

From the Chattanooga Times Editorial Page
October 27, 2009

Priceless value of public art

By Rich Boyd

It was just over a year ago that this city played host to a meeting of national leaders in the arts. Some 400 arts professionals traveled to Chattanooga for the annual meeting of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies.

The Tennessee Arts Commission invited this group to come to Chattanooga to see firsthand what you accomplished with your riverfront: the expansions of the Tennessee Aquarium and the Hunter Museum of American Art, the exhibit improvements at Children's Discovery Museum, the creation of beautiful new public spaces, the art that was central to all of it, and how you raised the funds and built it on time and under budget.

Those 400 guests went away amazed at what you have accomplished here and how you made the arts the focus in re-imagining your downtown and re-developing your riverfront, and how you have placed value on public art as the visible connecting sense of space, place and community.

Now I understand there is some conversation under way about the interpretation of a Chattanooga city ordinance as it relates to public art. There is a similar discussion taking place in Nashville about their percent for public art program.

Far be it from me to tell your city leaders how to spend tax dollars, but I cannot refrain from talking about the value of public art in our everyday lives, especially in a city whose image, whose very identity, so embraces creativity.

Consider this: We have allowed our country to come to a time and place where we cannot tolerate being in the presence of "difference." Announcements are still made on New York City subway platforms to please report any suspicious behavior or suspicious individuals to the nearest authority.

Where there was once a sense of trust in America, there is now an unfortunate undertone of hostility and suspicion, causing us to be wary and suspicious of people who may look differently than we do.

And then, there are the arts. What the arts do — and what they have always done — is invite people to come together in a spirit of generosity and curiosity, and to look at ourselves and those around us with interest and explore the things that divide us, and celebrate the things that bring us together.

Governments do not make films, write books, compose music or create pieces of public art. But what governments can do, should do, must do, is encourage the creativity that both arises from and fosters diversity.

That is real public value, and if we ever needed that value in this country, we need it now. It brings honor to all and violence to none.

Here is why the arts, including public art, are important: they matter. Public art matters because it questions the way we look at the world; because it offers different explanations of the world we live in.

A nation, a state, a city without art would be an entity that stopped talking to itself, stopped asking questions, stopped dreaming. It would have lost interest in the past and would lack curiosity about the future.

In a keynote address recently to the grant makers in the Arts National Conference in Brooklyn, Rocco Landesman, the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, laid out the guiding principle that will inform his work at the NEA, which he summed up in two words: "Art works." In that speech he cited examples of where art works in America. His second example was, and I quote: "Chattanooga, Tennessee has been transformed by its arts district."

Chattanooga is on the national stage because of your commitment to the arts. Four hundred arts leaders last year witnessed it, and the new NEA chair, speaking from a national platform, just affirmed it.

You do not need to hear from me that the power of the arts is immeasurable, but it is. And you don't need me to tell you the worth of the arts is priceless, but it is. And that is why you should honor your local commitment to what has made this city special.

Rich Boyd is the executive director of the Tennessee Arts Commission. His remarks here are excerpted from his address to the Chattanooga Rotary Club last week. Mr. Boyd's email is Rich.Boyd@Tn.gov