Art on the rise

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PAINTING the town . . . artists Sebastian di Mauro, Brad Nunn and Simone Eisler outside 175 Eagle St.

THREE new pieces of public art will be on view early next year, when Brisbane's latest high-rise development, the riverside office building at 175 Eagle Street, opens its doors to the public.

A pair of giant hands, one pointing skywards, will greet tenants and passers-by, a large aluminium sting-ray will hover over the foyer, while mythical sea creatures will beckon people towards the river.

Property developers Urban Properties and Consolidated Properties commissioned the three sculptures, the work of artists Sebastian di Mauro, Brad Nunn and Simone Eisler, at a cost of $125,000.

Brisbane's town plan requires that developers spend a quarter of a per cent of the project's budget on public art. State Government also has an Art Built-in policy which allocates 2 per cent of major capital works projects' budgets to public art.

"Some people aren't happy at having to spend the money, but most developers in the CBD think it's a great idea," says property developer Steve Tyson, who commissioned the works for 175 Eagle St.

Joint managing director of one of Queensland's largest property developers, Consolidated Properties, Tyson was quick to recognise the importance of art to the project and relishes his new role as benefactor of the arts.

"It seemed to us that a lot of developers see the public art component as an afterthought and a bit of a hassle," he says.

"We wanted to be pro-active and include a great piece of art. We thought that if we have to spend that much money, why not make it like an award which makes it really worthwhile to somebody?

"We wanted to get an established artist to make a piece that would be the flag-bearer for the building, but we also wanted to engage an emerging artist. And we wanted them to be from Queensland."

Tyson called on arts consultancy Public Solutions to manage the selection process.

They wanted the art to humanise the space around the hi-tech building and link it to the river.

"We are hoping people will bond with the work," Tyson says.

More than 100 artists expressed interest, and Artworkers Alliance created a shortlist. Five artists were then paid to submit a developed concept design, taking some of the risk out of a blind commission. A judging panel, including Tyson and representatives from the government public art agencies, including Councillor David Hinchcliffe, made the final choice.

"It's incredibly competitive," says Brisbane sculptor Sebastian di Mauro, whose piece, *Chat*, a pair of 1.2m-high hands in animated discussion, was selected.

"I've got a drawer full of unsuccessful submissions, about 250 of them. It's fantastic to finally get an idea from small size to life size.

"We wouldn't be able to afford that normally, not without a major grant from the Government."

Di Mauro, who is a finalist in this year's prestigious National Sculpture Prize, says he survives as a sculptor only by teaching design at the Queensland College of Art.

In the end, two works by emerging local artists, Simone Eisler and Brad Nunn (a full-time student at Queensland College of the Arts doing his doctorate in sculpture), were selected because Tyson wanted them both, adding another $25,000 to the budget.

Eisler's designs of mythical sea creatures will embellish a glass-walled walkway to the river, while Nunn's futuristic aluminium sting-ray will be suspended in the foyer.

TAKING a punt on three artists who have never done a public art project reveals a level of risk-taking not common in the public sector, says Matt Tobin, creative director of Urban Art Projects, the company producing the works at their Eagle Farm foundry.

This is despite government art projects being better positioned to take creative risks because the profit imperative is not there.

"Private developers are more willing to stick their necks out. If you're prepared to risk $20 million on a building, you're prepared to risk $100,000 on an artwork," Tobin says.

From conception to installation, the Eagle St art project is expected to take nine months.

Cultural policy consultant Cathy Hunt, who managed the artist selection process for 175 Eagle St, agrees that young artists find it hard to break into the public art game.

"Because of the amount of money spent and the need for it to be there for a long time, the tendency can be to take the tried and true way," she says.

"When you make public art you start with a fresh idea and then it changes totally because it's got sharp bits and people will climb on it and what happens if it gets graffiti," says di Mauro.

"From an artistic, cutting-edge point of view, ephemeral works are more challenging because they don't have to last for 10 or 20 years.

"They don't have all that public art criteria, like having to be structurally sound, embedded in it."