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Off the Walls: Occupy the Imagination

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CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Off The Walls: Occupy The Imagination

Mixing the eternal power of art with our state's new tourism logo — "Connecticut: Still Revolutionary" — seven new public art projects are appearing this summer in downtown areas. Unsightly parking garage walls are blooming with delicately rendered sea shells, a gritty bus terminal is transformed into a dazzling whirl of chromographic wonders, and a decaying downtown derelict factory becomes a magically illuminated surface of dancing images and lights.

I CAN ALMOST HEAR General Israel Putnam calling to his troops: "To arms! Artists-Creators-Inventive Minds-Pick up your paint brushes and pigments-Let's attack urban blight and raise our Spirits- Don't fire until you see the Whites of these Walls!" "City Canvases" is a \$1 million pilot program, funded through the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), was sparked by Governor Daniel P. Malloy. It offers the promise of creating a series of dynamic, uplifting, high visual impact murals around some of the state's least attractive urban settings.

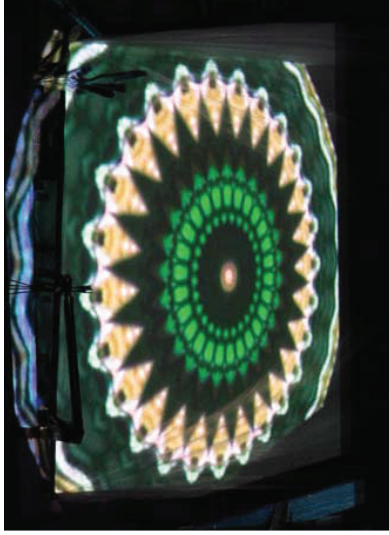
The project is the brainchild of DECD deputy commissioner Christopher "Kip" Berg-

strom who has focused his vision on the human values of "Placemaking" through the visual arts. "Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates buildings and streetscapes, improves local business and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired."

In deed and word, "City Canvases" is not just "talking the talk" but admirably "walking the walk" of tapping into our greatest resources: creative placemaking. As an art historian, I cannot cite another moment in America's political and cultural history like the transformative activities of FDR's New Deal. Sitting at a White House meeting in 1933 with her

husband's "Brain Trust", First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (who was knitting at the meeting!) openly wondered how it was "unbelievable that a great nation could fail to utilize its creative talents to the fullest."

With determination and vision, the meeting resulted in the launching of the W.P.A. — and the Federal Art Projects. By 1943, 5,300 fine artists in all 48 states had created 225,000 artworks. Take a look at the artistic gems painted on the walls of US Post offices in Greenwich, South Norwalk, Torrington, Norwich and especially New London — where Melville's "Moby Dick" is documented in Thomas LaFarge's incredibly executed six-panel mural documenting



From the left, clockwise, a projection by light artist Dustin DeMillo, and photographer Kelly Bigelow Becerra's projection piece "Horses and Cowboys" for New Haven's LAMP festival. Both artists will be providing videos for the Bridgeport City Canvas projections. In New London, Caruso Music Wall Mural: Songs For Our City, by the artist team Chimin Liu and Mark McKee.



whaling methods. Truly this is Connecticut's own "Sistine Chapel" for its ambitiously designed pictorialism. Just as "City Canvases" is leveraging tax revenues, the ultimate return on investment is an incalculable reward.

Inherently, the real dividends of this initiative come out of the intrinsic values of art. While all kinds of financial and entrepreneurial schemes are attempting to resolve existing deficits throughout the nation, the state, and in local municipalities, the malleable calculus of creativity seems to defy the laws of gravity. We've all seen how bombed-out urban slums like neighborhoods in Tribeca, Chelsea, Brooklyn's "Dumbo", or Hoboken have experienced





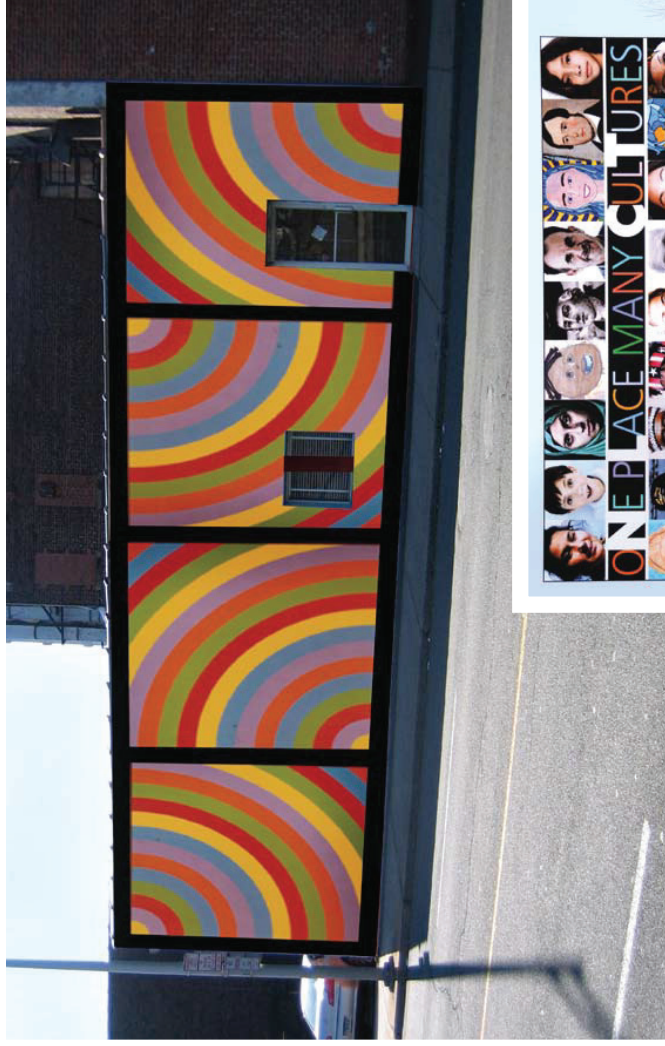
remarkable rejuvenations: once artist studios and creative types began to populate these formerly undesired spaces. Bergstrom wants to lure in "young entrepreneurs and innovators to fuel our economic engines."

I caught the peripatetically energized Bergstrom for a short interview about "City Canvases" at his Hartford office. He speaks with a degree of conviction about this initiative, knowing that an investment in the arts is a small down-payment on a brighter future for our state's most unloved urban walls. VENU congratulates the Connecticut Office of the Arts for taking a small wager on the

value of artistic inspiration which ignites revivals and renaissances past and present.

"Mr. Bergstrom: you have advocated for the role of public art here in Connecticut to energize a sense of "Place Making," can you play that out for us?"

"Place Making" is the absolute point of the economic development spear these days and public art is the thrust. When I watch institutions like The Bloomberg Philanthropies, The Ford Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The McKnight

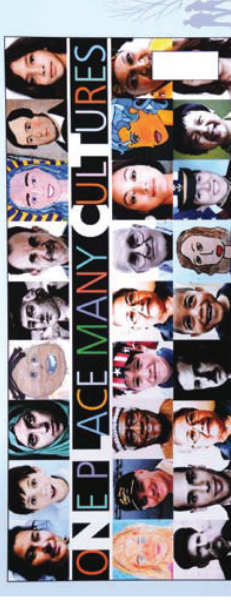


Hoboken, South Beach Miami, and parts of Los Angeles. Can you envision how City Canvases might spark forward progress around the State?"

"Creative place making animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates buildings and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. One dramatic way it's enabled is by the use of widespread public art installations to invigorate our surroundings. It makes the old new and the mundane magical.

Connecticut has always been a talent magnet and a place of innovation, from our very earliest manufacturing centers through corporations like Sikorsky, GE, Pratt Whitney, Covidien, ESPN, Jackson Lab and others.

move at warp speed, as opposed to the old, "Ah, well, I'll just catch the next bus and read a paper" speed of the past. There is no time to lose when it comes to completing work on our shared prosperity!" □



City Canvases amplifies the uniqueness and authenticity of our communities, therefore making them more attractive not only to our residents who live here, but also to the young entrepreneurs and creatives who will fuel the creation of our new economic engines."

"Under Gov Malloy's leadership, you seem to have put the City Canvases initiative on a lightning speed fast-track. Why was the accelerated schedule a necessity?"

"I feel that it's important to demonstrate in the warp speed age that we all live in that state and city governments and arts organizations can move at warp speed, as opposed to the old, "Ah, well, I'll just catch the next bus and read a paper" speed of the past. There is no time to lose when it comes to completing work on our shared prosperity!" □

Clockwise from the upper left, in Waterbury, Moosai Trout Mural at '90 South main Street by the Connecticut arts team of Joanne and Bruce Hunter; Native son Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawing #1105 in New Britain; The Cabinet of Shells on the Water Street Garage in New London by noted Connecticut graphics designers Jan Cummings and Peter Good; in New London on the Hygienic Art Park Wall, One Place Many Cultures, lead by nationally recognized artist Russ Kramer enlisting the talents local artists as the New London Mural Alliance; in New London on the Carriage House Wall, Hard Hat Painters, artist Team McZaushtny (Mike McNabrey and Troy Zaushtny).

To stay connected to Arts grants programs, the Art in Public Spaces projects, the CT Artist Collection and the many other activities, go to this link <http://www.cultureandtourism.org/cc/cwp/view.asp?n=39488&q=46450>

