

# FROM THE TRENCHES

## PLANO PUBLIC LIBRARY: ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH ART

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### Abstract

What is the role of the public library in communities? Does it go beyond books, databases, and learning resources? How can libraries add value to communities, enhancing quality of life for citizens, young and old? Art is essential for expressing cultural identity and promoting the growth of ideas. Plano Public Library embraces art within its organizational vision, utilizing exhibits and participatory art. Engaging the community in art activities provides opportunities for citizens to discover the breadth of services and programs available at the library. The Art in the Library program enhances the livability of Plano and the quality of life for its citizens.

**Keywords:** art, artist, exhibit, Artist in Residence

Welcome to Plano, Texas! Incorporating art in the library is one way Plano Public Library stays relevant and vital as a community center. Our city is a vibrant society of innovators and artists. The population of 270,000 citizens is a young and eth-

nically diverse community. The Plano community is well-educated, creative, and keenly focused on learning and academic achievement. Plano Public Library (PPL) has served the community for more than 50 years through five community libraries that are central to

the life and vitality of Plano.

As a destination that facilitates learning and offers cultural and recreational experiences, PPL continually strives to enhance the quality of life in the community; one method for this is with art. In response to community interest, PPL has expanded its array of art programs and community art exhibits to diversify the cultural and creative experiences offered to the community. In 2015, the library facilitated 242 art programs focused primarily on adults. In 2016, PPL embraced a broader community vision and added an artist-in-residence program. By expanding family and early childhood art activities and adding the artist in residence, art programming was increased by 26%. These programs enable residents to explore all facets of local art in a welcoming and community-centered environment. The Art in the Library program enhances Plano's livability and the city's quality of life for its citizens. Engaging community members in art activities provides opportunities for them to discover the breadth of services and programs available at the library.

The library's five locations are spread across Plano; all residents live within five miles of a library. With 4,200 visitors per day, PPL is an ideal venue to showcase art throughout the city. In 2015, the libraries had limited space to exhibit local art but saw an opportunity to increase community engagement through art in the library. In 2016, with the introduction of the 18st AIRSpace

exhibit space, all five PPL libraries created dedicated exhibit spaces for local artists and traveling displays. More than 150 artists exhibited their work over the course of that year. Each library has a designated exhibit coordinator who works with the library manager to choose exhibits that are relevant to the surrounding community and are best suited to their library's program calendar. Since installing exhibit systems, an influx of requests has ensued; exhibit spaces at some libraries are booked a year in advance. Work is under way to expand PPL's exhibit spaces, adding wall systems, panels, and table-top displays for three-dimensional art.

Citizens of Plano now have free access to art displays, demonstrations, and participatory activities through an array of library programming. To provide engaging learning opportunities, PPL libraries regularly display local art, including historical pieces, art made by local high-school students, and collections cultivated by community members.

### ***The 18st AIRSpace Artist-in-Residence Program***

The library's artist-in-residence program began with establishment of a dedicated space. Harrington Library was chosen because of its location in Old Towne Plano near the Cultural Arts District. Branded 18st AIRSpace for its address on 18th Street, this space adds a place to learn, share, and create art. The 18st AIRSpace hosts artists for one- to three-month residencies,

during which the artists set aside time each week to work on their art at the library. Having an artist in residence in a public space makes art more accessible to our community members by giving them opportunities to meet artists, watch them work, observe and learn about the creative work in process, and participate in the artistic venture. Both informal make-and-take art projects and scheduled two-hour workshops engage patrons in the creative process. By broadening artistic exposure and experience in our community, the library has established itself as a focal point for Plano's diverse population and draws people of all ages and cultural backgrounds.

Friends of the Plano Public Library provided \$10,000 seed money to begin this initiative. Several months later, a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services and Texas State Library and Archives Commission (2017) provided additional funding for the program. These funds pay for a monthly artist stipend, art supplies, promotional materials, and display equipment for the 18st AIRSpace. Local art groups assist in recruiting artists and promoting the program.

The library undertook artist recruitment in conjunction with community art organizations, seeking applications from local artists in January 2016. Artists could apply for a one-, two-, or three-month residency. A jury was set up to select resident artists from among the applicants; it included three library staff and representatives of

three partnering organizations: Plano Independent School District, Plano Art Association, and ArtCentre of Plano. The selected artists for that summer and fall brought interesting variety to the program, including kaleidoscope radial symmetry and tessellations, drawing, and bookbinding techniques relating to shibori. A three-month residency paved the way for a series of engaging workshops on the history and different types of bookbinding: scroll, accordion, stab, and pamphlet stitch. Another artist taught patrons how to create storybook characters from props.

Staff have thoughtfully prepared a welcoming space in which the artists can work and interact with the public. Tables are set up for patrons to use in the make-and-take activities. A large banner featuring the 18st AIRSpace logo hangs from the ceiling at Harrington Library to identify the physical setting of the artist in residence. Natural light is provided by floor-to-ceiling windows. Artists schedule weekly studio hours for working in the 18st AIRSpace. Announcements in the building alert patrons that the artist is present. Many patrons watch the artists at work and visit with them. They also take home with them tangible creative expressions and proudly share them with others, adding a word-of-mouth element to the promotional campaign. The 18st AIRSpace has brought hundreds of patrons to Harrington Library to observe and learn from the artists, to participate in make-and-take projects, and to engage in art workshops.

From June 2016 through April 2017, 605 people attended art workshops and 401 participated in informal make-and-take art projects developed by the artists. In post-program evaluation, adults and children alike expressed gratitude that this program had been offered by the Plano Public Library. One patron wrote, "Very good instructions. The artist was very knowledgeable. [I] liked the information about bookbinding and history. Well organized and prepared." Young people also commented on the program: "I liked the spirit that y'all put into this class. It motivated us. I (heart) this art program."

Individuals and families have enjoyed the hands-on art activities and learning new artistic styles and methods. Our patrons have expressed desire for more programs of this type. Visitors to the 18st AIRSpace represent a broad cross-section of our community, bringing together people of different age groups, cultures, and languages, as well as multigenerational families and people with disabilities. The 18st AIRSpace has grown into a robust, sustainable program. Outreach and public relations elements continue to develop and progress.

Several events in April and May 2017 provided additional opportunities to market and showcase the 18st AIRSpace. Plano ArtFest, sponsored by the City of Plano, was a free community event built around artistic inclusiveness, creative curiosities, and cultural connection. The event featured live

music, contemporary art installations, performances from local arts groups, a makers market of craftsman and artisans, family chalk art, food trucks, and other attractions. PPL staffed two booths with library resources for the event, one of which was dedicated to AIRSpace art promotion. The library presence featured a fabric-collage make-and-take project, which was extremely popular. In addition, posters depicting the current artist in residence, photos of various workshops, and projects from make-and-take events were displayed to show the broad scope of the program. In the course of one day, 345 festival-goers, from small children to senior citizens, participated.

A Bookmark Contest Art Celebration was held at Harrington Library to recognize child, teen, and adult winners of the annual library bookmark contest. Fifteen winners were recognized by Friends of the Plano Public Library. The event spotlighted the various types of art in the library, including bookmark art, art exhibits, and art kits available for check out. The current artist in residence made a special appearance for the evening and led a make-and-take art project; it was enjoyed by 250 participants. The event highlighted the relocation of the AIRSpace to a more prominent spot in the library.

The library also reached out to the Plano Citizens Academy, which teaches the basic roles and functions of the city council and city government through in-person simulations, tours, and ac-

tivities. Selected government departments give presentations to educate and engage residents on their staff's responsibilities throughout the year. The artist in residence talked with the academy participants about the 18st AIRSpace experience and relevant library programming while facilitating a make-and-take art project.

At the beginning of the artist-in-residence program, PPL implemented a public relations campaign to announce and raise awareness for both the new program and space; it continues now to help sustain interest in the 18st AIRSpace. Promotional elements have included: photos and descriptions in Engage, our seasonal 20-page, full-color events brochure; information posted to the PPL website, which receives more than 100,000 hits monthly; unique scrolling web banners promoting the artists-in-residence and workshops, placed at the top of various library website pages; full-color posters displayed in the libraries and public spaces; a feature in Check It Out! the PPL e-newsletter, sent monthly to 73,000 patrons; and posts on Instagram and Facebook.

Plano Magazine has featured the 18st AIRSpace in both print and online stories with photos. Their weekly e-mail, "Things to Do in Plano This Weekend," often promotes the 18st AIRSpace. The Team Plano e-news mailing, sent to more than 2,800 city employees, announced the establishment of the artist-in-residence program and introduced the three-month resident artist

who focused on the history of books. The City News e-newsletter for Plano residents has featured all 18st AIRSpace programs in its calendar section.

### *Ongoing Management*

A call for artists to apply for AIRSpace residencies is offered once per year. The selection jury is reconvened to review applications and conduct interviews. Artists are selected to present a wide range of artistic techniques and styles throughout the year. The 18st AIRSpace coordinator then arranges the residency schedule to provide variety from month to month. At the beginning of each month, a calendar with the current resident artist's schedule is sent to the manager at Harrington Library. This keeps staff informed of the times when artists will be present in the 18st AIRSpace. Artist profiles are publicized by season (spring, summer, fall), both online and in the printed Engage brochure of library programs. Artists are required to work a minimum of 16 hours per week, and many utilize this time to work on personal projects for upcoming installations.

The 18st AIRSpace coordinator handles purchases of core art supplies used by artists in make-and-take projects and workshops. Use of federal grant funds to pay for supplies or stipends requires that each artist have a federal Data Universal Number System (DUNS) number and System for Award Management (SAM) registration. For some artists, this is their first experience with federal grant funds. PPL has

developed and tested guidelines to walk them through the process. Artists submit monthly invoices for their stipend and supply purchases. A sample invoice is provided for those unfamiliar with the process. One artist specializing in ebru paper marbling purchased materials from Turkey, necessitating foreign currency translation based on the exchange rate.

### ***Evaluation and Lessons Learned***

Patron response has been enthusiastic. Survey results from the workshops carried marks of high satisfaction and many comments of appreciation. One patron wrote, for example, “Very hands on. Teacher was engaging. Family-friendly; quality time.” When asked about the best part of the program, another responded, “The educational aspect. Please continue. We have loved the Artist in Residence.”

Numerous families come back repeatedly for additional workshops. The most successful elements of the marketing plan included the poster displays in the libraries, Instagram posts, coverage by Plano Magazine, visibility on the library website, and write-ups in e-newsletters.

The artists have expressed appreciation for having a dedicated block of time to think, work on their art, and focus their creativity. They have shared that they like the exposure their art receives during their residency, interacting with people, and being featured in the designated exhibit space.

PPL faced difficulties with the physical space, artist contracts, and promotion of workshops and made changes to improve the campaign as those challenges arose in order to resolve them. After the first artist workshop, PPL developed an introductory script, as staff initially had no direction in how to open the program and introduce the artist. When workshops were held, PPL made announcements using the building public announcement system to draw in patrons who were in the building but unaware of the workshops. PPL initially set a maximum capacity of 100 for workshop participation. However, when 67 people attended a session, the size of the crowd was too overwhelming for the artist to engage with all those attending. Workshops were limited to 50 participants thereafter. Educating artists, staff, and patrons that workshops are not “come and go” has been an ongoing issue. The two-hour workshops are designed to give participants a chance to complete a more extensive project in the style of the artist. Once the artist has finished introducing his or her art form, late arrivals are disruptive for the artist, participants, and staff helpers, as the artist has to backtrack. Thus, PPL established a cut-off time after which point no new participants are admitted.

PPL amended the language in artist contracts to clearly state that the artist must schedule in advance the 16 core hours per week they work in the 18th AIRSpace, and hours must be worked while the library is open to the public.

The contract also states that the artist will conduct two 2-hour workshops each month of their residency on specified dates.

PPL also plans to improve the library's public relations, including following up regularly with partner organizations, sending human-interest articles about the artists to local publications, enhancing communication with library staff outside of the host library (Harrington), and promoting the program through local employers. Also, PPL plans to increase distribution of post-cards that announce the program and artists in order to enhance the visibility of the artist-in-residence program.

Art in the Library has brought joy, creativity, and connection to a broad cross-section of the community. The smiles and laughter, the joy of effort invested in a new venture, the pride in learning and creating—these are the best outcomes. As a declaration of enjoyment, participants now leave 18st AIRSpace projects and workshops wearing stickers proudly proclaiming, "I created art!"









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