

## Frequently Asked Questions

Here, in Artist and Designer **Nancy Ann Coyne**'s words, are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about *Speaking of Home*:

### **How did this project come about?**

**Coyne:** Growing up near New York City and never having experienced a skyway system, I was intrigued by their pervasiveness in the Twin Cities and their futuristic appeal, transporting pedestrians above street-level. I was further intrigued that the miles of architecture provided pedestrians little other experience beyond a place to get from A to B: an institutionalized walkway connecting the public to either their workplace or a consumer experience. The skyways are minimal and modernist in their form, with unadorned, expansive windows that invite, from the skyway level, the eyes and mind to wander over the city while in motion. From inside, it offers the perspective of the on-going theater of everyday American life.

### **Why did you focus the project on immigration and the concept of home?**

I remembered my own surprise when learning of the state's diversity as represented by the more than 120 languages spoken by children in the public school system. So, I became increasingly interested in developing a project for the skyway that explored the idea of home for new Americans in relationship to the power of place and how affordable housing helps root new Americans as they begin their new life in the United States. This led to an active partnership with the Twin Cities human service organization the Family Housing Fund on the development and implementation of the Minneapolis version of *Speaking of Home* – an important relationship that has continued with the St. Paul project.

### **What was the goal of including these 58 larger-than-life portraits and family photographs, and putting them on display in such a well-traversed venue?**

The goal is twofold: the project's materials and overall design endeavor to create a place for new Americans' voices and histories—often overlooked and marginalized in greater society—at the central node of power, namely, the center of the city's commerce and retail. The latter challenge surrounded how to humanize a utilitarian space and expand how audiences interpreted it. I chose to construct the project using photographs printed on scrim fabric through dye-sublimation printing. This design choice enabled me to reference the dynamic character of the city's public history.

Seen from the street level, the images appear—based on daylight and the time of the day—either opaque, as single histories or due to their translucency, merged with each other, as representing a shared identity of a city. In addition, its design enabled the project to cast the audience, both at the street and skyway level, as part of the piece, alluding to the ever-evolving story of immigration in American society, whether four generations ago or now. Fifty-eight individuals are participating in the St. Paul project. They have shared their family photographs from their countries of origin, their personal artifacts of memory and culture for the project.

**How do you determine how to combine image and text in your projects? How are the text signs made?**

For the past 20 years, my photographic projects have threaded text as another layer of narration. For *Speaking of Home*, I work with Larsen Design to develop the project's identity system and environmental design components. Excerpts from each collaborator's biography and meditations about home will be printed on translucent panels and mounted to the window frames. Each collaborator's word for home, in their native language, will be printed on a panel mounted overhead.

**How did you find your 58 collaborators, and how did you collect their photos and stories?**

I worked with human service and affordable housing agencies, as well as with the community at large to find and select collaborators. The images were selected based on their ability to convey emotion, cultural identity, a sense of home—or lack thereof. One of my criteria for selecting collaborators was that they represent a breadth of experiences, classes, education levels, and cultures. I was particularly interested in representing ethnic groups with a large presence in the Twin Cities, such as Hmong and Somali (the Twin Cities has the largest populations of these groups in the United States) and Tibetan (the second largest). Everyone has a story to tell and all of the people who joined in this project were excited to be collaborators. They seemed compelled to be a part of the project. For me, it was a wonderful, engaging experience to be invited into people's homes where they opened and shared their photographs and life stories.

**Have you meet with any resistance—political or otherwise—in making this happen?**

In Minneapolis the use of the skyway had to be vetted by four city entities and the building management; skyways in that city are privately owned but city-governed. In St. Paul, the opposite is true: the skyways are owned by the city. But in either case, there have been multiple layers of approval. I wouldn't say there has been direct resistance but as the skyway was being used for the first time in Minneapolis, there were questions surrounding precedent being set. Certainly with such a complicated project there have been some surprises along the way, but by and large there has been an openness to the idea.

**In Minneapolis, what was the popular response?**

When I was on-site documenting or surveying the piece, people would often come up to me and inquire about it, talk about what it means to them, and then thank me. We also conducted an audience survey through which to develop an impact study for evaluation purposes. This was an important tool to really gauge the popular response, and for St. Paul we will be expanding this research to develop a better understanding of the project's impact on both the range of participants as well as the downtown community.

**What does *Speaking of Home* say about public art installations?**

Public art is a broad field that runs the gamut from the monumental bronze memorial and other plop art to more interpretive or interactive pieces that emotionally affect audiences while broadening the experience of the built environment—such as Maya Lin or Krzysztof Wodiczko's work. *Speaking of Home* is an insertion, an intervention, into what otherwise is a purely retail/office environment designed for work and consumption. American cities and towns are increasingly interested in creating places that imbue a sense of shared identity and public history or create an experience for its citizens. The broader message or question raised is: in what ways can public art and environmental design transform civic, utilitarian

architecture and built environments into places of meaning, intimacy and emotional connection for the public?

Note: Portions of this text are excerpted from an interview with Nancy Ann Coyne by Steven Heller for *AIGA Voice*, December 9, 2008.