

Latest public art project highlights the lack of local applicants

BY LYNN HORSLEY - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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Iowa artist David Dahlquist's preliminary concept for the East Patrol art calls for a colorful tiled gateway to the police station. The concept will now be refined and may be altered in the final design. SUBMITTED DRAWING

Kansas City's biggest public art commission in years has just been awarded to an Iowa artist for a creation to enhance the new East Patrol police station.

But the project has also highlighted a recurring problem. Almost no local artists even bothered to try for it.

With 61 applicants for the lucrative commission, paid for with Kansas City tax dollars, only one artist was from the Kansas City area.

The situation has reignited a debate that surfaces nearly every time the city awards a major One Percent for Art project. Why don't more local artists participate, and should the city do more to encourage that participation?

"When you see only one (local) person submitting on a significant public art project, I think that raises concerns," Councilman John Sharp said before the City Council approved the \$425,000 contract last Thursday with Des Moines artist David Dahlquist.

Sharp and several other council members — as well as some artists — said the situation shows the city isn't doing nearly enough to recruit or cultivate local artists for its One Percent for Art program.

Council members were especially concerned because East Patrol is the most expensive public art commission since the \$1.3 million Sprint Center video project in 2006 and the \$1 million Bartle Hall ballroom sculptural

pots installation in 2007, which both were done by out-of-town artists.

Public Art Administrator Porter Arneill agreed but pointed out that Dahlquist was selected in part because of his commitment to involve locals, including urban youths, in creating the art for the new police station at 27th Street and Prospect Avenue.

Arneill has argued strenuously against establishing a local preference requirement for the program, which allocates 1 percent from Kansas City's taxpayer-funded construction budgets. It's in the city's best interest, he says, to showcase high-quality national talent, and many factors influence why more local artists don't participate.

"It's more complex than people realize," Arneill said.

Among the factors:

Public art is a very different skill from gallery paintings or sculpture. It involves knowing how to work with architects and engineers, managing big budgets and building something to be maintained for years, often outdoors.

It usually requires experienced artists who can obtain \$1 million or more in liability insurance. Arneill said Kansas City's excellent Avenue of the Arts program has allowed 69 local artists to gain experience through smaller, temporary works. But while some have pursued successful public art careers, Arneill said many others decided it's not their chosen field.

Arneill communicates extensively with local artists about public art opportunities and made an extra effort to let local minority artists know about East Patrol. But he said that in 12 years on the job, he has had very limited time to devote to assisting artists with professional development.

Still, council members say they want to see more outreach and nurturing of local artists to foster an arts community that can compete at this high level. A city manager's spokesman said that will be a priority for the new Office of Creative Services, which was funded for two positions in this year's city budget.

Of 39 projects approved since 1992, Arneill said 12 local artist teams were involved, including most recently the steel sculpture "Barnacles" by Rie Egawa and Burgess Zbryk located just north of Cosentino's in downtown's entertainment district.

Other prominent projects involving artists with Kansas City ties included the \$265,000 "Bull Wall" in the West Bottoms by Robert Morris and the \$200,000 light-and-sound work for the 11th and Oak streets garage by James Woodfill.

Still, Arneill acknowledged that the most high-profile projects have generally been done by outsiders, including the \$1.1 million "Sky Stations" atop Bartle Hall, completed in 1994 by New York artist R.M. Fischer.

Arneill also said only 5 to 10 percent of applicants for any given project are local.

Councilman Ed Ford said he thought the One Percent for Art program's original motivation was supposed to be promoting local artists, and that's not how it turned out.

"There's a disconnect," he said.

But former City Council member Katheryn Shields, who was instrumental in pushing the public art program in the early 1990s, now says that wasn't the intent. She realizes it is local tax dollars but said the goal was to bring the best art to the city, whether national or local.

"The artists are self-selecting out for those who have the actual capacity," she said.

Woodfill, a nationally recognized artist and associate professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, agreed with Shields.

"Many artists here do think the city should put more emphasis on local artists in the program. I do not," Woodfill wrote in an email, responding to questions from The Star. "I sincerely believe that the most important role of the One Percent program is to find profound and provocative art to inject into our public realm."

Woodfill said he thinks Kansas City's application process is efficient and streamlined and the city "does a great job of helping artists jump through all these hoops."

But NedRa Bonds, a textiles artist from Kansas City, Kan., who was on the panel that recommended Dahlquist, said she raised concerns at the time about the dearth of local artists who applied.

"I said to Porter, 'You could avoid this whole situation if you would grow your own people. There are many artists in this community who could do that kind of work if you would help them do it,'" Bonds said.

Tom Bean, an architect and chairman of the Municipal Art Commission, has high hopes for the new Office of Creative Services.

"The council talks about evangelizing the program out into the community," Bean said. "With two more people on staff in that office, you might be able to do that and certainly do it better."

Despite concerns about the lack of local art applicants, City Council members said they genuinely liked Dahlquist's preliminary concept for a colorful, tiled gateway to the new East Patrol station. The concept will now be refined into a final design.

Dahlquist, who is white, said he fully intends to involve the predominantly black neighborhoods near the project, just as he has done with diverse and minority communities on public art works in Nashville, Tenn., and Omaha, Neb. Locals may well create much of the art on the gateway's ceramic tiles.

“I look for ways of directly involving people in the area to inform the project,” Dahlquist said.

Still, Municipal Art Commission member Nia Richardson, who is black, said this selection has demonstrated the need to nurture more local minority and female artists to participate in the program.

“Hopefully it can help start that conversation,” she said. “How can we do better, especially if there are more projects coming east of Troost.”

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