The secret is out: It's OK to like and even want public art for your neighborhood, workplace or fun place.

Look at The Tower bar, a City Heights landmark that had been crumbling despite community fondness and a faithful clientele. While some people are still jarred by the brilliant colors and graphic patterns that a trio of artists recently applied to it, admirers are dancing for joy at the morale boost it is giving an ailing commercial strip.

Opened as a soda fountain in 1932, the art deco-style tower got the gift of a second heyday. The City Heights Town Council has inquired about printing the image of the jazzy supergraphic tower on its stationery. And in a recent local parade, The Tower joined the Statue of Liberty and Leaning Tower of Pisa in the pantheon of monuments when some fans replicated it for their float.

The Tower project, tackled by the city's Commission for Arts and Culture and the Mid-City Development Corp., is one of 10 pilot public-art projects that have materialized around the city during the past four years. The projects may be found in parks, a parking lot, libraries and a lifeguard station, among other places.

The community-based approach has been so successful that the San Diego City Council went on to adopt an innovative public-art policy for city departments that is being watched with admiration by other municipal governments.

Twenty public-art projects now enhance San Diego roadways, pump stations, branch libraries and other surprising sites. About 30 more are in the works.

And what is amazing to art-watchers from elsewhere is that San Diego's newest crop of projects is sprouting without city funds designated for public art.

In addition, artists are included in the design process, just as architects and engineers are. The artists' fees are paid out of the capital-improvements budget, because the city's official position is that art is not an expendable frill, but an integral component of successful and meaningful design.

At the city's Project Management Academy, Gail Goldman, public-art coordinator at the Commission for Arts and Culture, introduces city staff to the wide world of public-art possibilities via slides gathered from other cities. Projects range from manhole covers stamped with original patterns to closed landfills on which native flora is reintroduced.

"I get three or four calls after every presentation about projects that are applicable," said
Goldman, a people-oriented dynamo who previously worked in public-art and arts-funding programs at state and national levels.

From Engineering to Economic Development, at least seven city departments have embraced the concept and have begun incorporating art into civic improvements. Efforts to incorporate art in public places also complements Mayor Susan Golding’s Livable Neighborhoods program.

"Artists are creating friendly, positive environments," said Goldman, "Working with architects and engineers, they are making a difference in how we experience space and our (natural and built) environment. They are helping to make city facilities -- such as water-treatment plants that were off-limits to the public -- more accessible and educational.

"Or, an artist like Jean Cornwell can create a mural for an entry wall that complements the architectural design (of the Malcolm X Library nearing completion in Valencia Park) rather than fits into it."

In collaboration with fellow San Diego artist Raul Guerrero, Cornwell is creating a 40-foot-long mosaic about the history of language. It will incorporate a lantern, a symbol of enlightenment brought to life each evening.

Artists who focus their energy on public art, such as San Diego’s versatile Roberto Salas, are being joined by studio artists choosing to work in the public arena, Goldman said.

Robert Irwin, a nationally renowned artist based in Point Loma, recently was selected to work with engineers on the design of two replacement bridges for Torrey Pines Road, for example.

In addition to listening to residents talk about their neighborhoods, artists are peering deep into local history and tapping into kids' talents for design concepts that they hope will resonate with community members for a long time.

Artists who worked on the award-winning Vermont Street pedestrian bridge, for example, dug up famous people’s quotations about walking and then incorporated them into the design to make the walk above Washington Street more like a journey than a shortcut. They also designed pillars at each end to complement the different architectural styles of Uptown/Hillcrest and University Heights.

**No more 'plop art'**

In recent decades, many a downtown across the United States has added monumental and expensive art to its civic plaza and city-hall walls by passing ordinances, which typically require that 1 percent of the cost of a public construction project be set aside for public art. Claes Oldenburg’s giant "Clothespin," now considered a beloved
Philadelphia icon, is one of the most prominent success stories of urban percent-for-art programs.

But mandated percent-for-art programs also have gone awry, disillusioning artists and art lovers -- and angering the general public, many of whom have different priorities for their tax dollars. With wonderful exceptions, public sculpture began to be viewed as insignificant "plop art" or "architectural jewelry," added without soul after the building was designed, sometimes even after it was built.

Artists clamored for earlier and greater involvement, and cities began another phase of public-art application. In cities such as Seattle, Phoenix and Dallas, artists began taking their places on design teams alongside architects, engineers, landscape architects and interior designers. In theory, the idea was a big improvement: All the creative experts would collaborate as equals to produce an imaginative, well-integrated design.

In reality, after centuries of domination by architects, some artists are still fighting for equal status at the drawing board. And too many are still brought in too late in the process to get the full benefit and kick of an interdisciplinary team.

San Diego's innovative policy takes public-art programs to yet another level, one based on hard-won public and bureaucratic acceptance that public art is meaningful and adds value to daily life. The policy encourages, rather than mandates, city officials with capital-improvement projects to include public artists in their plans from the outset.

"What you have done is address the most obvious flaws (of public-art programs) and moved beyond them," said Jessica Kusick, director of public art for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County, Texas.

Kusick referred to mandated public-art programs that were plagued by too many projects and too little money to make an impact with public art, as well as the ongoing hurdles that artists face when others consider them appendages to the "real" design team.

Instead of putting art on a pedestal, San Diego visionaries see unlimited potential for artists' involvement, from police stations to the planning of downtown redevelopment projects.

"The systems and infrastructure of the city need the same attention" as traditional art spots, Kusick added. "We, the general public, have more interaction with a humongous bridge we drive over every day than, say, a courthouse."

Engineers and other designers admit that teamwork with artists takes some getting used to, on both sides. But converts are growing.

"My initial reaction upon learning that I was going to be working with a city-appointed artist on my design project was, 'You've got to be kidding,' said Rick Brady, an engineer
who is working with Manhattan Beach artist Robert Millar on renovating the Alvarado Water Filtration Plant.

"I kept visualizing some giant sculpture in the plant entry or an ugly mural on our most visible wall," Brady continued. "Instead, I came to appreciate that an artist can add value to even the most traditional engineering design project."

In fact, Brady made his comments when he, Millar and Goldman addressed a conference on the art of collaboration earlier this year.

And the tables are turning in the management of project teams, which is another reason San Diego is in the national art spotlight. For the first time in San Diego, a group of installation and studio artists and a landscape architect has been selected to lead a major public-art project: campus design of the Point Loma Metropolitan Wastewater Treatment Plant. The top-dog team, once approved by the City Council, will hire architects and engineers as subcontractors and guide the creative process.

**Cultivating public art**

Whether extroverted, like The Tower, or subtle, like copper-clad posts at a Mission Hills canyon overlook, the initial low-budget projects are the product of an innovative process developed by Goldman and the arts commission.

Goldman started by opening eyes to myriad options for functional or inspirational public art. Her slide presentations showed San Diegans a broad definition of public-art applications nationwide. They saw that imagination, function and humor can play a role in public art.

Then Goldman asked community members what kind of public art they wanted, if any, to reflect the essence of their community's character. Residents and businesses also were asked to identify an available site where they thought public art would make a statement.

San Ysidro residents said they needed more places to sit outdoors with sun protection. They chose the novel proposal of well-known San Diego artist Victor Ochoa, who has since designed and completed installation of seating in four public places. Cast in concrete of Mesoamerican-era stepped shapes and embellished with mosaic tile, each public seating element includes its own shade: a living tree that sprouts out of the top. Ochoa named the spirited and functional pieces "Arbol de la Vida, or "Tree of Life."

Pacific Beach residents identified the lifeguard station at the foot of Grand Avenue as a bulky concrete landmark they wanted to see improved. Robin Brailsford, a public artist who has created site-specific work in Los Angeles and other cities, was chosen to add neon, wavelike forms and a beach-pebble mosaic mural. The structure now serves as a friendlier swimmer's landmark by day, a cool-blue beacon by night.
"Communities are embracing their projects," Goldman said. "They recognize that the artist can function as a liaison or translator of community needs and community spirit."

**Public Art Projects**

Sites for sore eyes

Art is where you find it.

The city of San Diego's innovative public-art policy defines "art" broadly. Selected artists create site-specific artwork for buildings or places. Or they work as members of an interdisciplinary design team to integrate art or artistic vision into architectural, engineering and planning projects -- from parks to pump stations. Here is a list of completed projects.

Community sites/landmarks:


[] City Heights, The Tower colorization by Cynthia Bechtel, Mark Messenger and Christina Montouri.


[] Linda Vista, "groundLINE" earthwork by James Brown and Leslie Ryan.

[] Mission Hills canyon overlook, copper-clad and embossed guard posts by Richard Keely and Maide Morris.

[] Ocean Beach parking lot, painted-steel sculpture by Jill Moon and Matthew Welsh.

[] Pacific Beach lifeguard station, "Terrific Pacific," neon and mural by Robin Brailsford.

[] San Ysidro, "Tree of Life/Arbol de la Vida," concrete and mosaic-tile tree-shaded seating places in four public places by Victor Ochoa.

[] Vermont Street pedestrian bridge, Hillcrest/University Heights, enhanced by Gwen Gomez, Aida Mancillas and Lynn Susholtz.

Libraries:

[] Carmel Valley Library, Carmel Valley, bronze sculpture by Mary Buckman; painted friezes and mosaic medallion by Philip Matzigkeit.
Mira Mesa Library, Mira Mesa, suspended aluminum sculpture and inscribed marble benches by Larry Kirkland.

Penasquitos Library, Rancho Penasquitos, stained-glass windows by Deanne Sabeck with poet Jerrilynn Bouguereau.

Scripps Ranch Library, Scripps Ranch, stained-glass windows by Richard Spaulding.

Parks:

Balboa Park East Mesa Precise Plan, permanent and temporary art concepts by Christine Oatman and Richard Posner.

Balboa Park, "Night Visions," alternative Park Boulevard road signs by Roberto Salas.

Canyonside Community Park and Recreation Center, Rancho Penasquitos, interior courtyard by Christine Oatman, Andrew Spurlock, landscape architect, and Lee Platt, architect.

Mission Trails Regional Park Visitors' Center, terra-cotta sculpture by T.J. Dixon and Jim Nelson.

Other:

Golden Hill, artist residency by Richard Martinez.

Mission Bay Pump Station, Mission Bay, mosaic tile and native landscaping by Wick Alexander and Robin Brailsford.

In addition, more than 30 other capital-improvement projects -- including the anticipated San Diego Convention Center expansion, the Malcolm X Library (still under construction) in Valencia Park and the Arizona Landfill Flare Station in Balboa Park -- are set to incorporate public art.

For more information, contact Gail Goldman, Public Art Coordinator, City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, 533-3051.

Caption: 1 PIC 1 CHART
1. Tower power: Eyes pop and brake pedals plunge when people first encounter the repainted Tower bar in City Heights, a public-art project devised by artists, who worked with area residents and community leaders. 2. PUBLIC ART PROJECTS 1. Union-Tribune / JOHN GASTALDO
Memo: For chart see end of text.