A Look at Public Art: Examining the Importance of Public Art & How Cities are Making Their Collections More Accessible

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Abstract

The popularity of public art has grown in the past few decades; one of the main reasons for this is because public art brings a number of benefits to the city. Not only does public art create a more vibrant space for the residents of that city, it also helps attract businesses. The benefits that come with having public art have become evident to municipalities across the country, and in turn cities have started to invest more money and resources into their public art programs. One focus of these departments has been to develop a website that shows off their public art collection, and to develop a database that makes their public art even more accessible. In this paper I will examine the city of Austin's public arts website, and contrast it with Minneapolis' and Atlanta's sites, as well as outline the importance of public art and how it has helped shaped Kansas City.

The popularity of public art has grown in the past few decades; one of the main reasons for this is because public art brings a number of benefits to the city. Not only does public art create a more vibrant space for the residents of that city, it also helps attract businesses. The benefits that come with having public art have become evident to municipalities across the country, and in turn cities have started to invest more money and resources into their public art programs. One focus of these departments has been to develop a website that shows off their public art collection, and to develop a database that makes their public art even more accessible. In this paper I will examine the city of Austin's public arts website, and contrast it with Minneapolis' and Atlanta's sites, as well as outline the importance of public art and how it has helped shaped Kansas City.

One way this public service can be beneficial to a community is by helping attract more businesses. As the American Planning Association says "Creative-class theory suggests that a high-tech, highly educated workforce prefers a location with creative amenities" ("How the Arts and Culture Sector Catalyzes Economic Vitality"). This shows that businesses are going to be more attracted to a neighborhood that fosters a creative environment. One way to create this type of environment is through the city's public art.

Cities that exhibit public art are not only benefiting economically, but also socially. By having a well-established public art program, a city can assist in harboring creativity, as well as giving artists a place to grow and express themselves. When these individuals can express themselves freely, they create works of art that can help enrich the community as a whole, and not just aesthetically. This is because when a person is exposed to works of art, they are also being exposed to different ways of thinking, and different ways of looking at the world. These new lenses that art provides help spark the mind of an individual.

Public art also gives heart to a community, bringing a depressed neighborhood back to life, and pumping fresh blood through its boulevards. One does not have to travel far to find an example of how art has revived a community; simply attend a First Friday in the Cross Roads Arts District and one will experience this firsthand. It was not long ago that this district was nothing more than rundown, decrepit buildings on the verge of collapse. That is until Jim Leedy, a professor from the Kansas City Arts Institute, got tired of seeing his students leave town after graduating. According to Gina Kaufmann, Leedy "went looking for a neighborhood where he might be able to change that. He considered Westport, but the rent got too high. One day, while out driving, he stumbled upon the Crossroads" (Kaufmann "How Kansas City's Crossroads Became An Arts District, And The Story Behind First Fridays"). Leedy's stumble into the Cross Roads ushered in a new era, not only for this district, but for the entire city. He and his students helped transform this neighborhood into what we see now: A thriving, successful art district. A jewel in the crown of Kansas City.

Not only can art revive a dying neighborhood, it can also give people a sense of belonging. In a world where every new suburban sprawl is a copy of the last; a sense of identity is essential, and public art gives a community just that. Public art ties a community together and forms an identity for a city.

Where St. Louis has its arch, and Chicago its cloud, Kansas City has its own treasure. The fountains that adorn this city and are beloved by its residents have helped shaped Kansas City. Known as the city of fountains, Kansas City's vast collection of fountains is matched only by Rome's. Although the stunning fountains often take up the spotlight, Kansas City houses other marvelous works of art and architecture. Union Station is an icon in the landscape of this city. Opening its doors in 1914, this historic train station has played a key role in establishing the

identity of this city, and has been the site for some of the city's most memorable moments. The most recent one being the finishing point for that unforgettable parade in November of 2015 celebrating the Royals for crowning themselves the World Series Champions that year.

The benefits detailed above, from helping attract businesses, to bringing back a neighborhood from the brink of death, and helping give a community a sense of identity, are well known to civic leaders across the United States. Knowing this, they have started to invest more money and resources into their public art programs. How to make their public art more accessible has been something that these programs have focused a lot of their attention on. The cities of Austin, Minneapolis, and Atlanta have answered this question in their own unique way. These cities have ether created their own online database or, as in Austin's case, have taken advantaged of websites like PublicArtArchives.org which is a website where a city can upload pictures of their public art along with information of the work, and the website will then take care of sorting everything out for them. Regardless of whether a city builds their own search engine, or they use a website like PublicArtArchive.org, the most important things for making a city's art program accessible is having a good home page.

The city of Austin has an exceptional example of what a good public arts website looks like (image 1). Their website is well organized, uncluttered, and easy to navigate, and it does a great job at giving the visitor well condensed information that is easy to understand.

In contrast, Minneapolis' public art website is less interactive, and less visually appealing (image 6). One of the reasons for this is because of the lack of images on their homepage. This lack of images by no means makes the site a less functional one, it simply makes it a less appealing and less interactive site. This in turn makes the visit to their site an unremarkable one.

One thing that they both share is the fact that they both have a brief description of their programs. Both sites have well condensed information, which helps because having just a couple of paragraphs of text in the home page makes it less overwhelming for a first-time visitor.

What the people of Austin have chosen to highlight is the program's history, as well as an overview of how the program works. With just a couple of paragraphs they manage to make the reader feel knowledgeable about the city's art program. One of the things they have highlighted is the birth of the program, which was first formed in 1985, as well as how this program has helped shaped the identity of the city. They also describe how Austin "was the first municipality in Texas to make a commitment to include works of art in construction projects." They did this by having 2% of an improvement's budget go to commission or buying art for that site.

The links that the city of Austin have on its home page are one big reason the site is so easy to navigate (image 2). They are clear to locate, and help guide the visitor to many different programs and tools he or she might find useful. One of them being the city's current art projects, which is the "Current Call to Artist" link. This is an excellent tool for artists trying to find work. Once these artists click on the link they are transported to another page which further explains these projects. Some of the information detailed on this page are things such as the budget for current and future projects, as well as information on how to apply.

In order to apply an artist must first click on the "PublicArtist.org" link, which will take the artist to that website. Once here, an artist can choose from a couple of different projects the city is currently working on. This particular site is used by several other municipalities: Portland, Oregon, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Munich, Germany, and even the city of Olathe, Kansas all use this website.

Once the artist has located the project they want to apply for they can click on that link and be transported to that project's dedicated page. This page is where all the specific information for a particular project is located. Everything from the project's description, the art work's goals, and the selection information are detailed here. This page is also where an artist can apply to be a part of the project.

Another program that is dedicated to artists who are trying to get involved in public art is LaunchPAD. This program is another example of how a city can help foster homegrown artists. What LaunchPAD does is bring together new and emerging artists who are interested in a career in public art with well-established ones. The goal here is to help these new artists learn firsthand what it is like to work on a public art project. These LaunchPAD artist would be acting as the commissioned artist's understudy, assisting with tasks such as "materials research, attendance at meetings, review of applicable local codes/permit requirements, support during design, fabrication and/or installation of the artwork." What programs like these do is show emerging artist that there is a place for them in their home town. It tells them that they do not have to move to New York or L.A. to find work, and, as the Cross Roads Art District knows well, keeping talented and creative people around can help vitalize a community.

The site also provides a couple of different tools for individuals who want to explore Austin's public art collection. One of the tools is the link to the program's Flickr account (image 2). Going back to the Arts in Public Place's home page, a visitor will discover a photo gallery at the bottom of the page. By clicking on this gallery, a visitor will be transported to the programs Flickr account. Here the visitor will be taken to a photo album of the city's public art as well as a brief description of that work. The information that is detailed in these descriptions are the names of the works, the names of the artists, the medium the works are done in, where the works are

displayed, and the year the works were completed. The pictures they have uploaded also depict members of the city's Cultural Arts Division, and photos taken at events held by the Cultural Arts Division. These photos help give life to the program by giving the visitor a chance to meet the people who are working behind the scenes at making Austin a more interesting place to live in and to visit. Although this site gives a visitor a good glimpse at the city's public art, and at the culture that surrounds this community, it is not the place for those who want a more in-depth picture of the city's public works. For that information there is a database which details in depth the city's art collection.

This database utilizes the PublicArtArchives website, which is a great tool for artists or municipalities trying to show case their art collection (image 3). This site has a full fleet of features that makes managing an online art collect easier. One of the main ones being that the site is run and maintained by other people. According to the Public Art Archives website, they are "managed by a team of curators, public art administrators, information specialists, web developers, graphic designers, and arts advocates." This means that an individual or organization that utilizes this website can rest easy at night knowing that their online database is in trusted hands. Another useful feature is that this site provides a layout which is simple and easy to navigate.

What makes this site easy to navigate is the fact that it is recognizable, and intuitive. This search engine is built like Google, meaning that anyone who has ever used the internet can visit this site and feel comfortable with it immediately. The search bar is at the top where it is easy to see, and a visitor can search by artist, the collection, the material, the tittle of the work, the venue, or the year of the work (image 5). So, say for instance that an individual was doing a project on all of the sculptures around a city. They would simply type in "sculpture" in the search

bar and then all the works that fit that description would pop up. The city of Austin has nearly 13 pages of sculptures, and each page holds 10 works. That's 130 pieces of sculptures they would have to sort through, but if they wanted to narrow the search down, they could limited to only works done in bronze, for example. This would be a time-consuming task if they had to go through all 13 pages one by one and filter out what they were looking for. This site can do all that hard work for them. On the right side of the search results, there are several boxes that can narrow down the results. In their case they would go to the box titled "material" then they could click on "bronze". All the works on this site are also well documented. Not only do they have the artist's name, the name of the work, the date, where it is located, the art work type, and the material, but they also all have a description about the work, so those who are researching these works have a solid background about them.

Not only does this site makes it easy to browse through a city's public art collecion, it also encourages people to go out and experience these works like they are meant to be enjoyed: in person. The site uses Google maps to map out where every work of art is located (image 4). This feature allows people to personalize a route that best suites them. Another neat perk that comes with utilizing Google maps is that the user has access to Google's street view feature. This feature allows a visitor to take a virtual tour of the city's public art, just as long as that work is outside and on the side of the road. However, if the work is not on the side of the road then this tool can become a bit frustrating. Also, the works are not always exactly where they say they are going to be. The markers are an approximation of their location. An urban explorer is going to have to do a bit of actual exploring to locate them.

Minneapolis has taken a different approach to creating a database. Where Austin utilizes a search engine, which allows its visitors to search through their art collection, Minneapolis has

an interactive website which allows visitors to take a self-guided tour of the city's art collection (image 8). This website is set up like a slide show, with each slide being dedicated to a different tour. Each slide is split up into two halves. One half has an interactive map which pinpoints the location of each art work, while the other half details information a visitor might find useful. This information includes the number of artworks that are in that tour, the number of individual pieces, and the different artist that are being represented. Each slide also has an approximation of the time it will take to complete the tour, as well as the distance an individual will be traveling.

A visitor has six different tours they can choose from. Each tour is broken up by geographic location. Once an individual has picked the tour they are interested in, they simply click on the "Go to Tour" link which is highlighted in blue. This link will then open a new screen dedicated to that tour (image 9).

What sets this website apart is the way the tours are laid out. Each work of art has a dedicated slide, and to view the work, one simply scrolls down (image 10). Each slide also has detailed information about that work. This information includes the name of the work, the name of the artist, the medium, the year it was made, and a detailed description of the work. The slide also provides a photo of the work.

Although this is a great tool for those looking to take a tour of the city's artwork, it does not serve those looking to do research or trying to look up a particular work of art. To do that, an individual would have scroll through each slide on every tour. This would take a considerable amount of time. In this scenario, a search engine like the one utilized in Austin, would be ideal. The city of Minneapolis does not offer a search engine, making it very difficult for people to browse through their art collection.

The city of Atlanta is another city that suffers from not having a well-developed search engine (image 11). Unlike Minneapolis, the city of Atlanta does have a search engine, but it is difficult to use. To search for a particular work, a visitor must first know the name of the artist. This is the only filter this search engine has, unlike Austin's search engine which gives the visitor the choice to search by artist, the collection, the material, the tittle of the work, the venue, or the year of the work.

However, Atlanta's art catalog is organized in such a way that makes the search bar obsolete. They have managed this by having all of their works on a single gallery. Each work is side by side with a picture as the thumbnail, and the name of the work inserted in that image. By laying out their art work in this manner, they allow the viewer to scroll down the page until they find the work they are looking for, without the need of having to know the artist's name. Once the individual has located the work they are looking for, they can then click on the image to get more information on that work. This information includes the name of the artist, the medium, and a description of the work.

This method works for the city of Atlanta mainly because their art catalog is not very large. They can lay out their collection in this manner because their entire database is made up of 131 works. For a city like Austin or Minneapolis, which have much larger art collections, this would result in an enormous page that would take an unbearable amount of time to load.

Although each city's website had a unique feature which made them stand out from the other, the city of Austin had the best site overall. Their home page is clean and intuitive, their site is easy to navigate, and their search engine is the simplest to use. The city of Minneapolis' site may have been less visually appealing, but they stood out when it came to their self-guided tours. None of the other sites provided a better tool for people looking to go out and explore the

city's public art. Although both the city of Austin and Atlanta used Google maps to map out the location of their works, neither one of them provided actual tours. The city of Atlanta's website was the most difficult to navigate. A big reason for this was because of their search engine. Only being able to search by the artist's name is not convenient and this site would benefit greatly by having a larger set of options a visitor can search by.

In this paper I have outlined the features that a user might find useful when visiting a city's public arts website. Looking at Austin and how they have arranged their website can help an organization create an intuitive and easy to navigate site of their own. Utilizing images and links also helps in creating an interactive space which is easy and fun to explore. PublicArtArchives.org is one of the best tools to use when it comes to creating a database that is user-friendly, and the city of Minneapolis has a great blue print for creating interesting tours. When these different pieces come together they help create a coherent website that any individual would enjoy visiting.

Image 1: The home page of the city of Austin's public arts program.
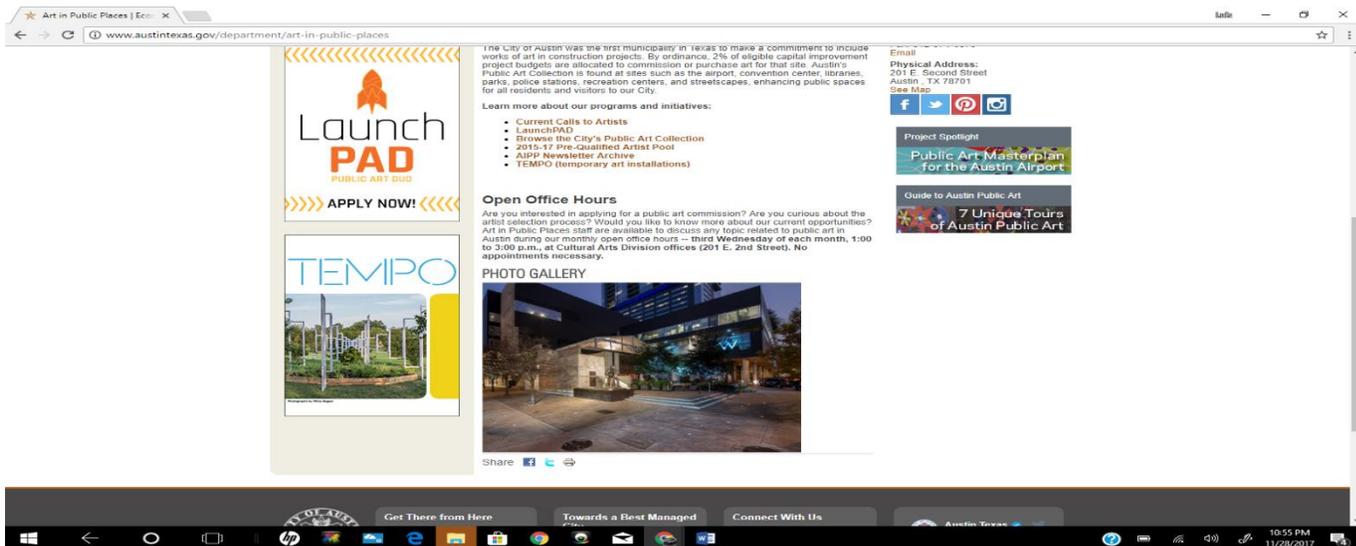
Image 2: On the top of this image we see the different links that direct the visitor to other parts of the website. On the bottom is a photo gallery that leads to the program's Flickr account
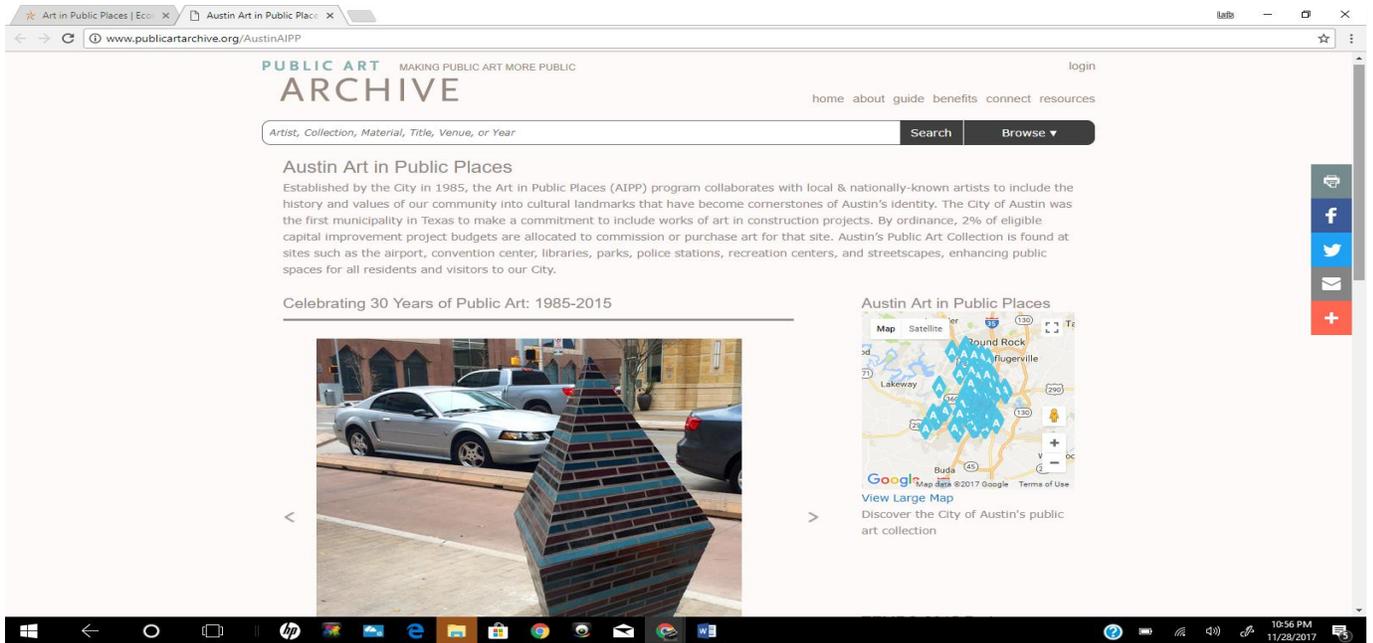
Image 3: Image of Austin's Public Arch Archives homepage. On the top is the search bar, on the bottom there is a slide show showcasing some of the city's art. To the right there is a map which shows the locating of all of the city's art.
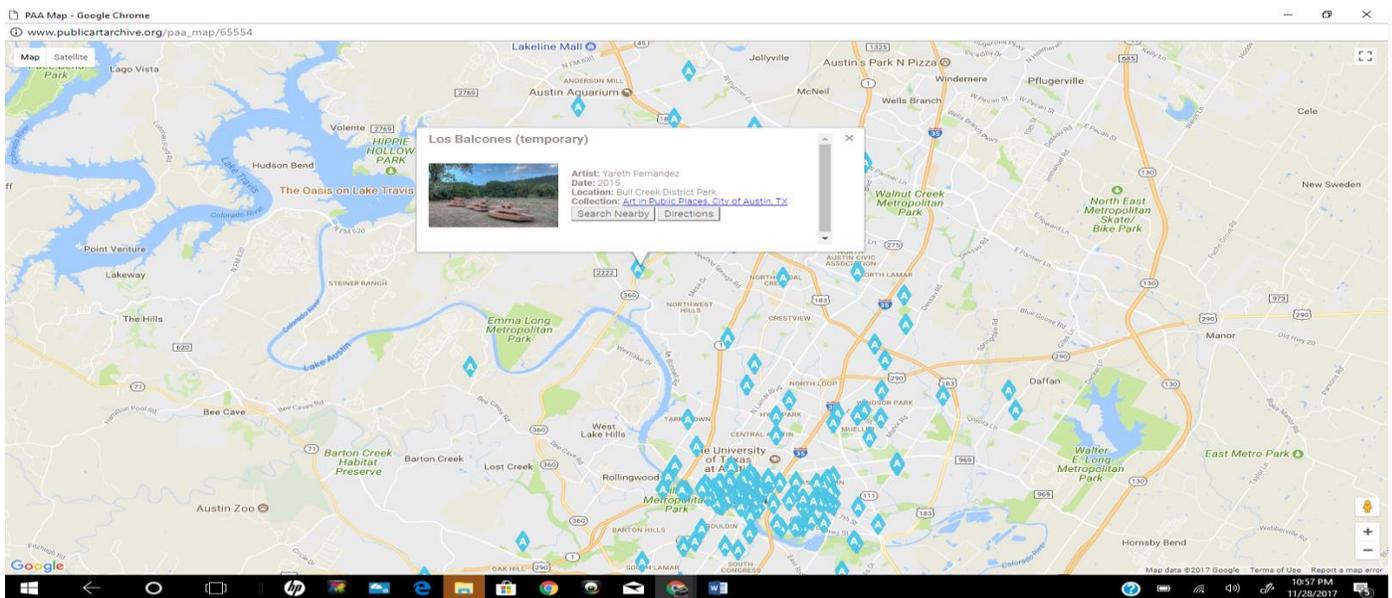

Image 4: A closer look at the map showing the location of the city's art. When a user clicks on the blue diamonds, an image pops up which details information about that specific

work.
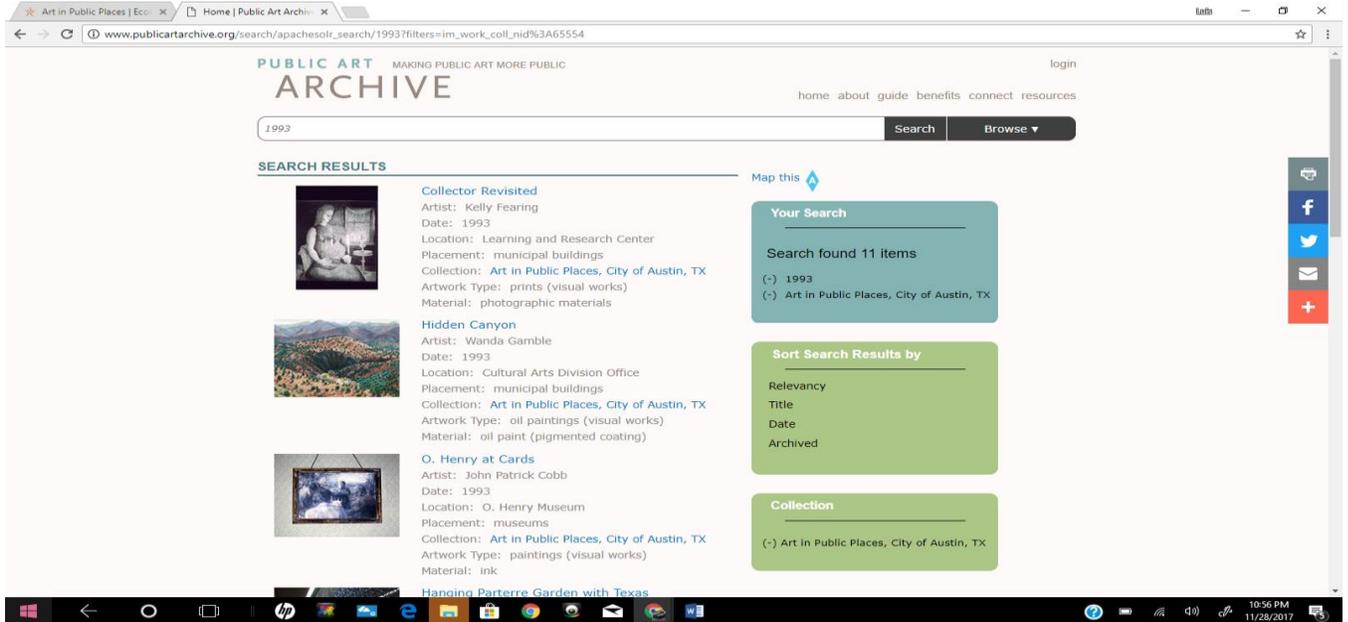
Image 5: Screen shot of a search result on the city of Austin's search engine. On the left there are a couple of the search results, and on the right, are some of the filters a user can use to narrow down their results.
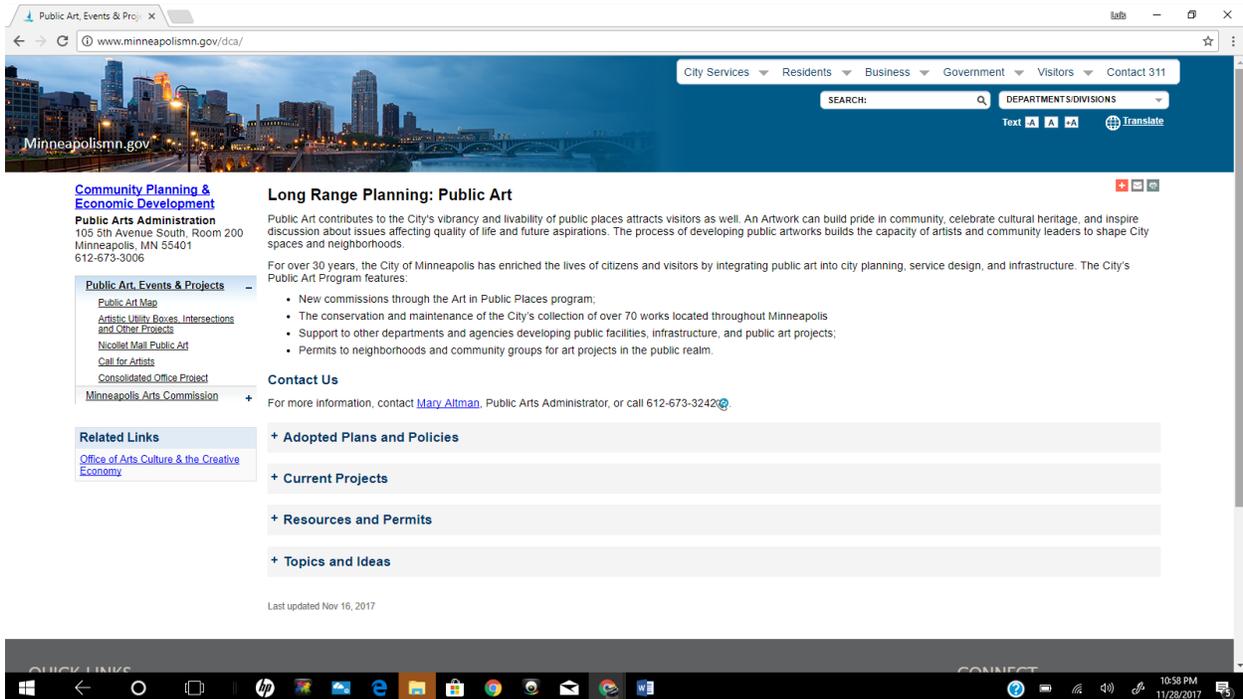
**Image 6**: The home page of the city of Minneapolis' public arts program.
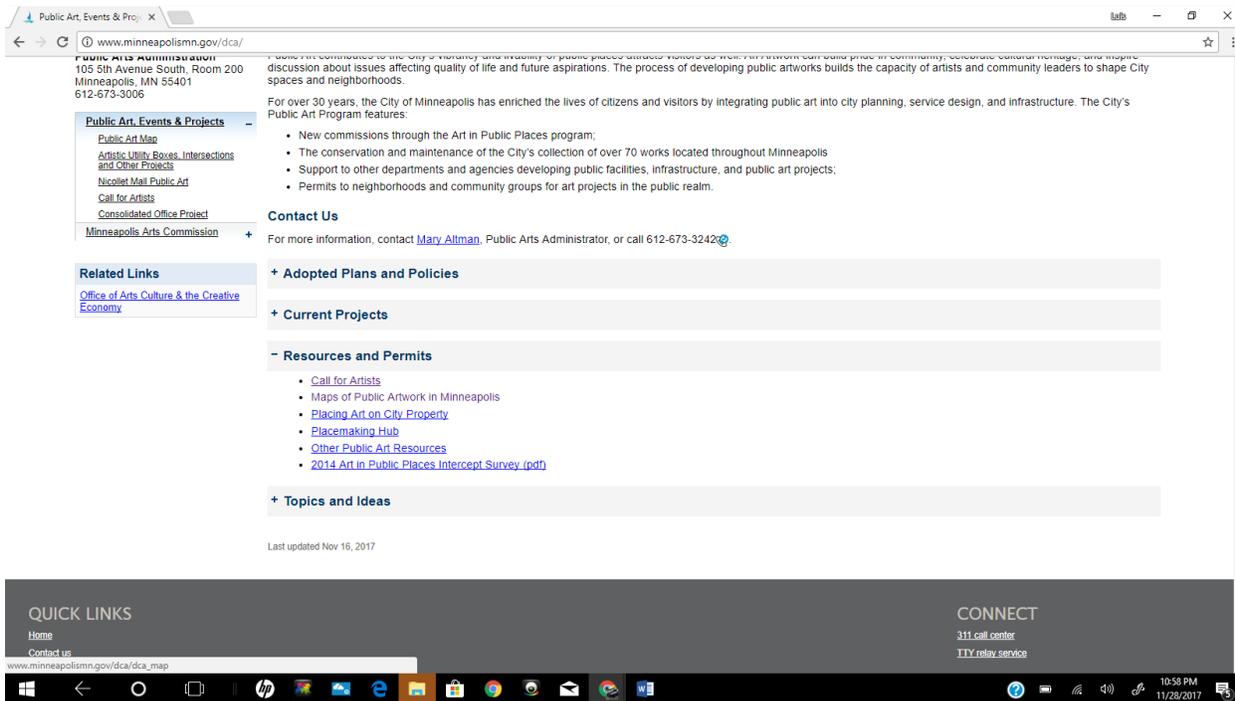
Image 7: A closer look at the page's dropdowns, that when clicked on, reveal a number of links that help a visitor navigate the site.
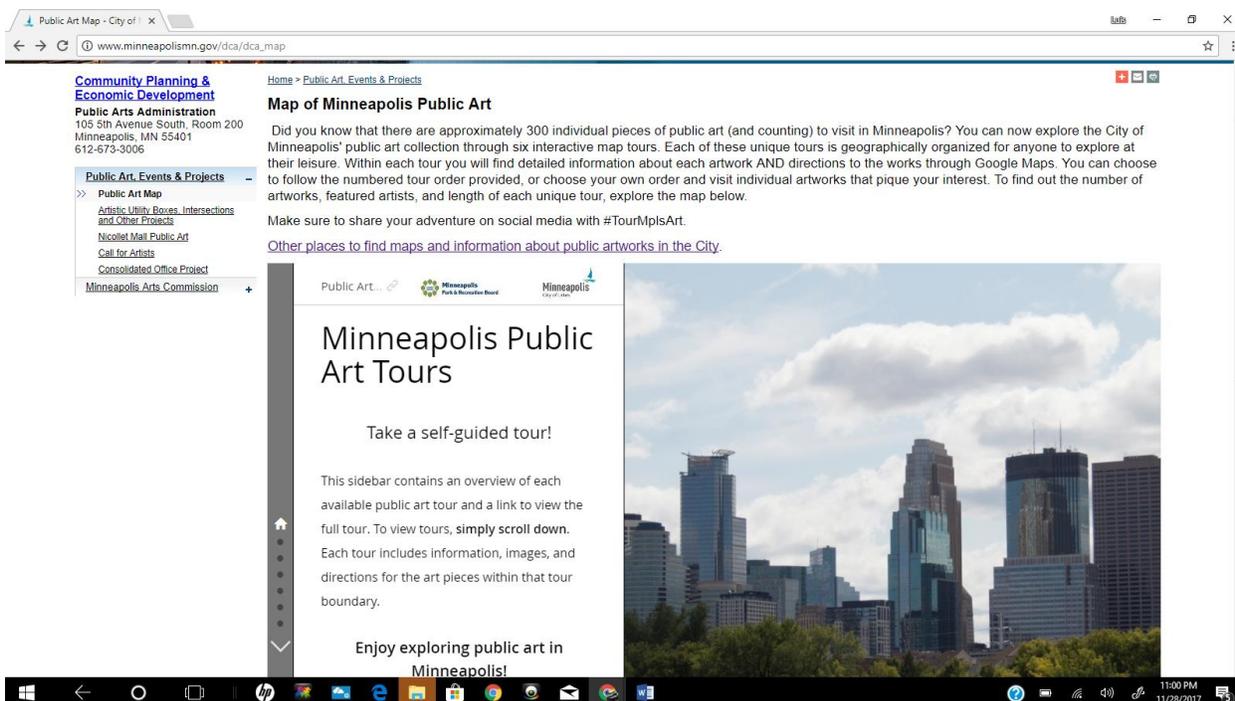
Image 8: The city of Minneapolis' self-guided tours page. On the top there is a description of the tour, and how it works. On the bottom there is the actual slide show which a visitor can scroll down to view the different tour that are available.
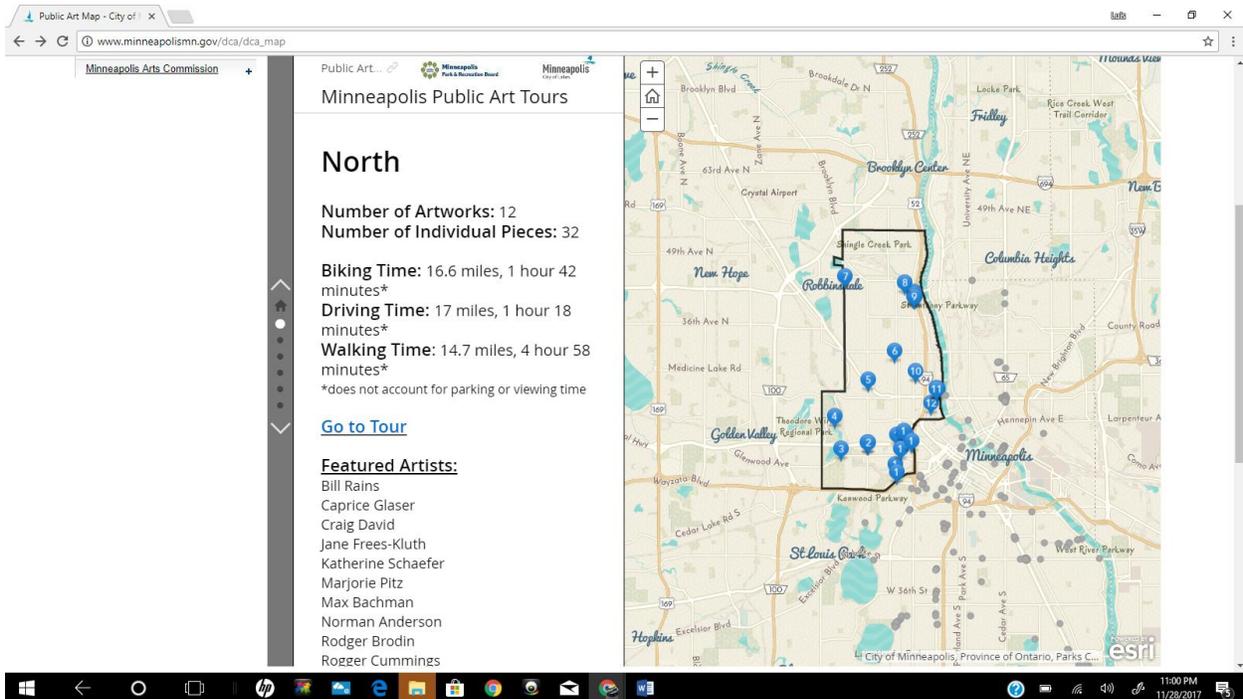

Image 9: A look at one of the tours the city provides. On the left, we have information such as the number of artworks, the time it takes to complete the tour, and the featured artist. On the right we see a map outlining the boarders of the tour, with markers pinpointing the exact location of each work.
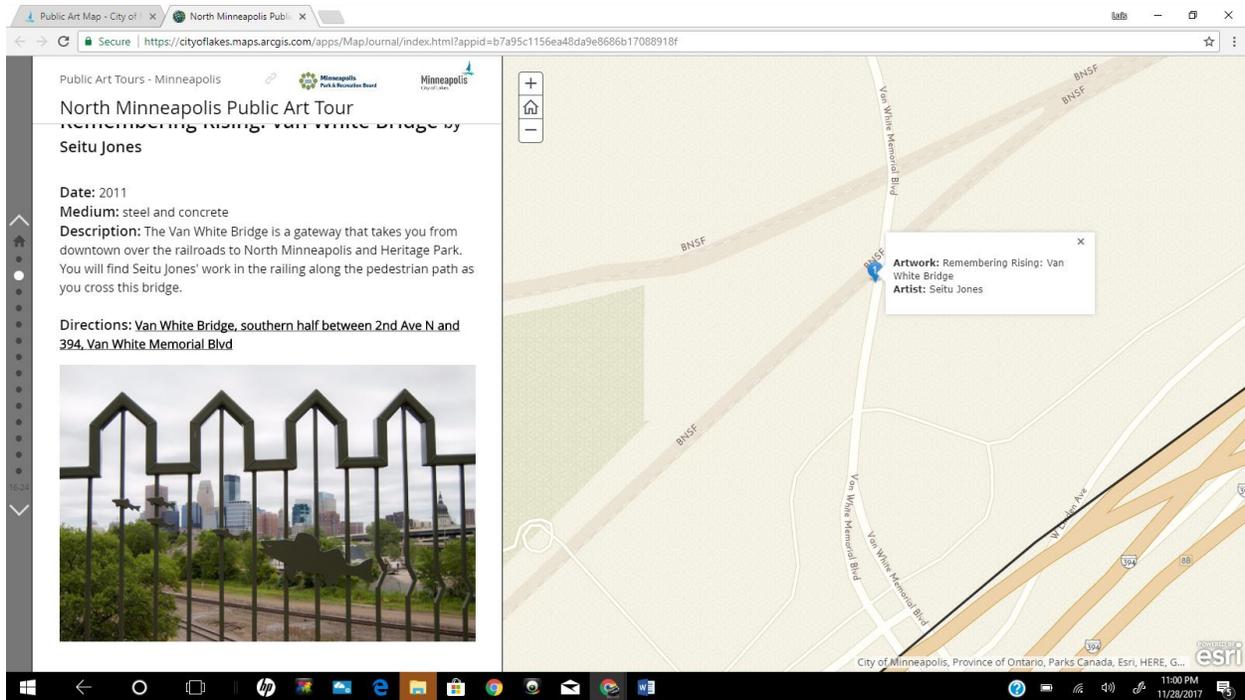
Image 10: Each slide is dedicated to a specific work of art. On the left the visitor is provided with information such as the name of the work, the name of the artists, the date, and a brief description of the work itself, and on the right, we just have a close up of the location of that specific work of art. The exact address is also detailed on this slide.
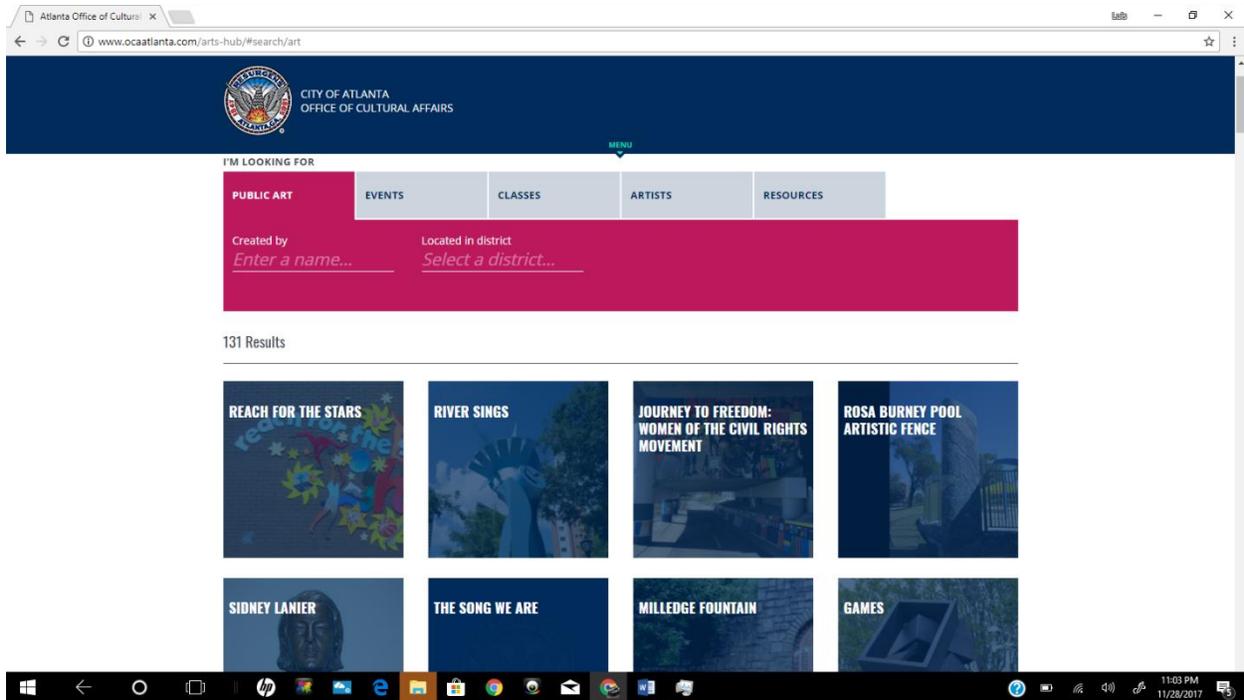
Image 11: An image of the city of Atlanta's search engine. The search bar is on the top, and on the bottom, there is a gallery of the city's art collection. Each picture is a link, that when clinked on will transfer the visitor to a page dedicated to that specific work of art.

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to copy someone, you might as well copy from the best.

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