



Watershed Artist-in-Residence Program History

2024



Capitol Region Watershed District Artist-in-Residence Program History

Saint Paul, Minnesota

Cover image: CRWD's lobby with the Mississippi River of Iron (2018) from artist Tamsie Ringler by Corey Gaffer Photography.



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1 Launching Watershed Districts Artist-in-Residence

The Watershed Districts Artist-in-Residence (AiR) for Capitol Region Watershed District (CRWD) was launched in 2010 as a shared role with Ramsey Washington Metro Watershed District (RWMWD). The collaboration was initiated by the planning process for the Green Line Light Rail, formally called Central Corridor Light Rail Transit. The Green Line is an 11-mile route that connects the downtowns of Saint Paul and Minneapolis located along University Avenue in CRWD. Public Art Saint Paul, a local non-profit working to place artists in leading roles to shape public spaces, improve city systems, and deepen civic engagement facilitated this Watershed Artist-in-Residence model inspired by their City Artist-in-Residence model.

According to the [Central Corridor Art Plan](#), “The broad goal of this collaboration between the Watershed Districts and Public Art Saint Paul was to open a dialogue with water resource managers about how artists might make the invisible visible to achieve water quality improvement and to identify initiatives to engage artists.”

A lecture by artist Cliff Garten on “The Expressive Potential of the Watershed” kicked off this work. Subsequently, Public Art Saint Paul convened a workshop that engaged a broad cross-section of water quality experts, environmentalists, social scientists and artists. Artist and CRWD Board Manager Seitu Jones was a key advocate in creating the AiR position at CRWD.

1.1 First Watershed Artist-in-Residence, Christine Baeumler

Because of previous work on water related public art projects, University of Minnesota Art Department Professor Christine Baeumler was contracted as the Artist-in-Residence for both RWMWD and CRWD in 2010.

The over-arching intention was to find ways to integrate art into watershed district work. The Watershed AiR model would create an ever-expanding community of practice laying a foundation for engaging art and artists in water quality initiatives including stormwater infrastructure as well as education, outreach and community engagement efforts.

“Research shows that experiences we have an emotional response to—because they are novel, interesting, or pleasurable—are the things that we most remember, and which have the most potential to influence how we think and behave. Artistic experiences often evoke a sensory and emotional response and have the potential to help people see, hear, feel, and even taste a unique water challenge, source, or process that would have otherwise been intangible. This can leave a resonant impression that changes how people perceive or feel about water and water systems.”

US Water Alliance. (2018). *Advancing One Water Through Arts and Culture: A Blueprint for Action*.

One of the first things Baeumler did as Watershed AiR was to shadow staff at both watershed districts to learn about the scope of their activities. During the summer of 2010, she accompanied and observed the monitoring and permitting programs, and toured existing innovative technologies and potential sites for future projects. In both watershed districts she visited rain gardens that have been implemented in parking lots and sites for potential public/private partnerships. In addition to learning about the scope of the work, she was also introduced to the language used by hydrologists, engineers, monitoring staff and scientists. She took the confined space safety training session offered by CRWD which enabled her to enter the Trout Brook Interceptor stormwater pipe. To be able to enter the underground world of

stormwater infrastructure right beneath our feet, largely unseen and unheard, was a powerful experience.

1.2 Public Art Along the Green Line

In her role as AiR, Baeumler also participated in development of the Central Corridor Public Art Plan (2013). The project partners recognized the opportunity for public art that this large-scale transit project running through the urban core of the Twin Cities presented. Public Art Saint Paul facilitated the planning effort led by Cliff Garten and Todd Bressi. Creating the Central Corridor Art Plan brought together planners, city officials from both Saint Paul and Minneapolis, CRWD staff, and artists to create a vision and framework for the Central Corridor that was intended as a living plan for creative engagement related to watershed management. Baeumler’s participation in this initiative was a valuable introduction to the issues and complexities of integrating art into stormwater management projects. During the early years of the residency, Baeumler also worked with RWMWD and KidZibits to create an interactive cistern for the Maplewood Mall stormwater project (2012). From these initial experiences, Baeumler produced the *Language of Water Art Plan* (2012), a guiding document outlining ways in which art could be integrated into the fabric of the watershed.

An initial CRWD project was to incorporate art into the rain gardens and stormwater planters adjacent to the Green Line (previously known as Central Corridor) on University Avenue in Saint Paul. The original stormwater planters and rain gardens were designed for function but lacked an aesthetic dimension. The galvanized steel railings dominated the first stormwater planter, distracting the viewer from the beauty of the vegetation. This issue became an opportunity for artistic intervention. Based on Ms. Baeumler’s recommendation, CRWD hired local metal artist, Lisa Elias, to design and fabricate new artistic railings that evoke the movement of water and falling water drops. These sites were further enhanced with decorative grates, Kasota stone benches and interpretative signage designed by Jim Roe establishing places of rest and learning along the busy transportation corridor. This was an early shift to transform an infrastructure feature into an aesthetic and informational site and became the model for integrating art into our work.



Above photos: Artistic stormwater planter railings by Lisa Elias (right) with elements of water drops.

2 The Hydrosocial (2012–2013)

In 2012, Baeumler received a Bush Leadership grant which continued to partially fund the AiR position for several years. The University of Minnesota also granted her a year sabbatical from teaching, and an additional research semester to focus on her artistic practice. As part of her residency activities, Baeumler was a visiting artist at the University of the West of England in Bristol. Through this opportunity, she was in conversation with geographers, artists, and planners who were engaged in art as a catalyst for water quality. It was at the *Catchment Symposium* at the Create Center in Bristol, UK in 2013 that she was introduced to a range of professional and discipline backgrounds from around the UK with the specific aim of expanding cross-disciplinary understanding and awareness of water issues. At this conference, Baeumler first encountered the concept of the “hydrosocial,” the idea animated by the need to link hydrological and hydrosocial orientations with cultural approaches to address broader socio-ecological concerns. Clearly, art could provide that bridge between engineered and cultural solutions to water related projects and programs.

2.1 International Low Impact Development Symposium (2013)

This idea of creating a cross-disciplinary community of practice led to Baeumler’s involvement in the International Low Impact Development (LID) Symposium held at the Excel Energy Center in 2013. Baeumler was on the organizing committee for the conference and worked with the committee to foreground artists’ efforts in the realm of water quality initiatives. Through Bush Leadership funding, Baeumler was able to fund the prominent water quality infrastructure artist Buster Simpson as the keynote speaker to the conference.



Above photo: Artist team for the 2013 International Low Impact Design Conference.

2.2 Hydropolis Paddle Boat Tour (2013)

As part of the conference, Baeumler also created the Hydropolis paddle boat tour of Mississippi River in collaboration with artist Shanai Matteson. The goal of the Hydropolis tour was to bring together 250 LID conference attendees from many disciplines with artists for an evening of art activities and conversation along the Mississippi River. One of the main conversations centered around how art can be a bridge between hydrological and social solutions to water quality concerns. The idea of the Hydropolis was to imagine a city in which the concerns for our water was of the highest priority and how valuing water in this way might reshape our behavior individually and collectively. The arts featured the dance group Body Cartography, a River Song Sing-along led by artist Marcus Young and music by the band Dreamland Faces. Buster Simpson, keynote speaker for the LID Symposium also attended.



Above photo: Seitu Jones (center) and guests at the Hydropolis Paddle Boat Tour in 2013.

3 The Bring the Frogs Back to Frogtown (2015–2017)

As AiR, Baeumler hoped to facilitate a longer-term community engaged project that would involve community and youth, while expanding engagement to a diverse audience. Partnering with local Frogtown community activist Patricia Ohmans of Frogtown Green, they initiated a project called *Bring the Frogs Back to Frogtown* at Hmongtown Marketplace in Saint Paul. Begun in 2015. Baeumler and Ohmans had a number of meetings with the owners of Hmongtown Marketplace, Toua and Nou, to imagine how the stormwater pond could be restored as a living ecosystem that could support frogs and other species. The team also collaborated to establish a booth at the Marketplace that could become a place for visitors to the Market to learn about water quality issues and the natural world which they would call FrogLab. In 2016, Baeumler and Ohmans secured a \$20,000 grant from the *Beautiful World Lee Family Foundation* to support the rental of a stall at Hmongtown Marketplace. Combining this grant with CRWD Partner Grant funds and a grant from the Awesome Foundation, they hired educator Chee Yang to be the FrogLab coordinator for two years (2015 and 2016) and organized the weekly events at FrogLab. Guest speakers were invited to present at the weekly FrogLab events. One important aspect of a cultural connection to

water quality issues was the Hmong community's interest in fishing. Kao Thao, Interpretive Naturalist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources visited FrogLab both summers and spoke about the connections between fishing and things residents can do to ensure better water quality.

Over the two-year period, the program, supervised by Ohmans also included consultant Emily Greger who wrote most of the FrogLab curriculum, now a naturalist for the Department of Natural Resources. Additional staff for FrogLab included Hans Bremhorst, an intern with Frogtown Green through the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) program, and Hannah Whitney (Frogtown Green program coordinator from 2015 to 2017).

The FrogLab team created a youth performance, Frog-a-Rimba, with a local elementary school that performed at Hmongtown Marketplace in the fall of 2015. The ecological restoration of the stormwater pond in front of Hmongtown Marketplace was begun with consultation with ecologist Fred Rozumalski, but that project is yet to be fully realized.



Above photo: Frog-a-Rimba youth performance at Hmongtown Marketplace in 2015.

4 Art and CRWD's New Office Building (2017-2019)

The relocation of CRWD's office provided an opportunity to reimagine how art could be integrated into the building and grounds of the new site. Baeumler became a member of the Outreach, Art, and Aesthetics (OAA) committee during the building design phase which included staff members Anna Eleria, Jessica Bromelkamp, Lindsay Schwantes, and Sarah Wein. As a committee, they identified major themes that art elements could convey at the new facility which are listed below.

4.1 CRWD OAA Committee Education and Outreach Goals and Themes:

CRWD seeks to create a watershed learning center at its new office in the Hamline-Midway neighborhood of Saint Paul that can help "Bring Water Back" into the consciousness of our community partners and residents. The education goals of the facility are to create a space to:

1. Invite community members and partner organizations to learn about our water resources and CRWD's efforts to protect, manage and improve them.
2. Educate visitors about stormwater runoff and its impact on the health of local lakes, wetlands and the Mississippi River
3. Reflect the communities' historic and current connections to water resources
4. Reflect and serve the community and its water values
5. Demonstrate best practices that utilize rainwater as a resource and help protect and improve water quality.
6. Provide resources, workshops and support to inspire and empower community members to adopt behaviors and implement best practices that protect and improve District water resources.
7. Create areas for visitors to engage, interact with and/or experience the facility's green infrastructure practices, greenspaces, watershed art, and other offerings.

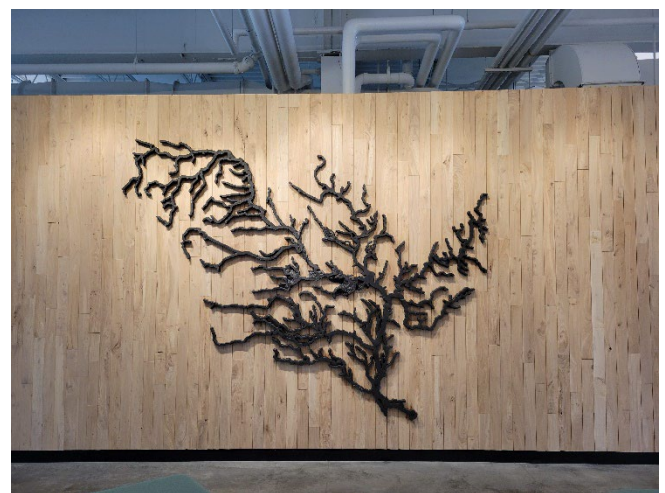
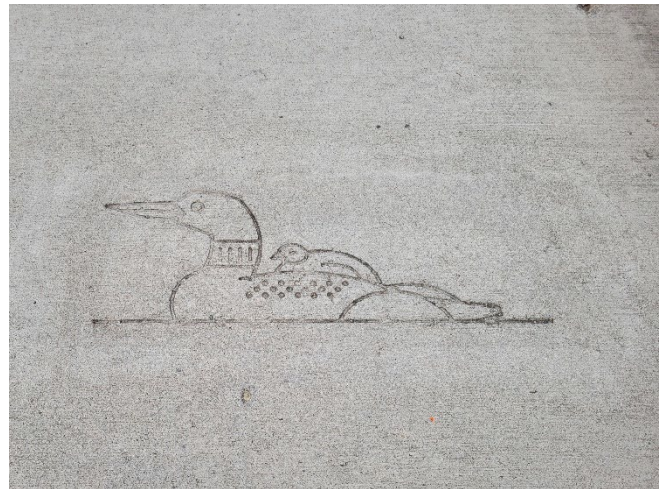
Major themes to convey via the new facility include:

- "Bring Water Back" – CRWD's 2010 Watershed Management Plan theme that applies to the physical restoration of water resources and raising public awareness of stormwater runoff and watershed management.
- "The science of hydrology" - Displaying and translating CRWD's monitoring data into aesthetically pleasing pieces or experiences that lead to a greater understanding of the District's work.
- "Conservation / Sustainability" - Demonstrating rainwater as a resource by capturing, storing and using it for irrigation and non-potable uses. Sustainable building and site design to reduce water, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. Water is vital to the flourishing of other species. Educating people on the importance of clean water for fish, birds, and macroinvertebrates.
- "Making invisible systems visible and/or audible" - (i.e., Trout Brook storm sewer) Draw connections between storm water and the bodies of water that people love and appreciate (lakes, Mississippi River).
- "We are all part of the solution" – Communicate residents' role in watershed protection and provide them with the information, resources, and skills to become watershed stewards
- "Technology & Urban Watershed Management" - Innovative stormwater management practices suitable for an urban brownfield site with an emphasis on green infrastructure practices
- "Diversity" - Honoring cultural connections to water throughout the District and contributions made to watershed protection efforts. Drawing connections between storm water and the bodies of water that people love and appreciate (lakes, Mississippi River).

Baeumler facilitated identification of artists whose work would reflect different aspects of CRWD's work and mission. With the recommendations of the OAA committee, CRWD commissioned four large artistic elements. Tamsie Ringler, created the *Mississippi River of Iron* showing the watershed of the Mississippi River. The creation of this art piece facilitated public art engagement during the District's 20th Anniversary celebration where partners and neighbors witnessed molten iron flow through the cast of the Mississippi River watershed. Duluth artist, David Bowen, was commissioned to create a kinetic sculpture, *tele-present water*, that highlights stormwater flows in the Trout Brook Interceptor. Ta-coumba T. Aitken created a painting, *Flow*, "... to bring insight to our known and unknown relationship with water." The painting reflects numerous figures of nature and community connected by an expanding swirling, ripple. The painting was etched onto a large glass wall to provide privacy. The team also worked closely with KidZibits to develop an interactive exhibit on the exterior of the building where visitors are invited to

manipulate the flow of water to a pipe or to a scene of nature including butterflies, native plants and their underground roots.

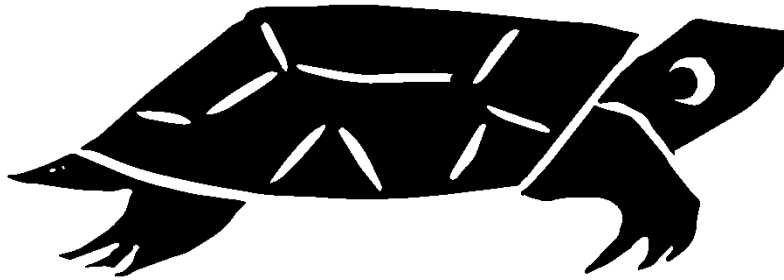
This is Folly, a graphic design firm collaborated with Baeumler and the OAA committee to develop a series of sidewalk stamps focusing on animals that live in or near water in the District, along with a Water Wildlife Exploration game. A Little Free Library with a green roof, designed and built by John Wenzel contains the game as well as books about water, nature and other topics relevant to the District's work on the corner of the property. Watershed AiR, Baeumler was instrumental in making connections to the artists behind each of these pieces and consulting through the projects from concept to realization.



Above photos, clockwise from top left: KidZibits interactive exhibit; This is Folly sidewalk stamps; Tamsie Ringler Mississippi River of Iron; and Ta-coumba T. Aitken etched glass wall.

5 Realizing the Full Possibilities of the Program

In 2020, plans began to come together for the vision of the next iteration of the Watershed AiR Program. This was kicked off through a ripple mapping exercise involving key staff, Board Manager, Seitu Jones, and Baemler. This exercise resulted in a set of Public Art Guiding Principles for the District. Baemler also suggested the District consider creating a document that describes the various ways CRWD may further our work with Art and Artists. The final product is Capitol Region Watershed District's [Field Guide for Working with Artists](#).



Above image: Turtle illustration by Julie Benda from CRWD's Field Guide for Working with Artists.

6 Artist-in-Residence Timeline

- 2009: Cliff Garten presented "Expressive Potential of the Watershed" Workshop day with CRWD, RWMWD, PASP and other colleagues
- 2010: CRWD and RWMWD launch the Watershed Districts Artist-in-Residence (AiR)
- 2012: RWMWD Maplewood Mall Public Art Projects
Language of Water Art Plan
Baemler awarded Bush Leadership Grant
- 2013: Completion of the Central Corridor Art Plan
International Low Impact Development Symposium & Hydrosocial
- 2015-2017: Bring the Frogs back to Frogtown and Frog Lab initiatives
- 2017-2019: Integrating Art into CRWD's new office space
- 2020: CRWD Public Art Guiding Principles
- 2022: CRWD Field Guide for Working with Artists