

Art

Improvising art is OK; improvising art policy isn't

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THE recent controversy over a proposed sculpture for Buffalo Bayou was a proverbial tempest in a teapot.

But we should be thankful for it.

It underlined the administrative confusion the art community must contend with when dealing with the city.

And it crystallized the important issue of an

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art policy for Houston.

In putting together *Landscapes*, a site-specific, open-air exhibit as part of the Houston International Festival, people who should have talked to each other did not.

DiverseWorks, which organized the exhibit, did not know that the Municipal Art Commission had to review the projects. The judges, named by DW, were satisfied that the artists they selected had presented artistically worthwhile proposals and taken care to ensure stability and safety in their creation. But the judges' criteria did not match those of the city Parks Department.

The Parks Department has the responsibility of ensuring that parks are well-maintained and are healthy and safe for the public that uses them. But the Parks Department does not have guidelines to which interested individuals or, in this case, organizations, might refer when they want to erect something on parkland. Rules and limitations have been discussed on a case-by-case basis. *Landscapes* was not discussed.

The festival, which subcontracted the exhibit to DW to organize and find the funding for, has experience with the MAC and Parks Department but also said it did not know MAC had to approve the projects.

MAC, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 1990 as the official art adviser to the city, has evidently not made its mission clear to the community at large. It is a volunteer organization whose 18 members are appointed by the mayor. But it is not part of city government; it only advises the city's executive branch. Its only power is to make recommendations. It has no budget, and since January 1989, hasn't even had the part-time assistance of a salaried staff member, a position



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A portion of *Phantom Neighborhood*, one of the open-air sculptures that made up the *Landscapes* exhibit at the Houston International Festival.

that had been funded by the Mayor's Office.

Its bylaws state that the only time it does not have to review works on city property is when installations do not exceed 60 days. Like its predecessor, the Bayou Show, *Landscapes* was scheduled for a 90-day duration.

MAC also would not have to act on temporary projects when another city department with jurisdiction over the site acts instead. In this instance, the Parks Department had jurisdiction, and its director, Don Olson, rejected one project on the basis of public safety and long-term impact on the park. The artists, though, said Olson did not bother to ask them about the engineering and safety provisions they had incorporated. Maybe if he had, artists Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth could have responded to Olson's concerns in a satisfactory way.

Olson did accept six other projects, half of them with modifications, and an alternate one by Massing and Galbreth, for a 45-day period.

The resolution of specific issues surrounding *Landscapes* was improvised. But the larger issue, that of creating a coherent public art policy, needs to be addressed.

Earlier this year, Mayor Kathy Whitmire was to have announced the creation of a blue ribbon Arts 1990 Task Force charged with establishing a comprehensive program for art in public places.

The initiative came from the MAC and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston (CACH) in a joint effort to define an arts policy and support system for the city.

The two organizations, one an art advisory group (MAC), the other a grant-making one (CACH), described nine goals for the task force to address. The goals include increasing financial support for all the arts, creating centers for artists and arts organizations, and promoting and marketing the arts. The task force was to include Houston and Harris County representatives, but no new date has been set for the appointment of its members.

Houston is too big and sophisticated to continue to improvise its art decisions. The task force could be the important first step toward at last defining an art policy for Houston and would be charged with drafting legislation to implement the art-in-public-places program.

At the very least, it could be a forum where the richly varied art community could make its concerns heard and feel that the city actually cares to listen.