Compelling Storytelling: Integrating Art, Information and Landscape

People search for a sense of place in their surroundings—a collective memory or narrative that connects them through space and time to others. This presentation explores storytelling in several recent landscape-based public art and communication design projects, covering possibilities for integrating art, information and branding for compelling place making.

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize the importance of and opportunities for compelling placemaking through storytelling and the potential for blending identity, art, and information.
2. Identify approaches to storytelling within landscape design along the continuum of communication—from abstract to didactic information.
3. Understand optimal opportunities for integrating artwork and information in the public realm and for setting project parameters.
4. Learn innovative approaches to interpretive design that avoid signage fatigue and convey a project’s unique identity.
1. Why Storytelling?
   a. the purpose and value of stories in design
      i. as a tool in process and form generation;
      ii. public investment, commemoration, community-building, placemaking;
   b. continuum of information: abstract to didactic
      i. art, interpretation, information, identity;
   c. storytelling spaces: from physical location to virtual presence.

2. Early Integration for Compelling Placemaking
   a. finding and refining the story— the ecological significance of water
   b. shaping the project narrative through site-specific public art
   c. final results — form, scale and interaction

3. Reshaping Expectations of Story
   a. evolving client expectations for theme, approach and expression
   b. using the site to develop an enhanced viewer experience and project narrative;
   c. consolidating extensive research into expressive form
   d. final results — form, materiality and text
4. Blending Art and Historical Interpretation
   a. integrated call for public art and interpretive signage:
   b. finding the compelling story in a quiet landscape;
   c. creating a formal approach to outdoor artwork for 40 below:

5. Avoiding Interpretive Signage Fatigue
   a. no one goes to the park to read signs:
      i. if it’s a book on a sign, it should just be a book—or a QR code;
      ii. making the most of images, art and first person narrative;
   b. graphic design techniques that are intended to endure:
      i. simple approaches to text and image;
      ii. materials and processes for longevity in outdoor settings: Digital Diamond,
         Digital Printed Powdercoat (SHi).
6. Information and Identity in Landscape

a. Defining the message—who are you and what do you want to communicate?
   i. communicating collective identity and value in the environment;
   ii. building a unified visual expression in "brand-averse" territory;

b. Finding the right "canvas" in the built environment:
   i. walls, courtyard pavers, benches, pavilion or pool;
   ii. matching the medium to the message;
   iii. not the Gettysburg address: avoiding "tombstone" when you’re carving in stone;

c. Technical details:
   i. typography, layout, languages
   ii. cost drivers and unique solutions that last—sandblasted base/epoxy fill lettering

d. From site-specific to virtual space
   i. building identity through story and landscape
7. 10 Ways to Put Storytelling to Work

i. Create an integrated team early
ii. Be open-minded—the best story might be hidden
iii. Be clear—what is the story and what isn’t?
iv. Who is the audience and why do they care?
v. Find stories with layers and depth
vi. If it’s a book put it in the library
vii. Create opportunities for personal connection within your story
viii. Use the story to get the community on board
ix. Don’t forget the story after schematic design
x. Choose the right media, tone and expression

8. Q&A

Jill Anholt is a founder and principal of Jill Anholt Studio established in 1998, focused on the creation of art in public places. Current projects include two large integrated works within the new design of Lansdowne Park in Ottawa, and a series of integrated artworks within a new public plaza in Vancouver. Along with her artistic practice, Jill is also an Instructor at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver and a Public Art Strategist who has created Public Art Master Plans for a number of new developments and facilities in both Canada and the United States.

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Susan Mavor, SEGD, is a principal and founding partner at PUBLIC: Architecture + Communication with over 18 years experience as an independent design consultant on communication projects for museums, higher education, not-for-profit cultural groups and corporate clients. With a background in theatre design, branding and environmental graphic design, Susan’s practice is at the intersection of information and the built environment. Recent projects involve the design of identity, placemaking, wayfinding and interpretative information within landscape architecture projects.

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