

The Permeable Classroom or the Tilted Arc Revisited

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Abstract

“The Permeable Classroom or the Tilted Arc Revisited” reviews the author’s various roles as artist, community activist, art educator and art therapist, in the design and implementation of a large, sequential community-based “Tree Memorial” project. Using the Tree Memorial Project as a compelling example of the “permeable classroom,” the paper delivers an overview of the project that takes place in and around the public school setting, featuring collaboration between teachers, students, parents, administrators, community residents, and city officials.

Initially, the “permeable classroom” is discussed as a complex, developmentally challenging, pedagogical model that promotes critical thinking and democratic processes in the classroom. However, as the paper progresses, the author shifts focus to develop a critical analysis of the Tree Memorial project, illuminating specific instances of how the project both succeeds, as well as fails to reach its full potential as an exemplar of the “permeable classroom.” The model of the permeable classroom is developed alongside a discussion of experiential learning programs and contemporary art practices.¹

The Permeable Classroom or the Tilted Arc Revisited

This article addresses the artistry of growing new ideas in the classroom from a postmodern aesthetics perspective, which Freedman calls “aesthetics attached to meaning” (2001, p. 41). The “Tree Memorial” project, largely orchestrated by the author as a series of community-based art events responding to a community-based incident, will be utilized as a vehicle to introduce the “permeable classroom” as a promising pedagogical model for teachers and faculty. Employing a constructivist framework the author discusses the rationale for the “permeable classroom,” while also analyzing the complex relationship between idea development in the classroom and the nature of community-based project development in the community. Richard Sierra’s “Tilted Arc” (installed in New York’s Federal Reserve Plaza, in 1981) is invoked as the legendary example of how diverse constituents negotiate across different platforms in an effort to sustain a democratic process that best represents multiple interests. An effective analogy is then made between scripted curriculum design that exists as a circumscribed entity and the more porous experiential learning protocol that routinely tackles the multifaceted nature of idea ownership between teachers/faculty, students, and the needs of the surrounding community. Theory and practice come together as the author reviews both the strengths and limitations of the “Tree Memorial” project.

Roy Sandy (1998) describes the “permeable classroom” as the “flow of knowledge that enters and leaves the classroom through connections with the external environment.”² He traces the term back to John Dewey’s formulation of social learning put forth at the turn of the 20th century. Dewey links ideas about social learning with instrumentalism (Jackson, 1998, p. 29), which implies that the meaning of the work goes beyond the work itself so as to achieve an end in the real world that holds moral, political or social merit. Dewey’s ideas about social learning seeded numerous “service-learning” programs

across the country. Although the University of Cincinnati was identified as the first institution to incorporate service-learning into the curriculum, the formal establishment of such programs began in the 1930's, during the Great Depression. A more recent flurry of programming followed the 1990 National Community Service Act.³

In a discussion of service learning programs, Taylor and Ballengee-Morris emphasize reciprocity of learning that occurs between the students, the institution, and the community. The spirit of partnership is expressed in the concept of "we," which informs the very nature of the collaboration (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004, p. 10). The authors go on to distinguish service-learning from community service, emphasizing that although both promote civic responsibility, service-learning is directly connected to academic objectives. In addition, "it is the communities' *needs* that serve as the organizing principle" for service-learning program development (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004, p. 6). Taylor & Ballengee-Morris identify learning objectives for such programs to include: "promoting trust in the form of committed involvement, hope in the form of an enduring sense of civic responsibility grounded in a criticality, and caring that engages an individual call to action" (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004, p. 11). The ongoing proliferation of service-learning programs in the community-at-large represent a variety of precedents for socially motivated, experiential learning to take place outside of the classroom.

The community project discussed in this article unfolded over an extended period of five years and utilizes a theoretical framework that is in keeping with service-learning protocol. The initial ceremony unfolded in reaction to plans for the demolition of 12+ acres of woodland located across the street from my home and on the hillside, behind the neighborhood elementary school. This project grew primarily out of my activism as an artist and community member. Simply put, I was a community-based artist with a need.

In developing a series of successive installations for this project, I straddled two groups. I was insider to the community-at-large, but outsider to the local school community. As a newly appointed art education faculty member at my university, I was an insider to art education and supervised an art education intern at the neighborhood school. However, I was an outsider to curriculum development at the school. In part, my outsider status restricted my ability to develop this event according to my pedagogical practice, which generally favors a constructivist approach that champion's student-centered inquiry.

The constructivist approach, which links curricula development with the process of posing problems that hold relevance to students' lives (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 35), thus bringing ideas about "choice and voice" into play (Milbrandt, Felts, Richards & Abghari, 2004, p. 19), was a sorely missing component in this project. Although the art teacher was able to draw connections between my proposal, her curriculum and events occurring a few feet away from the school's playground, the students did not discover those links on their own. In the final call, this missing step undermined the larger goals of the project, which were to teach children about "choice and voice," not only in terms of government policies regarding urban development, but also in terms of efficacy to think and act across a number of contexts as participating members of any viable community, both in the classroom and beyond.

It is my contention that the concept of the "permeable classroom" that challenges teachers and students alike to investigate *all* aspects of events that "permeate" the classroom walls can provide teachers and students with a working model for learning that minimizes hierarchical determinants of curriculum design. The "permeable classroom" is aligned with a horizontal postmodern perspective, "which invites the learner to pursue meanings in multiple directions along many routes of intellectual travel" (Efland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996, p. 115), and is a

model that incorporates ideas about “situated learning” and “co-intentional education” into discussions about knowledge and agency. “Situated learning” (Pitri, 2004, p. 6), which purports that the context of how one learns, is as valuable as what one learns is conceptually compatible with Paulo Freire’s bi-directional concept of “co-intentional education.” According to Freire, “co-intentional” education (Freire, 1970, p. 56) conveys the message that teachers do not deliver encapsulated knowledge. Rather, knowledge grows out of a process of interaction between the teacher, and the students. In the case of service-learning, the interaction occurs between the teacher, the students and the community agency (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004, p. 7).

The “Tree Memorial” project unfolded over five years in four distinct sequences. My ideas about voice, leadership, audience and dialogue shifted at each stage of the project, moving consistently in the direction of engaging my audience more deeply and actively. The shift grew out of my own developing awareness regarding an emerging reciprocity between artist and audience, moving from a model of consumption to a position of shared responsibility (Archer, 1997, p. 214).

Parallels Between the Permeable Classroom and Contemporary Artistic Practice

Why advance the model of the “permeable classroom” at this particular juncture in history? In the post 9/11 climate, where porous borders are deemed dangerous to national security, porous classrooms are also perceived as vulnerable entities. Introducing the “permeable classroom” as a viable tool for curriculum development comes at a time when schools are preoccupied with issues of accountability, as well as acts of random violence within the schools. Of late, we have witnessed what might be called a global assault on innocent children. Around the world, from the shootings at Columbine in the U.S. of

America, to hostage taking of school children in Russia, to the recent rash of school stabbings in China, schools are under attack. As a result, many schools in the U.S. have only one unlocked door in to or out of the school, and they have doorbells, as well as intercoms, to further restrict access.

The effort to meet national standards has resulted in the preponderance of teacher-dominated, “mono-directional” (Wexler, 2004, p. 13) learning environments that in effect, have turned classrooms into laboratories. Achieving measurable gains on standardized tests justifies an educational reform that is largely behavioral, focused on improving competencies in specific disciplines, at the expense of developing a child’s critical understanding of meaning and agency in today’s world. Although many teachers argue that this *is* “state of the art” education, one must acknowledge that it has little to do with everyday lived experience, the kind of experience likely to fuel artistic enterprise at the start of the 21st century.

In many respects, the clinically handled classroom has a lot in common with the modernist construction of the “white cube.” The modernist call for a formal, quasi-scientific objectified space, “divorced from social and political content in an effort to cultivate an attitude of ‘aesthetic disinterestedness’” (Efland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996, p. 15), may well be the precursor for today’s highly scripted classrooms, cut off from the “noise” of the real world.

The break away movements of the 60’s—the Fluxus Movement, Performance Art, Public Art, Graffiti Art and Earthworks—took art out of the gallery into the streets. In effect, the “permeable classroom” accomplishes the same end, joining art with life. This model also reflects shifts in my practice as an artist, with a number of parallels coming to mind.

About 15 years ago, I began to feel restless with my art, particularly with the idea of “making art for myself.” I no longer wanted to work in a political vacuum. I wanted to communicate my

ideas to larger audiences and locate my work within the spectrum of postmodern artistic practice that linked personal narrative with cultural criticism.

My current practice is aligned with performance art, installation art and what is being coined a “memory artist,” growing out of a cultural yearning to memorialize tragic events. This kind of practice departs from art therapy in that it is not tied to a redemptive posture or the goal of achieving closure (Young, 2000, p. 14). Rather, I am trying to provoke interaction, stir memory, and inspire dialogue about issues that concern social responsibility.⁴

In the “Tree Memorial” project, strategies of practice rooted in the genre of public art linking community voice with conceptualization of the work, further influenced my process. Not only were public art and notions of “site specificity” (i.e., “context”) critical in determining the shape and scope of the Tree Memorial project, “site specificity” was also instrumental in providing the pedagogical basis for discussing the permeable classroom as a viable tool for curriculum development.

Case Study: Four-Part Sequential Community-Based Art Project

The case study component of this article features an overview of four installations, depicting a three-tier response to issues of ecology, urban development, community and social activism, separated by one-year intervals. The first installation, “Earth Wounds,” installed on the grounds of the institution owning the land for sale, prioritizes my sole voice as artist and activist. The second installation, the “Tree Ceremony” represents the tragic aftermath of the destruction of the forest and centralizes the audience, children and adults, as vocal and active participants in a community-based event. The third and fourth installations represent the “Tree Memorial” project, a temporary public works installation that deals with the memory of the forest and

highlights children's voices in the form of a public dialogue with the artist.⁵ Each installation explores artistic agency, while tackling a different set of concerns attuned to my changing perceptions of artist and audience.

The First Installation

The initial circumstance that triggered these installations concerned the sale and pending development of 12+ acres of woodland across the street from my home.⁶ Initially, the land was designated for affordable housing. A long and drawn out battle ensued between owners of the land, and different sets of developers, city officials and the surrounding community. In the end, a gated community of 44 luxury condominiums, selling at 1.5 million dollars each, was erected on site, with four units of affordable housing built off-site.

In visualizing the plight of these two hundred year old trees, I began to think about how the trunks would be severed from the roots and about how my father, a refugee, had his ties with his homeland severed. I became preoccupied with images of the life cycle and the symbolic nature of the burial practice as a "return" to the earth. The earth, in my mind, became a healing element, a nutrient, and a source of closure. Steeped in eco-feminist literature, I began to associate the demise of these trees with the horrific death of my grandparents in concentration camps, whose bodies were never recovered. I envisioned creating a community-based burial ceremony that would enact a return of these trees to the earth, as well as provide a symbolic means to bury my grandparents and mourn their death. As I began to collect materials to create ritual objects, September 11th occurred, which represented yet another instance of death and violation, whereby 3,000 victims were consumed by fire, precluding the return of their bodies to earth.

In the first installation, "Earth Wounds," I developed a series of artifacts for the purposes of developing a community-based ceremony to memorialize the three named atrocities: the murder of the trees, my

grandparents, and the victims of 9/11. Although there would be ample opportunity for community involvement, I would be the self-appointed artist/leader centralizing my voice, my aesthetic, within the ceremony. The work was saturated with personal history and a personal aesthetic. Translating this work into a shared community event became my next challenge.

What follows is an account of my process as artist, educator, and facilitator to a community in need. Although I conceptualized my role as educator to be central to the development of this sequential project, in reality, it was the most compromised of the three roles, affording me only a marginalized presence within the school. Despite how notions of the “permeable classroom” initially justified the collaborative model, in reality, my contact with children was perfunctory and further mediated by school officials. While the concept of the permeable classroom grew out of my involvement with this project, the project itself fell short of the model. A critical evaluation of the project is fully developed in the closing discussion of this article.

Vying for Institutional Support in the Community

Plans for the original ceremony had the tacit involvement of the two institutions situated on the wooded hillside, sited for development. However, once the trees were cut down in order to provide needed revenue for one of the institutions, both institutions refused to participate in orchestrating a ceremony with the community, fearing recrimination from the neighborhood.

On March 17th, 2003, the same week that the U.S. went to war with Iraq, ten acres of woodland were bulldozed into oblivion over the course of two days (two acres were put aside as conservation land). No amount of anticipation adequately prepared the neighborhood for the intense feelings of devastation and loss that followed, despite years of productive social activism that contributed to the passing of three new ordinances: The Tree Preservation Ordinance, The Community

Preservation Act (or The Conservation Act), and The Inclusionary Ordinance (or The Affordable Housing Act).⁷ Rather than succumb to feelings of defeat, I was struck with a new plan, a plan that would celebrate the efforts of this small community, the voices of real people, who had sacrificed long hours, working together to save the trees.

With this plan in mind, I approached the neighborhood school, which was located at the foot of the hill. I initially contacted the art teacher, whose art room I had previously visited, and then the principal of the school. In addition to creating an event that would bridge differences and bring the community together, I was also convinced that this event would become a “teachable moment,” modeling for children, the meaning of community.

In retrospect, these sensitive negotiations determined both the success and failure of the project. The impetus to insert the ceremony into the curriculum came from outside the classroom and was justified as an extension of a pre-existing unit on “nature.” Already in the month of April, the school community had but one month to prepare for this large event. Although the students were actively involved in these preparations, a rich, open-ended inquiry into the events on the hillside was foreclosed, due to lack of time, thus undermining student ownership of the process.

The Second Installation

The community-based ceremony took place in the auditorium of the school and grew directly out of the neighborhood’s mourning for the trees, developing as a grass-roots initiative in opposition to big business. The plan involved dispersing little scrolls that the children made from twigs gathered on the hillside. The actual ceremony involved reading and then burying the scrolls into the earth, symbolic of a “rite of return” to the earth.

On the day of the event, the audience consisted of 300 children and members of the community. Participants included the mayor, members of the board of aldermen, the city tree warden, chairman of the neighborhood association, presidents of the conservator's association, the superintendent of schools, various commissioners, and a number of community members who had devoted personal time to fight the losing battle to save the trees.

The ceremony that eventually transpired was comprised of five parts. The school principal and I introduced the event, contextualizing the destruction of the forest with (a) educational curricula regarding nature and ecology, (b) city politics and the democratic process of voting, and (c) issues of preservation of the earth's natural resources for future generations. Children sang songs about trees, children and adults read from their scrolls to remember and honor the trees, and an additional group of children were designated to name, thank and hand out awards to 33 individuals who invested personal time to intervene on behalf of the trees. Lastly, children and honorees moved outside to plant scrolls into the earth, alongside 100 new spruce seedlings donated by the city (see Figure 1) in honor of the community's efforts to save the trees.



The Third and Fourth Installations

As the first anniversary of the destruction of the forest approached, I negotiated the implementation of a Tree Memorial Banner Project with the city. I designed the banner from a series of photographs taken of the fallen trees. The banners were installed along the perimeter of the land, as new condominiums began to visibly sprout on the hillside (see Figure 2). The brevity of the drive-by installation—one month's time—brought to light the phantom-like presence of the much loved forest that continues to permeate the neighborhood. The installation also coincided with phase one of the implementation of the Tree Ordinance, the first ordinance of its kind in New England.

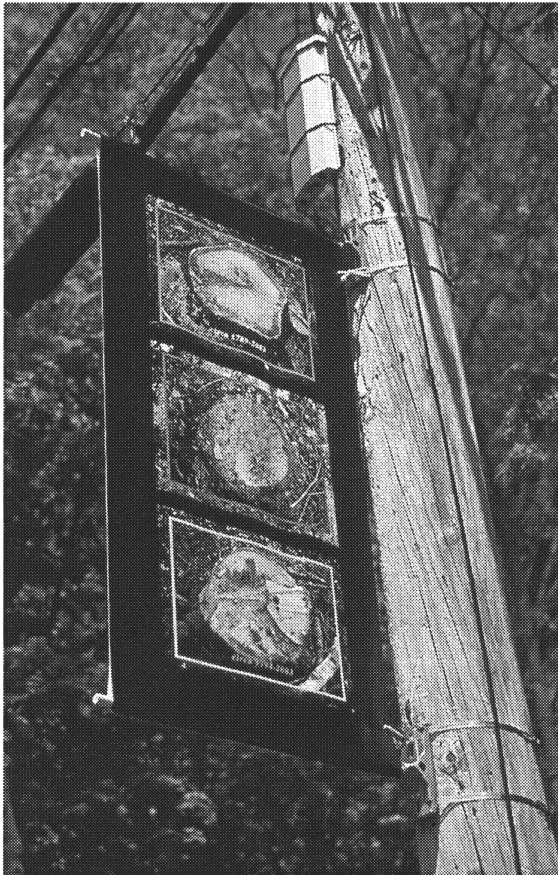


Figure 2

One of the Tree Memorial Banners was placed strategically next to the school at the foot of the hill. This decision was prompted by my own desire to broaden the original dialog by inviting the school to revisit issues of ecology, commerce and development, and ideas about sustainable growth, teasing out the merits of each position. Following a spontaneous reference to the lost trees made by a second grader, the art teacher agreed to sponsor another lesson that would entail a child-centered response to my Tree Banner Project. The Clothesline Tree Banner Project (see Figure 3) was a very lively outcome of this second joint venture, although the actual “dialog,” once again, had been truncated by other curricula demands.

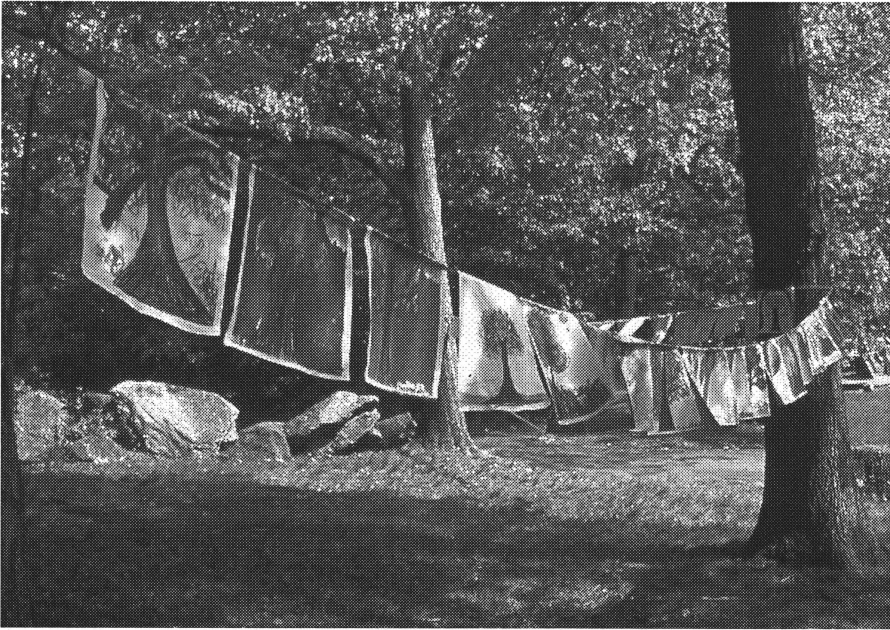


Figure 3

Reflective Evaluation

This article is as much about what didn't happen as it is about what did happen. By returning to both the definition of the permeable classroom—as the flow of information into and out of the classroom—

and the controversy that surrounded the tilted arc—in part, as a failure to take the community’s voice into consideration in the planning of public works—the author constructs a case for the permeable classroom, as a flexible and responsive model that fosters multiple viewpoints, introducing connections between ideas and opinions. The author puts forth the premise, that when the “permeable classroom” is coupled with a constructivist approach that brings context, voice and idea into relationship, “connected” learning is most likely to occur. By the same token, when curriculum is exclusively determined, packaged and mediated by teachers and school administrators (much like Sierra’s autonomous design of the Tilted Arc), student engagement is manipulated and ultimately diminished.

The Tree Ceremony and the Clothesline Tree Banner project satisfy many of the components of the “permeable classroom,” however, strategies of inquiry and the endorsement of multiple perspectives, associated with the constructivist model, were never fully achieved. Although I received tremendous collaborative support to develop the tree projects as thoughtfully choreographed public events, my status as an outside facilitator circumscribed my role within the project, as well as restricted my engagement with the children. In addition, children never visited the hillside to gaze upon the barren lot, never stood under the Tree Memorial Banners to ask “why,” never visited City Hall to see the boardroom where the city’s aldermen sit and vote, and never walked along the street leading into the gated community sporting the new million dollar condominiums. Missing are also the voices of children who like big trucks or feel excited to watch the development of large sites under construction, as well as the voices of sons and daughters of realtors, developers, and city officials looking for new sources of tax revenues to bolster school funding. Despite the tremendous appeal and apparent success of both projects (evidenced by emails and on-the-street conversations with parents, teachers,

neighbors and city officials), the story of the Tree Ceremony and the Clothesline Tree Banner project is also a story of missed connections between the students and the trees, the students and the developers, the artist/activist and the students, the artist/activist and the teacher, the teacher and the students, and the students and the curriculum. These missed connections are not only troubling in the abstract; they also undermine the efficacy of the overall project, tainting children's prospects of civic engagement with the underbelly of social engineering.

Beyond these immediate stumbling blocks lies yet another layer of resistance. Living in a world where the real and the virtual are increasingly interchangeable and where physical and temporal boundaries are routinely collapsing (Robertson & McDaniel, 2005, p. 89), one might expect that the "permeable classroom" would be an easy sell. However, concerns about money, time, larger classes, issues of safety, diminishing educational budgets that fail to recognize excursions into the community as legitimate learning expenditures—further justified by trends toward using the virtual world as the more expedient stand-in for the real world—are but a few of the reasons why classrooms appears to be the preferred site for learning. The fixed stability of the classroom as a controlled learning environment, designed to protect children from the real world of politics and commerce, may provide additional clues.

The "permeable classroom," by definition, allows the outside world to enter into the classroom, without ever having to leave the classroom. At the same time, the "permeable classroom" is best expressed when students have direct contact with primary sources, which may necessitate leaving the classroom to visit an actual site. Once students leave the classroom or click on the computer, the real world comes rushing in. Either way, the model of the "permeable classroom" disrupts the imagined safety of the classroom by allowing a mix of outside influences to enter into the classroom.

How these issues interact with the process of developing coherent learning objectives, may have important implications for the variety of collaborative ventures, partnerships and experiential learning programs, cropping up between schools and their communities. As was true with the Tree Ceremony and the Clothesline Tree Banner project, when learning objectives are determined in isolation, as an afterthought, or when a portion of the participants' voices are disregarded, the project loses import. In the final call, project derailment seems more intertwined with issues of inclusion and exclusion than with issues of complexity, political or otherwise.

The term "arrogance" is applied to artists who fail to consider the community in designing public sites (Kwon, 2002, p. 79). Could the same terminology be applied to teachers who fail to take into consideration the questions, concerns and interests of their students in designing classroom curriculum? The "permeable classroom" is a model that promotes ideas about "connected" learning by de-centering the authority of the teacher, and by valuing a variety of sources as content for learning. The model recognizes the relevancy of temporal, physical, virtual, political, historical, psychological, economical and cultural contexts, as well as personal and public circumstance, in an attempt to create responsive, responsible and educationally sound curriculum. The model of the "permeable classroom" offers educators an opportunity to realign pedagogical practice with relational values without jeopardizing academic excellence. Emphasizing horizontal fluidity and shared ownership of curriculum development, the "permeable classroom" is grounded in a criticality that deepens a child's appreciation of voice and agency in today's world.

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Notes

¹ This paper was delivered at the 3rd Annual Hawaii International Conference on Education, Honolulu, HA 2005.

² Sandy, L. R. (1998). The Permeable Classroom, *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 9(3). Retrieved February 22, 2005, from <http://oz.plymouth.edu/~lsandy/permeable.html>

³ In 1990, President Bush signed the National Community Act, and later President Clinton established AmeriCorps, through the Corporation for National Service (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004, p.6).

⁴ My initial impulse was to create an event that would serve the goals of what Friedlander calls "common memory," that which "tends to establish coherence and closure." However, as I continued to explore ideas about social memory and the role of artists in helping communities to remember, I moved in the direction of what Friedlander calls "deep memory," referring to memories that continue to exist as "unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of meaning" (Young, 2000, p. 14).

⁵Kwon remarks that “the artist as aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time...the artist used to be a maker of aesthetic objects; now he/she is a facilitator, educator, coordinator and bureaucrat” from *One Place After Another: Site-specific art and locational identity* (Kwon, 2002, pp. 50-51). These ideas parallel what Bohn, Reed and Jerich refer to as “teacher-as-orchestrator-of-learning” model (Rutherford, 2005, p. 15).

⁶I live in Newton Massachusetts, a densely populated suburb of Boston. According to the latest census, Newton is a city of 82,000 inhabitants. The average cost of a home runs upward of \$300,000. This parcel of land represented the last significant patch of green open space in the extended community.

⁷The Tree Preservation Ordinance passed in December of 1999. For more information, go to www.urban-forestry.com/citytrees/v36n3a04.asp The Newton Community Preservation Act, passed in November of 2001. For more information, go to www.newtoncpa.org The Inclusionary Ordinance, passed in March of 2003. For more information, go to www.ci.newton.ma.us./aldermen/zoning/04142003_report.htm