

Becoming a Hub for Community Connections and Creativity in Madison, Wisconsin



Photo credits: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Madison Team

Artists:

- **Robert Franklin (RobDz)**, Musician/Educator/Activist/Socialite, KBD Multimedia Group
- **Jenie Gao**, Artist, Creative Director
- **Hedi L. Rudd**, Deputy Director, South Madison Programs, Badger Rock Neighborhood Center
- **Additional Creative Collaboration Advisors** are listed here: <https://shopone.wpengine.com/current-projects/catalytic-projects-creative-collaboration-advisors/>

Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District:

- **Martye Griffin**, Director of Ecosystem Services
- **Catherine Harris**, Pollution Prevention Specialist
- **Kathy Lake**, Pollution Prevention Manager

Background

Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District has reliably protected public health and the environment through continuous innovation and use of the best available tools and techniques for almost a century. Like most utilities, increasing pressures on water resources, new sources of pollution, and threats such as climate change, as well as an increased call for public transparency, demand attention. The utility is embracing a One Water approach to continue fulfilling its mission into the future, which includes seeking solutions in the community. Issues like reducing salt, chemical and trash contamination, and lowering energy costs associated with water treatment all require public buy-in and cooperation. By engaging and empowering diverse water stewards, protecting water is something that individuals see themselves playing an active, important role in and lending expertise to. “Building relationships in the communities we serve helps build a collective vision for what should be and what is possible,” says Kathy Lake, Pollution Prevention Manager at the District.

When the District outgrew existing facilities and necessitated the construction of a new maintenance building in 2015, the historic building now known as “Shop One” became available for new uses. This building is being repurposed by the utility as an active community space to educate and connect water stewards.

To activate the Shop One space and engage communities in their service area, staff knew they had to try something new. They also recognized that creative approaches and methodologies were a critical tool for helping them solve today’s challenges and achieving their One Water goals. Initial research included participating in the Alliance for Artist Communities’ Emerging Programs Institute, visiting other treatment plants’ community spaces, and engaging with a senior interior architecture design class from the University of Wisconsin, Madison’s School of Human Ecology to envision how the space could be transformed. These activities and the US Water Alliance’s *Advancing One Water Through Arts and Culture* blueprint opened the District to the possibility of working with artists.

As Pollution Prevention Specialist Catherine Harris puts it, “engaging with artists and culture is a natural extension of our long tradition of innovation at the utility—of seeking the best tools available to address the situation at hand.” However, never having done this before, the District felt like they needed more support to move from this inspiration to a concrete plan. With support from Chief Engineer and Director Michael Mucha and seed funding from their operating budget, the District applied to the Accelerator to help catalyze first steps.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

In the fall of 2020, the District recruited nine Madison area artists and cultural leaders to serve as Creative Collaboration Advisors to help them think about the Shop One space and how to engage artists in their work. The Advisors’ charge was not to develop specific creative projects, but rather to help the utility create a vision and plan for creative programming and working with artists over the long term. The District identified Advisors through extensive community outreach and intentionally selected individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences. The group reflected a range of disciplines and communities: many had a background in community organizing or social justice work as a part of or in addition to their artistic practices. The District paid Advisors a stipend to meet 12 times over the course of nine months with utility representatives and a consultant who facilitated the process.

Since construction in 1958 (originally a pump house), the building now known as Shop One has served many functions for the District—from a laboratory to a mechanical shop. The next phase of this building is to serve as an educational space to interface with the community. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*



Artist Spotlight: Jenie Gao



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Our role was to help align the utility’s intentions with its impact.

Artistic Practice(s):

Jenie Gao is a contemporary artist specializing in public art, printmaking, social practice, and storytelling. Through her interdisciplinary work, Jenie advocates for fair pay and equity for artists, as well as building generative communities that work better for everyone.

Portfolio:

<https://jenie.org/>

Approach: Multiple Artists and Co-Designers

Advisors first co-created a set of values to guide the design process and the selection of projects and artists. They agreed that the process and future work should:

- **Center the Artist**—Value different perspectives and ways of knowing and create fair and respectful relationships with artist partners.
- **Co-Create with Communities**—Build meaningful and respectful relationships with communities that honor people and place.
- **Make the Invisible Visible**—Illuminate hidden systems of water stewardship, including those that have led to inequities and challenges today.

Throughout the 12 meetings, the Creative Collaboration Advisors team developed these recommendations for catalytic projects:

- **Artist/Educator Residency**—Supports an annual, year-long residence (www.onewatermadison.org/about-residency).
- **Creative Projects Process**—Offers a method for commissioning new works.
- **Participatory Community Engagement**—Provides outreach to build relationships.
- **Branding and Communications Project**—Builds awareness and creates a conversation between the District and surrounding communities.

Shop One Building at Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District during/after original construction in 1958. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*



Pilot Project: Shaping Shop One and Partnership Priorities

The Advisors created materials and processes for the Artist/Educator in Residence and for Catalytic Project Process commissions, as well as updated guidelines for the utility's ongoing Participatory Community Engagement. Their role, as artist Jenie Gao puts it, was "to help the utility avoid pitfalls and align their intentions with their impact." The utility posted the Artist/Educator Residency Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in mid-October 2021,¹ designed to "set clear expectations while creating space for creative autonomy and agency," according to Gao. The artists also helped the utility ensure that the compensation structure and amount aligned with the work expectations and that finalists were compensated for their work preparing full proposals—even if they weren't selected—recognizing the creative labor that goes into the process and the value for the utility of hearing different approaches.

The response to the RFQ was extraordinary in terms of the number (23), diversity, and quality of applicants. The wide range of artists submitting applications—filmmakers, textile artists, photographers, sound artists, muralists, and sculptors—also expanded the utility's imagination about the kinds of projects that they could do. After reviewing the proposals from four finalists, the utility selected tattoo artist and illustrator nipinet landsem as their first Artist/Educator in Residence in February 2022.² Advisors prioritized the Artist/Educator Residency as a starting point, because long-term engagement provides the opportunity for the utility to build capacity to work in a new way and for the artist/educator to become familiar with and involved in the utility's priorities and programs through multiple dimensions. The goals of this inaugural residency include helping the utility "develop the tools, practices, and processes needed to integrate artist collaborators into the District's workflow" and to "identify learnings and best practices to improve future residency opportunities."

The utility plans to continue launching catalytic projects per the recommendations collated in a final report,³ compiled as a product of the year-long Creative Collaboration Advisors process and their participation in the Arts Accelerator.

Artist Spotlight: nipinet landsem



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Through art, beauty, and celebrations of diversity and culture, this residency explores themes of water as a living part of the community and how diversity of experience informs each community member's personal connection to the water they use every day. I hope to get people talking, and that the community and the District both feel more secure in the potential for an ongoing relationship after my residency is over.

Artistic Practice(s):

nipinet is a local tattoo artist, illustrator, storyteller, and community educator in Madison. A descendant of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, they bring a rich heritage to their work as an Indigeneer Anishinaabe and Michif artist.

Portfolio:

<http://www.nedpines.com>

Lessons Learned

Ensure highly ethical engagement for arts partnerships.

Responses to the RFQ and residency structure validated the District's process of involving artists in the design from the beginning. "We had so much positive feedback from the applicants and the broader artistic community. People said it was highly ethical. That is 100 percent because we worked with artists," says Kathy. This outcome was the result of hard work from the utility and the Advisors, including being willing to stay in the relationship and work through tensions and challenges that came up along the way. Hedi Rudd, one of the artists, said midway through the process: "The artist advisory team holds values deeply rooted in social justice. We are doing our best to bring this to the water sector. Are they ready to hear the message we have to share?"

Lay a foundation for success.

The time that the utility spent building relationships and co-creating the process with artist partners on the front-end created the preconditions for a successful long-term arts and community engagement program. "We now have a process and blueprint that can sustain us for long-term, multi-year work. We have a pool of artists. We have tried to create a good reputation for the District in these spaces. We always knew that we were going to do Shop One, but now we've laid the groundwork for it to be well-received by the community. We've set ourselves up for success," says Martye Griffin, Director of Ecosystem Services at the utility. Jenie agrees, adding, "the utility wanted to do things right. We helped them build a process to make that happen."

Be open to the process and let it spark an internal culture shift.

Beyond the tangible outputs, engaging in this process shifted the perspective of District staff in unexpected ways, including making them aware of the deeper changes that the utility must make to conduct the deep community engagement work it has said it wants to do. "I'm realizing through this process that ensuring community-centered work means continuing to transform our structures on a much more profound level. To do these things long-term, the community must be part of the institution, but our current way of working is not always compatible. We need to dismantle systems of oppression from the inside out," says Martye.

Challenges and Tensions

Working at the speed of trust.

Utilities and artists have very different ways of thinking and working, and it takes time to learn each other's languages and build trust. There are also inherent power dynamics in relationships between institutions, artists, and community members that take intention and care to mitigate. Because the background of many of Advisors included community and social justice work, there was a heightened awareness of inequities and a commitment to ensure the process placed equity for both artists and communities at the center. This meant the process sometimes had to move more slowly than originally planned or desired, or even take a step back to move forward. Towards the end of the Accelerator, Martye noted that they realized "'moving at the speed of trust' is essential. And trust is something we need to take time to build." The outbreak of COVID-19 at the start of the process meant that all meetings had to take place virtually, which further complicated the relationship-building work. The Alliance's *Water Equity Taskforce: Insights for the Water Sector* report provides more information on how trust relates to water equity.⁴

Sparking innovation in traditional processes.

Utility processes across the country are often entrenched and bureaucratic, which can make working in new ways or with new partners difficult. Catherine, the project manager of the Madison Accelerator Team, noted that trying to work with artists to organize creative and community-focused projects can go against the grain of how the utility works. She says, "in trying to implement these ideas, we can frequently bump up against 'the way things are.' Some policies haven't been questioned for a long time, like requirements to participate as a vendor or our approval processes for new projects/procurements. This process is prompting a re-examination of how we do things that wouldn't have otherwise happened and has relevance beyond the Artist/Educator Residency. These are important conversations to have if we want to be more equitable and inclusive."

The Advisors' values established at the beginning of the process helped guide the utility in navigating these challenges. For example, when seeking to determine how to navigate insurance requirements for artists operating as independent contractors, the utility undertook extensive research to identify how to be fair to and inclusive of artists that may not have their own insurance. The utility also re-examined the intellectual property terms in its contracts to be equitable for artist partners.

Acoustic panels suspended from the ceiling in Shop One represent the Madison chain of lakes: Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, Kegonsa, and Wingra. Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District



Managing perceived risk.

Perceived risk can preemptively shut down creativity, experimentation, and innovation. Especially in a state like Wisconsin where the public sector is smaller than most states', utilities are cautious about doing anything that could be perceived as "risky" with public money. Even though the team was confident about the value of engaging the public and knew it needed to make the upfront investment in relationship building to do it well, not knowing the outcomes in advance pushed them to the edge of their comfort zone. The Madison team noted that the Accelerator was helpful in this regard. "The fact that the Alliance was contracting with the artists and had already established a blueprint for arts work allowed us to have a ready-made business case for what we were doing. That made it easy for leadership to say yes," explains Catherine. Utility staff also had the foresight and the support from utility leadership to build capacity in the utility's budget for catalytic projects before embarking on the process.

Shop One is an interactive space where communities and utilities engage around water. The goal of the space is to engage and empower water stewards. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*

Kathy points out that while engaging in work with artists may *feel* risky, *all* change involves risk. "Change is scary, but the more we can tell our story, the more other utilities will realize that they can do this, too. There are great benefits on the other side. Utilities know they need fresh ideas and new ways of working to address the challenges of water management today. The District's experience suggests that this is a risk worth taking."

Read the full compendium here: <http://uswateralliance.org/initiatives/water-arts-and-culture-accelerator>.

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Kathy Lake, Pollution Prevention Manager, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District



Notes

- 1 “Shop One Artist/Educator in Residence Overview,” Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District, 2021, accessed June 26, 2022, https://onewatermadison.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2021Call_ShopOneArtistResidency.pdf.
- 2 “2022 Artist/Educator in Residence: Meet the Artist—nipinet landsem,” Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District, 2022, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://onewatermadison.org/about-residency/artist-in-residence/>.
- 3 Creation In Common, LLC. *Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District: Shop One Catalytic Projects—Findings and Recommendations from Creative Collaborations Advisors*. (Creation In Common, LLC, 2021). <https://shopone.wpengin.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Shop-One-Catalytic-Project-Final-Report.pdf>.
- 4 US Water Alliance, *Water Equity Taskforce: Insights for the Water Sector* (US Water Alliance, 2021), <http://uswateralliance.org/sites/uswateralliance.org/files/FINAL%20Water%20Equity%20Taskforce%20Insights%20for%20the%20Water%20Sector.pdf>.



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