

## Bridging Cultures: An Interview with Nancy Ann Coyne

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Artist, curator and visual anthropologist Nancy Ann Coyne recently created “Speaking of Home,” a public art and environmental design project charged with re-imagining the use and experience of the Twin Cities skyway system—the most expansive one in North America—beyond a utilitarian above-ground pedestrian thoroughfare. Three years in the making, the 150-ft. pilot project employed the busiest of Minneapolis’s seven-mile network, at the heart of the city’s financial and retail center, to create a site of contemplation and discussion on the diversity of Minnesota today and to explore the identity of place. Children in the public school system speak some 120 languages—an internationality one would usually associate with coastal cities such as New York or Los Angeles—so the skyway became an apt venue for bridging these disparate cultures. Coinciding with the state’s 150th anniversary, or sesquicentennial, “Speaking of Home” showcased the stories of 23 new Americans, as depicted through 13-by-10-ft. portraits printed on sheer white fabric, each pronouncing their countries of origin, with text panels of each subject’s definition of home—as well as the word for ‘home’ displayed in each native language—all along the corridors of the IDS/Macy’s Skyway. Although they came down in mid-November, we asked Coyne to discuss the lasting ramifications of the project.

**Heller: You were responsible for transforming one of Minneapolis’s signature skyways into a temporary work of public art, for the first time in the city’s history. Along with Twin Cities firms HartungKemp (graphic design) and Larsen (environmental design), you made the most prominent of these utilitarian walkways into a 150-ft. journey into a celebration of Minnesota’s expanding immigrant population. How did this come about?**

**Coyne:** Growing up near New York City and never having experienced a skyway system, I was intrigued by their futuristic appeal—like a Fritz Lang film, transporting pedestrians above street-level—as well as pervasiveness upon my arrival in the Twin Cities. I was further engaged that the seven miles of architecture provided pedestrians little other experience beyond a place to get from A to B: an institutionalized walkway connecting the public to either their workplace or a consumer experience.

Later, in 2005, some years after my arrival—and imagining in my own mind how they could be redesigned—I received an R+D grant from Forecast Public Art, a Twin Cities arts organization, to explore how one might use the skyway for public art. I remembered my own surprise when learning of the state’s diversity as represented by

the languages spoken by children in the public school system. So, I became increasingly interested in developing a project for the skyway that explored the idea of home for new Americans in relationship to the power of place and how affordable housing helps root new Americans as they begin their new life in the U.S. This led to an active partnership with the Twin Cities human service organization the Family Housing Fund on the project's development and implementation.

**Heller: What was the goal of taking semi-translucent photographs, printed on fabric, constructed from 23 larger-than-life portraits and family photographs, and putting them on display in such a well-traversed venue?**

**Coyne:** The goal was twofold: the project's materials and overall design endeavored to create a place for new Americans' voices and histories—often overlooked and marginalized in greater society—at the central node of power, namely, the center of Minneapolis's commerce and retail. The latter challenge surrounded how to humanize a utilitarian space and expand how audiences interpreted it.

I chose to construct the project using photographs printed on scrim fabric through dye-sublimation printing (thank you, Portland Color). This design choice enabled me to reference the dynamic character of the city's public history. Seen from the street level, the images appear—based on daylight and the time of the day—either opaque, as single histories or due to their translucency, merge with each other, as representing a shared identity of a city. In addition, its design enabled the project to cast the audience, both at the street and skyway level, as part of the piece, alluding to the ever-evolving story of immigration in American society, whether four generation ago or now.

Twenty-three citizens participated and shared their family photographs from their country of origin, their personal artifacts of memory and culture, for the project.

**Heller: You say that the project enabled skyway users to experience the city and its citizens through its newcomers' eyes as the faces gaze out over the city while behind them a constant parade of skyway pedestrians intermingle with each. What is the single most important result of this display? Was there a consequence that you hoped for or didn't know you would achieve?**

**Coyne:** Well, in terms of urban design, skyways, in their national context, have often, in recent years, been criticized by urban planners and public space advocates as 1960s urban planning gone awry. Critics say skyways systems are too sterile and restrictive and have transformed cities into places to pass through, not live in. But the reality is, it is too costly and impractical to dismantle them. In Minneapolis, the skyway system was established in 1962, however, they remain fully underutilized beyond their use for transportation. The hope with "Speaking of Home," it provides an innovative model in which to rethink how cities and urban planners might expand and mine their use for temporary public art and civic design projects.

From the perspective of social justice, its design symbolically inverted the relationship between the city's native-born citizens and more recent arrivals here, as it situates the immigrants as stationary onlookers, as the locals pass by and move through the city in transit. During its entire history, Minnesota has been home to a substantial immigrant population and has served as a safe haven for refugees. Today, the United State's largest Somali and Hmong population lives in Minnesota. However, although Minnesota is a gateway state, historically, recent immigrants continue to face overt and subtle discrimination. The hope is to sensitize the general population to both their own immigrant roots and the difficulties new immigrants face today.

**Heller: Did you meet with any resistance—political or otherwise—in making this happen?**

**Coyne:** The use of the skyway had to be vetted by four city entities and the building management; skyways in Minneapolis are privately owned but city-governed. So there were multiple layers of approval. I wouldn't say there was direct resistance but as the skyway was being used for the first time, there were questions surrounding precedent being set. In the latter part of the project's development, I requested to allow text to be installed on the outside of the bridge but since it was not in the initial design that had been approved, the request was denied. Another issue arose due to the security issues surrounding the Republic National Convention. Although the project's design had been—months before—pre-approved, at the 11th hour the building management requested the redesign of a key design element. Two weeks before the install! So, there was a bit of rolling with the punches. But by and large there was an openness to the idea.

**Heller: So, what has been the popular response?**

**Coyne:** When I was on-site documenting or surveying the piece, people would often come up to me and inquire about it, talk about what it means to them, and then thank me. We also conducted an audience survey through which to develop an impact study for evaluation purposes. This will be an important tool to really gauge the popular response.

However, I did get two calls from people: one nerved by what he interpreted as my obvious “pro-immigrant agenda,” and the other, an Ethiopian immigrant who didn't believe I was representing her culture properly because the subjects were not wearing traditional cultural dress and showed two women in tank tops and in an embrace.

**Heller: What does “Speaking of Home” say about public art installations? Is there a broader message or lesson that goes beyond this initial event, which has been?**

**Coyne:** Public art is a broad field that runs the gamut from the monumental bronze memorial and other plop art to more interpretive or interactive pieces that emotionally affect audiences while broadening the experience of the built environment—such as Maya Lin or Krzysztof Wodiczko's work. “Speaking of Home” was an insertion, an intervention, into what otherwise is a purely retail/office environment designed for work and consumption. As a colleague pointed out, the project unfolded like a thought process in space.

American cities and towns are increasingly interested in creating places that imbue a sense of shared identity and public history or create an experience for its citizens. The broader message or question: in what ways can public art and environmental design transform civic, utilitarian architecture and built environments into places of meaning, intimacy and emotional connection for the public through the

**Heller: This installation coincided with a symposium on democracy and public art organized by the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. Can a project of this dimension effectively raise the consciousness of passersby? Or is it more or less wallpaper in the scheme of mass education?**

**Coyne:** Due to the project's installation in a retail environment, there are obvious challenges to the question of effectiveness. Certainly, there is also the pitfall of a piece being viewed as wallpaper—or an act of didactic tokenism. But based on site interviewing, both long-time residents and newcomers expressed how it made an imprint on their thinking and facilitated a better understanding of and connection to the Twin Cities as a place and the identity of its residents.

I think the key is to design an experience that draws audiences in by creating an opportunity for emotional connections—in this case, through personal photographs and thoughts—in a prototypical public space. It will be interesting to see and hear how the public responds to, experiences and perceives the skyways now that the artwork is de-installed.

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.