

The Record

Public art makes the city better

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A view of Jose Resende's piece as proposed for Timber Wharf. Photograph By contributed

What is art? Give me your answer to that question, and I'll probably be able to tell you which side of the Vancouver Biennale debate you fall on.

For those who didn't see [the story in the April 30 Record, debate is a-raging](#) (<http://www.royalcityrecord.com/news/new-west-public-art-proposal-delivers-the-wow-factor-1.1007587>) at New Westminster City Hall about whether the city should accept a recommendation from its public art advisory committee and proceed with three installations from the [Vancouver Biennale](http://www.vancouverbiennale.com/) (<http://www.vancouverbiennale.com/>).

Two of the three - Blue Trees and Public Furniture/Urban Trees -- have won support. But the third - WOW New Westminster, by Brazilian sculptor [Jose Resende](http://www.artnet.com/artists/josé-resende/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/josé-resende/>) - is proving to be a sticking point.

Why? Because, in a nutshell, several members of council don't like it.

The installation consists of four shipping containers positioned in two V shapes.

I'll grant you, it isn't particularly pretty. But what ever gave you the idea art was supposed to be pretty?

It can be pretty, sure. I'm as fond of a nice watercolour landscape as the next person.

But achieving a high scale on the attractiveness meter isn't art's first purpose.

To suggest that public art must be "attractive" by some narrow definition is to reduce it to some sort of pageant superficiality, as though its only function is to wear its pretty dress and tiara and look good for the masses.

Art is so profoundly much more than that.

It's meant to excite. To challenge. To question. To provoke. To disturb. To ask. To probe. To investigate. To annoy. To disrupt. To enlighten.

At its best, it aims to reveal, in some measure, some aspect of the human condition that we simply can not explain or understand in any other way.

And it can't do any of that if the people making decisions about it persist in being philistines about the whole thing.

To be honest, the fact that Coun. Betty McIntosh described the piece as "almost like a train wreck" and said it's "not anything anyone wants to be near" actually kind of endears it to me.

Her response proves that it does what art is meant to do: it provokes a visceral reaction.

I actually like Resende's piece, but that's neither here nor there.

The point is, public art can bring untold benefits to New Westminster. Some of those benefits are of the high-minded, conceptual, pretentious-sounding sort - such as the belief that surrounding ourselves with art elevates us as human beings, that encouraging art in public spaces helps us to grow as individuals and as a society.

More to the point, for many, will be the more tangible benefits that getting involved in Vancouver Biennale's "open-air museum" can bring to the city.

The Biennale includes education programs, bike tours, lecture series and associated marketing - all of which is included in the cost of the installations. Being part of it would help to draw more people to our city and, in particular, to our beautiful but still underused waterfront.

The cost of taking part, of course, is raising eyebrows too.

But I've got one word for the whiners on that front.

Piffle.

I mean that most politely, and I speak as a fellow homeowning, taxpaying citizen of New Westminster. The fact of the matter is, the \$90,000 the city would spend on this is small potatoes in the context of the city budget.

It's a tiny drop in the big bucket already being spent on parks, recreation and culture - which totals 19 per cent of the city's \$106 million budget, according to the city's draft 2014 financial plan, or about \$20 million.

I wholeheartedly support having my tax dollars spent on swimming pools I don't swim in and ice rinks I don't skate on, because I understand that public recreation is for the public good, and what's of interest to me personally takes a backseat to what's beneficial to the community at large.

I'd thank the critics to extend the same courtesy to public art.

So, honestly, I don't much care if you don't like Resende's piece, or any of the others. Go ahead and hate them all. Doesn't bother me.

Just please, don't mistake your opinion about their "attractiveness" (or lack thereof) for a fact that matters even one whit in the overriding question of whether they deserve to have their place in New Westminster.

Over to you, city councillors. Are you enlightened enough to step up and do the right thing?

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