

## Cairn Cunnane's *Our Fence* and the Public Art Program at the City of Ottawa

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Cairn Cunnane's *Our Fence* (2016) was unveiled to the public during an inaugural event at Ottawa's Bingham Park on June 4, 2016, as part of the city of Ottawa's Public Art Program (PAP). Situated in an outdoor landscape, *Our Fence* is decorated with stylized trees that sprout out to heights of 11.5 to 13 feet at either side of the central entrance gate.<sup>1</sup> Created out of polished stainless steel, the metallic grey fence extends 225 ft., with long linear ripple wave designs underlying vertical posts that are spaced 4 inches apart. The handrail height is 40 inches above the ground, and detailed figures throughout have been executed in a variety of sizes within a mix of over 10 grouped and individual poses. The grouped figures are taller than the average adult spectator at 6ft 6 inches, generating a larger than life visual experience for children viewing them within the park. They blend into the fence with sections of flat curved sheets of metal and lattice-work stylized bodies. The smaller figures are more freely executed as sculptures, giving a playful effect to the overall piece and lending a surprise element to those who realize their presence. The figures are devoid of distinguishing facial characteristics, allowing the average person to imagine themselves in the figures; However each is dressed uniquely with different style hats grounded in the past, suggesting that the figures are meant to illustrate a story. The partitions divide the narrative, reminiscent of an architecturally sculpted comic strip, visually consumed by viewers though the act of walking along

beside it, in addition to more central viewable angles, that are traditionally experienced with 3D sculpture. Cunnane refers to *Our Fence* within his portfolio, as being both figurative and architectonic art.<sup>2</sup> The latter description refers to *Our Fence*'s utilitarian purpose that viewers can easily recognize; an art work having a dual feature of a visually entertaining protective boundary for children in Bingham Park's playground, set beside the busy traffic of downtown Dalhousie Street.

*Our Fence* can be considered an artistic intervention for the introduction of safety however, at the same time its objective is to serve a larger audience than Ottawa residents,. Its intention is to promote a tourist attraction of what artistic talent can be seen in our city too.. Moreover, the intention is to create a lasting experience for community residents who interact with *Our Fence* on a recurring basis. Cunnane intended this art work to become a familiar landmark—a representation of home and belonging—as well as a functional object that also defines the community's common space. This, by comparison, is in great contrast to the traditional model of fine art display found in most museums and galleries. The viewer in a gallery setting is not allowed to touch the art on exhibit, much less interact with and make it a part of their everyday landscape. Whereas, public art not only can be touched and interrelated with, it can be opened, closed, explored and set to function within the course

of our daily lives.

Public art commissions in Ottawa often accompany major capital projects. The PAP is a major contributor to the Ottawa culture as these sponsored art projects become a visible part of the cultural fabric of the city. It has three objectives: maintaining public art displays, commissioning competitions for local artists and growing the city art collection itself. Since the program has access to a percentage of the capital project's total budget, new art commissions are planned for public sites, and are awarded to an artist based on peer assessment and the committee's recommendation. Artworks created within the program are also maintained for the future indefinitely, as they enter the city's collection. The mandate echoes the goals of many other Canadian city art museums: the Ottawa art collection is tasked with preserving Ottawa's visual art culture for future generations within its specific community.<sup>3</sup>

Established in 1985, the mandate of PAP is to support, collect and promote art and artists within the city of Ottawa and outlying areas. When complete, public art commissions become part of the city's art collection.<sup>4</sup> Using Cairn Cunnane's *Our Fence* (2016) as a model, this paper will explore and discuss the PAP's mandate to purchase, commission and select artwork from local Ottawa artists. *Our Fence* highlights the relevance of historical and contemporary public art, and can

be seen as an effective case study from which to examine how the many ways the PAP benefits the city of Ottawa, on many cultural levels for local residents, local artists and for the preservation of local history.

*Our Fence* is a significant example in the city of Ottawa's collection, since the mid 1980's when the assemblage of art for the city expanded from its initial donations and commissions to an official acquisition budget. This is when PAP began to prioritize the growth of its collection known presently, with direct purchases from local Ottawa artists. Today, the program houses, distributes and maintains collected art for the city of Ottawa comprised of more than 2,500 artworks created by over 700 artists.<sup>5</sup> These artworks are chosen for their ability to be displayed in multi-purpose, publicly-accessible spaces within offices and corridors of Ottawa's network of buildings. Initially part of the program, the Karsh-Masson Gallery eventually became the official city gallery that serves as a space for annual exhibitions which highlight the collection. This gallery also assists local professional artists with exposure by showcasing exhibits of their artwork in order to disseminate knowledge about them to the public. The gallery component of PAP supports, provides and promotes the exhibition space by hosting emerging and established local, national and international artists and partners with graduate students. Art talks, performances, and other collection-related events for the public also occur in connection to the exhibitions. Exhibitions are proposed by artists, curators, embassies and arts institutions. In addition, the PAP sponsors a third section of commissioned art that is collected and displayed within a variety of Ottawa's public sites. These include community centers, city buildings, roadways, transit way and parks. Public art installations such as Cunnane's *Our Fence*

are popular because they serve that practical dual function. again sometimes taking the form of a bicycle rack, bench or in this latest example a fence.

Today, the program has nine full-time employees with some of these staff members also working within part-time roles. These projects often involve maintaining art installations at over 150 public sites across Ottawa library branches, community centres, parks and City Hall displays for residents.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the PAP exhibits local art to the public, while also building a stronger art collection for the city. As a government-funded organization, PAP must follow the city's guidelines and policies. Nevertheless, there is some degree of creative liberty allotted within projects. For instance, the commissions committee initiates competitions for artist proposals that require individual assessment depending on the plan and the location. Once a location has been chosen, the artist proposal is vetted by an assessment group of three or more Ottawa residents who are visual art related professionals within the city, or have other pertinent attributes to the assessment process. This team evaluates the proposal in accordance with the PAP's aim to develop an open and creative culture in Ottawa.

Cunnane's *Our Fence* is an excellent model of how the PAP handles art commissions. Inaugurated in late spring of 2016, this specific work provides insight into how such projects are developed in light of their historical context and chosen site. Moreover, Cunnane's recollection of the call to artists was that the "public art for Bingham Park would need to integrate visually with significant elements that could provide identity and specific characters to the space, considering the rich location of its history."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, knowledge of Bingham Park's past accounts are im-

perative to understanding the function and meaning of *Our Fence*.

Situated in downtown Ottawa's Byward Market, Bingham Park is the oldest area of the city. Since its 1826 inception, Bytown Village (as it was formerly known) was settled by residents who moved to the area to construct the Rideau Canal. During that time, the city was divided geographically, with Upper Town to the west of the Rideau Canal (now called Centretown) and Lower Town to the east (now called the Byward Market). Cunnane's art installation is located within Bingham Park's perimeters of Sussex Drive, Clarence and Rideau streets and the Rideau Canal. The park's front entrance opens onto Dalhousie Street, which stretches between Cathcart Street and Bolton Street, near the Bruyère Hospital. Before the construction of the Rideau Canal from 1826 to 1832, this swampland was densely settled by two-thirds of the Bytown population. The residents consisted of poor, primarily Roman Catholic families, mostly of Irish and French background. In contrast, Upper Town was settled by a relatively wealthy British Protestant minority. Lower Town's population changed little over the next century, and in 1951 over 10,000 people were living in the Byward Market and surrounding area.<sup>8</sup> The 1960s saw the beginning of a massive population decline as families moved to new suburbs. In addition, a policy of urban renewal resulted in the eviction of many residents, whose homes were subsequently torn down. In 1986, the population was approximately 3,000. In contrast, today Lower Town's population is trending upwards again as new condos are built in the area.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Byward Market has transformed itself into one of the city's top tourist attractions, surrounded by a thriving community awash with heritage buildings, eateries, shops and entertainment venues.<sup>10</sup>

Coincidentally, the competition for a commissioned Bingham Park fence was initiated by the Lower Town Community Association (LCA), a community association that shares the same building as the PAP office, within the Routhier Community Center. The LCA is a committee that discusses community matters that affect Byward Market residents, businesses and government institutions. This zone ranges as far as the Ottawa River to the north, Sussex Avenue to the west, the Rideau River to the east, and Rideau Street to the south. The association meets once a month every second Monday to discuss topics surrounding the Lower Town Byward Market, which include heritage, environmental and planification issues.<sup>11</sup> When LCA originally initiated the commission, the association was in the midst of undertaking revitalisation plans to renew the Bingham Park playground. This plan involved refreshing existing structures that had not seen attention for nearly thirty years and the development of a gardening committee to improve the landscape design within the park, expanded to include the replacement of picnic table areas. During the landscaping improvements, the poor condition of the chain link fence, and lack of it in areas became a concern for the LCA. This was especially true for the sandbox area and playground abutted against the busy traffic of Dalhousie Street.

It was out of this necessity for a fence that prompted LCA member Sylvie Grenier to propose a creative alternative to the chain link fence. This idea was also brought forth during the revitalization of the site which would include new playground equipment in an attempt to enhance the character of the park for families, and to strengthen its identity within the Byward Market community. This idea also originated from another fence project that had been proposed for Sussex Avenue. After several LCA meetings the idea for a fence was approved follow-

ing a consultation process with the PAP in 2013. Once the consultation was complete, the funding for the plan was re-allocated from the Sussex Avenue Reconstruction, to that of PAP for the Bingham Park revitalization. A budget of \$160,000 was determined in addition to HST costs that were also covered for the plan. This amount included all design, fabrication and installation project costs.<sup>12</sup> A call for artists was disseminated via the City of Ottawa PAP mailing list and the local outreach Art Engine website.

Due to the complexity of the reconstruction, a two-stage public art competition was developed for the fence, and the first call for proposals went out in January 2014 with a submission deadline of February 18, 2014. While the selection committee received twenty-eight artist submissions and several viewing comments from the public, the committee did not select any of these proposals. Instead, they decided to reissue the opportunity to artists again in May 2014. Among the twenty-four submissions received from the second round of applications, shortlisted artists chosen were Detlef Gotzens, the teams of Michael M. Simon and Studio F. Minus, Tim des Clouds and Cairn Cunnane. These artists also presented detailed sketches and plans to the public at a Routhier Community Center open house that also took place in June 2014, in which the public was asked to submit comments on the artist proposals. These comments from the public in turn helped inform the jury's decision.<sup>13</sup>

The committee, named the Bingham Park Public Art Jury, was comprised of artists with public art experience Sylvie Grenier, Jason Grant-Henley, Michael Kinghorn and Andrea Stokes, as well as Renee Proteau, a Parks Planner of the City of Ottawa. This same committee was given the responsibility of reviewing

and evaluating submissions, in regard to its overall artistic look, its connection or sensitivity to the surrounding community, and its rating upon its designed safety and durability. After much deliberation, Cunnane was awarded the public art commission for Bingham Park, by the peer assessment committee. His submission plans for the Bingham Park fence were accepted based on his artistic excellence and experience as an artist, site integration of his idea, reflection of the profile and character of the community, and sustainability.<sup>14</sup>

Cunnane is an accomplished metal sculptor and blacksmith, who mixes traditional forging techniques with modern technologies. Since he had undertaken many sculptural projects in Ottawa, including work at Rideau Hall and at Parliament Hill, he was awarded the Bingham Park commission.<sup>15</sup> Immediately after the proposal's acceptance he began to realize the plans with which he had placed as a preliminary proposal. Once these drawings were approved as part of the initial stage of the project, he began working on a maquette as part of the second stage. By the third stage, he started constructing the fence itself. All this was created from his industrial studio space in Nepean featured by the Artist-Blacksmith Association of North America in their Spring 1996, Winter 2001 and Summer 2003 issues, and in the winter 2010-11 issue of the Metal Arts Guild. Cunnane has also exhibited metal sculpture at the International Caniron Conference at McMaster University in 2003, and in Victoria in 2007. In addition, he teaches the artisan blacksmithing as a craft within a mentorship program for the Ottawa School of Art, while exhibiting his work in solo and group exhibitions.<sup>16</sup> His art is presently collected in both private and public collections.

Cunnane's method of shaping, forming, and distorting metal allows him to explore crossovers of architec-

tural and functioning object design with figurative, plant and other forms of artistic sculpture. These sculptures are individually unique with an array of differing details that when visually combined as a whole reflect the community as client and the intended space, that of a cultural landscape. Often his artworks are made of metal consisting of bronze, stainless steel, aluminum and other materials.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the art he makes can range from hand-held to large installations. Cunnane explains his process in the following statement:

I'm exploring the awesome uncontrolled subconscious forces and expressions that are released in the moment of glowing red heat and unleashed physical energy without time to be filtered by thoughts. The results reveal a connection to my jagged distorted path to enlightenment. Presently I express figuratively with an architectural connection that's influenced by explorations of the Far East. I use ancient blacksmith techniques mixed with state of the art methods. Most of my work is created by forging. Unlike casting where a mould is made and metal poured into it, I heat the metal and work it directly, instantly for each brief moment it is glowing hot enough to manipulate. It begins with an idea that is transformed by the unpredictability of the forces applied and the control of them, to lead to expressions that reflect something I have done but cannot plan. It allows a connection to the sense of mystery we feel around us.<sup>18</sup>

*Our Fence* can be compared to another recent project that Cunnane produced for the Ottawa Overbrook Community Centre, in which he created two sculptural benches that represent environmental sustainability. These whimsical benches were shaped from collected, recycled, rescued, found and donated materials. They are present-

ed as a fluid collage of welded objects and forms inspired by themes of community and connections. Not only are these benches functioning seats, they are also distinctive works of art. Likewise, *Our Fence* is a functional work of art: it protects the Byward Market community children and families in the Bingham Park playground, from the street traffic on which it borders. During a recent interview with Cunnane, the artist reflected on why he decided to compete on the competition:

I first heard about the PAP commission competition from my mailing list or Art Engine website. From there I was interested the competition because I thought it was a great opportunity to develop some of my concepts into a significant art piece that would relate to the community.<sup>19</sup>

Cunnane also indicated that "after he read the history of the Bingham Park and Lower Town area of Ottawa ... he saw a lot of interesting events and people which changed the area dramatically."<sup>20</sup> This motivated him to include a reference to a variety of historic hats that would have been worn during the park's initial opening in 1898, of which he references to in the composition of *Our Fence*. Cunnane mentions that this is:

A way to connect to the many different people that lived here, or did in the past, or were affected by the area. I wanted to create a feeling of all-inclusive so that everyone has a place on equal footing. Some of these ideas of inclusion came from the advice of Ottawa residents Maurice Holloway (age 94) and Mike Shaw (age 75) ...by working with them once a week to receive critical feedback, in addition to my wife Maria's input. Three younger apprentices Jesse Frois, Alex Cabral and Mike Tunstall also assisted me with the

fabrication, welding and installation.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, Cunnane's artwork is informed by the history of Ottawa's past and present Lowertown community, as to what images he decided to incorporate in *Our Fence*. However, he also was cognisant to the nature of his materials, that being steel and metal, of which he then shapes in order to adhere to a functional design. Due to some of the limitations of working with metal, he starts with a complex idea, such as environmental sustainability, and renders it into simple forms, so that the initial intentions of what he is creating is not misplaced or absent. Cunnane maintains this process for all 200 feet of his sculptural fence that borders the eastern edge of Bingham Park and curves around the existing trees and hedges. The stainless steel design and stated earlier incorporates a flowing path or river and features thought-provoking groups of abstract overlapping figures and simple tree form patterns.<sup>22</sup> When Cunnane was asked if any other changes in the fence occurred during its development, he replied:

Yes. After having completed much of it they decided to do some test holes for the sonotubes. In order to save tree root damage, some sonotubes were moved, others changed in size, and others removed. The gate section was moved 600mm closer to the street. Another section that curved into the park had to be straightened out because of a newly installed retaining wall. At the Bolton St. end there suddenly appeared a large (now permanent) electrical box directly in the fence line. (The fence now does an "S" curve to accommodate this intrusion while keeping the essential feel of the piece). One by one the issues were accommodated while the concept intact.<sup>23</sup>

Cunnane's artwork *Our Fence* is not only an example of how the city of Ottawa's Public Art Program supports the creativity of local artists, but how it also stands as a reminder that preserving our cultural history within the city is fundamental towards its growth as a cultural hub and identity. On 4 June 2016, *Our Fence* was officially unveiled to the public for their enjoyment. Cunnane echoes this intention, stating, "it's not just a fence or rigid boundary it's an inspirational community story with a practical use. I like art that's public and accessible. Functional pieces that are used and touched as part of life are important today since the divide between the art world and general public is so wide."<sup>24</sup>

Rather than displaying an artwork for an audience separate from its intended use, or within the confines of an art museum space, the PAP has successfully achieved its objective through *Our Fence* to commission an artwork that strengthens a local art network. This particular installation has also positively contributed to the experience of Ottawa tourists and residents. *Our Fence* certainly elicits a response from those who interact with it on a daily basis, creating a lasting impression. As a result, this artwork succeeds in four ways. First, it provides exposure for the local artist. Second, it celebrates the history of the park itself. Third, it markets the Public Arts Program. Lastly, it maintains the safety of families by providing a functional separation from busy traffic all while being tastefully designed to preserve the historic story of the Byward Market. This being an area that is now the city of Ottawa as we know and live within today.

Cunnane created *Our Fence* to welcome visitors entering the Park through his public art. This inspirational sculpture also transforms this corner of Lowertown Ottawa into a playful view on local history, while being situated in the same area. Cunnane utilizes the parks natural

surroundings to convey this. For example, through the sculptural ripples of water which flow along the fence, referencing nearby rivers, and also through tall majestic trees as a homage to Ottawa's past mayor Samuel Bingham. Playful figures in stainless steel overlap one another, creating patterns and layers that connect the many generations who have come and gone within and around this cultural landscape. As a whole this artistic intervention is not only a lively addition to a nearby playground, but a distinctive picturesque working boundary that keeps all who visit Bingham Park safely inside its gates.

#### Notes

1. Sylvie Grenier, key note presentation at the Ceremonial Opening of Cairn Cunnane's *Our Fence* in Bingham Park, *Public Arts Program*, City of Ottawa, 4 June 2016
2. Cairn Cunnane: artist, blacksmith, sculptor, <http://cairncunnane.ca/category/portfolio/figurative/>, sourced 13 July 2017
3. Public Arts Program "Art Collection: About the Collection", <http://ottawa.ca/en/residents/arts-heritage-and-culture/art-collection>, City of Ottawa, sourced 8 Aug. 2016.
4. City of Ottawa "Backgrounder: Public Art for Bingham Park Bulletin" Public Arts Program, May 2016
5. City of Ottawa "Public Arts Program Brochure" Public Arts Program, distributed August 2016.
6. City of Ottawa "Art Collection: About the Collection", <http://ottawa.ca/en/residents/arts-heritage-and-culture/art-collection>, sited 8 Aug. 2016.
7. Cairn Cunnane (Ottawa Blacksmith Artist) in e-mailed interview correspondence with Sharon Odell, 7 Sept. 2016.
8. Bytown Museum, "Lowertown-Basseville: Introduction", <http://www.lowertown-basseville.ca/introduction.html>, sourced 28 Sept. 2016.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Lower Town Community Association "Introduction and Mandate", <http://www.lowertownbasseville.ca>, sourced June 20, 2016.
12. Public Arts Program "Ottawa Public Art Program presents a PUBLIC ART OPPORTUNITY FOR ARTISTS Bingham Park", City of Ottawa, 24 January 2014
13. Sylvie Grenier, key note presentation at the Ceremonial Opening of Cairn Cunnane's *Our Fence* in Bingham Park, Public Arts Program, City of Ottawa, 4 June 2016.
14. Ibid.
15. Public Art Program "Bingham Park Public Opening Ceremony Scenario", City of Ottawa, Saturday 4 June 2016.

16. Figureworks "Artists: Cairn Cunnane", <http://www.figureworks.org/cairn.html>, sourced June 20, 2016.
17. City of Ottawa Public Art Program, "File Pro Maker Catalogue Record, 2011-0006: Connections" (Bench), 2010-2011", March 28, 2012
18. Figureworks "Artists: Cairn Cunnane", <http://www.figureworks.org/cairn.html>, sourced June 20, 2016.
19. Cairn Cunnane (Ottawa Blacksmith Artist) in e-mailed interview correspondence with Sharon Odell, 7 Sept. 2016.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. City of Ottawa Public Art Program, "File Pro Maker Catalogue Record, 2016-0004: Our Fence (Fence) 2014-2016", June 14, 2016.
23. Cairn Cunnane (Ottawa Blacksmith Artist) in e-mailed interview correspondence with Sharon Odell, 7 Sept. 2016
24. Ibid.

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- , "Public art celebration - Our Fence by Cairn Cunnane", [www.facebook.com/public.art.ottawa](http://www.facebook.com/public.art.ottawa), June 1, 2016.
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