

## PUBLIC ART

## Thinking Inside The Box with *BioCity*

Expanded Environment's latest installation piece creates a place where all species are welcome.

BY [SARAH DOUGLASS](#) • 1/26/2016 AT 8:00AM

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*BioCity* creates a space where all species are welcome.

IMAGE: [EXPANDED ENVIRONMENT](#)

**NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION EXPANDED ENVIRONMENT** is changing the conversation of conservation with its upcoming exhibition, *BioCity*, an immersive handcrafted installation on display at Lawndale Art Center. Ned Dodington, creator

of Expanded Environment, has dedicated his career to finding ways that modern cities can coexist with nature.

“There are animals that live in cities and normally you think of them as pests, but they can provide a lot of benefits,” says Dodington.

The idea for *BioCity* came a little more than a year ago, when, after lack of funding killed another experimental project, Dodington saw another opportunity. The installation is a 12-foot plywood structure comprised of nine stacked cubes, which serve as frames to display the part man-made, part animal-made artfully landscaped habitat. Over the course of six months, the installation will undergo three stages, each meant to attract a different species valuable to the community.

“Our mission is to illustrate, exhibit and discuss ways for improving the way humans live in the world, specifically how people live in relationship to all the other animals around us,” explained Dodington.

The idea of the stacked sculpture is that every box will be programmed for a different type of habitation. With every phase, each frame will gradually get its fill to reveal a different species and provide proof that urbanization can play host to biodiversity.

The first phase is the plywood structure in its bare state. Towards the end of February, the second phase will commence. With the help of Buchanan’s Native Plants, a nursery located in the Heights, plants will be installed allowing Expanded Environment, along with the audience, the opportunity to witness and study which species arrive and thrive.

“It’s good to imagine it in month four or five, where those frames will be, hopefully, filled with things like twigs, leaves, branches and other bits of wood to help the insect life take hold of the structure,” mused Dodington.

By choosing only native plants that are drought tolerant and healthy for the environment, *BioCity* sheds light on how simple it is to create an environment that's sustainable for native species. The plants were chosen with the intent of attracting three important species in particular: Butterflies, bees and Chimney Swifts.

“Building for insects, birds, butterflies and bats have been in my mind for a long time, but this is the first experiment into what that might look like,” says Dodington.

The exhibition is the start to an experimental project Expanded Environment plans to build on for the next several years. Using *BioCity* as a prototype, Expanded Environment plans to install Wi-Fi sensors to the structure with the goal of tracking animal behavior, as well as environmental factors such as humidity readings throughout the day. All collected information will be sent to the Expanded Environment's website, giving audiences an in-depth look into the progress long after their initial visit to *BioCity*.

“If this bio attracting device is successful, we can make multiple throughout the city and have a sort of relay of data to scientists so [we] can see how active and successful biodiversity is growing in certain areas,” says Dodington.

By taking the opposite stance of anti-urbanization, and utilizing an eclectic group of outlets to express Expanded Environment's mission, this movement has potential to change the future of biodiversity conservation by adding to, not limiting, urbanization.

“Since 2008, over half the global population lives in urban areas. This is the first time in human history that this is the case. And so, how we live in these cities is really interesting to me,” Dodington said. “I think using art as a vehicle for starting conversation is the best way to have public discussions.”

*Thru June 11. Free. Lawndale Art Center, 4912 Main St. 713-528-5858.*

[lawndaleartcenter.org](http://lawndaleartcenter.org)

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