

2009 RUDY BRUNER AWARD: Silver Medal Winner
The Community Chalkboard and Podium:
An Interactive Monument to Free Expression

Charlottesville, Virginia





Jefferson Muzzles Award artwork on Chalkboard

The Community Chalkboard and Podium At-A-Glance

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY CHALKBOARD AND PODIUM?

- ❖ A monument to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States
- ❖ A double-sided chalkboard fabricated of locally mined Buckingham slate. The chalkboard is designed in two sections, each 7.5' in height, and totaling 54' in length. An adjacent podium for public speeches is 18" high and 6' by 6' wide
- ❖ An interactive installation that is available for the unrestricted use of the public at all hours of the day and night
- ❖ An art installation that anchors and enlivens a new public plaza at the east end of the downtown mall in front of City Hall

PROJECT GOALS (FROM THE APPLICATION)

- ❖ To create a place that celebrates and promotes the First Amendment right to free expression in an active and challenging way.
- ❖ To create a monument that is intellectually accessible to all people and that does not separate, segregate, or "self-select" a certain demographic of users
- ❖ To create a dynamic, interactive and civic place of public discourse
- ❖ To honor the intent of the First Amendment as a means of petitioning and challenging elected officials
- ❖ To enliven a formerly under-utilized area of downtown, and to anchor the east end of the downtown mall



PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

1996: Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression (TJC) creates the concept for a monument to the First Amendment.

1997: City Council approves proposal by TJC to form the First Amendment Monument Committee to oversee a design competition for the monument; architect Maurice Cox agrees to chair the Committee.

1998: TJC issues an RFP for design of the monument. Entry by architects Pete O'Shea and Robert Winstead selected as winner.

1998-2000: TJC works with designers to develop proposal. Project discussed at public meetings and exhibited in gallery.

2000: Completed design submitted to City Council for approval.

2001: Public hearing on proposed design held at standing room only meeting.

2001: City Council approves design by vote of 3 in favor, 1 opposed, and 1 abstention.

2001-2006: TJC designs and launches fund raising and outreach programs.

2001-2004: City Council plans extension of downtown mall to new public plaza outside City Hall. Wallace Roberts and Todd (WRT) hired to prepare urban design plan. O'Shea and Winstead work with WRT on placement of the monument in the new plaza.

2005-2006: Construction of Chalkboard

April 2006: Dedication of Chalkboard

KEY PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

Sponsor:

JOSH WHEELER, Associate Director, Thomas Jefferson Center

Designers:

PETE O'SHEA, Siteworks

ROBERT WINSTEAD, Architect (by phone)

City Council Members:

SATYENDRA HUJA, Former Director,

Charlottesville Planning Dept.; City Councilor

HOLLY EDWARDS, City Councilor

BRENT CARAVATI, Former Mayor; City Councilor

Community Representatives:

MAURICE COX, Former Mayor; Director of Design,
National Endowment for the Arts

JANICE JAQUITH, Radio Essayist

JOHN HERMSMEIER, Educator

DAHLIA LITHWICK, Journalist (Slate/Newsweek)

KRISTA FARRELL, Charlottesville Public Library

PEPPY G. LINDEN, Executive Director,

Charlottesville Children's Museum

LANCE HOSEY, Architect

JANE FISCHER, Executive Director,

Charlottesville Community Design Center

KATIE SWENSON, Former Director, Charlottesville Community

Design Center, Director, Rose Fellowship Program (by phone)

The Community Chalkboard and Podium



View of Downtown Mall

CHARLOTTESVILLE: A LIVABLE AND HISTORIC CITY

Founded in 1762, Charlottesville, Virginia is one of America's most historic cities. Charlottesville is well known as the home of three US Presidents – Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe – as well as for its spectacular natural setting in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is also the site of two of Jefferson's most important works of architecture: the University of Virginia's (UVA) "academical village," and his home at Monticello, located just a few miles from downtown.

With a population of 45,000, Charlottesville is a small city. For practical purposes, however, Charlottesville functions as the center of Albemarle County, with a population closer to 118,000.¹ Charlottesville's median age is 28, younger than the national median of 36 years, reflecting the large student population associated with UVA. The citizenry of Charlottesville is 68% white and 22% African-American, with the remaining population including Asian, Native American, Hispanic, Latino and others.²

The Charlottesville City Council, in its recent strategic plan, lays out the following vision for the city:

City Council Vision 2025 calls for the City to be a leader in innovation, environmental sustainability, and social

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlottesville_Virginia

² http://www.city-data.com/county/Charlottesville_city-VA.html



and economic justice; to be flexible and progressive in anticipating and responding to the needs of the citizens; and to act as the cultural and creative capital of Central Virginia. There are eight main areas of focus: economic sustainability, lifelong learning, and quality housing opportunities for all, arts and culture, green city initiatives, healthy city initiatives, a connected community, and smart, citizen-focused government.

Charlottesville has progressive goals, but it is also a southern city with a history of racial tensions. In 1954, in response to the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, Charlottesville closed its public schools for several months rather than integrate them in accordance with the ruling. Other racially charged episodes include the demolition of Vinegar Hill, an African-American neighborhood that was razed as part of urban redevelopment in 1965. To the outrage of displaced residents and their supporters, the Vinegar Hill site sat vacant for 20 years until it was redeveloped into a mix of

uses that now form the western terminus of the downtown mall. Recently, the City Council initiated a series of meetings designed to establish a meaningful and action-oriented dialogue between its African-American and white citizens. In addition, like many cities across the country, Charlottesville suffers from a shortage of affordable housing, and homelessness is a growing problem in the city.

THE DOWNTOWN MALL

The Downtown Mall is worth special mention. Designed in 1974 by nationally known landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, the eight block outdoor mall and its adjacent streets are an important center of business for the city. The Mall area hosts a thriving collection of local shops and restaurants, as well as important entertainment venues, including the historic Paramount Theatre and Live Arts. In its early years the Mall struggled somewhat, but in '96-'97 the Mall made a major turnaround when through streets were allowed to cross the Mall at four key points (before that time, it had been the longest continuous outdoor mall in the country). This alteration allowed controlled vehicular access to merchants, and began to animate the side streets with new development and shops.

Today the Mall is the centerpiece of a bustling historic district, which achieved National Historic Landmark status in 2007. Many of the buildings along the Mall are of historic importance and maintain a low four- to five-story height, making it a welcoming

and human-scale pedestrian environment. Restoration of historic structures continues, including a third theatre for use by a local opera company. The mild climate of Charlottesville allows many restaurants and cafes to have outdoor seating along the Mall, and a Children’s Museum and other cultural venues face directly onto the space. The Mall is active and well-used throughout the year.

It is notable that many of the uses on the Mall are somewhat upscale, and patrons of the shops and cultural venues are largely white. This is especially significant because two African-American neighborhoods are located nearby, yet those residents do not appear to use it to a great extent. The possible exception to this observation is the Chalkboard, which is used by people of all races, ages and backgrounds.

The west end of the Mall, formerly known as Vinegar Hill, is anchored by the Omni Hotel, which was built in 1985, and a public skating rink. Both are connected directly to the Mall by pedestrian plazas and pathways. The east end of the Mall, long anchored by City Hall and a small public amphitheater, was for many years much less active than the west end, where the bulk of retail and commercial uses are located. Before the East Plaza was built in 2001, the east end of the Mall terminated in a confusing street pattern that allowed vehicular access to City Hall and the nearby amphitheater, but was unattractive to pedestrians.



In 2001 federal monies became available to build a combination visitor and transit center at the east end of the Mall across from City Hall. At the same time, City Council approved a proposal by a local music promoter to rent the amphitheater space and upgrade it into the Charlottesville Pavilion, a venue that could accommodate high-profile musical acts. The City Council, headed by then-Mayor Maurice Cox, saw an opportunity to connect City Hall, the Pavilion, and the new Visitor Center with a public open space. They hired Wallace, Roberts and Todd to design a plaza that would extend the Mall and connect the major public venues on its perimeter. This new plaza also became the location for The Community Chalkboard. Today the plaza serves not only as a connection between these important civic uses, but is also the *de facto* location for many kinds of public gatherings, including political demonstrations, non-profit events, and various public meetings.

Charlottesville Transit Station and Visitors Center



HISTORY OF THE CHALKBOARD

The idea for a monument to free speech originated with Charlottesville's Thomas Jefferson Center (TJC). The Center is a non-profit institution devoted entirely to the defense of free speech "in all its forms." An independent and non-partisan organization, TJC's programs include education and involvement in legislative matters as they pertain to free speech. Recently the TJC and the Ford Foundation have joined together to create a program entitled "Difficult Dialogues," which focuses on threats to academic freedom at colleges and universities.

The Center also recognizes the many threats to free expression in the arts, engages in litigation around these issues, and hosts a variety of programs associated with protection of artistic expression. The TJC sponsors the "Jefferson Muzzles" award that identifies "particu-



larly egregious affronts to free expression." The TJC also recognizes people "who have shown extraordinary devotion to the principles of free expression" through its William J. Brennan, Jr., Award.

The Competition

In 1998 Josh Wheeler, Associate Director of the TJC, approached the Charlottesville City Council with the idea of installing a classically designed podium and landscaped space at the east end of the Mall as a monument to freedom of expression. The proposed design was something TJC had built at a park in Utah, and was interested in "franchising" in other locations. At that time the east end of the Mall was still a series of roadways that cut off City Hall and the pavilion from pedestrian access to the Mall. The proposed design placed the

Empty boots anti-war installation at Chalkboard

*Top: Jefferson Muzzles Award artwork on Chalkboard
Bottom: Lady Liberty artwork on Chalkboard*

podium at a grassy area near City Hall, in a leftover space that was difficult to access due to the surrounding vehicular traffic.

While the City Council liked the idea of a monument to the first Amendment, they did not like the design that the TJC initially proposed. Then-Mayor Maurice Cox, who was also a professor of architecture at UVA, felt that the classical podium design was not architecturally suited to Charlottesville. The TJC then suggested that they host a design competition for the monument, with a selection committee made up of local citizens. Maurice Cox was asked to serve on that committee, and after its second meeting agreed to serve as its chair.

The call for submissions was intentionally broad, inviting “concepts for a design to commemorate the free expression guarantees of the First Amendment.” It was “open to anyone with an idea to share.” The only criteria were that it must be “anything that serves as a physical and symbolic reminder of the importance of the right of free expression,” and that it must be located east of the downtown mall. There was no entry fee, and no prescribed format for submissions. As Josh Wheeler stated, the objective was to solicit ideas not just from design professionals but also from a diverse group of laypeople, and from as many of Charlottesville’s citizens as possible. A cash prize of \$1,000 was offered to the winner.

The committee received 36 proposals. The entry by artist and landscape architect Pete O’Shea of Siteworks with architect Rob Winstead was a disarmingly simple presentation: a piece of black chalkboard, approximately 12” by 24”, with a chalk drawing on it. The drawing depicted a large scale, full-height chalkboard wall, on which the public would be invited to write with no restriction as to content. This concept captured the imagination of almost everyone in the group, and was the first choice of 9 of the 11 committee members.

Public Process

Although the jury was enthusiastic in their choice of the Chalkboard, public review of the proposal in 2000 and 2001 generated a degree of controversy unprecedented in Charlottesville. The process, which included a series of public meetings and gallery exhibits designed to promote awareness of the Chalkboard, resulted in a major public debate. Some feared that graffiti, profanity, obscenity, and politically divisive language would appear on the wall.



Original competition submission by Pete O’Shea and Robert Winstead

Vociferous disagreements arose among citizens and politicians about the advisability of providing an outlet for such unedited public expression.

Reflecting on the controversy, some of those involved interpret the outcry as an indicator of long-held southern values, whereby unpleasant or controversial opinions were simply not expressed publicly. Others, including some of the older African-American residents of Charlottesville, feared that unvoiced racial tensions would be posted on the Chalkboard. Some public officials voiced concern that the location directly in front of City Hall would encourage criticism of elected officials. Notwithstanding these fears and concerns, in March of 2001 the City Council approved the design.

It is noteworthy that the public process leading up to the Chalkboard is still discussed as vividly as the Chalkboard itself, and the TJC maintains a file many inches thick of newspaper articles pertaining to the debate. Many feel that the dialogue was extremely important to the community and that the process itself served a community-building function and explored issues around freedom of expression.

As the city debated the Chalkboard, the City Council considered a plan for the redesign of the east end of the Mall. Federal funds were available for the new Visitor Center, and the Council realized that this provided the opportunity to create a publicly accessible eastern

terminus to the Mall. Since the new monument was expected to come on line concurrently, there was an accelerated effort to get the east end designed and under construction. In 2001 design of the public space was resolved, the location of the Chalkboard was finalized, and construction began.

FINANCES

Once the Chalkboard was approved, O'Shea and Winstead proceeded with their final design. In the meantime, it fell to the TJC to raise the required \$200,000 to pay for the monument. Funds came from a variety of foundations and individuals:

FUNDING SOURCES:

Foundations/Non-Profits = \$157,150

Planned Parenthood of the Blue Ridge
Scripps Howard Foundation
Center for Individual Freedom
John W. Kluge Foundation
Charlottesville-Albemarle Community Foundation Fund
Foundation for Roanoke Valley
I.J. & Hilda M. Breeden Foundation
Bama Works (charitable giving foundation for
Dave Matthews Band)

Businesses = \$19,993

SNL Securities
Lexis / Nexis
VMDO Architects
New Dominion Bookshop

Barnes & Noble
 C-Ville Weekly
 Les Yeux du Monde
 Silverchair Science & Technology

Individual gifts ± \$50,000

The TJC also received substantial discounts from R.E. Lee & Sons Construction and Buckingham Slate Co.

CONSTRUCTION COSTS:

Pre-Construction Costs

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|
| Design Fees & Community Outreach | \$62,417.37 |
|----------------------------------|-------------|

Construction Cost

| | | |
|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Labor: | \$31,642 | \$163,259.96 |
| Materials: | \$129,783 | |
| Misc.: | \$1,764 | |

TOTAL CONSTRUCTION COST: \$225,677.33

Annual Maintenance Costs

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Cleaning, Supplies, Electricity, etc. | \$6,534.07 |
|---------------------------------------|------------|

DESIGN

According to designer Pete O’Shea, the submittal to the monument competition was essentially done the night before the deadline, on a chalkboard hastily procured from K-Mart. Although O’Shea and Winstead had not worked out the details of the design, they were very clear that they wanted the monument to be highly interactive, and even confrontational, rather than purely symbolic.



The concept for the monument, as expressed in the RFP, was that it be “a fixed symbol of the right to free expression and an avenue for the exercise of that right.” For O’Shea and Winstead, the design challenge was to keep the design simple, and to avoid letting the design override the clarity of the intent. They wanted to create a “vehicle for expression,” rather than an art object for its own sake. The ultimate design solution reflects that intent. Although it is carefully proportioned and detailed, the Chalkboard does not attract attention to itself. Rather, it draws interest to the content of what is written on it.

Completed in 2006, the Chalkboard consists of two slate walls and a podium made of locally quarried Buckingham slate. The slate has significance in the area, as it has historically been used as a roofing material. Both sections of the Chalkboard are double sided, 7.5 feet in height, with stainless steel chalk trays integral to the design. The

View of Chalkboard looking toward Charlottesville Pavilion

shorter wall is 12 feet in length, and the longer one 42 feet. The sections are separated by a gap of 12 feet. They are illuminated with a subtle lighting strip below the top of the chalk tray. The wall is fabricated from a series of 1' by 4' and 2' by 4' slabs of slate attached to a concrete block wall that supports them from behind. The slabs are fixed by custom-designed stainless steel anchors—no mortar is involved. Next to the chalkboard walls is a slate podium, approximately 6' square and raised 12" off the ground.

There are inscriptions incised on each side of the Chalkboard and on the podium. These inscriptions were selected by Charlottesville high school students, who were given the opportunity to vote on which quotes were most meaningful to them. The permanent inscription on one side of the Chalkboard is from the First Amendment to the Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

On the opposite side is a quote from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall:

Above all else, the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, its ideas, its' subject matter, or its content. To permit the continued building of our politics and culture, and to assure self-fulfillment for each individual, our people are guaranteed the right to express any thought, free from government censorship.



Views of Chalkboard from plaza

And on the podium is a quote from John Milton:

*Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue
freely according to conscience, above all liberties.*

The Chalkboard is oriented in an east-west direction on the central axis of the Mall, so that people walk by one side or the other when traversing the space. People passing in and out of City Hall, the Visitor Center, Transit Center, or simply cutting through the public space, pass directly by the Chalkboard. Similarly, when there are events at the Charlottesville Pavilion, hundreds of people queue up



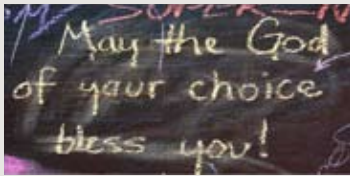
Diagram of Chalkboard location in plaza

in the square. There, they have the opportunity to read or write on the Chalkboard as they pass by. According to local residents, during the warmer months the plaza is jammed with people.

USE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHALKBOARD

When the Chalkboard was first planned, the TJC assumed that they would maintain it by providing chalk and cleaning it off once a week. From the outset, however, the use of the Chalkboard has been so heavy and consistent that it is cleaned at least twice a week, and usually fills up within 4 to 6 hours of each cleaning. Observing the use of the Chalkboard over several days, the site visit team noticed its magnetic effect on passersby who stop to read what is written and often add their own messages. Every inch of both sides of the board was covered during the entire site visit, despite the fact that it had been cleaned at least once.

In terms of content, there is some obscenity and profanity on the board, as well as the predictable teen chat, but there are also comments about current political issues and more deeply felt human emotions, as well as drawings with a wide range of artistic merit. No erasers are provided and we saw no evidence that users had removed remarks. Interviewees report that users occasionally remove profanities and foul language, but that more often, a single line is drawn through a phrase or statement, and rebuttals are



written nearby. The wall is reportedly used more heavily at times of national or local crisis, and at times when contentious issues are at the forefront of public awareness. A current “highway vs. parkway” debate continuously appears on the wall, and sentiments related to a recent shooting are expressed as well.

Young people, in particular, make frequent use of the Chalkboard. Charlottesville youth are reportedly impressed that their city has a public place where they are actually invited to express their opinions and where writing on a wall is not rejected as graffiti. Dahlia Lithwick, a journalist for *Slate* and *Newsweek*, feels the Chalkboard provides a kind of “face-to-face” interaction that counteracts the isolation felt by many in our society. Lithwick thinks of the Chalk-

board as a physical representation of what we are losing in daily civil conversation, and that this form of public expression makes people feel they are truly being heard. Ms. Lithwick also points out that nothing on the Chalkboard is truly anonymous—someone might always be observing what is being written.

Lance Hosey, a local architect who walks across the plaza on his way to and from work, agrees that the Chalkboard’s purpose extends beyond its functional aspects. He feels that “monument” is too static a term to adequately describe the Chalkboard, because the installation dynamically engages the community. Hosey sees the Chalkboard more as an art installation, whose surface has an ephemeral quality that adds to its beauty. Hosey also observes that different color palettes are used in different seasons, and that the way the light strikes the wall makes it a changing object. He considers it quite beautiful in all of its manifestations: when it is filled with writing, used for art, or relatively blank when it has been cleaned.

Katie Swenson, Former Director of the Charlottesville Community Design Center, and current Director of the Rose Fellowship Program of Enterprise Community Development, feels that the Chalkboard occupies a unique niche, “at the intersection of art and community.” In her experience, the Chalkboard is used “all the time,” and has become a modern expression of Charlottesville’s historic identity, providing a contemporary lens on issues of freedom of expression and the spirit of the Constitution.

Top: Passerby writing on Chalkboard
 Left bottom: Typical Chalkboard expression
 Right bottom: School group in front of Chalkboard mural

Periodically, non-profit groups are allowed to use the Chalkboard to announce events and programs. In these cases it is cleaned for their use, and the groups set up tables next to it. Among the groups that use the Chalkboard regularly are the Charlottesville Public Library and the adjacent Children’s Discovery Museum, which includes use of the Chalkboard in its programming for young children. The Chalkboard has also been included in educational programs as part of the study of First Amendment rights, and used by art programs such as the Summer Governor’s School Art Program, whose students drew a series of creative self-portraits on the wall. During the time of the site visit, a picture of Thomas Jefferson was drawn on the Chalkboard in anticipation of the TJC’s “Jefferson Muzzles” announcement.

Holly Edwards, an African-American City Council member, recalls that one of the most powerful uses of the Chalkboard occurred during a recent march in memory of a young African-American man who was shot. Members of the community joined together to walk to the Chalkboard, where they listened to speeches and wrote expressions of sadness and condolence on the wall. Edwards also noted that the Chalkboard and podium were the venue for a recent gathering marking the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education.

The Chalkboard has an extended reach through the website run by the TJC, which keeps a running record of photos of memorable



sayings, expressions, poems, quotes, and artwork. In this way, some of the most significant moments at the Chalkboard are preserved and further disseminated. The website also provides a space where people can write virtual chalkboard messages online. The TJC website is an important adjunct to the monument itself, adding breadth and an online presence. <http://www.tjcenter.org/monument/>

The Chalkboard is maintained mostly by volunteers who live or work nearby, and who regularly clean the Chalkboard and refill the chalk trays. On some occasions, school kids have been hired to do the work, but overall the TJC and interested citizens have managed to provide the level of maintenance required.

Left top: Young Chalkboard user with school group
 Right top: Chalkboard expression
 Bottom: Chalkboard expression
 Bottom right: Mural by school group

IMPACTS

The Chalkboard is the animating focal point of the East Plaza. The Chalkboard attracts people who are passing through this public space, and serves as a venue for political gatherings and speeches of all kinds. Architect Lance Hosey states that the Chalkboard has turned the square into the “free market of ideas” proposed by the framers of the Constitution, and has created Charlottesville’s own “speakers’ corner.”

The dialogue that occurred prior to the approval of the Chalkboard became an important aspect of the project. The public debate about the monument’s design served an educational and civil purpose, acquainting citizens with the concerns and values of their neighbors. Josh Wheeler of the Thomas Jefferson Center characterizes the public review process as a major dialogue on the nature of free speech. This process resonated with the political and social intent of the monument.



Chalkboard image to promote transit

FUTURE PLANS

Future plans for the Chalkboard do not involve any physical or design modifications. Rather, many feel that additional efforts are needed to elevate the level of discourse and the quality of artwork. Some suggest that the Chalkboard could be used to commission works of public art. As a venue for temporary art installations, the Chalkboard could display works of art that take longer to develop and might be kept on view for a period of time.

It is apparent to those involved that this next level of Chalkboard use will not happen on its own, but might be accomplished by adding a programming officer or advisory board. This entity could commission works of art and organize competitions on a regular and more formalized basis, as well as work to integrate the use of the Chalkboard into school curricula. The TJC intends to use Rudy Bruner Award monies to support this type of future programming

TJC hopes to create additional monuments to free expression elsewhere in the country. Their experience in Charlottesville has taught them that the competition and ensuing dialogue are as important in some ways as the monument itself. The TJC imagines that a monument might look quite different in each city, and should be tailored to the urban character, social issues, and cultural identity of each locale.



Assessing Project Success

SUCCESS IN MEETING PROJECT GOALS

1. To create a place that celebrates and promotes the First Amendment right to free expression in an active and challenging way.

The Chalkboard is an innovative approach to memorializing the right to free speech. The Chalkboard is interactive, unlike traditional monuments that foster passive observance of the First Amendment. The genius of the Chalkboard lies in its simple design and thoughtful location. These qualities attract the ongoing, spontaneous and unedited exercise of free expression.

2. To create a monument that is intellectually accessible to all people and that does not separate, segregate, or “self-select” a certain demographic of users.

The Chalkboard appears to meet this goal. Many different kinds of people use the Chalkboard, including people of all ages, races and ethnicities. It is particularly attractive to young people.

3. To create a dynamic, interactive and civic place of public discourse.

The Chalkboard is interactive and dynamic, and encourages and supports public discourse. One aspect of the monument that makes it so successful is its placement at the center of a public plaza. People gather in the plaza for public events, and it is traversed en route to and from the adjacent public buildings.

The level of public discourse, however, remains somewhat disappointing to some, who feel that the Chalkboard’s potential as a venue for more thoughtful dialogue or higher quality art has not been fully met. Ideas to address this issue include additional programming to elevate the level of chalkboard use.

4. To honor the intent of the First Amendment as a means of petitioning and challenging elected officials.

At the time of the site visit there were only a few comments on the Chalkboard relating to public or political issues. Residents report, however, that when issues of public concern are before



the City Council, or when issues of national concern emerge, the Chalkboard is covered with responses and opinions.

5. To enliven a formerly under-utilized area of downtown, and to anchor the downtown mall.

One of the most important functions of the Chalkboard is as a focal point in an otherwise stark public plaza. The Chalkboard and podium are the functional center of that space. The monument is a meeting place and a venue for political and other social events, with the podium providing not only a platform for public speaking, but a space to sit and an area for children to draw. The installation has become a much-needed destination at the east end of the mall.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Committee felt that the Chalkboard has “uncorked” the desire for public expression, particularly on the part of young people who use it frequently, and that it has energized the plaza, creating a new venue for public gatherings. They felt that this latter function was equal in importance to the opportunity for individual written expression. They also felt it was important as a new idea that could be easily adapted in almost any city.

The Committee emphasized the importance of the community process and competition that resulted in the final design of the Chalkboard. They noted that the public dialogue, including the vociferous objections to the idea, raised important issues of concern to the town. They also felt that the community process could be of value in many American cities. 🐦

*Chalkboard expression
Right: Detail of Chalkboard bus mural*