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Seven Days-Sister Cities Artist Exchange

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San Jose celebrates its close ties to Dublin and gets ready to host Sister City conference

August 1, 2012 - by Gary Singh



MATCHING OUTFITS: San Jose's sister-city art exchange with Yekaterinburg, Russia, included Robin Lasser's 'Camera Obscura Dress Tent.' 2011 C-print by Robin Lasser + Adrienne Pa

I am unfolding a glossy book titled *Seven Days—Sister Cities—Artist Exchange*, a high-quality product documenting a creative scheme that happened last year. Faculty artists from [San Jose State University](#) traveled to Yekaterinburg, Russia, one of San Jose's official sister cities, in order to photograph the landscape.

Likewise, two professional photographers from that city came to San Jose. The U.S. State Department sponsored the entire affair. A copy of this book exists in every single branch of the San Jose Public Library system, as well at offices in City Hall and its Russian equivalent. It is an amazing

volume to flip through.

In the book, Yekaterinburg City Councilmember Yevgeniy Porunov writes that the relationship between his city and San Jose, launched in 1992, is not just for politicians but also for artists, business representatives and everyday citizens: "I hope that the urban landscapes included in this book will pique the reader's interest in the other city's people and culture, while encouraging a fresh look at one's own home town." Amen.

I could not have written that any more succinctly. I usually avoid politicians, but when it comes to travel, I will be the first one to suggest that experiencing and writing about another locale helps one to contemplate one's native turf. If the two locales in question already have an established Sister City relationship, then another dimension emerges to the experience.

What's more, the timing here is key, because San Jose was just selected to host the Sister Cities International (SCI) 2014 Annual Conference. Held every year for more than five decades, the conference will return to California for the first time since 1998, even though the state has the greatest concentration of sister-city relationships in the United States.



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I say it's well deserved. San Jose, of course, has a much richer sister-city operation than many might realize. Twenty-six years ago, former San Jose Mayor Tom McEnery, along with Dublin Mayor Bertie Ahern, had a pint and launched the San Jose–Dublin relationship.

That scenario has now either directly facilitated or formed a symbolic backdrop to an entire generation of exchanges, whether it's high-tech companies moving into Ireland or some clown from San Jose's weekly paper writing about Dublin author J.S. Le Fanu, who pioneered lesbian vampire stories.

Besides Dublin and Yekaterinburg, San Jose is also sister cities with Okayama, Japan; San Jose, Costa Rica; Veracruz, Mexico; Tainan, Taiwan; and Pune, India. In many cases, artists are starting to participate even more. Folks behind the ZER01 Biennial, for instance, have already collaborated with their equivalents in Yekaterinburg on the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art.

Tim Quigley, president of the San Jose–Dublin Sister City Program, led the effort to bring the SCI 2014 conference to San Jose. Although he was in front, waving the flag, so to speak, an entire regional collaborative network of folks made the whole thing happen. Many Northern California cities, arts and education leaders as well as elected officials all provided human and logistical support.

Even better, a huge youth component just may emerge in the whole shebang, proving a mechanism for high-school-age kids to travel and participate in the sister-city program. All of the above convinced the powers that be in our nation's capital that San Jose was the right choice for 2014.

"It was a very innovative, typically Silicon Valley—you know, a chaos, creativity and collaboration sort of model—that just totally wowed the selection committee in Washington," said Quigley.

Robin Lasser, one of the SJSU faculty artists who went to Yekaterinburg, said it was one of best things she ever did. She'd recommend it for any artist at any stage in his or her career.

"To have the exchange, with some of us going over there, and having the Russians come over here, and having both cities fully back that exchange, really meant a lot to the Russians," explained Lasser. "It meant a lot to them that the city cared enough about the arts to do this. And we felt likewise, when we went to Yekaterinburg."

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