

1999 Rudy Bruner Award

SILVER
medal winner



ARTScorpsLA

Los Angeles, California

This is an excerpt from:

COMMITMENT TO PLACE:
URBAN EXCELLENCE & COMMUNITY

BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

ROBERT SHIBLEY

with

EMILY AXELROD, JAY FARBSTEIN, AND RICHARD WENER

1999 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

Graphic Design:
Caronchi Industries
14 Sullivan Street
Charlestown, MA 02129
www.caronchi.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-76056
ISBN: 1-890286-02-8

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130 Prospect Street
Cambridge, MA 01239

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SILVER MEDAL WINNER

ARTScorpsLA



ARTScorpsLA AT A GLANCE

WHO MADE THE SUBMISSION?

- ARTScorpsLA, Tricia Ward, Founder and Director.

WHAT IS ARTSCORPSLA?

- A series of art parks designed, built, and used by local community residents in collaboration with a nonprofit public art and educational organization associated with the University of Southern California.
- Approximately 28 murals throughout the city, created as part of a citywide graffiti abatement program.
- An effort to revitalize local communities in response to the civil unrest of the early 1990s.
- A redefinition of territory, public space, and ownership under the aegis of a private nonprofit organization.
- A training ground and an open cultural and educational space for youth.
- A collaboration among multiple constituencies who have an interest in community open space, arts, education, and youth development.



CHRONOLOGY

- 1992
Tricia Ward founds ARTScorpsLA and securs an unauthorized garbage dump as the site for the first project, La Tierra de la Culebra.
- 1995
La Culebra opens.
- 1995
Spiraling Orchard, another youth-built art park, also initiated on abandoned land in Temple-Beaudry.
- 1996
ARTScorpsLA takes over abandoned building in Chinatown to develop as office/ studio/ workshop.
- 1997
ARTScorpsLA asked to assist with Koreatown art park (The Francis Avenue Community Garden).
- 1994-1999
Walls of Reclamation, a citywide mural project, initiated at the request of the County Open Space & Parks District as part of a graffiti abatement program.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

Individuals who were interviewed are marked with an asterisk [*]

ARTScorpsLA

- *Tricia Ward, Founder and Director, ARTScorpsLA

City of Los Angeles

Commission for Children, Youth, and Their Families

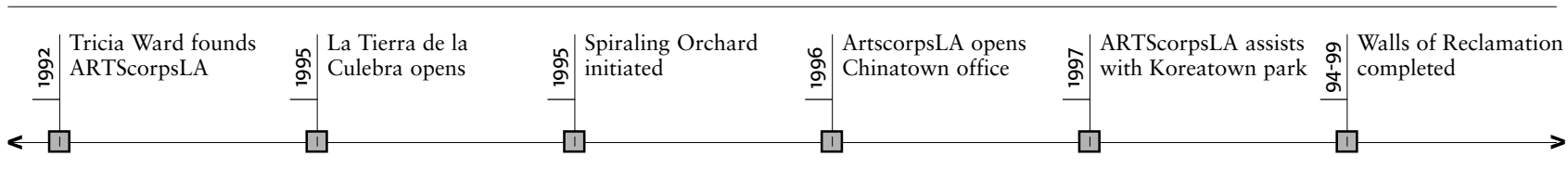
- *Olivia Mitchell, Assistant Director
- *Anne Broussard, Director of Child Care

Councilmember (1st District) Mike Hernandez and his staff:

- *Eduardo Reyes, Chief of Staff
- *Edward Rodriguez, Chief Planning Director
- *David Marquez, Chief Deputy of Legislation and Policy
- *Michael Lee, Senior Field Deputy
- *Karen Lee, Chinatown Field Deputy

Cultural Affairs Department

- *Carla Fantozzi, now Education Manager Museum of Television and Radio.



Metropolitan Transportation Authority

*Alan Nakagawa, Senior Public Arts Officer; former member of ARTScorpsLA's board

Architects/Designers

*John Maroney, Tricia Ward
*Roger Hong, AIA, architect

Funding Agencies

ARCO
California Arts Council
*Cheryl Mendoza, Senior Program Officer, California Community Foundation
Cal-Trans Mitigation
Federal Summer Youth Employment
*Karen Lewis, Chair of Philanthropy, Footlighters Foundation
*Nancy Grey, Director, Foundation for the Arts in the Environment
*Gwen Walden, Program Manager, Getty Trust Fund: Multicultural Intern Program
*Josephine Ramirez, Project Associate, Local and Comparative Research, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities
*Elva Lima, GTE Foundation, Downtown Commission
Los Angeles General Services Department and City Council
Los Angeles Community Redevelopment and Community Development Agencies
Los Angeles Shares
Los Angeles Conservation Corps
Los Angeles County Commission on the Arts
National Service/AmeriCorps
NEA
Sears Foundation

Urban Resources Partnership
Youth Arts and Cultural Affairs Department

Cooperating Organizations

*Bruce Saito, Executive Director, Los Angeles Conservation Corps' Clean & Green Program
Los Angeles Unified School District
Building Up Los Angeles /National Service Commission/ AmeriCorps
Eureka Communities/Fellow
Los Angeles Alliance for a Drug Free Community

VOLUNTEERS AND INTERNS

Aaron Zaima, USC student, volunteer, employee, and Getty intern
*Julie Bach, Jamie Kim, Regan Duffy, current interns
Claudia McDonnell, Public Art Studies graduate student at USC, volunteer
*Margaret Garcia, artist who taught at la Culebra

Community Participants

*Cindy Medina-Diama, local resident
Sal Oseguero, original volunteer, later co-director of Youth Leadership Council (an institutional body of ARTScorpsLA)
*Jaime ("Vyal") Reyes, mural and spray-can artist. Professional consultant
*Margaret Crawford, Professor of Urban Studies and Theory at Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCIARC)

Others

Carol Goldstein, Professor of Cultural Planning, UCLA
*Inmo, Chinatown Gallery Owner
*Karen Mack, Program Director, Community Partners

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

HISTORY

La Culebra

In 1992, in the wake of civil unrest and violence following the first Rodney King police trial, Los Angeles searched for ways to heal and find reconciliation among its communities. While the business community focused on coordinating philanthropic and grant money through the quasi-public program Rebuild LA, the arts community assisted the Los Angeles Arts Commission in raising money through “Re-Wing LA” (as in helping the City of Angels to once again take flight). Like so many post-riot interventions, these efforts were seen largely as one-shot workshops where artists came into the community, did a project with local residents, and left.

Tricia Ward participated in Re-Wing LA, but was dissatisfied with the “quick-fix” vision it embodied. A veteran of the politically active New York City “Green Guerrillas” and Roosevelt Park Seniors Coalition, she rejected the idea that communities needed “healing,” a prescription she described as patronizing and naïve. Rather, she felt, the recent outbreaks of violence had been about the community’s lack of voice. True healing could only be the result of democracy, of communities gaining a voice and taking control of their neighborhoods.

Guided by this belief, Ward disengaged herself from Re-Wing LA and initiated a separate project, what would later become La Tierra de la Culebra (the land of the serpent). In both New York and LA, Ward’s art had been focused on the use of fallow land; for la Culebra she continued to follow her strengths. Identifying a derelict parcel in her Highland Park neighborhood (east of downtown), Ward gathered young artists from within the immediate neighborhood and began to work with them to clean up the trash that littered the land. This activity began before any permission had been obtained from the owner, but a 9-month use agreement was soon negotiated.

Ward quickly mobilized a group of about 35 youth volunteers to help her transform a site that was, in her words, “a ruin.” She felt that the transformation would be most effective if hinged upon a powerful image or symbol. However, she did not select it by herself, as the more typical public artist might. Rather, Ward challenged the youth to find a symbol to represent all the area’s cultures (especially Latino, Asian, and white — few African Americans were in the area) and to be positive and forward looking. She held a series of discussions with the young people, who researched symbols and their meanings, finally agreeing on the Mayan and Asian symbol of the serpent (la Culebra).

The Selection Committee was initially concerned about overtones of cultural appropriation in this act, but these concerns were eased once it became clear that the locals themselves chose the symbol based on interpretations of each cultural heritage. In the symbolic



The La Culebra sculpture is made of found objects from the site, mainly river stones and colorful broken tiles.

economy of the Shoshone tribe (upon whose former lands the site rests), the serpent's head signified knowledge, the body growth and movement, and the tail wisdom. Alternative and equally powerful symbolism was found in the myths of the Aztecs and the Asian cultures. While the accuracy of the appropriation of this symbol can be contested, the fact that the Asian and Latino participants found meanings of value to them is not in question. Interestingly, though the serpent was not a viper, some Christians initially took offense. Although some tension still remains, most friction has since dissipated.

Within six months, the site was cleared and the serpent was constructed out of stone at a very low cost, essentially for materials only. Even materials were inexpensive – the bulk of the stone, for example, came from a dry river bed running through the site. At the winter solstice in December of 1992, an Aztec ceremony with dancing and chanting was held to celebrate and consecrate the new park. An amazing 2,000 people participated. During the same winter, ARTScorpsLA formalized itself, attaining the nonprofit (501 C-3) status that enabled them to receive funds for ongoing activity on the site. Since then ARTScorpsLA has, with volunteer labor, completed additional landscaping and other improvements. There are places to walk and sit, hold classes, and give performances. Several murals line the walls, many of which are periodically recreated (as was happening during our site visit). Trees have grown, there is shade, and the site is much more attractive than before.

The la Culebra Property

Over its 7-year history, ARTScorpsLA's relationship with the property owner has been complex. The project started during a real estate slump and, while the landlord intended to build multi-family housing on the site (per its zoning), nothing was likely to happen soon — especially since he was reportedly trying to build at several times the allowable density. However, he does not appear to have managed his ownership or development plans very effectively. In the last two years, he defaulted on one of the four lots that makes up the property, and the bank transferred ownership to ARTScorpsLA. More recently, according to the district's city council representative, the city has formed concrete plans to use available funds to buy the other three lots (for \$180,000). They would be owned by the city parks department, but operated by ARTScorpsLA under a lease agreement. Money for improvements such as lighting and fencing would also be available, and ARTScorpsLA is seeking donations for other improvements such as a building with storage space and restrooms. However, the landlord appears to be resisting the city's efforts (possibly to gain leverage in price negotiations). He recently served ARTScorpsLA with an eviction notice, which they are fighting in court. Thus, the long term use of the site by ARTScorpsLA — and its retention as community open space — though probable, is not yet assured.

Spiraling Orchard

With the proven success at la Culebra, ARTScorpsLA began to initiate other community art projects. The other major place-based

effort is the Spiraling Orchard, located in a transitional neighborhood called Temple-Beaudry just west and north of downtown, with skyscrapers visible in the background. This parcel is owned by the school district, which acquired it along with a large site nearby where a new high school will be built. It had earlier been part of a site assembled for a Japanese financial center, but a declining real estate market killed the original owner's plans. This particular parcel, discontinuous and too small for school use, was identified by ARTScorpsLA as having positive potential for its community.

In 1995, ARTScorpsLA began to work with the neighbors, this time distributing through the local elementary school a survey designed to help identify the kinds of programs and services needed by the community. The local elementary school distributed the surveys, and they received 250 responses carrying the strong message that after-school programs in the arts were of great need. Ward responded by developing volunteer-based, 10-week 60-kid programs at Spiraling Orchard, designed to include every single family that responded to the survey. The space that developed from this effort is an outdoor park whose centerpiece is a spiral pathway, reinforced by the planting of young trees. In addition, a semi-circular seating area with benches covered in mosaics was created by neighborhood children. Although this site does not revolve around a single cultural symbol like la Culebra, it still strives to be the focus of community activity, both through the youth-oriented programming and through cultural festivals like the one in full swing during the site visit. The site visit team witnessed Aztec troupe chanting and

dancing, Spanish-language speeches addressing the meaning of the spiral form, a Mexican-style barbecue, arts and crafts for the kids, and a soccer game. Many neighborhood families appeared to be participating.

Other Projects

Other ARTScorpsLA projects include a large number of murals in various locations (at least 28 are reported to be still in existence), and aid to schools and churches in Koreatown with planning and implementing the Francis Avenue Garden (with much more space devoted to gardening than to art). During our site visit – a sunny Sunday afternoon – the garden’s gate was locked, and Ward explained to the site visit team that the whole question of whether there should be a gate had been hotly contested. She had not supported the faction that insisted on its inclusion, but had accepted the decision (and she did have the key).

In addition, in 1996 ARTScorpsLA acquired an office/studio in the old part of Chinatown, and it is expanding to have workshop space there. The new space is centrally located between the two art parks and provides a new set of challenges in terms of working with Chinese residents, who are not always receptive to Anglo or outsider intervention. However, it was reported that ARTScorpsLA has, in the short time it has been there, made some positive impressions and connections, possibly playing a role in attracting a few studios and galleries to the area.

VISION

“ARTScorpsLA reveals the link between a healthy environment and healthy humanity through community revitalization projects that incorporate community building, arts and arts education, and the development of life skills.”

ARTScorpsLA Mission Statement.

At the heart of ARTScorpsLA is the goal of redefining public art. As traditionally conceived, Ward explains, public art would be better described as “plop” art: public money buys something, which is then “plopped” in a public space. ARTScorpsLA has attempted to wrest public art from this artifact-oriented state, where it tends to respond to the dictates of art criticism better than it serves community needs. Ward envisions public art as public process, an ongoing act of creation both grounded in and reinforcing community identity, development, and empowerment. In effect, the arts can be a vehicle for communities to reclaim their urban spaces – “art,” as one site visit team member remarked, “as social work.”

When approached in this way – as process over product – public art becomes collaborative, populist, “everyday,” developing its own audiences even as it is created by its audiences. A crucial part of this dynamic is a commitment to organic (or what Josephine Ramirez calls “jazz”) design. Instead of beginning with formal goals and plans, ARTScorpsLA approaches a community with an artistic vision of melding community perspectives into an as-yet undefined community artwork. This provides the artistic (and the practical) room for community visions to sort themselves out and to reach the



Mural workers learn by doing in La Tierra de la Culebra Park.

kind of unifying syntheses represented by the serpent-symbol at la Culebra. It encourages a continual evolution of projects, emphasizes community participation, and ultimately provides community ownership: what begins with an artist’s vision ultimately becomes a community’s artwork. The parks serve as sites for activities and as “repositories of cultural meaning” rather than as places of passive appreciation of an outside artist’s vision. The Selection Committee was particularly impressed by how the project helps teach people to care for their places: by actively engaging the parks – making them and then using them – people attain a genuine connection with these urban places.

By applying this new definition of public art to her traditional bailiwick of urban fallow ground, Ward has drawn out the most provocative ramification of her vision: a reworking of the idea of ownership in public space. In addition to the innovation of substituting a flexible private nonprofit organization for an often rigid city park agency, Ward has infused ARTScorpsLA with a truly radical notion of public space as continually contested territory, belonging to no single owner permanently. Since 1992, la Culebra has moved in and out of turf wars between rival street gangs, sometimes serving as neutral space and at other times being appropriated by one or another gang. (At one point, for example, a group of “OGs” – Old Gangsters – took over the park to provide a safe place for their grandchildren.) Ward has remained resolutely neutral during these shifts, refusing to exercise ownership authority over the site, holding true to her vision of “collaboration – for better or worse.” In her view, the gangs are part of the community, and as such must play a role in the continual re-creation of the park.

When taken as seriously as it is by Ward, this kind of approach can obviously create both minor and serious problems. ARTScorpsLA has had a problem with theft of books and tools, for example, but Ward smilingly explains that “this is a *good* thing,” because it means they are wanted and are being used. Also, there have been some difficulties with the police when a temporarily dominant gang has crossed the boundaries of acceptable behavior in the park. When one such gang began conspicuously drinking in public at the site, for example, the police had to act against them, causing friction between Ward and many locals since she was inaccurately portrayed as the instigator of the busts. The worst incident was the murder of a gang member near the Culebra site. Despite these problems, however – and Ward herself might not even describe all of them as



Supplies are stored in a neighbor’s garage immediately adjacent to la Tierra de la Culebra.

problems – there is no denying the potential power of the collaborate-with-everyone philosophy when trying to create a place that has real meaning for its community.

Obviously, a key part of ARTScorpsLA’s re-negotiations of art and public space is a commitment to openness and collaboration with multiple constituencies. As Ward’s collaborative philosophy dictates, no exclusion is practiced – even dedication of a project to its immediate community or neighborhood, if that were to mean excluding others based on class, race, age, ethnicity, or geography. Thus, the participants and programs at a given site could be constantly changing. Clearly, Ward also accepts the fact that inclusion at this level inevitably invites conflict and confrontation. The working out of divergent positions, she maintains, is an essential part of the process, rather than an obstacle to be avoided. Ultimately, this kind of project can provide a voice for people of widely different backgrounds, and can knit them together in a common cause.

Finally, the ARTScorpsLA vision places community at the heart of the artistic process. Beyond providing settings for evolving community relationships, the parks have focused on providing for youth a kind of experiential learning that plays out through a non-hierarchical, self-organizing process. This process can seem unstructured, but is intended to shift responsibility to the learner. Teaching formats include mentoring, various levels of participation, and allowing youth to discover principles themselves – and thus the space and freedom to fail along the way.

ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

Tricia Ward

The dominant force in ARTScorpsLA is its founder and leader, Tricia Ward, who funded the early activities out of her own pocket and later created the organization as a vehicle to attract and manage funding and to lease or take title to sites. Ward is universally acknowledged both for being highly unusual (“really weird” in the impressed words of one interviewee) and for being unusually open to collaboration with others. One site visit team member noted that “Ward is not inclined to linear thinking,” an observation that appears to coincide with her distaste for linear planning and process. In addition to sparking her creativity, this characteristic also may play a part in Ward’s most widely praised attribute: her willingness to listen. Olivia Mitchel, the Assistant Executive Director of the LA Commission for Children, Youth, and Their Families described Ward with respect as “a white woman who listens.” In Chinatown, Ward gained trust in a community traditionally suspicious of Anglos by having all of her first steps be about paying attention: she asked Chinatown community leaders to walk with her looking at potentially worthwhile properties, and then intervened to stop demolition of a decorative wall that she had observed was central to a local movie being filmed. At an even more committed level, Ward refused to exercise power to shape the way gangs responded to the la Culebra park, instead choosing to value their activities as part of a community process that she had no right to control.

Her unique gift – what might be called a genius for listening – allows Ward to collaborate with an amazingly broad range of people, “from the Gettys to the gangs,” as described to the site visit team. As an Anglo, she also appears to be unusually capable of



The artist Tricia Ward, Founder and Director of ARTScorpsLA

gaining acceptance by other ethnic groups. She works extensively in mostly Latino neighborhoods, and is City Council Member Mike Hernandez’s appointed representative to the city’s Commission for Children, Youth, and their Families. As Councilman Hernandez explained, Ward has been accepted not only by Latinos; she has been able to penetrate the very closed culture of Chinatown more effectively than his own Chinese-American aide. The site visit team observed Ward interacting with neighborhood youngsters with a combination of affection and discipline, expressing high expectations for their behavior and accomplishments. They saw her giving encouragement to Latino artists in their teens and twenties, several of whom worked on the projects’ murals and who credited Ward with helping them take advantage of important opportunities. They also heard the compliments of staff at a variety of city agencies, community-based organizations, and charitable foundations who were uniformly positive in describing the impacts of her projects and interventions.

The Selection Committee noted that ARTScorpsLA shows signs of being a one-woman show, but there is also evidence that the organization may be growing beyond its dependence on Ward and architect John Maroney. Ward teaches at the University of Southern California, and has brought a significant number of her graduate students to do their practicums through ARTScorpsLA. Some have continued with their projects even after graduating. Many community youths have received scholarships through ARTScorpsLA and have continued to work on its projects. And ARTScorpsLA has been effective in obtaining funding from a very

wide variety of sources and in cooperating with many, sometimes casually related, community organizations. Nonetheless, the Selection Committee recognized that at this point Ward remains the solitary central figure. This reflects Ward’s dynamism and creativity, but it also suggests the presence of what one interviewee called “founder’s disease”: despite her commitment to community rather than artist control, Ward has been reluctant to loosen her hold on ARTScorpsLA’s reigns. MTA Senior Public Arts Officer Allen Nakagawa explained that he left ARTScorpsLA’s Board of Directors because he felt that the organizational structure was inappropriate; what Ward really needed was an Advisory Council.

The Selection Committee also commented on a potential downside to Ward’s unique leadership style: can it be sustained? Indeed, is it even *about* permanence to any significant degree? As one interviewee explained, Ward’s urban interventions are all about “organizing for ‘not-forever.’” This philosophy is in accord with her ideas of non-linearity, collaboration, and public space as contested “turf,” but it is not exactly a sturdy basis on which to found a long-term process – it requires, by its nature, constant maintenance, constant creativity, constant attention, and enormous energy, all from someone with the determination and skills of a Tricia Ward. In short, the Committee felt, ARTScorpsLA may not be just a one-woman show; its animating spirit may also depend on the unreplicable creativity of a single individual as well. Another Selection Committee member responded to this observation, however, by suggesting that fragility and impermanence may sometimes be a positive thing.

ARTScorpsLA

ARTScorpsLA’s organizational structure is evolving. Owing to its initially very loose structure, there are concerns regarding ongoing management and operation. Several informants referred to a “lack of consistent presence of ARTScorpsLA” at the sites; according to one, “due to a small staff, there have been periods of time where the site has been neglected.” Committed to a wide range of functions and outside obligations, Ward may have spread herself too thin.

New organizational structures have been put in place to address some of these issues. For each project, there is now a site leader or developer who has day-to-day responsibility, in theory freeing Ward to focus on policy, planning, and funding – not always an easy transition for a hands-on artist. Also, there are mechanisms at each site for gathering community input and ownership. At la Culebra, there is a Youth Leadership Council which organizes activities and enforces the rules (described by ARTScorpsLA as a “self-governing administrative body”) as well as a group of Mothers of Culebra.

ARTScorpsLA continues to study its organizational structure with an eye toward improvement. Ward rejected an initial, academic assessment that suggested a more rigid structure. More recently, however, ARTScorpsLA has received technical assistance from Deb Grotfeldt, executive director of Project Row Houses (a Rudy Bruner Award Silver Medallist in 1997), who recommended more structure and focus for ARTScorpsLA to function at a higher level of efficiency. Key suggestions included hiring an executive or administrative director to free Ward from running daily operations,

clarifying the roles of other staff and site managers, and reconstituting the board of directors, adding individuals who could help with policy, fundraising, and networking. Ward agrees with the suggestions, is looking for an executive director, and will be inviting new board members. To a considerable degree, the future success of ARTScorpsLA would seem to depend on the success of these initiatives.

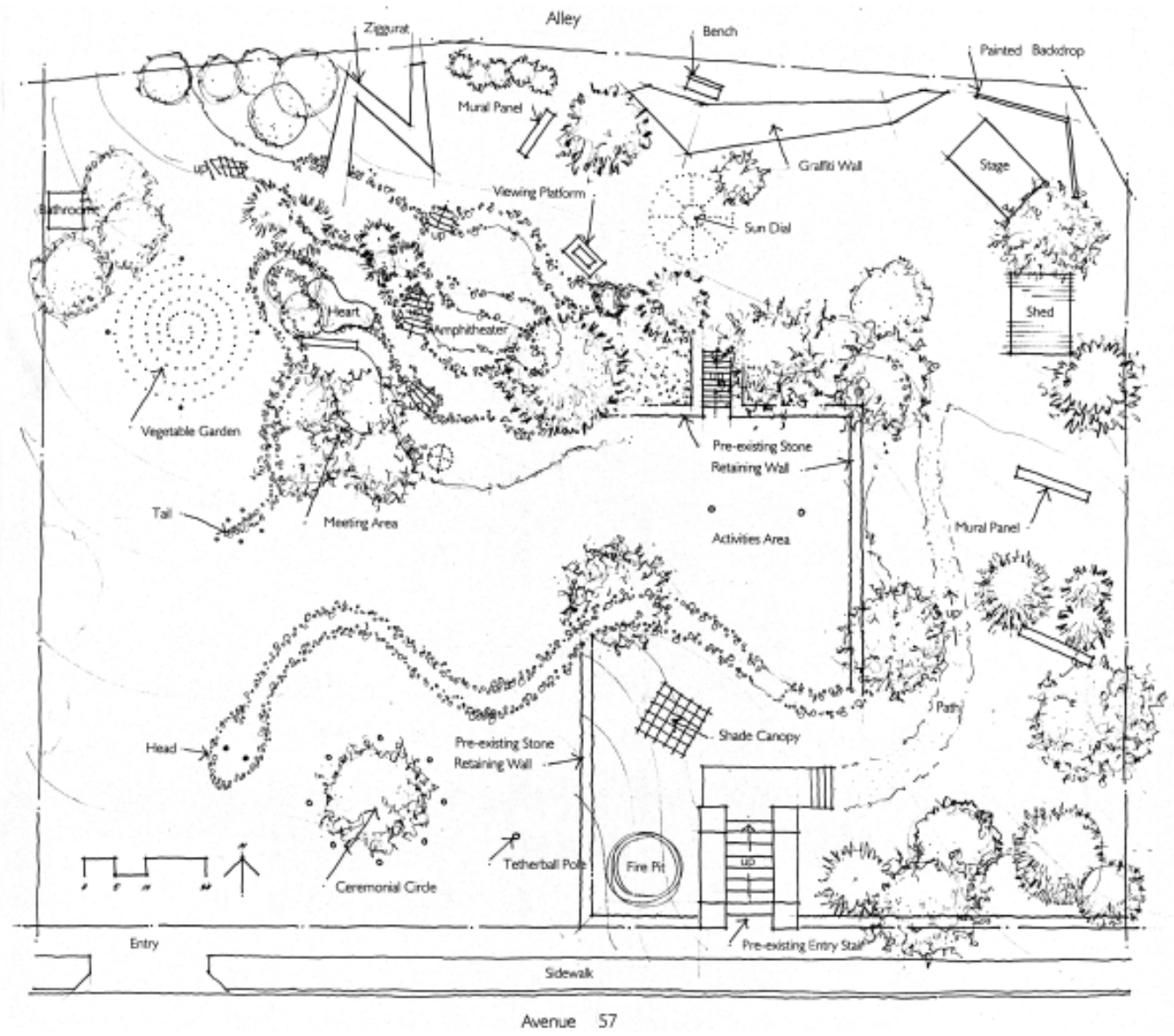
Since the Site Visit, ARTScorpsLA’s efforts to develop a new Board of Trustees have made progress. Positions on the Board have already been accepted by an attorney from a large firm, the manager of the Reinvestment Act from Sanwa Bank, and a local developer. A request to the new General Manager of Recreation and Parks for the City of LA is pending. Additional members are still being considered to develop the small new governing body.

DESIGN

The Artparks

La Culebra

The la Culebra site is made up of four rectangular parcels, with a steep slope from street to back and across the middle parcels. The giant snake figure, made of river stones as well as colorful broken tiles and other found artifacts, is one of several devices that integrate the parcels. Another is a path system that works its way through the site, and a third is a series of landscape transitions on the steep slopes. There are two major entries from the street, one on the



Site Plan drawing describing La Tierra de la Culebra.

lower edge and one through an upper set of stairs. The landscape features have matured such that large, open spaces as well as intimate places can be found. Moving through the park is an act of discovering these places. One site visit team member described it as an “unpretentious landscape plan – not a ton of attention to detail, somewhat organic, but it seems to work.”

Spiraling Orchard

The site consists of two lots that slope steeply upward from the street. One has an old oil tank typical of this neighborhood riddled with skeletons of pumping and storage equipment. Children have painted signs and murals on walls and on the tank. The second lot has the “spiraling orchard” toward the top of the slope. The spiral is incised into the earth and planted with small fruit trees (apricots and nectarines) placed every few feet. They will, eventually, be



Spiraling Orchard opening ceremonies

espaliered to form a continuous surface (when in leaf) that one can follow to the center. At this point, the Spiraling Orchard does not have park-like landscape features or site subdivisions in place as does la Culebra, although it does have structural chairs and benches with Culebra-like construction. Some of the public art, for example the old oil tank, is already in place.



Steps at ARTScorpsLA’s la Tierra de la Culebra feature glass and tile mosaic wok.

Murals

ARTScorpsLA is a prolific producer of public murals, having completed more than 30 of them in the past seven years (28 of which are still reported to be in existence). Generally, young artists have started working at the Culebra and then been given a role on the mural team. It is something of an honor to be part of the mural team, and interns have to demonstrate dedication as well as talent to gain a place. One particularly ambitious mural, “Earth Memories,” painted on a retaining wall at Belmont High School, is 600 feet long and tells the story of the evolution of the universe. Others are in various inner-city locations and many have strongly political or cultural themes. The next mural will be around the construction fence at City Hall.

Urban Context

Highland Park and Temple-Beaudry are approximately 80% Latino. Residents live predominantly in multi-family structures, with 2-3 generations sharing an apartment. More than 50% of youth are below the poverty line, the high school dropout rate is higher than 60%, and the unemployment rate is 12% (dates for this information were not available). Councilman Hernandez showed the site visit team maps printed from the city’s geographic information system (GIS) that plotted other socio-economic indicators which showed that his district, particularly where ARTScorpsLA is working, has the highest concentration in Los Angeles of factors that indicate poverty and social disintegration. Construction of more than 500 new units of housing in Temple-Beaudry is now underway, which will help to stabilize the area’s resident population.



Spiraling Orchard opening ceremonies

SILVER MEDAL WINNER

ARTScorpsLA



ARTScorLA mural work - one of twenty-eight still in existence on LA buildings.

ARTScorpsLA Programs

Consistent with its mission, ARTScorpsLA offers a variety of activities, mostly arts- and culture-related, some just fun. Some of the activities occur on a regular schedule – especially at la Culebra – principally after school and on Saturdays, since they are youth-oriented. In the months preceding our site visit these included arts and crafts (making dolls, musical instruments, masks, murals, sculpture classes, glassmaking, and so on), poetry workshops, Aztec drumming and dancing, and various sports, as well as festivals celebrating Summer Solstice and Valentines Day.

Other programs are oriented toward job training and employment, and ARTScorpsLA has consistently received funds from AmeriCorps to support these efforts. In these programs, community youth receive a stipend to work on ARTScorpsLA’s projects. Teens might begin as volunteers, move on to trainee status (with an honorarium), and then become paid mentors as they demonstrate skills and commitment. Ultimately, they could become site instructors when they have shown an ability to work with younger children.

Teaching is an important part of ARTScorpsLA’s mission. It integrates graduate students in public arts with its community projects. Each graduate student plans a project that might last for a day, a week or a month and executes it with community participants. Since 1993, the Getty Trust has funded a few internships for ARTScorpsLA to support the students who have demonstrated the greatest commitment and effectiveness. ARTScorpsLA has provided 62 scholarships to youth from the la

Culebra neighborhood to pursue higher education. These young people have, in turn, worked with hundreds or thousands of children throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

FINANCING

Total development cost of la Culebra was about \$212,000, and the site has an annual operating budget of about \$20,000. The project was initially funded with money from Ward’s own savings account. The subsequent variety of sources testifies to the creativity and



Picnic and mural at la Tierra de la Culebra

persistence of ARTScorpsLA fundraising (see table). For Spiraling Orchard, the cost so far has been in the range of \$ 40,000, with the bulk of it coming from two grants: \$20,000 from the NEA Program for Art in Public Places for outreach and original designs, lease, and so forth; and another \$12,000 from the LA City Department of Cultural Affairs to pay kids to work on the amphitheater.

With a renewed lease from Los Angeles Unified School District in 1999, ARTScorpsLA has been feverishly applying for funds to sustain the further development of Spiraling Orchard. To date, the S. Mark Taper and Plum Foundations have provided funds for a job training program, BULA/Americorps program has supported scholarships for young people, and Good Works Foundation and Sanwa Bank have helped fund artists/mentors. Additionally, ARTScorpsLA has submitted proposals to the Staples, Robinson, and Stein Foundations, and the NEA.

ARTScorpsLA operates on a cash budget of a little over \$200,000 per year, plus in-kind donations of almost another \$100,000. Last year's funding sources are shown in the following table. (Note that both cash and in-kind are included on the same list and that some monies flowed directly to participants without going through ARTScorpsLA's books):

1997 FUNDING SOURCES	AMOUNT
ARCO	\$10,000
CALIFORNIA ARTS COUNCIL (DIRECTLY TO ARTISTS, NOT ARTSCORPSLA)	\$7,000
CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION	\$13,000
FOOTLIGHTERS FOUNDATION	\$38,000
GETTY MULTICULTURAL INTERN PROGRAM	\$10,000
GETTY TRUST FUND	\$20,000
GTE	\$3,000
LA COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY	\$50,000
LA SHARES (IN-KIND: SUPPLIES)	\$20,000
LA YOUTH ARTS AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT	\$13,000
LA CONSERVATION CORPS (PLUS \$4,000 FOR IN-KIND VOLUNTEERS)	\$15,000
LA COUNTY COMMISSION ON THE ARTS	\$4,000
NATIONAL SERVICE/AMERICORPS (\$46K LABOR, \$20K SCHOLARSHIPS)	\$66,000
URBAN RESOURCES PARTNERSHIP	\$25,000
TOTAL	\$294,000

ARTSCORPSLA AND THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

The relationship between ARTScorpsLA and the City of LA is a complicated one. ARTScorpsLA was, after all, born out of Tricia Ward’s unwillingness to put up with the red tape she encountered in the government-run Re-Wing LA, and she has continued to refuse funding if it is encumbered by “healing” agendas or other unwanted baggage. Nonetheless the City has proven an invaluable ally on the financial ledger (see table in “Financing”), and has also helped ARTScorpsLA in the procurement of sites. Currently, for example, ARTScorpsLA has asked and has been promised eventual ownership of the la Culebra site, and applications are in line to provide city-funded water, fences, and money for maintenance.

If Ward has occasionally been wary of the City, she has nevertheless gained some staunch allies there, including Councilmember Mike Hernandez. Hernandez was very impressed with what Ward has been able to accomplish working in a very tough neighborhood, reminding the site visit team that Jackson Browne’s song “Born on the Avenues” was about this area. As he summarized it, she made a park, with no resources, working with the community, on land she didn’t own that was not zoned for public open space. Nor was she helped by the widespread prejudice against the youths Ward hoped the park would serve. Hernandez liked the fact that Ward had captured the kids’ imaginations and gotten them to visualize what the space could be like through their own creativity. He feels that la Culebra is a model of effective grassroots action, and he likes to take politicians there to see it — to show them how much can be done with limited resources when the peoples’ energy is harnessed.

He has taken mayoral candidates, the incumbent mayor, state senators, and congressmen to la Culebra. He also goes there to read to the kids and to talk to them. La Culebra, he feels, is a kind of communications bridge, a place where the youth, even the troubled ones, have become stakeholders and treat it as “sacred ground” – neutral turf, free of graffiti, a place where gangs can sign peace treaties.

Other City allies include Allen Nakagawa, who reported to the site visit team that the project has helped to “inspire” the MTA to extend public transportation beyond its present service area, which ends near where the King riots began. As yet, there has been no action on this plan.

FUTURE PLANS

Not including the murals, which are relatively limited in scope, ARTScorpsLA’s two main projects are works in progress. La Culebra is a substantial accomplishment, having completely transformed its site and having had enough time for the landscaping to mature. It will continue to evolve, perhaps through a planned support building (the “Footlighter’s House of Dreams”) with a kitchen, restrooms, library, computers, and second-floor quarters for an artist-in-residence. Spiraling Orchard is far less complete, though much work has been done there, too. The fruit trees will grow, more planting will be done, murals will be added or redone, and more amenities will be installed. In terms of organization and governance, the goal is to make the art parks self-governing community centers by having youth councils and parents’ groups

make decisions and provide needed management (see “Organization and Leadership”).

ARTScorpsLA is currently involved in several other projects, including painting murals at City Hall and assisting a community garden and arts project in Koreatown. They are also in discussion with the LA Conservation Corps about taking responsibility for developing an art park on part of a 20-acre site called Debs Park in East LA. With the same group, ARTScorpsLA is participating in a grant-funded project from the Community Redevelopment Agency to design a new park bench from recycled materials. Another project is proposed to have a reptilian theme (“Reptilia Island”), but will undoubtedly evolve in the usual ARTScorpsLA interactive manner.

Negotiations with the City to establish a public-private partnership are underway and may prove to be the policy precedent that ARTScorpsLA has been working to establish since its inception. This undertaking is linked to the acquisition of the la Culebra land and a number of improvements, such as designing and building a sculptural fence around the perimeter of the park; lighting and irrigation systems; and securing all masonry walls and the sculptural Culebra for the future. Construction on the Footlighter’s House of Dreams will begin when the partnership with the City has been negotiated, which is projected to be during winter 2000. This partnership will also determine the premise for development of Reptilia Island and the Renaissance Skill Center in Debs Park.

ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS

HOW WELL PROJECT MEETS ITS OWN GOALS

- *To have a long-term impact on the quality of life by facilitating highly innovative uses of land.*

It is too early to judge the long-term impact of a project that started seven years ago and is still evolving. However, both of the sites entail innovative land use and have positively affected the quality of life for people in their immediate area.

- *To foster direct short- and long-term community involvement, sense of ownership, empowerment, and commitment/pride.*

Members of the community at each site have been involved in its creation and participate in its activities. A good number of people did express a sense of ownership, community self-awareness, and pride to the site visit team.

- *To develop creativity, environmental awareness, interpersonal leadership, and trade skills that will prepare local teens for paid jobs.*

Although no tracking data are available, many observers and participants spoke of the growth they had seen or experienced through working on ARTScorpsLA projects. Graduate students were having valuable experiences working on community art, children were learning art and cultural skills, and teens were working on construction and art projects that have led to paid

employment, not only with ARTScorpsLA but also on commercial and other public art projects.

- *To strengthen family ties and community cultural self-esteem.*

In Cindy Medina-Dima’s family the site visit team saw one example of strengthened family ties, and the team also observed participation in cultural activities, such as the Aztec ceremony at Spiraling Orchard, and were shown the importance of the cultural symbols incorporated into artworks. Apparently, these symbols (including the serpent), especially once they are consecrated, are meaningful to a broad range of community members. Even the police thought of la Culebra as sacred ground.

OTHER MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Impact on Neighborhood and Community

According to most people with whom the site visit team talked, ARTScorpsLA’s impact has been aesthetic and inspirational. New community organizations have sprung up, youth have been positively engaged, employed, and trained, and there are more places for them to spend their time productively and safely. Local youths interviewed on site praised Ward as a comfortable and open woman, and expressed gratitude for the opportunities ARTScorpsLA offered them. Parents appreciated the safe public space for family outings. As one of the youths described Culebra, many see the parks as a “sanctuary, a gift to the community.” These positive experiences have mainly been centered in two neighborhoods.

Gangs and Crime

The areas in which ARTScorpsLA works are considered classic inner-city neighborhoods in terms of their socio-economic profiles. In addition, they are high crime zones, with gang turf conflicts and related struggles over shifting boundaries. In this difficult terrain ARTScorpsLA has tried to provide real solutions – employment, job training, youth mentoring, cultural affirmation – to some of the issues that Ward felt had boiled over in the riots. More fundamentally, the organization has continued to adhere to the challenging model of true collaboration that Ward believes creates a safe zone for the community’s voices to be heard. This process is one that will never bring clear, unalloyed success. Continual breakdowns, conflicts, and re-negotiations are built into the script. Thus, while many locals did tell the site visit team that ARTScorpsLA has helped ameliorate living conditions, at least on the territory where they operate directly, the long story of periodically unpleasant gang involvement reveals what Ward would consider a successful but obviously never-finished story.

Place vs. Process – The Crucial Issue

Beyond leadership and sustainability issues, the Selection Committee’s primary concerns with ARTScorpsLA were questions about the nature and meaning of urban excellence. The basic question was whether ARTScorpsLA is ultimately a *place* or a *process*. Clearly, there are elements of both in the projects; the parks do exist, after all, and they are explicitly based on a provocative philosophy of process. What the Selection Committee grappled with was where the power and *excellence* of



The Francis Avenue Garden center walkway

ARTScorpsLA really lay: in the parks, or in the process that has created and sustained them?

Most members of the Committee did agree that in this instance the process of generating community involvement and caring about public spaces was more impressive than their physical quality. The parks were interesting but did not warrant an award for design. The radical notions of public art and public space embodied in Ward's design process and in the usage of the parks over time were more innovative than any single public artwork that they produced.

This led some Committee members to ask whether ARTScorpsLA presents a challenge to our notions of place, forcing us to expand them not just in breadth but in depth to include the rituals and practices that create and nurture places. Others felt that, even so, it

would still be inappropriate to award the Gold Medal to a project that seemed so overbalanced towards process compared to the actual places that had been created. One Committee member speculated that a consequence of this emphasis on process may be that fewer people are ultimately reached: participation may be a life changing experience for local youths, but only for those youths who actually choose to *participate*. It is not enough to simply experience the place; to be thus affected, one must engage the process as well, and this necessarily limits the constituency.

The Selection Committee concluded that an excellent and innovative process does not necessarily lead to a great space, at least in conventional design terms. At la Culebra, a good place was indeed created, and there is evidence that it continues to benefit from the processes that brought it into being: the cultural festivals, the youth programs, and the shifting patterns of public usage all speak to Culebra being more than just a park. The nature of the Spiraling Orchards is still to be determined. In the best case, it too will institutionalize the welcoming processes that have made Culebra such a meaningful location; in the worst case, it will simply be a pretty, but unremarkable, urban park. Culebra, too, could have such a future in store for it, depending on how well it sustains the rituals and loose structures that make it special. These unresolved issues make ARTScorpsLA an important project to continue watching. To the extent, however, that community building is an important aspect of urban excellence, the ultimate physical form of the parks may be less important than the bridges built among diverse communities.

Questions of place and process also raise the issue of sustainability. Ward’s own philosophy of contestation, fluidity, and change – planning for the “not-forever” – left the Selection Committee wondering whether permanence was even a goal of the project. With its organizational challenges and its unique form of tenancy (leasing land from a hostile owner), this is no idle question. The Committee then discussed the importance of sustainability in urban excellence. Is an essentially ephemeral intervention, almost a performance art piece, enough? No firm conclusions were reached on this thorny issue, in part because it is difficult at this early stage of the game to measure ARTScorpsLA’s legacy over time. Nonetheless the Committee acknowledged the power of ARTScorpsLA to provocatively raise issues such as this that force us to question the very meanings of the term “urban excellence.”

Values Reflected in Development Process

As has become clear, most of this project’s power emanates from the values embodied in its development process. The idea of using a redefined concept of public art to positively destabilize public spaces in a way that gives voice to community residents of all stripes, while at the same time providing a ladder of opportunity for those who wish to take it, is clearly the central informing value and the most notable element of the project. Whether such impressive programmatic values can, by themselves, be considered sufficient grounds for the highest accolades of urban excellence, remains an open question – and a question that must, the Selection Committee felt, be counted among this remarkable project’s many contributions.



ARTScorpsLA: Teaching life skills through the arts

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Dickerson, Amina and Tricia Ward, "A co-meditation on youth, art, and society," in Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson, eds., *Conversations at the Castle* (The MIT PRESS, 1998). See pp. 150-60 for a section on ARTScorpLA. The full book addresses questions inherent in public arts programs: *Who is contemporary public art for?*

Dunitz, Robin J. and James Prigoff, *Painting the Town, Murals of California*, (R.J.D. Enterprises, 1997). See p. 200 "Earth Memories" on an ARTScorpLA mural. The book profiles 300 murals in 50 California towns.

Jacob, Mary Jane, Michael Brenson and Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, (Bay Press, Inc., 1995). A Chicago-based community art program focused on "urban artmaking" related to critical social issues. Like ARTScorpLA, the program pushes the boundaries of public art.

Related Rudy Bruner Award Winners

(For full bibliographic cites, please see Introduction)

Radial Reuse Plan, Lincoln, Nebraska (1989 cycle). A participatory process that created a 3 mile linear park connecting neighborhoods on land formerly intended to be a major roadway. Sparked neighborhood revitalization in adjacent areas.

Project Row Houses (1997 cycle). Rehabilitation of 22 historic "shotgun" style houses into art galleries showcasing the work of prominent African-American artists, housing and support services for single working mothers, and a variety of daycare and after-school programs.

Contact

ARTScorpsLA

Tricia Ward, Director and Founder

Julie Bach, Coordinator of Creative Projects

936 Mei Ling Way

Los Angeles, CA 90012

Phone: 213-617-3877 or 3876

Fax: 213-617-3878

E-mail: aclacla@earthlink.net

Web: <http://home.lacn.org/lacn//artscorpsla/index.html>



BRUNER FOUNDATION

130 Prospect Street

Cambridge, MA 02139

PH: 617.492.8404

FX: 617.876.4002

www.brunerfoundation.org