Houston Arts Alliance (HAA), through its Civic Art + Design department, administers the process of acquiring and conserving artworks for the City of Houston Art Collection.

HAA accomplishes this by entering into contracts with the Mayor’s Office of Cultural Affairs, affiliated local government corporations, and corporations. Civic art projects thus constitute a collaboration between HAA and City of Houston departments and corporate entities.

Funding for civic art comes primarily from the 1.75% civic art allocation included in the budgets of City of Houston Capital Improvement Program projects for vertical construction. A City department may also elect to allocate funds to a civic art project over and above the mandated 1.75%.

HAA does not control the City’s civic art funds. The funds are held by the City Finance Department until a City department decides to expend them. At that time, the relevant department contracts with HAA to acquire an artwork, either directly or through a commission process.

After HAA has entered into a civic art contract, it works closely with the staff of the City department or a local government corporation to determine the parameters of the project, including physical size, budget, location, timeline, etc.. This process culminates in a Letter of Authorization issued by the department permitting HAA to work on the project. HAA staff presents the proposed project to the Civic Art Committee, a standing committee of the HAA Board. The process for selecting artists for civic art projects is this:

At the start of every public art project, Civic Art + Design staff works with the project Client to determine the timeline and process for artist selection. Typically, a publicized open call is issued. The call may be a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) or a Request for Proposals (RFP). For projects with larger budgets and longer timelines, the preferred method for artist selection is often a thorough two-step process in which an RFQ is followed by an RFP issued only to the project finalists. In an RFQ, eligible artists and artist teams apply with qualifications such as a resume or CV, a letter of intent, and examples of past artwork to be considered for a commission. In an RFP, artists apply with project-specific proposals as well as other supportive documentation. For City of Houston projects, panels consisting of artists, arts professionals, City department representatives, and sometimes community members and architects are assembled to review all of the project applications and recommend artist(s) to be selected for the project.

Before the start of each calendar year, the Civic Art Committee and the HAA staff work through a panel process to develop a list of artists to be considered for new projects with fast-tracked timelines. Names for this Houston Arts Alliance Artist Roster are solicited through an open call Request for Qualifications and direct invitation. The Civic Art Committee and HAA Board must approve this annual Artist Roster. At any time, artists not on this Roster may be considered for commission through open call, depending on the nature of the project as determined by the Client in partnership with HAA (as noted above). Program details for annual Artist Roster are released annually.

All Requests for Qualifications and Proposals are written in alliance with Public Art Network best practices and advertised in appropriate outlets.

Recent civic art commissions in Houston that have taken multiple years include such monumental works as Wings Over Water by Joe O’Connell and Creative Machines at the George R. Brown Convention Center, Radiant Fountains by Dennis Oppenheim at Bush Intercontinental Airport, and Bert Long’s
ART/LIFE, at Looscan Branch Library. Commissioning or acquiring civic art is a lengthy process, requiring many reviews and checkpoints. The process may be especially lengthy when the artwork is to be integrated into a new facility, as construction budgets and calendars are subject to change. In short, realizing a civic art project can take months or years.