

Artist: Janet Echelman
Location: Greensboro, North Carolina, USA
Year: 2016
Researcher: Jessica Fiala

Janet Echelman's *Where We Met* floats above the Carolyn & Maurice LeBauer Park in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. Constructed of intricate netting, the sculpture is both a landmark and a meditation on interconnectivity. The work's qualities and dynamics shift with the time of day, revealing the sky above on a clear afternoon and serving as a colorful beacon when illuminated at night. The work delicately reveals the motion of the breeze, giving form to the frequently invisible forces of the natural world.

Emphasizing a relationship with nature that hinges on both reliance and responsibility, Echelman explains: "In this time we are living, I think we need voices of nurturance, harmonious coexistence, and interconnectedness." By providing a shifting, graceful contrast to the city's hard edges on a monumental scale, the work invites audiences to "think outside of our preconceptions about what our cities and structures are and can be." Concurrently, the sculpture's tethered form foregrounds "connectedness to one another and to our natural and built environment."

Although aesthetically ethereal, *Where We Met* is grounded in place and history, echoing physical relationships that provide fodder for reflection and conversation. While conducting research into the history of Greensboro, Echelman traced the location of textile mills along six railroad lines that converged in the city. These transportation lines not only helped the city develop an identity as a regional hub, they also carried disparate populations, bringing the city's diverse communities together. The sculpture provides an analogy for these relationships, described by Echelman as an "interwoven history, all knotted together," with these physical and social relationships reflected in the project's title, *Where We Met* (Carey, 2016).

Where We Met builds on history, yet the project also points toward the future, creating a new meeting point for the city's communities. As Greensboro continues to evolve, so, too, will the sculpture. As part of the project's regular maintenance schedule, *Where We Met* will change color approximately every five years. In so doing, the project notably blends permanence and ephemerality in public art. Yet this quality also brings the massive work to a personal level—a means for the city's residents to mark out their own phases of life as well as a method of remembering shared histories to come.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Echelman began her artistic career as a painter, yet while on a Fulbright lectureship in 1997 in Mahabalipuram, India, she faced a pivotal challenge. The date for her exhibition was fast approaching, but her paints had not arrived. Turning elsewhere for materials and inspiration, she connected with fishermen who she regularly watched on her walks along the beach. They shared netting materials and methods, which became the basis for Echelman to experiment in sculpture. From there, she expanded to learn about lacemaking, to learn how to engineer projects at the scale of buildings, and to begin to find ways for these sculptures to fly above public spaces.

This new form of public art required methods for testing safety, gauging the impact of weather, and modeling forms that could be fluid, yet secure. Echelman also needed strong and durable fibers that could be flexible enough to respond to extreme winds. Over the past two decades, these pursuits have

led Echelman to connect with partners with a range of expertise—architects, aeronautical and mechanical engineers, computer scientists, software developers, lighting designers, landscape architects, and fabricators. In 2012, she began a collaboration with Autodesk to develop custom software that could be used to design the sculptures and create simulations to test the impacts of variables such as gravity and wind. This cross-disciplinary collaboration is advancing capabilities for both public art and computer science, through the development of tools for soft body modeling. On the structural side, her works today are anchored by ultra high molecular weight polyethylene, a specially designed fiber that is flexible, yet 15 times stronger than steel—the same material used by NASA to tether the Mars Rover.

Each permanent project of Echelman's goes through an extended process of development, design and testing, and ultimately fabrication. To generate ideas with a deep connection to place, Echelman makes site visits, conducts interviews, researches the history and environment of the area, and studies how current residents and visitors interact with the place that her sculpture will live. Ideation through hand sketches coincides with 3D computer modeling to test effects like Greensboro's periodic ice storms. Collaborations with engineers help to refine the design and ensure that the work meets safety standards, with projects constructed to adhere to the building codes demanded of skyscrapers and to withstand category five hurricanes. Fabrication on machine looms is combined with hand splicing and knotting, with craft maintaining a central place throughout the process.

The seed for *Where We Met* began with a \$1 million grant from the Edward M. Armfield, Sr. Foundation to The Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro's Public Art Endowment to manage a public art project that would showcase Greensboro's and North Carolina's textile history. Echelman was invited to develop a proposal and her research led her to the railroads that served as arteries for the city's cultural life as well as the economic history of the textile industry.

Where We Met is a focal point within a larger \$10 million, 4-acre park project funded by a bequest to the Community Foundation from Carolyn LeBauer. The sculpture's site is a 17,000 square foot lawn that can accommodate up to 4,000 people and includes a performance stage.

After nearly two years of construction, LeBauer Park opened to the public during a weeklong series of celebrations, culminating in the lighting of *Where We Met* on the evening of August 14, 2016. Designing the project to renew itself through new colors, the current yellow/orange/blue scheme will be replaced in 2022 with blue hues, recalling the city's history of denim production.

ARTWORK EXCELLENCE

Where We Met embodies many contradictions: volume and porousness, advanced technologies and handmade craft, permanence and ephemerality. In these characteristics, it builds upon painstaking processes that Echelman and her collaborators have honed over the past two decades and is imbued with themes that have developed throughout her body of work. Her sculpture directs the eye to in-between spaces and connecting points. It has a deep relationship with place and yet is open enough for visitors to create their own meanings. The project gently calls attention to a larger relationship with the natural world while contributing a dynamic presence of its own to shared public space.

On the one hand, Echelman underscores the project's expansive characteristics, "This sculpture is physical proof that we humans are interconnected with each another and with our planet." Natural phenomena beyond human scale are made manifest in the project, as the sculpture ripples in the wind, casts shadows, and continually changes its appearance in different light and weather.

Additionally, *Where We Met* is also hyper local, as Echelman notes, “placing you in space and placing the city in geographic space.” The guiding lines that trace the city’s historic railroads physically orient the work and its visitors in relation to history and nearby landmarks and cities. Viewers following these lines can see the pathways that connect their location with a network of local and regional relationships. Echelman’s close partnership with the city during the park’s design phases helped to advance this embedded quality of the work, with the city altering the street grid to more fully align *Where We Met* and its home park within these lines of reference.

These simultaneously wide-reaching and personal qualities meet in the project’s cycles of renewal. As residents revisit the park year after year over the course of their lives, growing in their own journeys, the artwork, too, will change, its colors marking eras of the life of the city as well as the lives of its residents. Echelman emphasizes this individual aspect of the shared experience of the sculpture, “Each time the colors change, it’s an invitation to see the familiar in a new light...And over the years, I hope people will look back at the photos they’ve taken and be able to locate memories and phases of their lives by the colors of the sculpture” (Kane, 2021).

In creating a monumental artwork that evolves over time, Echelman is crafting a situation where the work can be both iconic and personal. She is also providing the field of public art with a chance to rethink assumptions surrounding permanence and ephemerality through a largescale project designed to center a changing world.

CONTEXT & ANALYSIS

When Echelman began developing *Where We Met*, she entered into a city in the midst of change. Downtown Greensboro had been on the decline since the early 2000s. Without a residential base, the city center was losing its vitality as department stores and businesses increasingly relocated to suburban communities. Simultaneously, employers were leaving the city. In 2019 Greensboro was home to only eight remaining Fortune 500 companies out of 25 present in the city just a decade earlier (Triad, 2019).

The city was also facing a long history of racial segregation, worsened by the struggling downtown and lack of pedestrian pathways. While overall segregation in the city has been on the decline, a 2019 report commissioned by the city documented an increase in racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty since 2010 (Matsuoka, 2019).

While the above challenges persist, development efforts have been underway over the past couple of decades. One key component, a four-mile greenway that will encircle the city, entered planning phases in 2009, with its first tranche completed in 2012. Efforts within the city center masterplan include the LeBauer Park project that houses *Where We Met*. In addition to the stage near the sculpture, the park features amenities such as food kiosks, a playground, a plaza with interactive fountains, ornamental gardens, and a sculptural wall designed for visitors with sensory processing disorders. The area surrounding the park includes a public library, children’s museum, cultural center, a neighboring park, and a civil rights museum a couple blocks away.

Entering into this sociocultural landscape, *Where We Met* brings with it the question of how the city will continue to forge a path where its many communities can move forward and enjoy the benefits of redevelopment together. Within the many layers of economic, social, and restorative work facing communities across the United States, public artworks such as *Where We Met* can provide invitations for communities to cultivate shared space. LeBauer Park has already become a nexus for activities ranging from recreation to gatherings calling for racial justice and police reform.

Relating anecdotes shared with her since the project's opening, Echelman describes the city's diverse communities coming together for events like movie nights, yoga, or a pickup game of frisbee underneath the sculpture, noting the potential for this space to provide room for forging connections: "If you hold a space that makes people want to spend time, they spend time together." This interconnectedness that honors each visitor's unique experience is a core element in Echelman's work, and she notes that the park's success, as well as the impact of her own project, hinge on the visitors who are making the place and the sculpture their own.

**Unless otherwise noted, quotations above are drawn from an artist interview with the project researcher conducted on May 20, 2021.*

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