

An aerial photograph of Cooley Landing Park, showing a building, a paved path, and a body of water. The background features a cityscape and mountains under a hazy sky.

East Palo Alto Heroes & Legends

at Cooley Landing Park



East Palo Alto
Community
Archive

DYSON  WOMACK

Public
Art
Plan

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Introduction

Cooley Landing, is a 9-acre peninsula located at the edge of San Francisco Bay in East Palo Alto. Once the site of Ohlone indigenous settlements, it later became home to the historic Runnymede Poultry Colony in the early 20th century and, ultimately, a landfill site in the 1960s before its recent transformation into a nature preserve. Today, Cooley Landing is emblematic of the longstanding resilience and vision of the community of East Palo Alto and is a place for gathering, nature, and reflection.

As the newest city in San Mateo County, East Palo Alto recently celebrated its 40th Anniversary. Rapid demographic changes have sparked real concern from residents that their contributions to the city's history and culture are being erased – the Black population in particular, has gone from being over 60% of the community when the City was founded to only 10% today. The Cooley Landing Public Art Commission invites artists to respond to this dynamic history, interpreting East Palo Alto's unique past, present, and future through a public art installation that will resonate with and celebrate the community's multifaceted identity.

The commissioned artist(s) will have the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with local residents to create a significant public art piece that speaks directly to the community's experiences, aspirations, and heritage. The project aims to highlight local voices from East Palo Alto, telling the history of the City by highlighting the contributions of its diverse leaders and stories. Artists will have the chance to lead interactive workshops, community meetings, and outreach sessions to understand the diverse perspectives that make East Palo Alto a vibrant and culturally rich community. This collaborative approach is founded on the significance of an inclusive creative process, where the community becomes a co-creator, embedding their stories, struggles, and hopes into the very fabric of the final artwork.



Image: A selection of the EPACA's online archive

Adding to the richness of this project is the partnership with the East Palo Alto Community Archive, an invaluable resource that preserves stories, artifacts, and oral histories from generations of residents. Artists can draw on this archive to deepen their understanding of East Palo Alto's journey and bring greater impact to their work. With access to archival materials and firsthand accounts, artists will be able to celebrate stories that are sometimes hidden or overlooked. This is more than just an art project; it is an invitation to become part of East Palo Alto's ongoing story and contribute a new chapter to its vibrant cultural legacy.



Image: EPACA headquarters in East Palo Alto.

ABOUT THE EAST PALO ALTO COMMUNITY ARCHIVE (EPACA)

The mission of East Palo Alto Community Archive (EPACA) is to collect, share, promote, celebrate, and preserve the unique history of the East Palo Alto community for future generations. East Palo Alto is an inclusive, welcoming, connected, multilingual, multicultural community where residents learn about the past and collectively reimagine the future of the city. The EPACA seeks to ensure the history of East Palo Alto is a source of inspiration and a means of future development for the community.



Opportunity

Cooley Landing in East Palo Alto presents a unique opportunity for public art to tell the story of the grassroots community leaders who founded and developed the City of East Palo Alto. East Palo Alto’s efforts to self-empower and attain equitable access to resources are beginning to pay off in many ways. Yet, many of the people who directly led this work – Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Black people – are not recognized or celebrated publicly in the City. The proposed public art commission will begin to tell these stories, reflecting specifically on the history of success in the community.

Too often, the stories that are told about East Palo Alto are told through the mainstream media’s lens of trauma and perceived deficiencies, rarely recognizing the various forms of wealth the community has always possessed. By telling these stories at Cooley Landing, we expect to provide a sense of recognition and pride in spaces that are directly connected to East Palo Alto. By virtue of the way that the proposed art project invites participation across identities and fosters community, we seek to build power through solidarity and equity.



Images Left image is a community mural at Bloomhouse in East Palo Alto by Brandan “BMike” Odums. Top right Leilah Babirye, “Agali Awamu (Togetherness)” 2022. Bottom right “Leaders and Legends” at Smith Playground in Philadelphia, PA, 2022.



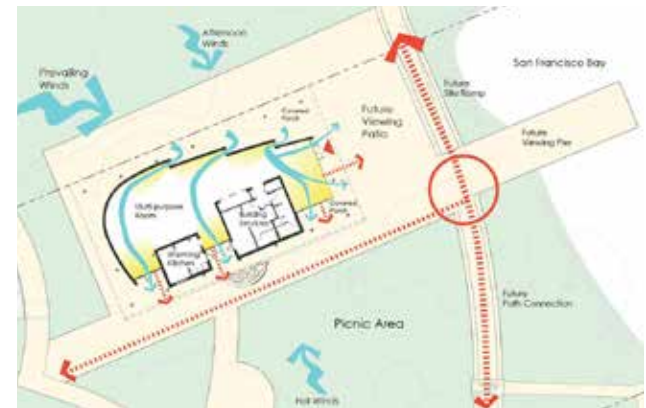
Cooley Landing Park, situated on the San Francisco Bay Trail adjacent to the MROSD-owned Ravenswood Open Space Preserve at one end of the planned Bay to Sea trail, serves as an accessible open space that already engages and inspires many visitors of diverse backgrounds.

Cooley Landing Education Center
Walking Trails
Outdoor picnic area and amphitheater

A walking trail runs along its length, and the site features the newly built Cooley Landing Education Center, a 3,900-square-foot community building used for a variety of local and regional workshops and education activities.

The landscape is calm and expansive, inviting various art opportunities, from sculptural to more integrated pieces that complement the natural environment. With its blend of open space and architectural elements, Cooley Landing is a versatile site for artwork.

The Artist or Artist Team selected for the Cooley Landing project will be encouraged to explore a variety of approaches, from interactive installations woven into the walking trail to sculptural works that can act as focal points within the landscape. Materiality and form can be explored in a way that harmonizes with the peninsula's natural surroundings, with an emphasis on durability and environmental sensitivity. The Artist or Artist Team will work collaboratively with the project team and the community, using insights from residents to shape how the art engages people on-site. One primary goal of the commission will be to support ownership and belonging at Cooley Landing by creating inclusive outdoor spaces that reflect the perspectives of BIPOC and other historically underrepresented communities.



Plan view of the Cooley Landing Education Center and surrounding grounds. Red lines indicate the future path for connection with the Bay to Sea trail.



East Palo Alto Community Archive

To inform the artwork's conceptual and aesthetic foundation, artists will have access to the East Palo Alto Community Archive, which houses invaluable historical and cultural resources. This research phase, combined with a robust community engagement plan, will guide the design and development of the final artwork(s) to ensure that it reflects and represents the community's heritage and aspirations.

Through thoughtful design, the artwork should drive meaningful engagement, elevating Cooley Landing as an accessible and inclusive public space that celebrates and honors the diverse voices within East Palo Alto.



Images courtesy of the East Palo Alto Community Archive



Stakeholders

PROJECT TEAM

The project team comprises the art consultant and the East Palo Alto Community Archive (EPACA) leadership and staff. The project team will manage all elements of the public art commission from the call for artists to the implementation of the artwork at Cooley Landing.

COMMUNITY PUBLIC ART COMMITTEE (CPAC)

The CPAC is a group of East Palo Alto residents and stakeholders selected by the EPACA. The committee will act as an art selection committee for the art opportunity. The group will work with the project team to select the Artist or Artist Team for the art commission. Once selected the group will support the proposal development by providing input and direction on the proposed public artwork.

COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL (CAC)

Selected by the EPACA, this larger group of community stakeholders will advise, support, and engage in the community engagement component of the artwork development. They will provide leadership and support through the development of the proposed artwork.

ARTIST OR ARTIST TEAM

The Artist or Artist Team awarded the public art commission at Cooley Landing will facilitate engagement, integrate community input, and lead the design process.

Image: Bloomhouse community mural
"Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow" in East Palo Alto





Approach

The following framework articulates the method by which this plan will be executed and evaluated.

PROGRESS

- Deepen the reach of the commission opportunity within local and regional communities utilizing diverse and approachable avenues of outreach.
- Support financial sustainability for working artists through funded investment in public art.
- Provide tangible resources for artists that encourage exploration and innovation within their practice.

ACCESS

- Understand the communities that will experience and encounter the commissioned public art on day one, and consider how the piece will develop with the community over time.
- Approach surrounding communities and stakeholders through trusted and known entities, providing the opportunity for direct engagement with the commissioned art, artists, and site.
- Support a robust community engagement process throughout the artwork development.

EQUITY

- Develop this commission opportunity to encourage responses from artists at various career stages working across a range of media.
- Utilize evaluation metrics that address bias based on subjective taste, institutionalized prejudices, and historical privilege.

REPRESENTATION

- Represent the communities, stakeholders, artists, and land on which we work with integrity and accountability.

Process

The open call Request for Qualifications (RFQ) will be open to Artists or Artist Teams to apply to the Cooley Landing Public Art Commission. Dyson & Womack, the art consultant, will lead the project team and selection panel (CPAC) through a process of selection outlined below.

01. OUTREACH

The art consultant will publicize the commission opportunity by distributing the RFQ and conducting curatorial research and outreach to recruit applications from qualified artists.

02. SHORT LIST

Following the application deadline, the art consultant will review all applicants and generate a shortlist of Artists or Artist Teams for further review.

03. EVALUATION

The shortlist of Artists or Artist Teams will be presented to the project team and the CPAC for review, scoring, and evaluation process.

04. AWARD

The project team and CPAC will meet to review evaluations and select the Artist or Artist Team through a process of consensus-building and dialogue.





Artistic Vision

The selected Artist or Artist Team will work with the Project Team, the CPAC and CAC, and the community to develop a public artwork for Cooley Landing that is reflective of and supported by the East Palo Alto community. The following characteristics represent the artistic vision for the artwork and the guiding principles for the selection and development process.

ARTISTIC QUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Designs should incorporate a high level of craftsmanship and artistic excellence. We will rely on a material understanding of artistic practices, the history of public art, and a culturally diverse definition of artistic excellence to evaluate artistic quality.

CONTEXT AND CONCEPT

Proposed artworks should be innovative, engaging, and compatible with the location in terms of scale and form. The proposed artworks should strive to be conceptually appealing to an audience diverse in age, background, and ethnicity. The proposal should exhibit originality while aligning with the commission opportunity, site, and community goals as defined further through the community engagement component.

VISIBILITY

The proposed artwork should have the potential to increase the visibility of public art in East Palo Alto, support opportunity and access, and drive civic engagement.