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Reporting on Art in the City: Newspaper coverage of public art in Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago, 2001 – 2010

Cristián Doña-Reveco
University of Nebraska at Omaha, cdona@unomaha.edu

Toby A. Ten Eyck
Michigan State University, teneyck@msu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Doña-Reveco, Cristián and Eyck, Toby A. Ten, "Reporting on Art in the City: Newspaper coverage of public art in Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago, 2001 – 2010" (2016). *Latino/Latin American Studies Faculty Publications*. 12.
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Reporting on Art in the City:

Newspaper coverage of public art in Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco,
and Chicago, 2001 – 2010

Abstract

Local journalism is expected to record significant events, people, and ideas tied to the location where the journalism is practiced. Public art commemorates some of these significant events, people, and ideas, some of which encapsulate the style of the city, and all of which can become issues that gain media attention. We investigate a decade (2001-2010) of newspaper reporting and policies related to public art in four cities that are considered cultural destinations in the US – Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago – to understand how this issue is used to define and describe each of these cities and style within media discourse. We argue that what is covered and how it is covered shed light on how journalists and those who make decisions about public art seek to develop and maintain the styles of cities.

Keywords

Public art, journalism, style, Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago

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Introduction

Public art is meant to commemorate, celebrate, or decorate aspects of a city or neighborhood (Sharp et al. 2005). Public art is also expected to highlight the cultural breadth and depth of a city, as “monuments represent an essential aspect of the city as a work in the sense of a work of art” (Remesar 1999:7). Works of art, however, are not homogenous, nor are interpretations of those works. Creations and interpretations are based on a number of aesthetic and other social qualities of which there is very little consensus (Barrett 2008). News organizations can shape the way these discussions take place in larger arenas, including informing audiences of the processes through which works of art and placement are chosen, background on artists and their motivations, public responses, and how the art does or does not fit the style of the city.

Our conceptual framework for investigating official decision-making processes and media coverage regarding public art and city style echoes that of Cronin (2008:65), who argued, “[a]ny set of discourses and discursive practices renders legible certain aspects of the social terrain....” Her work focused on outdoor advertising and graffiti, aspects of the urban landscape that share similarities with public art as all are typically visual and meant to attract attention

to some message. Cronin's goal was to highlight discourses embedded in hegemonic notions of entrepreneurship as well as those of resistance to more fully understand urban spaces and their fluidity. We share the goal of explaining urban spaces but from the standpoint of efforts that are made to situate cities within certain discourses or styles. These styles can be fluid, such as a US city reinventing itself to look like a Bavarian village (e.g., Frankenmuth, MI, Leavenworth, WA) to longstanding traditions (e.g., New Orleans and creole culture), which are also variously (re)interpreted. We look to press coverage of public art between 2001 and 2010 and currently available policies on public art in four cities –Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago – to investigate if and where aspects of style are discussed in public arenas.

Background

Unlike Cronin's (2008) advertisers and graffiti writers who do not purport to be guided by notions of objectivity when creating messages, journalists are expected to provide audiences with multiple interpretations of the issues they cover (Gitlin 1980). This can lead to a reliance on stories that are, or have the potential to become, controversial (Crook, Pakulski, and Waters 1992:154-157; Weeks et al. 2012). Controversies are sites of control efforts for identities and where styles arise from these control efforts (White 2008). The styles of cities can be spaces of contention, and styles are created for and within cities to help maintain identities, especially when faced with alternative identities based on

marginal stories such as high crime rates or political corruption. Identities can arise from food (Philly cheesesteak, Boston baked beans, New York bagels, Chicago-style pizza, New Orleans creole, etc.), music (New York rap, Los Angeles hip hop, New Orleans jazz, Chicago blues, etc.), and ways of talking. Nicknames also highlight style. New York is referred to as the Big Apple while New Orleans is the Big Easy. Chicago is the Windy City and Los Angeles the City of Angels. What, however, is style and how do we know it when we see it?

According to White (2008:112), “[w]hereas identities can be like musical notes that struggle for a melody, and discipline embeds these identities in the larger context of a genre, style is the rhythm of social life.” Style, however, is not everything and everywhere, it is not permanent, and in the wrong context it can be inappropriate. A style can get action by admitting an identity into a situation, or it can lead to disengagement such as displaying a tattoo within certain work environments. It is, according to White, scale invariant, providing a conceptual tool to understand both the individual actor and large social groupings.

In cities, styles grow out of leaders and citizens practicing the “invention of traditions” that legitimize institutions, promote social cohesion, and inculcate beliefs and value systems among fellow members of the community (Hobsbwan and Ranger 2008). The identification of Philadelphia as the City of Murals and Kansas City and the City of Fountains, for example, attests to the construction of shared styles in relation to public art, and those walking through each city would

likely feel a different social rhythm in each place based on interpretations of these labels and their accompanying styles. Other instances would include specific pieces such as the *Chicago Picasso* or Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York City, as these become part of the construction of a memory and tradition regarding art in public spaces that reflect the cities in which the art is (or was) displayed. When style is created in an appropriate manner, positive changes can take place, as is evidenced by the construction of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao that changed the city's style as a place that is no longer the declining industrial center and the locus of Basque separatist terrorism, but a Mecca for artistic tourism (Bell and De-Shalit 2011).

The creation and maintenance of a style depends on appropriate discourse (White 2008), and within a city this will stem from officials, citizens, tourists, and media outlets. Much like Goffman's (1959) interpretation of the performances of the individual and small groups, the legitimacy of the performance of a city's style is based on shared scripts and the mobilization of social, cultural, and economic power (Flora and Flora 2004). These resources are typically unevenly distributed across a population, so creating a script for an identity as large as a city is rarely purely democratic. As Luna-Garcia (2008:144) contends, "[t]he creation of particular symbolic economies by urban elites allows processes of urban regeneration and gentrification that could not be easily understood without the support of the ideological strength of cultural discourses." Harrison (1996)

argued much the same thing, stating that management decisions consist of determining what needs to be managed, studying and comparing options, choosing among these options, implementing a plan, and seeking feedback on the plan's trajectory. We argue that the cultural discourses and feedback on management decisions and urban styles are often carried by the media, and to understand decisions made within urban spaces on issues like public art one must also understand the role played by media organizations within that city.

It was mentioned that journalists are trained to be objective in the sense of offering opposing viewpoints on controversial topics. How a topic is chosen to be covered and the coverage itself, however, is tied to the power of those involved in all aspects of the coverage (Bagdikian 1990; Schiller 1989). The cultural discourse that can be found in the media and undergirds a city's style is created by those in power who have a vested interest in creating a city that becomes a commodity (Luna-Garcia 2008). That the media play to those in power is not a new insight (e.g., Baudrillard 1981; Marcuse 1964), but it does shed light on how processes (e.g., paying for public art) become part of the cultural discourse within cities that legitimates decisions within places like city halls and real estate development offices. These decisions manifest themselves in public art projects that become part of the cityscape which reinforces the cultural discourse of the city and its style, further legitimizing the original decisions and decision makers.

Unless major controversies arise, future decisions are thought best handled by those who already hold legitimacy in this arena (White 2008).

For a city's elite to gain acceptance and legitimacy, their decisions must be disseminated to the public, and this is often done through the media (Babon 2006; Tepper 2011), which is why we are interested in news coverage of public art. Reports focused on the outward appearances of a city would provide insights into that city's style (Ferrell et al., 2001), while also highlighting the interests behind creating, maintaining, and challenging styles (Franklin and Murphy 1998). We are not arguing that public art is the lifeblood of a city or that poor decisions will stop tourists from visiting. Cities such as the ones we are studying provide citizens and visitors with many experiences that range from shopping to sporting events to parks and areas in natural settings, all of which have little or nothing to do with public art. It is also assumed that newspapers are not the only public forums that engage public art (Ten Eyck and Fischer 2012). Public art can, however, have an impact on how people within and outside a city view the built atmosphere (Kammen 2006), and art has been found to generate revenues in urban spaces (Evans 2005; Quinn 2005).ⁱ In addition, media coverage of public art extends the script to audiences comprised of tourists who are interested in visiting cities that take its public art seriously. To look more closely at these cities, their styles, and the powers behind the decisions, we turn to stories of

public art published between 2001 and 2010 in the newspapers of Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago.

Data and Methods

To investigate the styles of cities as reported in newspapers, we follow White's (2008) argument that styles are aspects of control efforts among identities that arise out of stories. In addition, the identity must be fluid as style is unneeded in static environments. To this end, we chose four cities with alternative stories (e.g., natural disasters, internal corruption) that could potentially challenge identities that position them as commodities (Luna-Garcia 2008). Both New Orleans and San Francisco have experienced natural disasters within the last few decades that have claimed numerous lives, Chicago has a reputation for political corruption, Philadelphia has received negative publicity for its professional sports clubs and fan behavior, as well as the decision to display a statue of Rocky Balboa on the grounds of the Philadelphia Museum of Art that led some individuals to question the seriousness of the Philadelphia art scene, and all four cities have high crime areas.ⁱⁱ Regardless of these threats, each city is considered to have a style (or styles) that makes them unique, which had led to each being considered a major tourist destination with various tourist web sites listing them as some of the top tourist destinations in the US (along with places like New York, San Antonio, Hawaii, and the Grand Canyon).ⁱⁱⁱ We were also interested in finding cities that were far enough apart that it would be unlikely that any style would be based on

distinguishing the city from a local competitor, and that each of the city's major newspapers had to be accessible online (Tepper 2011).

Each city will be treated separately in the following analysis starting with investigations of official verbiage regarding public art taken from each city's web pages, followed by a discussion of the news coverage of public art. News reporting is imbued with style (e.g. Zelizer 1992), and therefore this part of our analysis is, in a sense, a study of two styles – the style of the city and the style of those reporting on public art. We would, however, argue that what is being covered is based on more than a reporter's interest. In addition, it is unlikely that reporters are a direct part of the decision making processes regarding public art. They may decide to cover some art while ignoring others, but the pieces that are being written about are part of the city and processes that do not include their input.

We are also aware that newspaper readership is declining in the US (Morton 2002). Still, the press can and do shape our understanding of the world (Gitlin 1980). This has been found to be as true in the arts (Ten Eyck and Busch 2012) as well as for other topics (Gamson 1992). For this study we used Lexis-Nexis, ProQuest, Factiva, and Access World News Research Collection archives to access newspapers articles between 2001 and 2010 that included the search term 'public art' from *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *San*

Francisco Chronicle, and *Chicago Sun-Times*. While each of these cities contains numerous newspapers, these were the newspapers with the highest circulations.

The initial searches revealed 242 articles from Philadelphia, 255 from Chicago, 270 from New Orleans, and 322 from San Francisco (n=1089). Given that constructed weeks or random sampling can lead to the exclusion of important events, we decided that all articles would be included in the analysis.

A coding scheme consisting of word count, placement, slant of headline, slant of article, sources, themes, frames, editorialization, and a short description of each article was created and used by two coders. Both coders worked through articles together to reach a level of acceptable consensus on the variables in the coding scheme before separate coding. All subsequent questions on issues that arose were discussed.

Analysis

A note on general trends. Given the role of public art in commemorating events and individuals, we thought there may be some controversies regarding what should be commemorated. This could include a lay person saying they did not like a piece of art, a developer complaining about having to include art in a building, or a reporter saying that a piece was problematic, such reporting that people were avoiding an area where some piece of art was displayed. We found few articles with controversial content. San Francisco had the largest percentage of controversies (21.4%) followed by Chicago (20.8%), Philadelphia (18.6%), and

finally New Orleans (11.5%) (Table 1). The typical article was a review of some piece of public art, an aspect we did not try to quantify. We turn now to a qualitative investigation of the coverage.

Table 1 about here

Philadelphia. Known as the City of Murals, Philadelphia has sought to create public spaces for artists since at least 1984 with its Mural Arts Program which sought out graffiti writers to beautify the city. The city has expanded its interest in public art by commissioning works supported by funds from new construction projects, as well as protecting existing works. This process is partially carried out within the Philadelphia Art Commission which must approve all construction and alteration efforts, oversees signage and other projects in special areas (e.g., historical districts), and acquisitions of new works of public art. The Commission's meetings tend to be open to the public offering a forum for citizen input, and the composition of the Commission must include art practitioners and experts (painter, sculptor, architect, etc.) who are used to determine the aesthetic quality of artist applications and their final products.

Efforts to expand the city's public art and mural moniker involves programs on art education and restorative justice, as well as opportunities for artists to ask for funding for mural projects. While little is said about a style for Philadelphia within these procedures, efforts are made to involve local artists and organizations. According to a story listed on the Creative Philadelphia page

(<http://creativephl.org/post/108828493494/artplace-communitydevelopmentinvestments>, accessed January 26, 2015), local NGOs are being invited to apply for development funds that would likely include space for the arts.

There are no explicit instructions on the Creative Philadelphia page of how a local piece of art is to be chosen, though as we begin to look at the news coverage we can see trends that would point to a Philadelphia style. Murals were an important part of the coverage, such as the following story from November 6, 2001:

The huge and delicate Dream Garden mosaic, threatened with sale, subject of an intense preservation battle for 3 1/2 years, object of local courtroom argument and international aesthetic praise, will be acquired by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and will remain in the lobby of the Curtis Center across from Independence Mall, its home for nearly a century.

“We are all thrilled,” said Derek A. Gillman, president and chief executive of the academy. “The mural will remain here in Philadelphia now as a great piece of public art. We want to see it enjoyed by everyone, and we’ll do what we can to make it enjoyable.”

....

What launched the controversy was the Merriam estate's effort to strip the mural - which weighs as much as 10 tons and comprises hundreds of thousands of shards of specially fired and tinted glass - from the Curtis walls and to ship it to an anonymous buyer (later identified as casino owner Steve Wynn) in the summer of 1998.

The city responded by designating the mural the first "historic object" under a previously unused portion of the local preservation ordinance. Lawyers for the estate then sued, arguing that the city made all sales impossible and had therefore robbed the mural of all value.

It is difficult to interpret the efforts made by the city to protect this mural as part of the City of Murals moniker or that the mural would have been preserved regardless of the city's label. The coverage was presented in a way that this mural, and not a piece of public art, should be protected

The topic of murals appeared elsewhere, such as a letter to the editor in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (January 26, 2007) in which the author argued that too many of the current murals lacked the style or texture of Philadelphia.

Instead of showing passion, compassion, and a spirit of self-determination and permanence, these murals have no more impact than a smiley face on a T-shirt.

It is no different than painting homey scenes over the boarded-up windows of abandoned buildings, which actually was done on North Broad Street near Lehigh Avenue.

I know people will say, “Well, the community asked for this,” or that the community “was consulted before this mural was painted.”

My response to that - if that’s true in all cases - is that then there is a deeper disconnect between reality and perception than I had imagined. Also, few, if any, of the artists who do the actual paintings come from the community they are interpreting on the wall.

The argument concerning that the content of the murals provides no insights into the city in which they are located, as well as the newspaper’s decision to publish this letter, links it to style. According to this letter, too many of the murals mean nothing, and so the time and energies given to promoting Philadelphia as the City of Murals is problematic.

Returning to Cronin’s (2008:65) interest in how discussions are tied to “aspects of the social terrain,” the reporting of events and publishing of letters focusing on murals provides insights into a larger social terrain that consists of a specific art form the city has adopted as an identifier. Murals may contain different styles (medium, content, technique), but murals are also a style of art

that, while present in other cities, has come to be viewed as part of the urban landscape of Philadelphia among those who had the legitimate authority to give that label to this city, as well as those who report on art in the city.

New Orleans. New Orleans is likely to be best known for a piece of performance art among readers – Mardi Gras. The style of Mardi Gras – masks, the colors of purple, gold, and green, the depiction of beads -- can be found throughout the city's public art works, as is the Fleur-de-lis. We begin with a discussion of how the city is involved in public art decisions.

The Office of Culture Economic and Arts Council, as well as groups tied to the areas where the art is to be displayed, are typically involved in these decisions (personal communication). For example, the Vieux Carre Commission will have input into determining what is appropriate for the French Quarter while a separate group will be part of determining art pieces along the Mississippi Riverwalk, though these areas are adjacent to one another.

As with Philadelphia, funding for public art comes from a 1% budget line item in all eligible municipal bonds (typically tied to new and restoration building contracts). The money is used to fund artists and their projects as well as maintenance for existing pieces. While this funding has created numerous opportunities for local artists to create and display their works, the money is often allocated on an annual basis which makes it difficult to determine how much

should be set aside for new projects and how much is needed for maintenance (personal communication).

While the formal processes of funding and choosing art are similar to Philadelphia and the other cities, what is chosen provides an insight into the style of New Orleans. The following appeared in the *New Orleans Times Picayune* and is a truncated list of modern sculptures (a total of twelve were listed in the newspaper, with ten tied to a New Orleans theme) being placed in the medium along Veterans Boulevard in Metairie just outside New Orleans.

“Wind in My Sails”

[The] angular design is based on childhood memor[ies]of sailboats on Lake Pontchartrain.

“Sculptural Trees”

[I]nspired by “thinking of the trees that were lost in the storm.”

“Monumental Holistic 4”

Try to think of it like black coffee, scotch on the rocks, or raw oysters. Nothing added. Like it or not. Take it or leave it.

“We the People”

The nearly 10-foot-tall, 2,750 pound steel construction . . . will be coated with an abstract pattern of 30 to 40 colors including hints of beads, masks and human figures.

“Jammin’ Jazz”

The meaning of the piece took on an unintentional hurricane recovery theme when it was damaged by a falling tree and soaked in floodwater in 2005.

“Jumping Through Hoops”

The Crescent City . . . sculpture is in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. (January 17, 2010:D1)

New Orleans is known for its food culture, including coffee, alcohol, and seafood. There is no need to mention Katrina when saying something was lost in the storm, though the city has experienced other hurricanes and other places were affected by Katrina. There are also mentions of music (jazz) and nicknames (Crescent City) that are linked to New Orleans. Finally, the reporter discusses a very specific sculpture in the body of the text, stating, “George Rodrigue's 16-foot-tall Blue Dog sculpture was lowered onto its pole at the corner of Severn on Jan. 5 and immediately became the most significant piece of modern sculpture in the New Orleans area.” Rodrigue was born in New Iberia and had galleries in New Orleans during the decade we studied (he died in 2013). His Blue Dog, first painted in 1984, has become symbolic of the city in numerous settings, though there are no famous blue dogs prior to this in New Orleans history. The image has become famous with ties to the city and its style (e.g., fun, frivolous, mysterious).

The local aspect of New Orleans style is also evident in an article appearing on August 7, 2009 (A7), regarding Mayor Ray Nagin's interests in sculptures (and his legacy, which took a much different turn later).

Jelly Roll Morton, Mahalia Jackson, the late Mardi Gras Indian Chief Tootie Montana and a brass band will . . . line up alongside the bronze Satchmo that currently surveys the former site of Congo Square, a rendition of which will be featured too.

The opera house might not seem a good fit with all those black icons, and it will presumably be set somewhat apart from them.

Still, you need a touch of the hifalutin to reflect the full range of New Orleans culture, which is said to be the idea of the sculpture garden. You will probably agree that whoever dreamed this up must be some kind of genius.

Mayor Ray Nagin would agree with that assessment, because the sculpture garden is his baby. If the opera house will inevitably appear anomalous and overshadowed, that is unlikely to be an accident in Chocolate City.

The names of the icons as well as the places (e.g., Congo Square, Chocolate City) are specific to New Orleans. In addition, while music is important in all the cities we studied, as well as many others, only New Orleans can boast to be the

birthplace of jazz. The artworks and the media discourse reflect the constructed style of the larger social terrain of New Orleans and become something that can be consumed when visiting the area.

San Francisco. As with Philadelphia and New Orleans, San Francisco funds public art with “a ‘1% Art Program’ that requires large projects in the Downtown and nearby neighborhoods to provide public art that equals at least 1% of the total construction cost” (<http://www.sf-planning.org/index.aspx?page=3339>, accessed January 27, 2015). Decisions and enforcement are overseen by the Department of City Planning which has developed a 17-page guideline that, according to the same web site, “stresses that the goal of the Downtown Art program is to achieve a more vital and interesting downtown while safeguarding the many subjective choices which can be made in the process.” The role of the Department of City Planning is not specified in these documents.

News coverage of public art in San Francisco discussed local traditions such as the Golden Gate Bridge, damage caused by earthquakes, and biographies of prominent artists and art supporters. The content of some of the art pieces, however, covered topics not found elsewhere in the coverage we studied, such as the following reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on February 11, 2009:

Dogs do what dogs do - and in Berkeley, “dog do” is now part of some very public art.

Decorative medallions depicting dogs sniffing, dumping and humping each other have recently been added to the base of one of a pair of sculptures commissioned by the city on either end of the pedestrian and bike bridge over Interstate 80.

While *Mannekin Pis* is a well-known piece of public art in Brussels, the San Francisco area was the only city in which these types of behaviors, even if only among dogs, were featured in coverage of public art displays. It may not be the actual depiction of these activities that reflects the Bay Area style, but the fact that these depictions were allowed in public and reported on that reflects a style of openness toward otherwise deviant behaviors, such as can be found in San Francisco's Poetry Renaissance and interpretations of the Haight-Ashbury District in the 1960s and '70s (Smith 1969).^{iv}

Other installations were connected to the area such as the following article that appeared on December 23, 2002 concerning Cupid's Span:

Observant passers-by will notice how "Cupid's Span" changes aspect with viewing angle and distance.

Up close, its taut bowstring and vertical arrow relate to the cables and towers of the Bay Bridge.

From a moderate distance, the bow, arrow and string suggest the hull, mast and rigging of a Spanish galleon -- the vessel of the colonizers -- a reading countered by the identification of

bow and arrow with Native Americans -- the colonized. One double reading of “bow,” of course, is as the bow, or front end, of a ship.

Viewed from farther off, across the Embarcadero, the curves of Cupid’s bow dovetail with the arching fronds of the palms that line the causeway and implicitly also with the swoop of the road itself.

The Embarcadero runs along the wharf that borders the south side of the San Francisco Bay, and is a popular area for tourists. Cupid’s Span, with all its potential meanings concerning love and relationships, is reported to fit the Embarcadero and San Francisco much like a beaded sculpture fits the New Orleans style.

Ties to a larger social terrain also included cultural aspects. According to a *Chronicle* article appearing on March 5, 2010, one of the most noticed pieces of public art was Brian Goggin’s “Defenestration.” It depicts furniture falling out of an abandoned hotel, which led a reporter to ask if the piece was tied to suicide. “. . . Goggin said it was inspired by his reading about the First Defenestration of Prague. That incident, which ignited the 15th century Hussite wars, involved an incensed mob throwing seven city council members from upper windows of the town hall.” The article gave no indication of why the reporter connected falling furniture to suicide instead of something like a demolition project, but one

interpretation is that suicides are tied to one of San Francisco's popular identifiers – the Golden Gate Bridge – a landmark that is less than five miles from Goggin's creation.

Tying art to the larger urban context was also part of the "Pavement to Parks" program. As reported on September 18, 2009,

At the end of Eighth Street between two cafes - one geared to blue-collar workers, the other courting students from nearby California College of the Arts - designers Rebar Group placed three patches of lawn within frames of rough granite curbing.

The seating is granite as well - polished black squares that jut like piers from the lawns and were found along Market Street until the mid-1990s.

The population of San Francisco is not homogenous, and the art and reporting reflect this larger social context. In addition, and symbolic of a writing style as well as the sculpture, the artwork is tied to San Francisco's wharf area where tourists consume the city through the purchasing of souvenirs.

Chicago. The Windy City, which has a history of public art controversy around such pieces as the Chicago Picasso (Kammen 2006), has a higher "art tax" percentage program than any of the other cities in our study: "1.33% of the cost of constructing or renovating municipal buildings and public spaces be devoted to original artwork on the premises . . . at least half of the commissions [will] be

awarded to Chicago area artists to provide opportunities to the local arts community”

(http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/provdrs/public_art_program.html, accessed December 10, 2014). Decisions regarding appropriate art are made at the community level as aldermen are alerted to a project who identify other interested parties. This is followed by a public forum in which community members participate in addition to other city departments to gain a sense of the history of the area where the art will be installed. After discussions with the public are concluded, a recommendation is made to the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs who makes the final decision.

Our first reading of the public art program in Chicago made the process look more transparent than the other cities, but a series of nineteen articles between April 29, 2001 and December 23, 2007 uncovered concerns with who was making final decisions on art and artists, as well as how funds were being spent. According to these reports and editorials, Scott Hodes, a Chicago attorney, began asking the Public Arts program for accounting records that the city was unable to provide. According to a November 7, 2003 editorial in the *Sun-Times*,

Who should determine who chooses and commissions public art works in Chicago? Common sense would tell you that artists and community representatives should have a major say, being that they are more knowledgeable about art and what is

desired in neighborhoods than the people in and connected to City Hall. In the past, city officials illegally gave name out-of-town artists precedence over local artists.

But once again this week, attorney Scott Hodes' marathon effort to bring about an equitable balance on the Public Art Committee between government and non-government individuals (and to expose misuses and abuses of funds) ran into a brick wall. A City Council committee approved a proposed ordinance that would allow PAC members to designate surrogates to vote on art expenditures in their absence -- an obvious reaction to Hodes' assertions that six of the meetings held by the panel since February 2002 were illegal because a quorum was not present.

Decisions made within meetings are not part of the visual style of a city, but what is decided and how it is decided may reflect the city's political style. This is also true of what constitutes a story worth reporting, and how that story is written (Clark and Silver 2012).

Coverage of actual art work was concerned with, among other things, what constitutes art and when and how pieces become part of its style. This happened to the owners of Cermak Plaza who had to negotiate Dustin Schuler's "Spindle," a piece that was, according to an editorial published on July 26, 2007, significant to the area.

Like it or not, the Spindle put Berwyn on the map. It's the first thing mentioned under "features" in Berwyn's Wikipedia entry (followed by the World's Largest Laundromat in the 6200 block of West Cermak Road). But its days are likely numbered. Though the mayor calls it "an icon," Berwyn residents still regard the Spindle with roughly equal measures of affection and disdain.

The Spindle looks like, as described by one reporter, a car kebab. In that particular article, published on April 15, 2008, the Spindle is tied to the tradition of the Chicago Picasso:

The question is eternal, it seems, and people in Berwyn are asking it yet again this week as the "Spindle" – California artist Dustin Shuler's sculpture of eight cars pierced and stacked on a huge spike at Cermak Plaza—is being offered for sale

Then again, Chicago's best-known work of public art – the untitled sculpture by Pablo Picasso at Daley Plaza—wasn't always popular, either. When it was installed in 1967, "Everybody thought it was an outrage, this funny-looking thing," Chicago arts advocate Natalie van Straaten has recalled. "Was it a horse? The head of a dog? A lot of people would have preferred a statue of Ernie Banks instead."

Over the years, the Picasso found its way into most Chicagoans' favor. It had several advantages over the "Spindle," however, not least of which is that its creator happened to be the world's most famous living artist at the time.

"Spindle's" portrayal in a popular movie brought more tourists to Berwyn. That Berwyn residents never came to a consensus on that perspective shows how difficult it is to anchor style around artworks that can be interpreted in various ways.

Ties to other public art pieces and to Chicago were found in other articles, such as Gordon Halloran's piece of frozen art installed in Millennium Park in 2008. According to an article appearing on February 1, 2008

Like Anish Kapoor, creator of the legume-like Cloud Gate, and Pablo Picasso, who designed the baboonlike untitled sculpture in Daley Plaza, Gordon Halloran is the latest artist whose public work of art will have all of Chicago talking.

....

Halloran is a Canadian artist known for creating works out of colorful pieces of ice. His latest creation is a giant wall of ice in Millennium Park that was inspired by the sight lines of the architecture on Michigan Avenue. It's the featured exhibit in what is being dubbed Chicago's "Modern Museum of Ice."

“He’s never worked in the States before and never on this large of a scale,” [Dorothy Coyle, director of Chicago's Office of Tourism], said. “It’s a perfect project for Chicago.”

Besides ties to other public artworks and the Chicago skyline, no explicit statement is made as to why a piece of ice sculpture that would melt when warmer days arrived is “a perfect project for Chicago.” We could argue it fits with a Chicago style because of the city’s winter climate, but that is only an assumption. It is also interesting to note that none of the three artists mentioned in this article – Kapoor, Halloran, and Picasso – are from Chicago (or even the US), one of many concerns raised by Hodes when challenging how public art works were being chosen and funded.

Discussion and Conclusions

Cities such as Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Chicago display artworks in public spaces to provide viewers a sense of both the cities’ history and contemporary culture. Each city has created programs that collect funds from building projects to support the creation and maintenance of public art. There are some differences in how these programs are implemented and enforced, as least from descriptions found on official city web sites, but these given little sense of a style. The programs and processes in Philadelphia and San Francisco seem more centralized with city officials and departments more engaged in the process, while neighborhoods and communities are more engaged

in Chicago and New Orleans, though the legitimacy of the process in Chicago was questioned. Local artists were also featured in numerous articles, though New Orleans and Philadelphia seem to emphasize this to a greater degree, at least in terms of formal guidelines and discussions of the art and artists in the news coverage we studied.

According to White (2008), one does not find style in formal decision making processes. What is put on display, however, does provide more insights into the styles of these cities, especially given the similarities in the formal decision making processes. The public art covered by the news in these cities did not stray far from the style created by more familiar images, such as San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and New Orleans' Mardi Gras. In San Francisco, the birthplace of the Poetry Renaissance and where Ginsberg's *Howl* was first heard, we found discussions of public art that ranged from statues of dogs urinating to symbols of love. News from New Orleans covered topics ranging from race and the statues of jazz musicians to ties between artworks and Hurricane Katrina. In Chicago, reporters covered the "car kebab" statue, an ice sculpture in Millennium Park, and tied both to the Chicago Picasso. In Philadelphia, stories of murals were prevalent, as were discussions of a statue of Rocky Balboa at the Philadelphia Museum of Art whose stairs the fictional Balboa ascended while training for a fight. Public art was present in each city, but the content was often different, and the news coverage pointed to how these

pieces “render legible certain aspects of the social terrain...” by highlighting how the art made sense within these urban contexts (Cronin 2008:65).

These cities, as with others, are in a constant process of constructing, negotiating, and reconstructing styles. In the process of creating a city identity that ‘brands’ the city—e.g., Philadelphia as the City of Murals—the city must reach an equilibrium between the members of the community, including tourists, who want to maintain historically constructed traditions and those who want to create new ones (Kavaratizis and Ashworth, 2005). The development and erection of public art can play a role in this. Since the art is public, various interests want their opinions regarding the art to be heard. In Philadelphia there are discussions about what is and what is not a mural. Should graffiti, for example, be included with murals? It is also relevant to ask who makes the decisions to accept or commission public art beyond the formal processes we discussed, as well as which of these events should be covered by the media. These decisions will have ramifications for businesses, citizens, and tourists. As mentioned by Rebay (1982), citizens of a place tend to use its culture as an identity marker though few of them created those cultural icons, and business owners rely on these markers to direct consumers to purchase their goods. Any and every piece of public art is important to create and influence the identity of the city; they are “the punctuation and intonation of public space” (Matossian

1999:67). To lose the label of a cultural destination would be problematic for more than just those concerned with creating and disseminating news.

Finally, it should be understood that the cities we studied may be in a better position to absorb negative publicity given their positions as cultural centers, and each has many organizations and individuals in place to help create and maintain identities. Controversial funding for statues in New Orleans is unlikely to deter tourists from engaging in Mardi Gras activities, while depictions of dogs fornicating will not stop tourists from wanting to cross the Golden Gate Bridge. Following similar controversies in smaller urban areas would provide greater insight into how place-based identities and styles are shaped, maintained, and challenged, as well as how such challenges are controlled within formal decision-making structures.

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Table 1: Cities and controversial public art stories

A controversy is discussed		City of Publication				
		New Orleans	San Francisco	Chicago	Philadelphia	Total
Yes	N	31	69	53	45	198
	%	11.5%	21.4%	20.8%	18.6%	18.2%
No	N	239	253	202	197	891
	%	88.5%	78.6%	79.2%	81.4%	81.8%
Total	N	270	322	255	242	1,089
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Notes

ⁱ An anonymous reviewer pointed out that decisions focused on tourism in any given city involve much more than city officials and media outlets. This includes tourism bureaus, business owners, school districts, and so forth. Our focus on official city policies and newspaper reports is not meant to trivialize the roles played by these other actors, but to study style in open forums.

ⁱⁱ Public art projects in both San Francisco and New Orleans have been inspired by natural disasters. This includes the Coit Memorial Tower in San Francisco and public art projects funded by the Joan Baez Foundation that commemorated Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. These projects provide audiences insights into the cities' styles at times of crises, such as creating boats that mimic Mardi Gras floats in terms of color schemes and decorations.

ⁱⁱⁱ The US Census Bureau ranks San Francisco as fifth in US destinations for international tourists, Chicago as ninth, and Philadelphia as thirteenth. According to Philadelphia's Economic Impact of Arts + Culture office, San Francisco is ranked second in major US cities by per-capita expenditures, followed by Philadelphia and Chicago. According to a study conducted by Arts and Economic Prosperity IV (<http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/arts-economic-prosperity-iv>), Chicago ranked as the number one city in total spending, Philadelphia ranked third, and San Francisco ranked seventh. According to *US News and World Report*, San Francisco is the fourth best place to visit in the US, Chicago is thirteenth, and New Orleans is eighteenth (http://travel.usnews.com/Rankings/best_usa_vacations/).

^{iv} One anonymous reviewer pointed to our interpretations of public art as over-generalizations. We would agree in the sense that there is little academic writing concerning the depiction of certain bodily functions in public art. However, we are comfortable in stating that we did not find similar discussions in the news coverage of public art in the other cities (even though actions such as 'flashing' are well-known in places like New Orleans). This may be where academics and art reviewers diverge in determining when it is acceptable to speculate on interpreting the social terrain.