

DowntownDC Business Improvement District (BID)

INNOVATION

The DowntownDC BID, in partnership with non-profit PAINTS Institute, the Denver Smith Foundation and local artists, first joined together in a coordinated effort to beautify downtown and instill hope and unity at a challenging time for local residents of the District of Columbia. Many businesses in DowntownDC BID area and throughout the city in the summer of 2020 were boarded up in response to looting and vandalism that occurred related to protests over police brutality and racism. This outdoor public art exhibition was designed to enliven public space and breathe new life into what was downtown DC's busiest neighborhood pre-pandemic. The BID desired to signal to the community that downtown was still open for business, bring attention in a creative way to the social unrest that was occurring and stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. As the project grew to include Black Lives Matter Plaza, St. Johns Church and the exhibit at the National Building Museum, the audience grew to a national and international scale. The subject matter made this project innovative, and that was evidenced by the fact that a major museum, the National Building Museum, decided to exhibit the work in the fall of 2020, and by the fact that the Black Lives Matter Plaza messaging was replicated in downtowns around the country.

OUTCOME

This project benefited many stakeholders including retailers, property managers, building owners and local residents. It also benefited more than 30 local artists who were commissioned for the pieces, earned exposure for their work, and participated in additional opportunities. The problem was that boarded up storefronts in the Gallery Place-Chinatown area communicated that downtown was closed, desolate and dangerous. The murals shifted that perception to enliven the area, made it a vibrant destination, and contributed to general community spirit at a time of great despair and unrest. Outcome was measured in several ways: business owners reported more activity and foot traffic and desired to keep the murals up much longer than the few months they were anticipated to be up, the murals were repurposed for a National Building Museum exhibition, and the overall message and sentiment of Black Lives Matter plaza reverberated across the world as it was replicated by other downtown areas..

EXECUTION

The foundational logistics of this project incorporated finding partners, securing artists, coordinating with property managers, facilitating the on-site event logistics and broadcasting to the largest network of people possible. The artists that were secured through the PAINTS Institute and the Denver Smith Foundation were diverse, talented creatives from a wealth of backgrounds and perspectives. The works created on-site were thought provoking, inspiring and added depth to the impact of the event. The quality of work seems to speak for itself in the aftermath of opportunities that came about. Many of the mural artists gained local and national exposure, participated in other local events and had the opportunity to sell their work through a variety of platforms and outlets. In addition, it was because of the organic success of the first public art exhibition project that spawned the museum exhibition, panel and second public art activation.

REPRESENTATION

The DowntownDC BID spearheaded this effort which involved four partner organizations, more than 30 artists, property owners, property managers, retailers and one of the largest stakeholders in the DowntownDC BID: the Capital One Arena. It's important to note that the artists were more than just creatives. They were diverse in age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds. Some were versed in arts for social justice and others had experience using art to mobilize. This project also allowed the public to engage with the artists as their works of art were in motion. People were also invited to participate by sharing and creating their own artistic expressions. The BID provided the infrastructure to make the initial event happen which included coordinating with the event partners and property managers, getting the word out and providing the artist materials. The public art exhibition was on display for people to see and experience. As the project grew and took on a life of its own, the BID became the centerpiece of this mini-movement and then played a key role in connecting the dots.

REPLICATION

The Black Lives Matter Mural Project could be modified by other downtown areas that want to enliven properties that have been abandoned, boarded up or altogether forgotten about. Empty storefronts can become canvasses for organizations, communities and civic organizations to make impactful statements using visual art.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

At the onset, it was unclear how we were going to make this project a reality. It was with the help of partners that this project came to fruition and morphed into something bigger. The collective pool of resources, collaboration and social climate at the time are what allowed this idea to expand from a weekend event into a multi-month effort that included a museum exhibition, panel discussion and second mural activation.