Experience has taught Sherri Brueggemann that beauty holds power: Dynamic sculptures and murals on city buildings may please the eye, but they also motivate the community.

“The indigenous peoples and the people that came afterward have always sort of found this place spiritually inspiring for art and creativity,” said Brueggemann, manager of Albuquerque, N.M.’s Public Art Program. “Funding it through a municipal program really supports the whole image.”

Thanks to the Art in Municipal Places Ordinance, which passed in 1978, 1 percent of city construction bonds have since been earmarked to finance the program. Brueggemann estimated that it totals roughly $1.5 million every two years.

Art from the program has adorned fire stations, libraries and parks, with more than 650 pieces scattered across the city.

Brueggemann and her colleagues manage and promote the public art program with everyday technology. They track artwork locations in a FileMaker Pro database, and marketing efforts include posting images and videos to Flickr and Vimeo, as well as displaying art locations on an interactive map.
Art and Data Management

The program is a rewarding effort to bolster Albuquerque culture. “It’s an added benefit,” said project coordinator Brendan Picker. “Say you build a new library, we can also commission a nice sculpture to be in front of the library. It’s about place-making—enhancing the built environment and creating opportunities for the public to engage with art.”

Software tools help Brueggemann and Picker inform taxpayers about elements that transform their neighborhoods into a citywide museum.

The Albuquerque Public Art Program’s Web portal is a directory of links and services for residents and tourists searching for municipal elegance. Most of them point visitors to city-specific artwork, but others are gateways to national and global art.

The city has capitalized on popular video and photo sharing resources to reach the public. Its Vimeo feed includes interviews and documentaries where artists reveal how they created their pieces, and Albuquerque’s Flickr account showcases paintings, drawings, murals, pottery, jewelry, statues and sculptures, many which come in extraordinary shapes and forms. The Fish Globe at Tingley Park, for example, is a giant sphere composed of brown, interlocking trout.

Albuquerque’s Art

Many of the more than 650 pieces of art in Albuquerque, N.M., are fashioned in the land art style, a movement incorporating man-made structures with natural environments.
Nearly all have been designed to capture the vibrancy of the indigenous peoples of the Americas who embody the southwestern spirit.

Strangely beautiful metal flowers and other growths sprout from the ground at Tingley Aquatic Park, sculpted animals are frozen in time at the city’s aquarium, reverse reliefs are mounted on the workforce development building downtown, and colorful murals spice up pillars in town. Even freeway intersections are beset with stylized glass, steel and stone pylons, as well as walls glowing with LED light.

The Vimeo documentary about the Flyway sculpture on Coors Boulevard exemplifies the uniqueness of Albuquerque’s art — and the artists’ pride. The structure comprises 16 rows of six painted, jetty jack angle irons welded to an earthen mound. Artist Robert Wilson made the irons point to the sky at an angle to symbolize birds launching themselves into the air, an instance where art reflected local life.

“When those birds fly over, I want them to be looking down on this piece and see that it’s right in their pathway,” Wilson said in the footage. “The idea that they will be flying exactly in the rows that are created by Flyway is really appealing to me.”

Albuquerque’s Web portal links visitors to the interactive public art map and a printable PDF map of a walking tour. The interactive map is a simple GIS Web application that marks art locations with orange dots. Users customize the interface via a drop-down menu where they select an interface type, including street view and topographical view.

The FileMaker Pro database helps staff sort and track artwork, so creating maps and walking tours is much easier than it would be otherwise. Brueggemann started the database in 1995 because she’d found FileMaker Pro useful for data management at jobs she had prior to joining the Public Art Program.

“The importance of the database is for us to protect the public investment, to know where every single piece of art is, and what condition it’s in,” Brueggemann said. “Every public artwork in our database has its own ID number, and we have used that number on all our promotional material, so just about any time we use a picture of one of our pieces, we use a number to identify it.”

Eagle-eyed viewers will notice those numbers under photos on the program’s Flickr page. For example, the Center of the City Centennial street art photo is tagged with the number 618, which corresponds with the artwork in the database.

This system simplifies marketing efforts. The database numbers are printed on brochures and trading cards, and city staff members explain their usefulness to residents.

“When we go into the schools and we give workshops, we hand out a batch of trading cards, and they all have a number,” Brueggemann said. “We explain to them how the number can help lead them to get more information on our Web page.”

**Challenges Ahead**

Technology and public art are integrated nationwide. The Public Art Archive, for example, is a searchable database of descriptive art media in the United States.
and Canada, which couldn’t exist unless jurisdictions like Albuquerque offered their information electronically. The archive is currently accepting submissions from participants.

Similarly, CultureNow’s Museum Without Walls project offers data and images on thousands of artistic creations to the public via a suite of Web and smartphone apps. The iPhone app contains a searchable database of photos, an interactive map and podcast interviews with artists, curators and others with art-related careers from about 55 public art collections from around the country.

These modules are impressive at large scales, but some people feel there’s room for improvement at the local level. Helen Lessick, an artist and public art consultant, believes many governments should offer more detail in their online data.

These modules are impressive at large scales, but some people feel there’s room for improvement at the local level. Helen Lessick, an artist and public art consultant, believes many governments should offer more detail in their online data.

There’s a story behind every piece of art, and Lessick thinks that the story isn’t always fully told, if at all, when the information is disseminated on the Web.

In Albuquerque’s case, online Vimeo interviews provide crucial insight into artists and their creations, but more work could be done in additional areas to ensure that taxpayers know why their art is important and how it came to be.

Lessick is a project manager for Web Resources for Art in Public (WRAP), a project focused on exposing artists and their work to the public in a way that’s often limited to the confines of museum walls. Since 2010, WRAP has educated public art groups about how apps, blogs, video and other Web tools further this goal.

“I am eager to make sure that our field is accurately well represented,” Lessick said.

Technology may pose another challenge to governments as it changes how artists create and how audiences experience their work. Digital art encompasses pieces printed or projected on video screens, still 2-D and 3-D images that shift or change form, and interactive still and moving images.

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“Technology changes faster and faster,” Brueggemann said. “In some ways, we just sort of have to adapt technology to promote our permanent collection instead of the other way around. We can’t really incorporate the digital medium as an art form itself.”