Sculpture in Gotham
Book Review by Laura Holzman for Public Art Dialogue
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Bogart, Michele H. Sculpture in Gotham: Art and Urban Renewal in New York City.

Midway through Sculpture in Gotham: Art and Urban Renewal in New York City, Michele Bogart observes that “by 1990, New York City had no fewer than six major public art programs, none of which had existed before 1974” (155). In six clear and readable chapters, her book tells the story of how this phenomenon came to be. Sculpture in Gotham sidesteps operatic public art episodes to focus instead on the more mundane, but no less important, processes involved in commissioning a substantial portion of public sculpture in New York from the mid-twentieth century to the present. In particular, the book charts several shifts in administrative structures that contributed to and reflected the city’s growing embrace of public sculpture as an important component of urban redevelopment.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, when the book begins, Robert Moses’ distaste for public sculpture limited the works commissioned and installed under his watch as Commissioner of Parks. During the decades that followed, however, new leaders “regarded public sculpture as a way to help empower minorities, reassure tradition-minded residents, and maintain the social order” (42). Skillful arts administrators including Doris Freedman, Suzanne Randolph, and Anita Contini led

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municipal and private initiatives that aimed to support mayoral agendas, neighborhood goals, and artists’ creative autonomy. They sought to bring art from the downtown galleries into other parts of the city. They invited community members to weigh in on the art proposed for their neighborhood. They worked collaboratively with review boards, funders, artists, and other organizations. Several of these programs found success by cultivating temporary projects instead of permanent installations. Bogart details the specific innovations of efforts such as the Community Environmental Sculpture Program, Creative Time, the 1982 Percent for Art legislation, and the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s Arts for Transit program. In the final chapter, she analyses a handful of more recent public sculpture projects that built on the legacies of these earlier endeavors and brought matters of race to the fore. Throughout *Sculpture in Gotham*, Bogart draws from archival materials, interviews, and her own experiences as a member of the New York City Art Commission.

By concentrating on administrative structures, organizations, and procedures instead of extensively interpreting individual artworks, Bogart lays out a valuable framework in which others can situate more detailed studies of particular objects and issues. Her focus on the actions of arts administrators, many of them women, elevates the significance of this often unsung labor in the process of generating public art. This is an important intervention. Even so, when I encountered the few sections that do contain deeper discussions of specific projects, I wished for more content like this elsewhere. For example, I appreciated her analysis and interpretation of the 1997 *Duke Ellington Memorial* and the circumstances surrounding the drawn-out creation of the 2011 *Frederick Douglass Memorial* (chapter 6). As a reader I latched on to the rare moments when she offered her opinion about the successes or shortcomings of other projects. Nonetheless,
readers unfamiliar with the complex behind-the-scenes negotiations, partnerships, and permissions involved in generating public art will find an insightful overview in this text. Scholars and arts administrators in particular who seek to add historical perspective and New York-based geographic specificity to their understanding of today’s practices will surely benefit from Bogart’s work.