

# Public Art Takes Over in Providence

Not just the face, but the entire body and beating heart of public art is changing in Providence. Stroll through the streets, take a turn into a wide, open lot between buildings, and you may find yourself an ant caught between gargantuan humans on opposing walls - one stepping into a world of rainbow wonder, and one staring at a ring that hovers in mid-air over an empty hand. The contrast and dance between our beautiful historical buildings and these fresh, innovative outdoor sculptures, murals and installations is exciting to see.

Surprisingly, the funding for the majority of public works in recent years hasn't come from government grants or municipal support, but from private sources and donations, and the driving force behind nearly all of this growth is an organization called The Avenue Concept. If you haven't heard of them yet, trust me, you will.

Yarrow Thorne, executive director of The Avenue Concept, is a true visionary whose energy and determination has brought opportunity to many talented artists and growth to the city. As an undergraduate industrial design student at RISD, Thorne saw the necessity for a public arts program that reflected the real needs of the people living in PVD. He envisioned public art that did not simply decorate, but that could solve problems for multiple people through creativity and design. By 2012, this dream had become a reality with the founding of The Avenue Concept, and in 2013 the project was launched. Supported initially by a seed grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation ([rauschenbergfoundation.org/grants/avenue-concept-0](http://rauschenbergfoundation.org/grants/avenue-concept-0)), the group has to-date raised funds and support for more than 170 public works. We have The Avenue Concept to thank for the immense wiring system under Kennedy Plaza, which allows for public concerts and generator-free food trucks, and it can bring to life an interactive lighting display that turns the Plaza into a shimmering wonderland at night. It was Yarrow's organization, not government funding, that wrote out the checks to every technician and laborer who built this gift to the city.

Today, The Avenue Concept continues its essential mission to fund and support public art that is both beautiful and sustainable. Thorne has a deep understanding of the importance of educating and engaging the public, using stories and documentation to make art a living, breathing reality that involves the viewer. As The Avenue Concept continues to collaborate with civic agencies to revitalize under-used public spaces and establish new public art initiatives, be prepared for extraordinary surprises. Have you ever seen a giant American flag knitted in mid-air by steel needles two stories high? Keep your eye on Kennedy Plaza. You will. For more information, visit their website at [theavenueconcept.org](http://theavenueconcept.org), and blog at [theavenueconcept.com/blog](http://theavenueconcept.com/blog)

One Providence company that has given its support to the Avenue Concept is Paolino Properties at 100 Westminster in Providence. The expanse of expressive murals by Bert Crenca lining the curve toward the Turk Building on Weybossett Street was funded in part by Paolino Properties. As the former Mayor of Providence and director of the RI Department of Economic Development, Joseph Paolino came to recognize the need for public art. He continued to support the arts when he moved to the private sector with property development.

Paolino's latest contribution to the city is "Illuminating Providence," a public art installation that uses LED technology to light and outline the two enormous wide-arched windows at the top of Paolino

Properties' 20-story flagship building at 100 Westminster Street. New step lighting debuted on the top of the property on June 15 to celebrate the beginning of Providence's Pride celebrations, and on June 30, Illuminating Providence launched a 15-minute light show choreographed to music. Paolino's goal is to enhance the skyline of downtown Providence. "The lights were turned off at the Superman Building next door at about the same time I bought 100 Westminster. It's time to illuminate our city at night," he said. An integrated astronomical clock in the system's Pharos controller allows its circuitry to respond to sunset and adjust its start time every day. There are plans to program and customize a variety of themed light shows throughout the year. When major renovations are undertaken at 150 Washington Street, 76 Dorrance Street and 30 Kennedy Plaza, those buildings will be illuminated as well.

If you'd like to become more familiar the public works around our city, you can find maps and photos at The Avenue Concept's site. Their Farm Fellow, Jessyloo Rodrigues, offers a free downtown garden tour on the last Sunday of every month until October 28. "Foraging Downtown Providence" explores Jessyloo's own three Avenue Gardens Downtown, as well as other nearby urban greenspaces and plant life. The Avenue Concept has plans to publish an 80-page full color guide to art in Providence that updates as installations change. And Gallery Night Providence now offers a walking tour on the third Thursday of every month - you can visit galleries while you explore streets with an expert guide.

Providence is coming to life - be part of the dance.