



Photo of a pin oak (*Quercus palustris*) growing next to a modern building. Photo courtesy of the [Tree Love](#) exhibit by Matthew López-Jensen, a 2017 NaturePLACE artist.

USDA Forest Service and Partners

Bridging Art, Science, and Community Forestry

By Julie Capito-Hernández, Lindsay K. Campbell, Erika Svendsen, and David Maddox

NaturePLACE Collaborative Arts Program: An Art-Science-Practice Collaboration Program

NaturePLACE Collaborative Arts Program, formerly known as the Urban Field Station Collaborative Arts Program, is a virtual, place-based artist residency program hosted by the USDA Forest Service in partnership with [The Nature of Cities](#). The program aims to foster collaborations between land managers, artists, and scientists, cross-cut disciplinary approaches to **PLACE, LANDSCAPES, ARTS, CREATIVITY, and ECOLOGIES**, and curate events and public programs that mix science and art into public conversations.

A key element of the program is that it is not a commission for work, but a call to engage in the relationship-building process between practitioners, scientists, and artists. By focusing on the process, pressure to create a product is alleviated and artists can focus on co-production and exploration of novel ideas to address the problems at hand. Since 2016, the program has been facilitating collaborations across the globe with six cohorts, and plans to launch a seventh cohort in summer 2025.

To be successful and sustainable, our collective work in urban and community forests needs the understanding, care, and consideration of community members. However, community engagement can be a challenge with the traditional strategies that we have in our toolbox as scientists and practitioners. We have found that collaboration with artists can help to co-create a new bridge to communities.

Artists can be thought-partners, translators, creators, and unifiers—gathering communities about our urban forests in celebration, fun, and awe. Collaborations provide an opportunity to explore creative ways to connect with the public and try new storytelling methods to effectively reach a variety of audiences. Additionally, artists help us to visualize the many ways that stewardship can impact the urban environment and through that deepen local ecological knowledge and our relationship to the land.

This article highlights ways of integrating art and artists into our work as urban and community foresters. Through four examples of collaborations fostered through the [NaturePLACE Collaborative Arts Program](#), we hope to spur new partnerships and ignite a conversation on how art-engaged approaches might strengthen our collective efforts. >>



Artist Nikki Lindt listening to the sounds beneath a forest.
Courtesy of Nikki Lindt, 2020-21 NaturePLACE artist.

Unlocking Underground Soundscapes of the Urban Forest

Walking through the urban landscape can be noisy: the sound of traffic, public transportation, people bustling through the streets. So much so, it may make the “natural” areas and elements of the built environment seem quiet. But, what might listening to nature be like? What might nature hear? And would hearing a tree or stream compel us, in new ways, to care for urban nature?

Artist **Nikki Lindt**, a member of the 2020-21 NaturePLACE cohort, gave us a look into what nature hears by bringing to the surface the underground sounds of the urban forest—and of the natural world more broadly—through her project [The Underground Sound Project](#).

The Underground Sound Project is a collection of subterranean acoustic recordings taken from various locations across New York City public park lands and

waters, as well as in rural Cherry Valley, New York. The project involved the collaboration and co-production of new knowledge with land managers and scientists across NYC while mixing creativity, imagination, science, and practice. This work was featured both virtually and as an in-person public soundwalk through Brooklyn’s Prospect Park—such a success that it was extended to provide more people the opportunity to experience the magical sounds of plants, water, soil, and human engagement in the urban environment.

Lindt’s work was later incorporated into the environmental education curriculum with NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, NYC Department of Environmental Protection, and other organizations. It also inspired new considerations as to how sounds from our urban environment might impact wildlife who share the urban forests.

Gathering Community for the Trees, Birds, and Bees

Trees, birds, and bees are three diverse groups of important and ubiquitous actors in our urban forests that provide many essential services for city inhabitants. Based in Springfield, Massachusetts, artist **Richard Johnson** has been participating in the NaturePLACE program since 2022, hosting community workshops around the birds, bees, and trees of his home city.

Johnson’s “Bee the Change” workshops have utilized art, such as mural making, as a bridge to engage community and teach the public about the importance of these fellow beings, such as the role of bees as pollinators. These workshops continued through 2024, and the relationships Johnson has fostered with scientists and practitioners of the USDA Forest Service and with local organizations like ReGreen Springfield will endure.

Tradition and Care in a Changing Environment

Invasive species and tree removal can be a heavy management burden for urban and community forestry programs. What if there are ways to use wood waste while helping to sustain traditional wood carving practices? **Nalu Andrade**, a 2022-23 NaturePLACE Artist in Residence based in Honolulu, Hawai’i, did just that.

Andrade hosted a series of workshops titled *Carving Out Our Future*, where participants spent one day of mālama ‘āina (caring for the land) followed by a day of kālai (carving) to make māna ‘ai, a traditional, Native Hawaiian baby dish for their first food, carved from the prolific and invasive strawberry guava tree (*Psidium cattleianum*). Taking place at restoration sites, Andrade’s workshops intertwined efforts to restore forests and traditional relationships amongst people and land.

As a result of this artist-science-practitioner collaboration, new connections have been made; these can sprout into long-term programming to both continue community stewardship of forests through the workshops and to help re-establish native, endangered hardwoods in the forests for future use in traditional carving. The State of Hawai’i Urban & Community Forestry Program created a [video highlighting Andrade’s work](#). >>



Nalu Andrade, a 2022 NaturePLACE artist, leading a carving workshop with youth. Image courtesy of David Maddox, The Nature of Cities.



A scene from the *Who Takes Care of NY?* exhibit, as attendees explore the Stewardship Maps of NYC. Photo courtesy Malcolm Pinckney, NYC Parks.

Labor and Love of Stewardship: Who Takes Care of New York?

Thousands of stewardship groups across the New York City metro area take care of the lands, water, trees, and people, laboring in love for the places they call home. In 2019, an in-person exhibit at the Queens Museum highlighted the stories, geographies, and impacts of diverse civic stewards across New York through art, maps, and storytelling. The in-person exhibit, [Who Takes Care of New York?](#), was then adapted to live virtually on The Nature of Cities website.

The exhibit combines science and data collected from the USDA Forest Service Stewardship Mapping and Assessment Project ([STEW-MAP](#)), which collected information on civic stewardship groups' organizational capacity, geographic territories, and social networks, with artists whose work aligns with the themes of stewardship and public engagement. This included NaturePLACE artists **Matthew López-Jensen** and **Julia**

Oldham as well as **Magali Duzant** and **Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow**. Through photography and imagination they interpret the work of caring for the places they live.

Art, science, and practitioner collaborations are not new; they persist over time. We see art collaborations as essential to broadening reach, sparking interest and innovation, and deepening our understanding of and inspiring stewardship action essential to successful urban and community forestry programs.

So, how do you initiate partnerships between yourselves and artists? As suggested by one of our agency partners, start by extending the invitation to individuals with a diverse set of expertise and experiences, then, gather in a park or forest, share food, and begin to tell stories, setting the stage for open conversations, and see what new ideas begin to unfold. 🌱



New USFS Resources



Forest Service releases Silvics of North American tree species as a searchable database for the first time: <https://research.fs.usda.gov/silvics>

Baltimore's [Camp Small](#) is the city's urban wood recycling center focused on Zero Waste. A video about the 5-acre wood yard tells its million dollar story.



The new [Oakland Urban Forest Plan](#) is a model that positions the city for success in maintaining and expanding its tree canopy cover for all city residents.



A new [School Tree Study](#) evaluates tree benefits and care in California, and now includes a completed policy report on Depaving Schools, and a StoryMap on transforming school grounds from gray to green.

A new article in Ecosphere on [Aligning urban forest management actions with urban sustainability goals](#) elevates the role of urban and community foresters.