also adapted their standard signs or architecture.

The improvements have also spurred a further landscaping and lighting plan. In one project, high school students were recruited to plant bulbs on school property. The township has already planted eighty trees near the school and solicited several hundred thousand dollars of corporate contributions for landscaping along the arc of corporate office buildings that curve around the school. Villanova University has responded with its own landscape plan, and two of three churches along U.S. 30 have complied with plan's encouragement to light their edifices.

And the project has clearly been taken to heart by at least some residents. As one police report described a group of men congregating at Unkefer Park: "A group of self-styled druids were reported performing rituals around the stones the summer after they were installed. Caller reported 'a group of people dressed in black with plastic over their heads who appear to be chanting to the rocks.'" The druids, it turns out, "were praying to the rocks for the summer solstice" and were peacefully dispersed by the police.

Thus in terms of its scale and its transformative impact, the Radnor Gateway Enhancement Program has elevated itself above the scope of a typical public art project. It has moved beyond serving as an act of atonement for the scar the new freeway has left behind, and offers an example of how art and design can turn the most ordinary of roads into civic space.