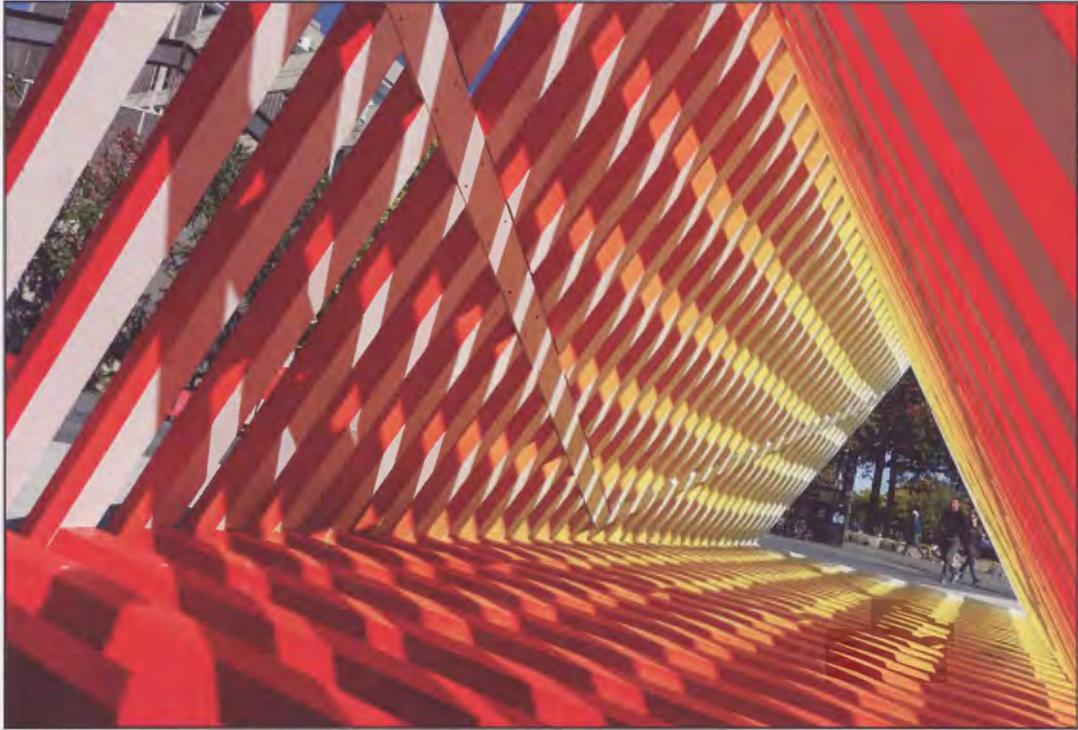


The University Campus as a Space for Public Art



A View Through *Warming Warning*

By David Buckley Borden
& Aaron M. Ellison

On our daily walks through Harvard's campus, the public art and art spaces still catch our eye. From rotating student work inside the campus center to temporary pieces on the Harvard Yard, the campus evolves with each new installation. As stunning, evocative, or poignant as these works may be, what exactly do these installations and work spaces tell us about the university as a space for public art? Are they for everyone or just for those with an ID to enter the ivied grounds? How does space for art on college campuses throughout the greater Boston area differ in accessibility, content, intentionality, or associated programming from the public art situated in public-owned spaces?

As highlighted throughout this issue of *BAR*, the greater Boston area has many fine examples of public art and programming—enough to fill an entire magazine with content. But the same geographic area that boasts a growing interest for art in public places also has fifty-two colleges and universities whose campuses are (at least partially) open to the public. The artworks and architectural gems that are scattered across these campuses include temporary installations and permanent acquisitions. An increasing number of these universities are trying their hand at creating accessible spaces for art by facilitating research, curatorial opportunities, and special programming while providing spaces for

design, prototyping, production, and conservation of public art. In many ways, colleges and universities have taken on several of the roles and responsibilities historically shouldered by museums.

When artists work with a university, they can feel like they just won the lottery, and yet they are still subject to university bureaucracy and the many campus voices that must weigh in on the project. They may receive space, financial support, and a wide range of opportunities for researching, developing, and executing temporary or permanent installations. On the other hand, there are taxes to pay in terms of gaining access, learning who the key players are, and ensuring that the work dovetails with the institution's vision and mission.

Allow us to introduce ourselves, as we are not your average artists or commentators. We are both Harvard affiliates: Aaron is the senior research fellow in ecology based at the Harvard Forest in Petersham, Massachusetts; David is a graduate of the Graduate School of Design and Charles Bullard fellow, associate, and designer-in-residence at the Harvard Forest.¹ David also is a current participant in Now + There's Public Art Accelerator. Together, we create installations that use ecologically informed art and design to communicate scientific ideas and foster discussion, cultural cohesion, and activism around pressing environmental issues. Last year, we worked together to install *Warming Warning*, a public art installation that provided an immersive visualization of climate change on Harvard's campus. Our reflections on public art on university campuses are refracted not only through the prisms of our own experiences, but also by discussions with supporters and curators of public art in, on, and around community spaces and college campuses in Boston and Cambridge.²

Is Art on Campus Public Art?

There is no wholly agreed-upon definition of "public art" or even the "public" space where art is located. Good public art should not be sculptural "plop art"³ or large murals that are "so universal as to be meaningless... [and that] might have been airlifted by helicopter onto a scaffold to paint, and then hoisted back in the air without ever touching the ground."⁴ The manifold examples of public plop art are large, solitary, usually abstract sculptures or insipid murals produced by an artist who has had previous success in museums or galleries. Oftentimes, this notion of previous success at an institutional level safely qualifies their art for a place on a city-owned plaza or wall, in a random space on a university campus, or in the atrium of a shopping mall or corporate headquarters.

In thinking about public art, we resonate most closely with ideas expressed by Christopher Ketcham, the newly appointed associate curator of public art at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Drawing on his research into the production of site-specific minimalist sculpture reflecting the social and material conditions of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s, Ketcham maintains that "successful, transformative public art should be site-specific and contextual, sensitive to and complementing its surroundings...intruding on and rupturing our everyday experience [and] making us think about the environment and the space that we're in, even if just for a moment." In the extreme, Ketcham argues, it should "change the shape of the public space [in which it is placed] and produce a fundamentally different idea of the space itself." On MIT's campus, Antony Gormley's *Chord* provides an example of site-specific work within a permanent university installation setting. The four-story, polyhedron sculpture transforms the space in which it is placed from a nondescript stairwell into a location for meditation on the unity of organic and inorganic forms. Situated at the intersection of hallways between science, humanities, and mathematics departments, the sculpture was placed with its viewers in mind.⁵

Art installed on a collegiate campus can certainly change the shape and perception of the space, but is it really public? Many places on urban campuses are on or adjacent to public thoroughfares and are seemingly as open to the public as any city-owned park or square. Yet, they are the private property of the institution. On MIT's campus, some public artworks can be seen by anyone traveling through campus, while others require the viewer to arrange access from one of the university's museums. Works like Mark Di Suvero's *Aesop's Fables II* are accessible to a huge population because of the work's location on heavily trafficked lawn, but there are also works (like Antony Gormley's *Chord*) in hallways, libraries, interior courtyards, and dorms that, while technically open to the public, require special access for those without a key card. As Lillian Hsu, director of public art at the Cambridge Arts Council, remarked, individuals who are not students, staff, or faculty of a college or university may not perceive campus public spaces as truly "public" (i.e., open to them) even if the university has expressly identified its public art collection as open to all. Although we think that artworks on university campuses intended to be public art fit within a reasonable definition of

(opposite) David Buckley Borden and Aaron M. Ellison, *Warming Warning*, Harvard Plaza, 2018. Photo courtesy of David Buckley Borden.



Mark di Suvero, *Aesop's Fables, II*, 2005. Installation view in front of Frank Gehry's Ray and Maria Stata Center, 2004. Photo courtesy of MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Antony Gormley, *Chord*, 2015. Installation view, Building 2, MIT. Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art Funds. Photo by Peter Vanderwarker. Courtesy of the artist and MIT List Visual Arts Center.

"public art," we also think universities that support and display such artworks should take extra steps to site them in accessible locations and communicate their availability to everyone, not just the ID-carrying "campus community."

Impact, Accessibility, and Inclusion

Our experience installing *Warming Warning* (2018) highlights the public-private duality of art installed on an urban campus.⁶ The project was intentionally designed to take maximal advantage of a public space and "intrude upon" people's daily comings and goings. It also was intended to encourage discussion and promote activism about climate change and to be visually arresting. Among the options Harvard suggested for siting *Warming Warning*, the Science Center Plaza was an ideal location. At first glance, this plaza—just southwest of the intersection of Oxford and Kirkland Streets—appears to be part of the university.⁷ Steps away from the wrought-iron gates of Harvard Yard, the Science Center Plaza functions as a connector across campus and as an outdoor communal space. On weather-permitting days, the plaza becomes a busy destination, welcoming daily food trucks, a farmer's market, benches, tables, and space for student demonstrations. The plaza itself is a three-block-long bridge that sits above six lanes of traffic on Cambridge Street.⁸ The space is owned by the City of Cambridge yet managed by Harvard as open space for the city.

The plaza was designed by Stoss Landscape Urbanism and completed in 2013 to replace an underutilized, aging field with a highly flexible space that would welcome the public with a range of dynamic, year-round programming.⁹ Amy Whitesides, one of the directors at Stoss, told us that the plaza was meant to be an active space open to anyone from within or outside the university and to act as a counterpoint to the more private, gated Harvard Yard. Programmed activities, public circulation, and emergency access were principal drivers of the design. The plaza is an ideal centralized location for student gathering, yet also serves as a central public connector for pedestrians and bicyclists commuting to and from workplaces in Harvard Square, Central Square, and elsewhere in Cambridge and Somerville. Its north edge is an eight-foot-wide fire lane that provides emergency access for the Cambridge Fire Department station located just east of the plaza.

The location, design, and continuous buzz of activity on the Harvard Plaza really appealed to us. Harvard Common Spaces had allocated us space adjacent and parallel to the fire lane in front of the

Science Center. But in a last-minute design change, we rotated *Warming Warning* 23° off this straight east-west line to maximize the installation's visual impact with respect to the sun's daily traverse. While maintaining emergency egress, this change physically encroached about six feet into the space occupied by the farmer's market that uses the plaza in the summer. Common Spaces wanted us to move the eight-ton sculpture back to its defined orientation, but the farmers were delighted with the additional traffic that the sculpture brought to the market.

Public participation was further encouraged through a range of site-specific programming, including interpretive signage,¹⁰ an opening-day set of public talks on art inspiring action about climate change,¹¹ and curriculum development and other art-science activities with Cambridge public school teachers.¹² Finally, the juxtaposition of *Warming Warning* with Harvard's Science Center drew attention to the relationship between the settled science of climate change and the unsettled public response to the set of choices confronting us now if we want to mitigate or even reverse its effects.¹³

Permitting and Logistics

Public art cannot be sited at the whim of the artists. Rather, locations for public art are constrained by zoning, planning board requirements, property boundaries, and ownership. For example, both the Cambridge Planning Board and Harvard were involved in permitting *Warming Warning* because the Science Center Plaza is city-owned yet managed by Harvard. The 350-square-foot footprint of *Warming Warning* was large enough to require filing for a building permit. As it was located atop a bridge, a structural engineering analysis and stamped engineering drawings were also required. Although the Planning Board eventually ruled that a building permit was not required for this sculpture, the engineering analysis revealed that our initial idea for making this a "walk-through" installation was incompatible (at its designed size, determined in large part by available materials) with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Rather than doubling the size of *Warming Warning* to permit added ramps and handrails inside the sculpture, we explicitly restricted walk-through access for everyone while emphasizing the visual "walk-around" experience of the large-scale graphics through information-rich signage. The flat plaza further allowed for access by both non-motorized and motorized accessibility devices.

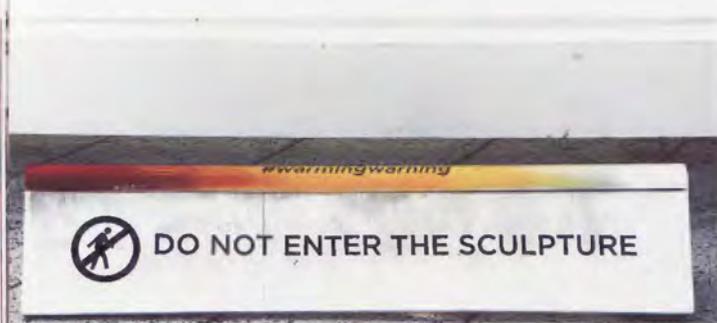
Content and Risk, Intention and Process

Elsewhere in this issue, public art scholar Cher Krause Knight writes that proposals for public art installations often founder on a matrix of social and political entanglements or clashing shareholder agendas. For various reasons, universities might be able to take more risks with the content and intention of public art than municipalities or municipal organizations because decisions about pieces to exhibit on campuses are usually made by a relatively small number of curators and university administrators rather than by larger groups of stakeholders, community members, and public service workers. Ty Furman, the managing director of the Boston University Arts Initiative, emphasized that for the curators, faculty, and administrators involved in commissioning public art for their campuses, the "works have the same value intellectually and academically as an academic symposium on the same issue." He adds, "Through both university-based public artwork and academic symposia, scholars, practitioners, and concerned individuals come together to think about and reflect on current perceptions and ideas about a particular topic." And as Bree Edwards, the first director of Harvard's new ArtLab, noted, university-based public art and campus symposia both "create opportunities to bring people together around polarizing issues such as race, immigration, or safety, in less confrontational spaces than a public hearing or demonstration."

Edwards also pointed out that "universities can support production by providing artists with access to fabrication resources or intellectual expertise." She is particularly excited that the ArtLab will have an artists' residency program that supports research, process, and engagements in public space, whether or not it results in an actual installation. More generally, universities can support through short-term and long-term

Exterior View, Harvard Art Lab,
2019. Photo by Iwan Baan.





Stoss Landscape Urbanism, Harvard Plaza, aerial view with tent, 2013. Photo courtesy of and © Stoss Landscape Urbanism.

David Buckley Borden and Aaron M. Ellison, *Warming Warning*, installation view, Harvard Plaza, 2018. Photo courtesy of Aaron M. Ellison.

David Buckley Borden and Aaron M. Ellison, *Warming Warning*, DO NOT ENTER Sign, Harvard Plaza, 2018. Photo courtesy of Aaron M. Ellison.

residencies or permanent teaching appointments—the process of research and creation of new knowledge and ways to communicate it, not just the product that an artist delivers at the end. Our work with *Warming Warning* reflected such a commitment by the Harvard Forest, Harvard’s Office for Sustainability, and Harvard Common Spaces to support public art underlain by scientific research. We all worked together to test the aesthetics and the effectiveness of different visual representations of scientific data.

Concluding Remarks

Colleges and universities aren’t altruistic organizations, and each has its own agenda in supporting certain public art projects and not others. All the while, these institutions of higher education are openly dedicated to thoughtful and rigorous free inquiry into both timely and timeless topics. Although some public artworks installed at universities were foisted on them by loyal alumni and others to flaunt wealth or connections to renowned artists, the best public art at universities reflects not only their commitment to education and engagement, but also their ability to support artists throughout the process of ideating, designing, and producing transformative works. In our view, successful public art represents a partnership that includes numerous stakeholders who use the process of its creation as a means to learn more about themselves, their community, and their society. Pamela Worden (the first director of the Cambridge Arts Council and the founder of UrbanArts, Inc.) made a strong case that public art can serve as an educational tool to benefit the students, staff, and faculty at the universities and residents in the surrounding neighborhoods; the resulting conversations can bring these groups, which historically may have viewed each other with distrust, together. In cities like Boston and Cambridge, where the colleges and universities have, for centuries, fostered a climate of free, open, and civil discourse, public art has a place both on the town common and on the collegiate campus. //

1 Learn more about Aaron, David, and their work at <https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/aaron-ellison> and <http://david-buckleyborden.com>.

2 Interviewees included: Bree Edwards (director of Harvard University's ArtLab), Ty Furman (managing director of the Boston University Arts Initiative), Lillian Hsu (director of public art at the Cambridge Arts Council), Christopher Ketcham (incoming associate curator of public art at MIT), Cat Mazza (associate professor in the Art Department, University of Massachusetts-Boston), Amy Whitesides (director of Stoss Landscape Urbanism), and Pamela Worden (the first director of the Cambridge Arts Council and the founder of UrbanArts, Inc.). We thank them all for thoughtful discussions about public art that continue to inform our thinking on the topic.

3 Defined by Harriet F. Senie in her 1992 book *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy*. New York: Oxford University Press. Senie is the co-founder of Public Art Dialogue and is a professor of art history at CUNY.

4 Murray Whyte, "For public art in the Boston area, competing interests and big questions." *Boston Globe* (27 July 2019) published 28 July 2019.

5 Susan Stewart writing on Antony Gormley's *Chord*: <http://www.antonygormley.com/resources/essay-item/id/156>

6 <https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/warming-warning/>

7 Harvard's Science Center (built 1970–1973, renovated 2001–2004) was designed by Josep Lluís Sert. It was funded by Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid Land Camera, whose shape is echoed in the building's stepped design. In addition to offices, classrooms, lecture halls, teaching laboratories, a library, the Science Center includes a public food court and a free museum exhibiting Harvard's Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments.

8 Architectural historian Bainbridge Bunting called the rerouting of Cambridge Street and the construction of the bridge to accommodate the Science Center "the most important improvement in Cambridge since the construction of Memorial Drive in the 1890s." Bainbridge Bunting (1985) *Harvard: An Architectural History*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

9 www.net/projects/campus-institutional/harvard-plaza. Accessed 28 July 2019

10 Developed by Clarisse Hart (Harvard Forest) and Colin Durrant (Harvard Office for Sustainability).

11 Organized by Clarisse Hart (Harvard Forest) and the Harvard College Conservation Society.

12 Organized and facilitated by Angie UyHam (founder, Cambridge Educators Design Lab) and Flossie Chua (project director, Project Zero/Harvard Graduate School of Education).

13 Coincidentally, *Warming Warning* opened the same week that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its report stating unequivocally that limiting global warming to 1.5 °C (2.7 °F) above pre-industrial levels will require dramatic cuts in carbon emissions by 2030. See Jeff Tollefson (2018). "IPCC says limiting global warming to 1.5 °C will require drastic action." *Nature* volume 562, pp. 172–173.



David Buckley Borden and Aaron M. Ellison, *Warming Warning*, assembly, Harvard Plaza, 2018. Photo courtesy of David Buckley Borden.

David Buckley Borden & Aaron M. Ellison, *Warming Warning*, installation with Cambridge Public School teachers, Harvard Plaza, 2018. Photo courtesy of Flossie Chua/Project Zero.