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Why stimulus spending should go to public art

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In their search to find programs upon which to rest the complaint that the stimulus bill is too generous, some conservatives have seized upon one of their favorite whipping boys: the arts. "Even [House Republicans] can't quite believe it... \$50 million for that great engine of job creation, the National Endowment for the Arts," declared Rep. Mike Pence (R-Indiana).

Pence intended to be ironic about the NEA's role as an engine of economic activity. But he could have been sincere, since his comments were right on the money. Arts are actually a great form of economic investment, particularly public art, and they should be amply funded in the stimulus package. Every year nonprofit arts organizations generate \$166.2 billion in economic activity, support 5.7 million jobs, and send almost \$30 billion back to government, according to Americans for the Arts. There is hardly a person more likely to go out and spend her stimulus check than a starving artist.

Unfortunately, \$50 million is an awfully small amount: it is 1/600 of the \$30 billion allotted for roads and bridges. The House Democratic majority wisely

ignored Pence's philistinism and created other revenue streams within the stimulus that can be made available to the arts.

The money for artistic projects is almost by definition ready to be injected into the economy. It may take years to draw up a plan for a highway, obtain the right of way and fend off legal challenges before the bulldozers start rolling. But to buy a canvass and some paintbrushes, or even some metal for a public sculpture, is comparatively straightforward. That puts quick money into the pockets of the companies that build, sell and ship those artistic materials as well.

"The money goes straight into the economy," says Janet Echelman, a sculptor whose giant metallic nets have revitalized public parks and downtowns from Texas to Portugal. "I pay two full-time assistants in my studio, plus consultants who are architects, engineers, and landscape architects, as well as lighting designers. A very large portion goes into fabrication, which is funding workers at a steel factory." Echelman currently has a commission from Phoenix to build a centerpiece for a new downtown park that may face funding shortfalls. There are "shovel-ready" arts projects like hers throughout the country.

Although federal agencies like the Department of Agriculture could, through the Rural Development Program, spend a bit of their stimulus money on art, it will be largely up to state and local governments to determine what proportion, if any, of the various revenue streams will go to the arts.

Community Development Block Grants, for instance, can be used to support art projects and institutions. By far the largest pot potentially available for art would be the \$43 billion that the House allotted for transportation funding. State art agencies often work to improve the relationship between, say, a highway or a train station and its surroundings, using a small fraction of the transportation project's money for public art projects.

A well-designed public space can boost real estate values and create opportunities for small local business to thrive. Public art in urban environments can also help physically and socially knit together communities. In Houston, Echelman hung a bright orange sculpture from the bottom of a highway on-ramp that flew over a public park. That area, once desolate, has become a popular destination. Judy Baca, an artist in Los Angeles has hired inner-city youth to help her paint public murals, partly to help improve relations between rival gangs. "It has the additional benefit of crime prevention and enhancing the opportunities of under-privileged kids," explains Robert Lynch, CEO of Americans for the Arts. "The process is as important as the product."

Local and national arts organizations are already beginning to appeal to state governments to invest stimulus infrastructure dollars in art. In Massachusetts local organizations have asked Governor Deval Patrick to direct his administration to spend 1 percent of the federal infrastructure dollars on design excellence and public art, and the governor's office has been receptive. "People like living in well designed, carefully thought out urban environments," says Ricardo D. Barreto, director of the UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. "Public art is about more than putting a statue in a corner. It is linked to urban design."

If one agrees, even just in part, with Richard Florida's "creative class" theory - that a welcoming environment for creative professionals is the key to helping cities and even countries retain a competitive economic edge, as he compellingly argued in *The Rise of the Creative Class* and *The Flight of the Creative Class* -- then supporting the arts in general, and public art in particular, would be the ideal way to spend some of the stimulus dollars. Hopefully the Mike Pences of the Senate will not win that argument next week.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BEN ADLER is a journalist in New York City. He has been a reporter for *Newsweek*, *Politico*, and *The Nation* and has written for *The American Prospect*, *New York*, and *City Limits*, among other publications.
