



DOWNTOWN DIALOGUE

THE ART OF REBUILDING LOWER MANHATTAN

BY LIZ BERGER



Flying Animals, by artist Caitlin Hurd, on construction fence at 99 Washington Street

"The shapes arise!" Walt Whitman wrote. "Shapes of factories, arsenals, foundries, markets, shapes of the two-threaded tracks of railroads..." In poems written more than a century ago, Whitman celebrated New York City as he saw it: vivid, dynamic, a little mad, but always full of wonder.

Much has changed since Whitman's day, but New York is still wild and crazy and, as those of us who live or work Downtown know especially well, the shapes still arise.

Lower Manhattan is in the middle of one of the greatest periods of public and private construction the nation has ever seen, with more than \$30 billion worth of construction on 190 sites south of Canal Street.

It's a long-term blessing that at times seems like a short-term nightmare. For the past 8½ years, Lower Manhattan has endured construction inconvenience on an epic scale. It has been tough for commercial tenants, small businesses and residents alike.

That's why the Downtown Alliance launched a groundbreaking public art program in 2007 called Re:Construction. Since it began, this initiative has been transforming Downtown construction sites into canvases for innovative public design and architecture, a job that's essential for mitigating the inconvenience.

So much of what we've done Downtown since 9/11 has been aimed at making a bad thing less bad, but this is an effort to put some whimsy and cheer back into the daily lives of the 350,000 people who live and work here.

With a \$1.5 million grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the program has already installed temporary artworks at 10 sites: Fulton Transit Center (John Street at Broadway); Fulton Street reconstruction (between Broadway and Nassau); Fulton Transit Center (Broadway between Ann and John streets); Goldman Sachs headquarters (200 West Street); AIG building (175 Water Street); street reconstruction at Houston and Broadway; Louise Nevelson Plaza (Maiden Lane and William Street); Hudson River Park; 50 Trinity Place and 99 Washington Street. By the end of January, we will have installed five more projects.

Adding a public art component to our civic improvement and economic development efforts creates a more welcoming environment, helps beautify our streets, points the way around construction sites for pedestrians and increases foot-traffic and economic activity in the neighborhood. The works of art create places of cultural attraction, curiosity and anticipation. They generate excitement about Downtown's rebuilding process.

Think of it as an intervention in the midst of an urban renewal.

Our mantra is that bright, exciting, easy-to-negotiate streetscapes make a place more attractive for living, working, visiting and doing business. They also make a place safer—because fewer people find themselves stepping into traffic-packed streets to avoid confusion or obstruction.

We plan—in all—to install about 30 public art projects over three years. So let the shapes arise! We think Walt Whitman would be proud of what's happening in this corner of "Mannahatta"!

—Liz Berger is President of the Downtown Alliance