

National Art Gallery of The Bahamas

Lesson:

Space as Culture:

Visual Artistry in Public Space

by Marielle Barrow, PhD

Grades: 7-9



Antonius Roberts, Sacred Space, 2005. Photo: Reagan Kemp

Overview:

In this lesson, students will engage with the notion of public art as a technique that constructs particular kinds of cultural narratives through the incorporation of physical space/landscape. Students will research how different cultures curate space to sustain ways of being, seeing the world or disciplining behavior. In particular, students will explore how public art has intervened in space as cultural constructs/ explore art as intervention in public space by researching Caribbean artists who have created public artworks and the narratives surrounding these interventions.

Content:

“In Egypt there are pyramids; in China, there is the great wall ... more than Junkanoo; we have Clifton, celebrating the resilience, ingenuity and creativity of the Bahamian spirit.” (Tyrone Ferguson, Personal Interview with Marielle Barrow, 2005)

In the essay “Land and People: Space as Cultural and Natural Geographies” Iliana Rodriguez shares her understanding of “space as culture”. Spatial configuration is a language and speaks of a culture and a people. The interior and exterior architecture of a space tells a story of function, thought and habit. Landscaping and **topographies** can signal a sense of liberation or control, intimacy or commonality, sharing/community or individualism and division. Visual artistry placed in public space can disrupt, re-configure or extend the meanings produced in the surrounding spaces. Oftentimes, public art appears in the midst of a city, breaking the rhythm and structure of sky scrapers and introducing a calming space for thought, play and refreshment. At other times, in the construction of public art as monuments or memorials, space is carefully structured to convey or perpetuate specific narratives of a time past, an event or a people. Through our interactions with these spaces, our ways of thinking become more socially ingrained or alternatively, we begin to question the dominant narratives.



Benjamin Moultrie Grant, Monika Anne Cunningham, Angelika Wallace Whitfield, Tayler Rolle, Joseph Sweeting, Taylor Higgs, Tiffany Rutherford, Dominique Brown, Tiera Ndlovu, and Keanu Pennerman, Project “Break Da Box” at Project ICE, 2020. 6’ x 6’ 6”. Photograph by Krista Thompson.

The use of space not only expresses a sentiment and constructs a narrative but landscaping, topographies and physical constructions can suggest rules of order and hierarchy, a sense of reverence or ease, discipline or chaos, a sense of divinity or **secularism**. The symbols and configuration of a church for example are distinct from that of a classroom although it may have similarities in layout in terms of classroom style seating. Varying levels for example , the stepping up on a platform to an altar, the use of stained glass and large windows behind the altar are distinct from that of the classroom setting where playful displays, charts on the wall or signs in funky lettering may be featured. Spatial arrangements encourage a particular sense of self and mode of interaction and help to shape what is community. Space and the use of space can shape narratives of fracture/brokenness or unity and wholeness. “Sacred Space” at Clifton Pier seems to promote a culture of community living, a sense of a shared spirituality and common or historical connections through the arrangement of figures.

(Adapted from Doctoral Thesis “ Counter-Cultural-Memory and Cultural Capital: the arts as sustainable civic practice in the Caribbean”, 2016, by Marielle Barrow, PhD)



Antonius Roberts, detail of Sacred Space, 2005. Casuarina trees and oil paint. Various dimensions. Clifton Cay, New Providence. Photograph by Krista Thompson.

Discussion:

- How do you as an individual interact with Sacred Space at Clifton Pier? What/how does it make you feel?
- In what ways is the site a community space and what makes it community-oriented or communal?
- What sense of self and mode of interaction are promoted by your classroom space as compared to a church? Think about different religions and the sense of self promoted by their places of worship - how is Sacred Space at Clifton Pier different or similar to these?
- How can the construction of public art shift the narrative or use of a space?
- How has the construction of Sacred Space at Clifton Pier shifted the narrative of that space?

Activities:

Students will select and research Caribbean artists who have created public artworks and the narratives surrounding these interventions. Students will create a blog, vlog or social media campaign which seeks to advance the circulation of the narrative that the artist has created. Alternatively, students can create their own public artwork and create the blog, vlog or social campaign around the project.

Extension:

Students can also create a game, deck of cards or other intervention surrounding a single or a series of artworks in public space in the Caribbean or artworks created by Caribbeans within public spaces in other countries. Public performance can also be considered public art. How does masquerade and other public artistic performances affect our understanding, negotiation and memories of space? Students can create a public performance and poll audiences to better understand their responses.

Glossary:

- **Intervention** - taking action to improve a situation. Public art acts as a way to create space to reflect, commune, and challenge the social landscape.
 - **Topographies** - the detailed representation of the natural and physical features (soil, rock, vegetation, hills etc.) of a place, usually on a map.
 - **Secularism** - the principle of maintaining a separation between government and religious institutions.
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Resources:

Poupeye, Veerle. “ Constructing and Contesting the National Past: Jamaica’s Public Monument Controversies”. Caribbean InTransit Arts Journal Vol. 3, Issue 6 (2021): 17

Fernandez, Marta. “ New Directions in Caribbean Art, En Mas: Carnival and Art Performance of the Caribbean. Caribbean InTransit Arts Journal Vol. 3, Issue 6 (2021):117

The Meeting Place Community mobile application, Apple store

Roberts, Antonius,; Barrow, Marielle. Sacred Places, A Sense of Place, I-ease Publishak Bahamas (2018)

