
The Art of Public Art

ELEANOR HOWE

IN THE LOBBY OF THE NATIONAL GUARD MILITARY CENTER ON THE western edge of Raleigh hangs a haunting portrait of a young citizen soldier preparing for active duty. Wearing a casual shirt and a baseball cap, he faces a mirror, his back to the viewer. A newspaper lies open on the bureau below the mirror. “Guard Mobilized!” its headline shouts. In the mirror the man’s image wears fatigues and a flak helmet. For Major Danny W. Hassell, this work made from hundreds of tiny pieces of wood “goes to the very heart of what the

National Guard is all about; I think you can imagine the thoughts that are going through this man’s mind.”¹



WHEN THE SUN BEGINS TO SET OVER THE campus of East Carolina University in Greenville, the broad, brick-lined plaza in front of Joyner Library comes alive with sound and lights. Keeping time to a recorded drumbeat, water dances across the surface of a high wall adjacent to a clock tower. Below the tower rises a wispy fog, illuminated by subterranean lights.

As the sun’s last rays strike the tower, a set of

doors opens, a small pirate cannon rolls out and—boom!—salutes the evening. For library director Carol Varner, this interactive entryway “pulls people in and makes them want to experience the library and the rest of the campus in a different way.”²



IN WEST JEFFERSON A LARGE PAINTING OF MOUNT JEFFERSON SURROUNDED by rhododendron, columbine, trillium, and other native plants and trees has transformed a once-drab wall facing a parking lot on the main street. Local arts council administrator Jane Lonon says the mural “is absolutely the most beautiful, classy work of art to hit Ashe County ever! Local folks are seeing firsthand what a difference using the arts as a vehicle for downtown revitalization can make.”³



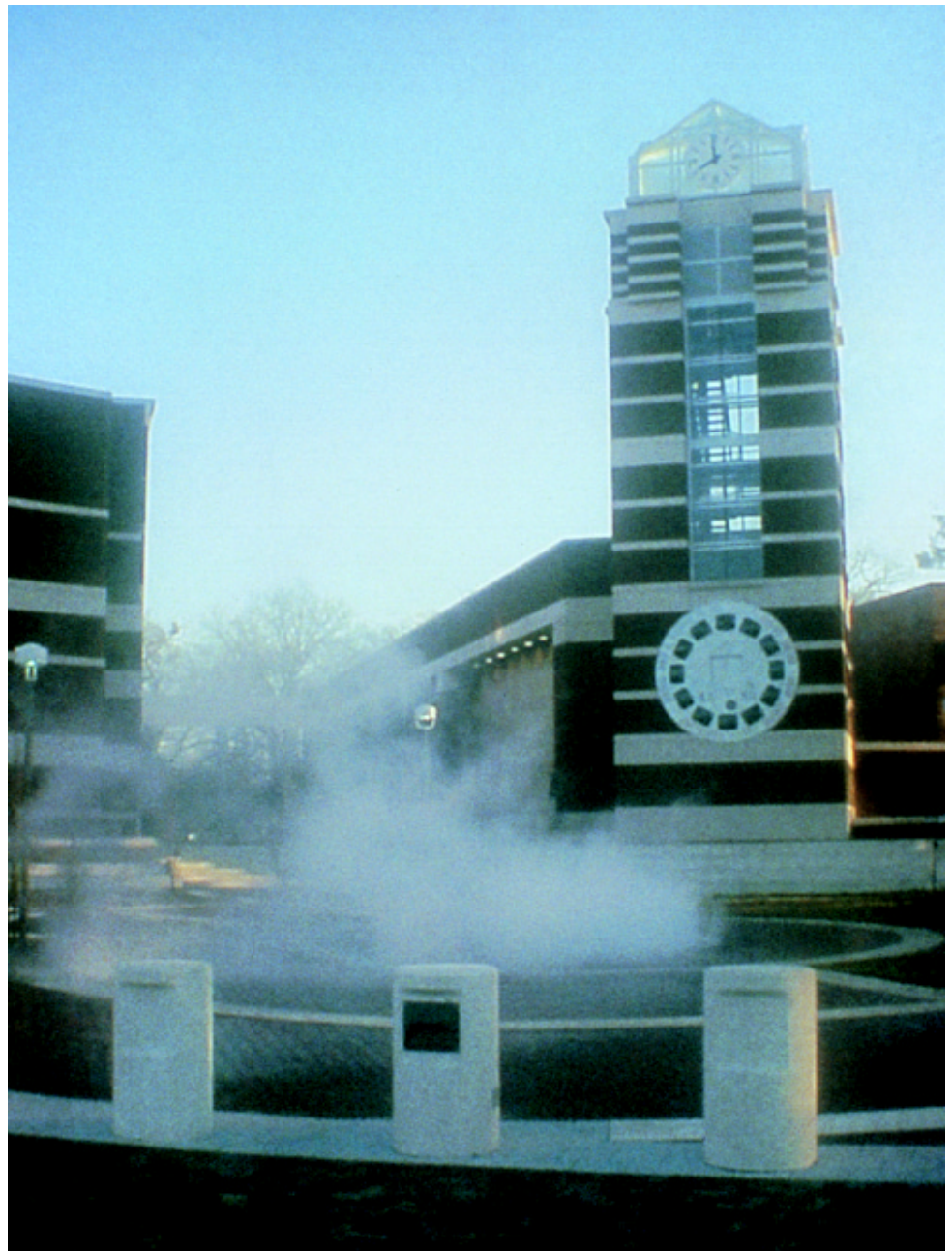
Untitled marquetry (hand-cut wood panel), by Silas Kopf, 1992, at the National Guard Military Center, Raleigh.

The author is a free-lance writer who specializes in politics and government.

Right: Sonic Plaza (*interactive sound-and-electronics sculpture*), by Christopher Janney, 1998, at East Carolina University. Photo © 1998 by PhenomenArts, Inc.

Below: Chalice (*concrete and salvaged-stainless-steel sculpture*), by Al Frega, 1996, at Moore Hall, Western Carolina University.

All photos accompanying this article, except that of *Sonic Plaza*, are from the North Carolina Arts Council. All images are of original works owned by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.



Throughout North Carolina, public art is transforming the built environment. No longer limited to oil paintings in lobbies or granite sculptures in gardens, public art today may be landscaping that incorporates words formed by artfully arranged plants, or a “waterwall” of hand-carved tiles made by clients of a mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse center. More and more, public art in North Carolina is site-specific, with artists working alongside architects from the start of the design process in order to incorporate art into the finished project. And whereas public art once was mainly reserved for grand government structures like the capitol and the legislative buildings, it now graces locations as varied as they are commonplace—a small-town rose garden or cemetery, a police station, even a farmers’ market.

Just as varied are the mechanisms for funding public art, from state programs to city set-asides to all-volunteer efforts. This article looks at the range of public art in North Carolina by focusing on two state programs and four municipal approaches. A sidebar (see page 7) presents recommendations for initiating projects and pursuing funding.

WHAT IS PUBLIC ART?

Jean McLaughlin, director of North Carolina’s Penland School of Crafts, defines “public art” as art that is “in your everyday environment; it’s not part of a museum collection.”⁴ For sixteen years, McLaughlin headed the Artworks for State Buildings program, North Carolina’s major avenue for placing art in the public environment.⁵ She continues to be a leading

proponent of public art; this summer on Penland's campus in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the school is sponsoring a two-week session on public art, at which architects, landscape architects, and urban planners in the state will meet with artists, craftspeople, and artisans.

Public art is necessary, McLaughlin believes, because as we alter the physical environment, we need to be careful how we create space for people. "I see public art as one way to make sure there's attention to people, to human scale, to creativity and imagination," McLaughlin explains. "When public art succeeds, it challenges us to think, it sparks our imagination and stimulates our senses and our mental faculties. It is 'provocative' in the best sense of that word."⁶

STATE-FUNDED PROGRAMS

Artworks for State Buildings

In this country, programs that set aside "a percent for art" have been around since the 1940s, when Philadelphia launched the original one. By 1982, when North Carolina's General Assembly approved this state's first program, similar ones existed in nearly thirty other jurisdictions (states and cities).⁷ Rather than designating a percentage of construction funds for art, as other programs did, North Carolina's Art Works in State



Family Arc (original color lithograph), by John Biggers, 1994, at the Student Services Building, North Carolina Central University.

Buildings Act⁸ set aside a flat amount of \$5,000 for the first fiscal year, which it increased to \$10,000 for the second year. In 1987 the act was amended, and 0.5 percent of the amount spent for the construction, the remodeling, or the renovation of each state building with a budget of more than \$500,000 was set aside for art associated with the building. Responsibility for the program was given to the North Carolina Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Resources.⁹

The act was repealed four years ago during budget negotiations and without debate.¹⁰ Even now, the circumstances of its quick demise are a mystery. North Carolina Arts Council director Mary Regan remembers that "the legislature was looking for a lot of things to eliminate. [The program] was in the budget one day, and then the next day, when the budget was reported out, it wasn't. No one really led a charge against it; it happened quietly."¹¹

Although the set-aside died quietly, it generated



ASL [American Sign Language]: Past, Present, and Future (neon sculpture), by Betty Miller, 1996, at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf, Wilson.

much discussion in its short life, not all positive. Two projects in particular, *The Education Wall* at the state Education Building and *Spiraling Sound Axis* at the state Revenue Building, both on North Wilmington Street in Raleigh, raised the ire of some lawmakers and their constituents. Critics complained that the 30-by-90-foot granite wall sandblasted with education images, including a child's drawing of a schoolhouse, a line of poetry, and Cherokee symbols, was questionable art and, with a price tag of \$110,000, a waste of taxpayers' money.¹² They expressed similar objections to the even more expensive (\$130,000) "sound sculpture," which featured recordings of horses on cobblestones, tobacco auctioneers, bullfrogs, geese, and thunderstorms.¹³ Even State Senator Howard Lee, a strong supporter of the program, believes that, for those two projects at least, the funds might have been better used. "Art is in the eyes of the beholder," he says, adding that most people find traditional paintings and sculpture more acceptable.¹⁴

Scope of Projects

When the legislature eliminated the 0.5 percent set-aside, a number of projects had been funded but not completed. "The funding was cut off before there was a lot of evidence of the kinds of art that would be in the program, before there were lots of things around the state," Regan says, lamenting that the program was killed "before it had a chance to show what it could do."¹⁵ The last of the sixty projects funded by the program will be completed this year. There is a wide variety in their location, cost, size, and medium.

The projects include a \$10,000 neon sculpture, *ASL: Past, Present, and Future* (ASL standing for American Sign Language), at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf, in Wilson; a \$27,000 landscape of formal and natural plantings at the Agronomics Laboratory in Raleigh; and \$16,000 forged-steel gates for the North Carolina Arboretum in Asheville, with images of a stream surrounded by sycamore trees and of paths bordered by rhododendron and pitcher plants. More than half of the installations are at state schools and universities, but there also are works at Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh, the Murdoch Center (a long-term care and treatment facility for persons with mental retardation) in Butner, the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market in Greensboro, and the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Visitor Center in Asheville. Although three projects—*The Education Wall*, *Sonic Plaza* (at

East Carolina University), and *Spiraling Sound Axis*—cost more than \$100,000 each, fifteen installations, including the hand-cut wood panel at the National Guard Military Center, cost \$10,000 or less.¹⁶

Future of the Program

As its reach and scope expanded, the program gained more supporters, even among people who were initially skeptical. Donald W. Eaddy, director of Agronomic Services (housed in the Agronomic Laboratory), was a member of the selection panel for the landscape project, *Nature/Nurture*, at the building that now carries his name. "I was very concerned in the beginning,"



Stream Garden Gate (*forged- and stainless-steel gate*), by David Brewin and Joseph Miller, 1996, at the North Carolina Arboretum, Asheville.

he remembers. "I was not sure we would come out with something that would be acceptable to the agricultural community. But the development really describes our mission here, taking our natural resources and using them for the benefit of man, . . . at the same time protecting them for future generations. So I am very pleased."¹⁷

Senator Lee believes that "there are enough successes now that we shouldn't abandon the program." During the last legislative session, at the request of Betty McCain, secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, he introduced a bill to reinstate the program. The bill never made it out of committee, however. "At the last minute, the appropriations chairs



Clockwise from top left: Nature/Nurture (environmental sculpture), by Page Laughlin, Christine Hilt, and James G. Davis, 1994, at the Agronomics Building, Raleigh. Font (Lumbee River) (terrazzo-and-bronze sculpture), by Kenneth Matsumoto, 1995, at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Children viewing detail of North Carolina Belongs to the Children (acrylic on canvas), by James Biggers, 1994, at the State Legislative Building, Raleigh.



just didn't feel like we could make this kind of commitment," he recalls. "I think it was a question of money more than anything else. There are people who feel that making that level of commitment for art in public buildings is hard to justify when you need things like public schools."¹⁸

Regan is optimistic that the program will be revived "when the time is right." In the meantime, Arts Council staff will maintain the sixty projects that were accomplished under the program, develop education resources related to the projects, and respond to calls from municipalities around the state interested in developing public art in their communities.¹⁹ Meanwhile also, private organizations or individuals may fund public art on state property—as has already happened in a few cases, most notably at the North Carolina Zoo.

New Works

Another avenue for channeling state funds into public art projects is New Works, a dollar-for-dollar matching-grant program that also is administered by the North Carolina Arts Council. Begun in the late 1980s to encourage organizations to commission new works, the program "really opened up possibilities for organizations that weren't arts organizations but . . . wanted to commission art for public spaces," says Jeff Pettis, New Works' visual arts director. Unlike the Artworks for State Buildings program, the New Works program has been free of criticism. "When public money is involved, you could run into controversy," Pettis acknowledges, "but the positive benefits of a program like this so far outweigh any potential risks that people have really embraced it."²⁰

A Sample of Projects

A New Works grant covered almost half the cost of the Ashe County mural, which was sponsored by the local arts council and the county Revitalization Committee in a partnership that has been described as "positive, active, and supportive." Lonon, the arts council administrator, says that the 12-by-29-foot mural on a West Jefferson bank building "is just the start of a major downtown . . . 'sprucing up.'"²¹

On Mother's Day last year, the Wilson Rose Garden opened on city land after six years of hard work by a dedicated group of volunteers. The 140 varieties of historical and modern roses—a total of a thousand plants—were in full bloom and “made quite a splash,” says Rufus Swain, chair of the rose garden committee. By next Mother's Day, the committee hopes to have a work of art on a circle at the midpoint of the main walk into the garden. “We always anticipated we would need some kind of focal point for the garden, and we went to the state Arts Council to get assistance with what we'd need and how we'd go about it,” Swain explains. The committee received a \$1,500 planning grant from the North Carolina Arts Council as well as help putting together a request for proposals and a list of sculptors to whom the request should be mailed. Three finalists have been chosen from among the twelve proposals the committee received. Once the final selection is made, the committee will seek private funds to commission the artwork, budgeted at \$20,000.²²

The Cleveland Center in Shelby houses mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse programs for Cleveland County. Six years ago, with the help of a \$4,500 New Works grant, the center began developing *Restoration Garden*, a therapeutic natural environment. Completed in 1997 at a cost of \$35,500, the garden features a 4-by-8-foot waterwall made of 224

hand-carved, glazed ceramic tiles in shades of bronze, blue, green, and burgundy. According to a newsletter on gardening as therapy, the waterwall “transforms unused space into a beautiful and functional environment.”²³ To fund its “building blocks,” the Cleveland Center sponsored two workshops in which more than 200 clients, staff members, and community volunteers paid \$25 each to create a tile in honor or in memory of someone. “One of the most interesting results of this project,” said Anne L. Short, project director, “was our ability to use the workshops to tell the stories of the mentally ill and developmentally disabled individuals we serve.”²⁴

MUNICIPAL EFFORTS

Cary

With a local nonprofit group raising money for public art, the Cary Town Council decided it needed “a sound public process” for accepting and developing projects, so last year it set up a cultural arts committee to review all proposals for art on town property.²⁵ The first piece accepted under the new policy was a stainless steel sculpture at a major gateway to town near the SAS Institute. The sculpture was commissioned and paid for by Cary Visual Arts, a nonprofit group whose 120

APPLYING FOR FUNDS

Paying for public art sometimes requires as much creativity as the art itself, and the result may not be universally well received by taxpayers. Following are some suggestions for developing public art and ensuring taxpayers' satisfaction, offered by those who have successfully negotiated the process:

- ✘ Start with a small group.
- ✘ Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- ✘ Draw on the expertise of the North Carolina Arts Council. The staff can be called on for advice and maintains a voluminous resource file of visual artists.
- ✘ When applying for competitive grants, do your homework ahead of time and make sure the proposal is well developed.
- ✘ Keep the process as broad-based as possible. Open it to the public, and make it a venue for community participation.
- ✘ Have the artists participate in grassroots workshops with the community.

Municipalities or 501(c)(3) (nonprofit) organizations interested in applying for a New Works matching grant from the North Carolina Arts Council should request a copy of the grant guidelines well in advance of the yearly March 1 application deadline. The grants are competitive, and only twelve to fifteen are awarded each year. Because the total yearly grant budget is around \$40,000, the council may fund projects for less than the amount requested.

Among the criteria New Works staff look for is breadth of effect. “These are statewide grants, so we're looking at whether a project will have a wider potential reach than a specific local interest,” Jeff Pettis, director of visual arts for New Works, explains. “It's always a good idea for applicants to call us in January or February to talk about their projects before applying, because we can help them put together applications.”¹



NOTES

1. Jeff Pettis, visual arts director, N.C. Arts Council New Works grant program, telephone interview, Jan. 6, 1999.



Untitled glass wall, by David Wilson, 1997, at the Kenan-Flagler Business School, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

members pay dues of \$30 to \$50 a year and sponsor the annual Cary Art Ball. For each of the past two years, the ball has raised more than \$150,000 after expenses for commissioning public art. Its first project, already installed on the grounds of town hall, was a series of six cast-bronze sculptures. Victoria Castor, executive director of the arts group, explains that Cary Visual Arts started with “a group of private citizens who mostly had lived in Cary all their lives and really felt strongly about art as a way to beautify the town.”²⁶

Charlotte

Charlotte is unique in the state in being the only municipality with a percent-for-art program. A 1988 ordinance sets aside up to 1 percent of the construction or renovation funds for all public buildings for art. The program, which is under the local arts and science council, has a full-time director as well as two full-time and one part-time staff members. A public art commis-

sion of twelve members, half of them appointed by the city and half by Mecklenburg County, works with the director and the staff. In the last five years, more than fifty projects have been completed at sites as varied as libraries, community centers, a police station, a social services building, and a ballpark. The staff also works in partnership with businesses to develop privately funded public art, including an interactive sound-and-light installation for NationsBank on top of a parking garage. So far, says program director Jennifer Murphy, “everybody has appreciated every piece we have done.”²⁷

Raleigh

Five years ago, under the leadership of its arts commission, Raleigh embarked on a public art plan. With city money the commission erected the *Light + Time Tower*, a 40-foot-tall structure of galvanized steel with twenty panels of clear glass that act as prisms, catching sunlight and fracturing it into wavelengths so that the glass appears colored. The industrial-looking tower, part of a plan to beautify Capital Boulevard, was immediately criticized by many residents who felt it was unsightly. Arts commission director Martha Shannon says the commission thereafter changed its focus somewhat, away from applied art and toward art education. With grants from the A. J. Fletcher Foundation and the North Carolina Arts Council, the commission developed a teacher’s guide to public art complemented by thirty-three slides, and distributed sets to public schools throughout Wake County, as well as to others in the state. Shannon says the response from teachers has been “tremendous.” The commission now is updating its five-year plan and is looking for grants to begin another public art project.²⁸

Salisbury

With guidance from the Waterworks Visual Arts Center, the nonprofit arts center for Rowan County, Salisbury is planning the Freedmen’s Cemetery Memorial Project. When completed, the memorial will stand on an open grassy knoll between the predominantly African-American Soldier’s Memorial AME Zion Church and the predominantly white, walled cemetery in the center of town. Research indicates that about 120 people are buried in unmarked graves on the site. According to Denny Meham, Waterworks’ director, historically those in power have defined art because “they create it and they commission

the artists.” One of the critical issues in the Salisbury project, Mecham says, is that “the contributions of 30 percent of the population have never been acknowledged. This project is an acknowledgment of the contributions of a whole culture to Salisbury’s history.” Waterworks’ funding comes from memberships, foundation grants, and the North Carolina Arts Council. The projected budget for the memorial project is \$30,000.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Inspired by varied impulses and taking many forms, public art has, throughout time, helped define a special place, commemorate a critical event, or express an idea. It is, in the words of the Raleigh Arts Commission, “for everyone to see, enjoy, and learn from.”³⁰ It may even provoke, especially when public funds are used. If money is tight and a project is over budget, the temptation may be to cut back on art, but “over time,” Charlotte’s Jennifer Murphy thinks, “people see that the value of what’s created is far greater than the cost.”³¹

NOTES

1. Major Danny W. Hassell, facilities engineering supervisor, N.C. National Guard, telephone interview, Jan. 6, 1999. Artist Silas Kopf’s untitled marquetry (hand-cut wood veneer) panel, completed in August 1992, cost \$7,106. The work, made of thirty species of wood, was funded by the Artworks for State Buildings program.

2. Carol Varner, director, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, telephone interview, Jan. 5, 1999. *Sonic Plaza*, by artist Christopher Janney, was completed in November 1998. Funding for the \$106,936 installation came from the Artworks for State Buildings program.

3. Jane Lonon, executive director, Ashe County Arts Council, in *Final Report, North Carolina Arts Council New Works Grant #9800768* (West Jefferson: July 15, 1998), p. 1. *Spring Flowers on Mount Jefferson*, by Burnsville artist Robert Johnson, was completed in June 1998. The North Carolina Arts Council New Works grant provided \$2,500 of the total cost of \$5,900, with remaining funds coming from the Ashe County Revitalization Committee and the Ashe County Arts Council.

4. Jean McLaughlin, director, Penland School of Crafts, telephone interview, Jan. 12, 1999.

5. McLaughlin, who joined the staff of the North Carolina Arts Council in 1975, researched and wrote the legislation for the Artworks for State Buildings program in the 1970s. When the program was approved in 1982, she was named director. She resigned in May 1998 to become director of Penland School of Crafts.

6. McLaughlin interview, Jan. 12, 1999.

7. Beverly Ayscue, public art administrator, Artworks for State Buildings program, interview, Dec. 15, 1998. Also N.C. Arts Council, *A Guide to North Carolina’s Artworks for State Buildings* (Raleigh: N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, April 1996).

8. The 1982 legislation that created the state program, N.C. Gen. Stat. Art. 47A, Ch. 143 (hereinafter G.S.), used the name Art Works in State Buildings. The 1987 amendment described later in the same text paragraph referred to it as Art Works for State Buildings. The North Carolina Arts Council, which runs the program, refers to it as Artworks (one word) for State Buildings.

9. G.S. Art. 47A, Ch. 143.

10. 1995 N.C. Sess. Laws ch. 324, § 12.2, effective July 1, 1995.

11. Mary Regan, director, N.C. Arts Council, telephone interview, Jan. 5, 1999.

12. North Carolina Arts Council, “*North Carolina Artworks for State Buildings*” *Project Update* (Raleigh: N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, Aug. 1, 1998). Also Geoff Edgers, “Artful Departure,” *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 7, 1998, available at http://search.news-observer.com/plweb-cgi/nao_search.cgi.

13. N. C. Arts Council, *Project Update*; Edgers, “Artful Departure.”

14. Howard Lee, North Carolina senator, telephone interview, Jan. 8, 1999.

15. Regan interview, Jan. 5, 1999.

16. N.C. Arts Council, *Project Update*. A description and a photograph of each project, its location, its cost, and the name of the artist can be found at the N.C. Artworks for State Buildings Web site, www.ncarts.org/artists.

17. Donald W. Eaddy, director, Agronomic Services, telephone interview, Jan. 7, 1999.

18. Lee interview, Jan. 8, 1999.

19. Regan interview, Jan. 5, 1999.

20. Jeff Pettis, visual arts director, N.C. Arts Council New Works grant program, telephone interview, Jan. 6, 1999.

21. Lonon, in *Final Report*, p. 1.

22. Rufus Swain, chair, Wilson Rose Garden committee, telephone interview, Jan. 5, 1999.

23. *Carolina News* (newsletter of the American Horticultural Therapy Association, Carolina Chapter) (June 1997).

24. Anne L. Short, project director, Cleveland Center, in *Final Report, North Carolina Arts Council New Works Grant #9700494* (Shelby: July 14, 1997), p. 1.

25. Town of Cary, *Policy Statement 116: Art in Public Places* (Cary: adopted Jan. 8, 1998).

26. Victoria Castor, executive director, Cary Visual Arts, telephone interview, Jan. 13, 1999.

27. Jennifer Murphy, director, Charlotte Public Art Program, telephone interview, Jan. 5, 1999.

28. Martha Shannon, director, City of Raleigh Arts Commission, telephone interview, Jan. 6, 1999.

29. Denny Mecham, director, Waterworks Visual Arts Center, telephone interview, Jan. 4, 1999.

30. City of Raleigh Arts Commission, “*Light + Time Tower*,” *An Artwork Based on Physics* (Raleigh: n.d.).

31. Murphy interview, Jan. 5, 1999.