

Artwork Adds Architectural Personality

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Integrating artwork into a project creates identity and helps build the bonds of community.



The Continuum artwork, depicting people holding hands inside their homes against a cityscape background, has become a unifying element and is used on the exterior, in interior spaces, and as part of the healthcare-provider's

logo.

By Christopher Bockstael, AIA

Recent experience shows that works of art—carefully and meaningfully integrated into the architectural fabric—can play a vital role in making final built outcomes more consequential, more personal, and even more productive. Decades of experience offer useful lessons in

how sculpture, murals, installations, and applied art can have a surprisingly transformative effect. Examples of public places are among the most self-evident—the famed Picasso sculpture in Chicago’s Daley Plaza, for example, or a few blocks away, Anish Kapoor’s “Cloud Gate” in Millennium Park.

Of course, six-figure budgets and marquee names aren’t possible for everyone and, fortunately, not even necessary. Modest art programs, crafted with care and real meaning, can have equally profound effects.

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Interview with Christopher Bockstael

Case studies help show how art can play such a critical role in creating prosperous, compassionate communities—a theme in all Svigals+Partners, New Haven, CT, projects. In each case, art is integral to the location, the project, and the client’s very mission and brand.

Consider one example from the healthcare sector: A few years ago, the New Haven, CT-based nonprofit group Continuum began working with designers and developers to build its new headquarters. This provider of in-home care services had grown quickly, thanks to consistent application of a core principle: caring for challenging patients, including those who other providers deem too difficult to take on.

Continuum’s unique approach, rooted in community-based philosophies and in-home services, was meeting the growing need with 60 in-house staff members and 100-plus visiting nurses serving more than 1,200 clients.

Their move to a new, purpose-built location became an outgrowth of their admirable mission. In addition to a workplace that is large enough to accommodate the staff, Continuum’s leadership felt their new headquarters should communicate two ideas: the importance of community and the very human need to have a home. Expressing these ideas with new artwork came naturally in project planning, starting early on with the developer, Centerplan, and the design team at Svigals+Partners.

Using a highly collaborative, creative engagement process, the team conceived of a cost-effective strategy for integrating new artwork with original figurative motifs. The imagery

depicts people holding hands inside their homes against a cityscape background, connecting the iconic homes with a more expansive notion of community.

As evocative as it is, it isn't art for art's sake. It was the result of a branding process in which the architects and designers hand-drew logos for client review, chose the best one suited for their mission, and integrated its design throughout the building. The project team then applied it to the group's website, brochures, and stationery. By the project's end, Continuum had a complete branding package, which the nonprofit now uses across all client touch points.

This includes the new artwork, now a focal point of the organization's home and brand. Neighbors and visitors see it on the façade's band of laser-cut aluminum panels. (For cost-effectiveness, the panel surfaces are etched with varied textures to add dynamism and depth.) Once indoors, the theme of home is reinforced in the entrance lobby, where a large installation, suggesting a hearth, is now the centerpiece, built with stone-veneer panels on a double-height wall behind the reception area. Elsewhere, murals and smaller branded elements echo the home-and-community motifs.

It's a warm welcome—and the perfect image for Continuum. In the end, this new mixed-use building offers an engaging and completely original streetscape for the bustling urban neighborhood. More than that, it gives shape and form to the healthcare provider's core principles. This sense of meaning doesn't end at the front door; it follows Continuum's community, wherever they are.

This story is replicable. The key is to start early in project planning and definition so that art will make a difference. It takes participation, active listening, imagination, and true engagement.

Integrating artwork into workplaces can be strategic, cost-effective, and inspiring. But most important, it helps build the bonds of community, helping make them prosperous, compassionate, and full of life.

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