

On downtown Berkeley street, the poetry is underfoot

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[Lou Fancher](#)



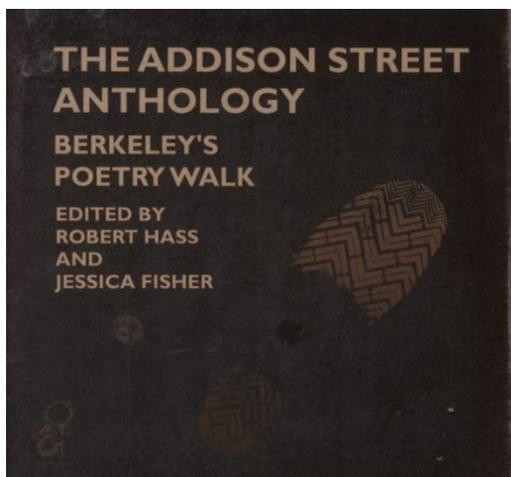
The Berkeley Poetry Walk, completed in 2003, was motivated by community sentiment in the 1980s to create a vital downtown arts and cultural district to reverse economic decline. Photo: [edrdo](#)

On a downtown Berkeley city block, poetry is a constant companion.

Stretched along both sides of Addison Street between Milvia Street and Shattuck Avenue, cast-iron “stepping stone” plaques engraved with fired, glass porcelain enamel lettering speak the language of poets from Ohlone

Indians to contemporary wordsmiths.

Known as the “[Berkeley Poetry Walk](#)” and anthologized in *The Addison Street Anthology*, published by Berkeley-based [Heyday Books](#), the public-art project was a massive undertaking completed in 2003 by a team of pivotal volunteers, private donors, the City of Berkeley, City staff and the Civic Arts Commission.



The Addison Street Anthology, published by Heyday Books

Fueled by community sentiment in the 1980s to create a vital downtown arts and cultural district to reverse economic decline, the project's origins gained momentum from a 1992 market analysis by the Office of Economic Development. The study compared downtown Berkeley to other commercial districts in the region and determined that arts establishments and restaurants were key factors in attracting people to Berkeley.

The 1994 Downtown Public Improvements Plan and funds from Measure S bonds laid the groundwork for the literal

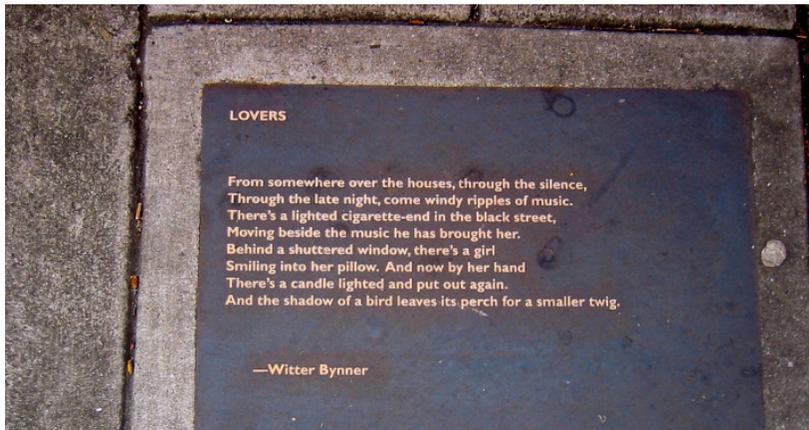
manifestation of an artistic push that is embedded today in Addison Street's Berkeley Repertory Theater, The Aurora Theatre, Freight & Salvage and the Poetry Walk sidewalk.

Money played a small, crucial role; people did the rest.

Emerging like a swarm of larger-than-life characters in a play by Shakespeare or superheroes in a modern day action film, the credits list is long: landscape architect and initial streetscape designer John Roberts; public art consultant Steven Huss; technical consultant/artist Scott Donahue; experts at Cherokee Porcelain and Steel in Tennessee who invented and fabricated the unique, durable, slip-free panels; graphic artist David Lance Goines who selected the type font and design; Project Manager Mary Ann Merker who shepherded nearly three tons of poetry into the sidewalk; and Robert Hass, U.S. Poet Laureate and Professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

And like a "thank you" award speech, there are countless unsung "others," including members of neighboring arts communities, city assistants, business owners and private donors, and more.

"It was a most remarkable project," Hass said. "When I was asked to choose the poems, I just said 'Sure, let's do it.' I had no idea how much work it would be."



One of the embedded poems on the Berkeley Poetry Walk on Addison Street. Photo: [Carleton Gholz](#)

In an introductory essay to the anthology, Hass outlines the selection criteria he developed. The 128 poems were to be by poets who lived, worked, or had influence on the area. Diversity was a starting premise and led Hass to include works by Native American Ohlone people,

Mexican rancho era song/poets, poems from Japanese and Chinese internment camps, translations, poems reflecting local theater traditions, song lyrics, reflections on nature, cities, politics, love, sorrow, humor and more.

"Mostly it was to tell the story from this side of the Bay. We could have done anything, but it occurred to me that there was enough interesting writing in the East Bay," Hass said.

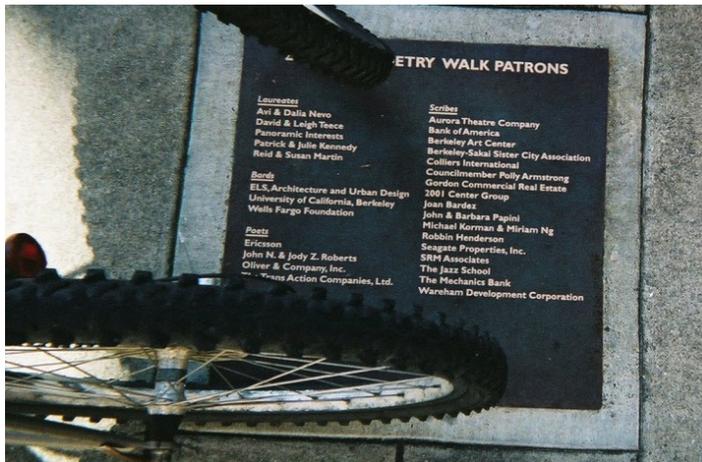
Relying on research, instinct and decades of having studied and been steeped in traditions rising from the early 1950s Beat poets, Hass says he "interviewed old people" and consulted people of all ethnicities. From their stories, he stumbled upon intriguing pockets of poetry. "I learned about faculty wives like the "Mother's Milk Club" who got together with their children once a week and read their poems," he said.

One poem written by Malka Heifetz Tussman and translated by Kathryn Hellerstein, "Keep Me," still haunts him.

“Tussman was the last Yiddish poet to receive the Jerusalem Prize. She lived up on Euclid in her last days. Her tile is still sitting in the corporation yard and isn’t in the ground yet, along with a few others we didn’t get to,” he said. “I’ve got to call Mary Ann right away and get on that.”

Merker — if anyone can — will soon have “Keep Me” in place. The Civic Arts Commission secretary says the project was daunting, positive and required endless problem solving.

“When the poetry panels first went in I had so many inquiries that as project manager I asked each member of the team to write an essay on what they did to make this happen and [posted it on our web page.](#)”



Plaque showing the Poetry Walk patrons. Photo [edrho](#)

In Merker’s essay, she says finding a company to make panels that would meet city requirements and be aesthetically pleasing required extensive teamwork. Over time, the initial look — black squares with bright white type — mellowed into a warm, rust-colored patina and golden, creamy white text.

Hass said: “I had mixed feelings about putting things near the streets. From an

Asian point of view, this would seem very disrespectful; people would spit on them, drop gum. John Roberts said, ‘Well, we’ll just steam clean them every year.’”

Cleanliness in the actual poems’ content was another challenge. “The most Berkeley poem of all was by Allen Ginsberg and was about moving into his Berkeley cottage and where he was going to hide his dope. Another poem was a song’s lyrics and had an obscenity so there was a question whether or not I could use that,” Hass says.

Often, Hass would check with Adam David Miller (a member of the commission) to learn if a given poem would incite objections but says he was left largely on his own to build the collection.

The project won the Downtown Berkeley Association’s 2003 President’s Award and continues to draw attention — although less frequently than when it was first installed. Hass has noticed that a bittersweet interaction happens when one of the poets dies. “People have brought flowers to their tiles,” he says.

And a larger, entirely sweet but still complex echo of the fervor that led to Poetry Walk continues in Berkeley schools and bookstores and resides on the internet, he says.

“The energy has changed over the years. It has to do with the Occupy movement, with how much more directly political social activism has become. But during the post-war period an active life of poetry happened here and it’s still going on.”