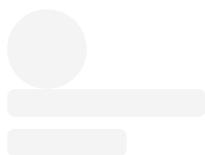


Art in the Public View: Walking through RI's street scenes

Shortly before an array of computer printouts and hand-written notes announcing business closures and curbside pickup policies presented a kind of collective commentary on COVID-19 along North Main Street, somebody spray painted a plea on an undeveloped lot near Rhode Island School of Design's administration building: "PUT SOME ART ON THIS WALL!"



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A post shared by The Avenue Concept (@avenuepvd)

For months, the state-owned site between **Cafe Choklad** and **Mills Tavern** was an active construction zone. Where a portion of wall had been removed to expose soil retained by metal mesh, workers assembled fragments of street signs - CLOSED, DETOUR, EXIT - into an orange and white montage held in place by a ladder of wooden slats bolted into the cement. The project's completion left behind a blank gray wall until the burst of graffiti - whether earnest advocacy, self-referential statement, or marketing stunt - colored the concrete canvas.

The booms and busts of local history, as well as more recent development decisions, have shaped the landscapes that allow for the art, both intentional and inadvertent, that adorns the region's walls. In PVD and Pawtucket, as in Warwick and Woonsocket, the insignias of earlier occupants remain imprinted on the facades of old mills and warehouses. An abundance of highway overpasses and underinvestment in pedestrian infrastructure results in unlighted and unused spaces. As entrenched inequalities persist, makeshift memorials honor lives lost too young and community programs seek to elevate stories celebrating pride and resilience.

"When a local artist tells their story via their art, it is deep and I can see their soul in it," said **Marta V. Martinez**, founder and executive director of Rhode Island Latino Arts.

While artistic expression has long provided an outlet for making sense of, or making a statement on, the world, it's also creating opportunities. PVD's tagline as "The Creative Capital," grew out of a 2009 brand development project with North Star, a place-branding and marketing agency headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. Since then, local arts organizations and city officials have funded and facilitated prominent displays of art throughout the downtown:

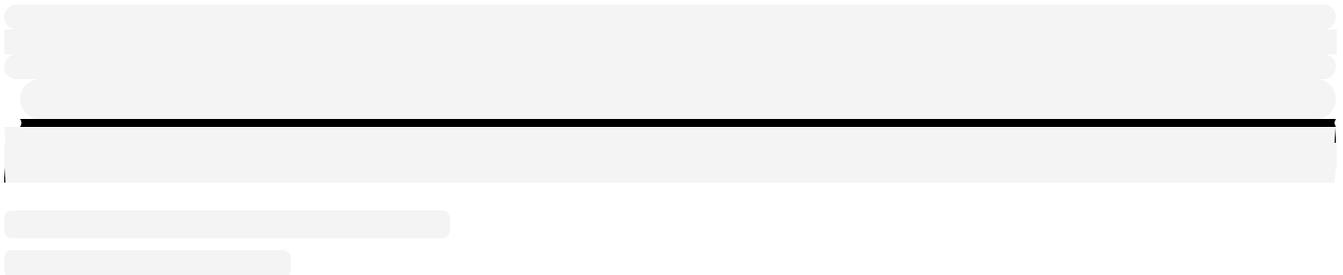
- On Aborn Street, **Shepard Fairey's** mural "Providence Industrial" applies strong and sharp shadowing to render an industrious spirit to the Superman Building, the Crook Point Bascule Bridge, and the Biltmore Hotel — icons from the eight years he spent in the city.
- On Custom House Street, Baltimore-based Gaia worked with the Tomaquag Museum (390A Summit Rd, Exeter) on "Still Here," an expansive mural featuring Lynsea Montanari holding a photograph of Narragansett and Wampanoag tribal elder Princess Red Wing, as a symbol representing the continuity of local Indigenous life.
- Between Clemence and Mathewson Streets, "She Never Came" covers the full expanse of a building with a man hunched across an empty table with a ring in hand and a rat on his shoulder. The mural by Bezt, half of the Polish street art duo Etam Cru, channels more *Willard* than *Ratatouille*.
- In local photographer Mary Beth Meehan's "SeenUnseen" series, a portrait of Bidur Diab Killi, the first woman to arrive in RI as a refugee from the Syrian civil war, smiles above a parking lot off

Snow Street, inaugurated in 2017 by Mayor **Jorge Elorza**.

“Working in public is complicated as it includes many voices and stakeholders that are easy to identify and often not so much,” said **Yarrow Thorne**, founder and executive director of the Avenue Concept, a PVD-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting public art. Public murals and the installation of other works in public spaces involve managing copyrights, artist fees, material costs, community outreach, insurance coverage and other layers, said Thorne.



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A post shared by The Avenue Concept (@avenuepvd)

In July 2021, an agreement between The Avenue Concept and the City of Providence detailed a shared belief that “public art provides not only aesthetic benefits but also opportunities for education, inspiration, quality of life, increased tourism and economic development.” After Providence’s police and fire departments and Verizon raised no objections to The Avenue Concept’s proposed placements of public installations, the City granted the organization exclusive easements through 2030. The Avenue Concept agreed to present an annual plan to the City for approval.

“We create infrastructure for our public art portfolio of murals and sculptures and programs to change and evolve over time,” said Thorne. “It’s making space for artists and taking care of logistics. We’ve created standards and tools to ensure that artists can focus on executing their personal vision with as much flexibility as possible.”

This summer, the Avenue Concept is working with **Emblem 125**, a residential and retail project under development in the Jewelry District, to commission a mural by Aryz and coordinate his travel from Spain. Five new sculptures will also be placed throughout downtown PVD.

“It’s challenging because, as I’m told by some of our artists, they are being told that the local talent is not as high quality as it can be and they are encouraged to leave RI to establish themselves elsewhere,” said Martinez.

At the moment, Rhode Island Latino Arts is supporting **Rene Gómez** with a two-year residency. His mural, “El Corazón de Providence” graces the interior of La Broa’ Pizza (925 Broad St, PVD). His utility-box portraits feature Juan Pablo Duarte, the most widely celebrated founder of the Dominican Republic, and Josefina “Doña Fefa” Rosario, memorialized as the “‘mother’ of Rhode Island’s Latino communities” in *the Providence Journal* after her death at 90. Martinez said she hopes the support gives Gómez space to create and build his portfolio. He’s currently at work on a series of portraits that Martinez expects will be displayed later in the year.

Local nonprofits AS220 and New Urban Arts also support community mural projects, as does the City’s department of Art, Culture, and Tourism. In Pawtucket, a focus on public art emerged from the city’s annual arts festival (Held since 1999, the 24th annual event is scheduled to take place from September 9 to 18). These publicly supported efforts have led to nine sculptures, 12 murals, and 28 painted utility boxes on the streets of Pawtucket.

In November, Gabriel Calle Arango traveled from Medellín, Colombia to contribute a mural, “Esperanza,” to Slater Memorial Park. And as part of the Cornerstone Corporation project under development at 6 George St, representatives of the city and arts organizations will review more than 100 bids proposed by artists across the country, to integrate public art along Pleasant St.





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A post shared by The Avenue Paintbar (@avenuepaintbar)

“We are the city of the arts,” said **Emily Rizzo**, Pawtucket City Hall spokesperson. “Pawtucket has always had that kind of involvement. One of our goals is to continue attracting more artists, fostering them, continuing the momentum and representing the cultures in our community.”

Throughout the Creative Capital, and across RI, publicly and privately funded projects alike captivate – and capitalize on – sustained interest in these street scenes. But as brick walls and utility boxes increasingly become approved platforms for creative expression, unsanctioned equivalents remain

misdemeanors under state law. The Avenue Concept maintains 240 square feet of “legal walls” outside its headquarters (304 Lockwood St) for artists seeking safe, legal space on which to experiment and share their work. Otherwise, those heeding the call to “PUT SOME ART ON THIS WALL!” typically must be accepted into formal programs or risk criminal charges.

As mobile apps, self-guided walking tours and even runners’ meetups encourage audiences from near and far to explore and celebrate public art as a local attraction, the intentions of the artists themselves and the exterior spaces that serve as their canvases reveal even deeper stories of the city and its communities. Is a mural on a shuttered storefront a touristic invitation or a distraction from the emptiness of its interior space? Is the patching of a crack on a wall beauty in the eye of the beholder or a reminder of the need to invest in basic maintenance?