

We have a unique point of view at Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

We approach our work with creativity and curiosity. We strive to push the boundaries of what is possible in our urban environment and create new expectations for the Downtown experience.

This perspective informs everything we do, including and especially our work in the public art realm over the last decade. We are incredibly proud of the impact of our work on the visual landscape Downtown. This pride is exceeded by the gratitude we feel for the amazingly talented artists and creators whose work brings life to unexpected and forgotten spaces. We are honored to support them and this book is a celebration of those partnerships. Without the artist, there is no art...

The people of Grand Rapids have always understood the intrinsic value of art in the public realm. For decades before Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. existed, artists and community leaders worked to elevate the arts in all forms. Look no further than Alexander Calder's La Grande Vitesse or Maya Lin's Ecliptic, among others, to see and experience evidence of this.

This foundational understanding of the power of public art to spark curiosity, celebrate creativity and connect our community is a through-line from the past to the current work of Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

This book memorializes this work and provides a retrospective on its impact. This is not an exhaustive record of every artist or project, rather a celebration of how far we have progressed as a community, illustrated by some of our favorite projects and initiatives. This is just the beginning, and the future holds incredible possibility...

To everyone that has joined and supported this journey, especially the artists: thank you. Our Downtown is a brighter place because of your work.

Enjoy.

**Kim Van Driel**  
*Director of Public Space Management*  
Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

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# An Artistic History

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La Grande Vitesse  
Project X  
Ecliptic

Grand Rapids has always stood at the forefront of public art. Alexander Calder's La Grande Vitesse or Maya Lin's Ecliptic are great examples of this.

These pieces are the backbone of an incredible body of public art. From spectacular to functional, this local history of art in public spaces inspires the present and future.

# La Grande Vitesse

Shortly after the signing of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson, two local projects received some of the first public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. The first, Alexander Calder's La Grande Vitesse, is a ubiquitous component of Grand Rapids' identity and was the first public artwork funded by the Art in Public Places program.











Image: Fabrication of La Grande Vitesse in Tours, France.  
Photo Credit: Grand Rapids City Archives.



Above: Louisa James Calder and her husband Alexander.  
Photo Credit: Grand Rapids City Archives.



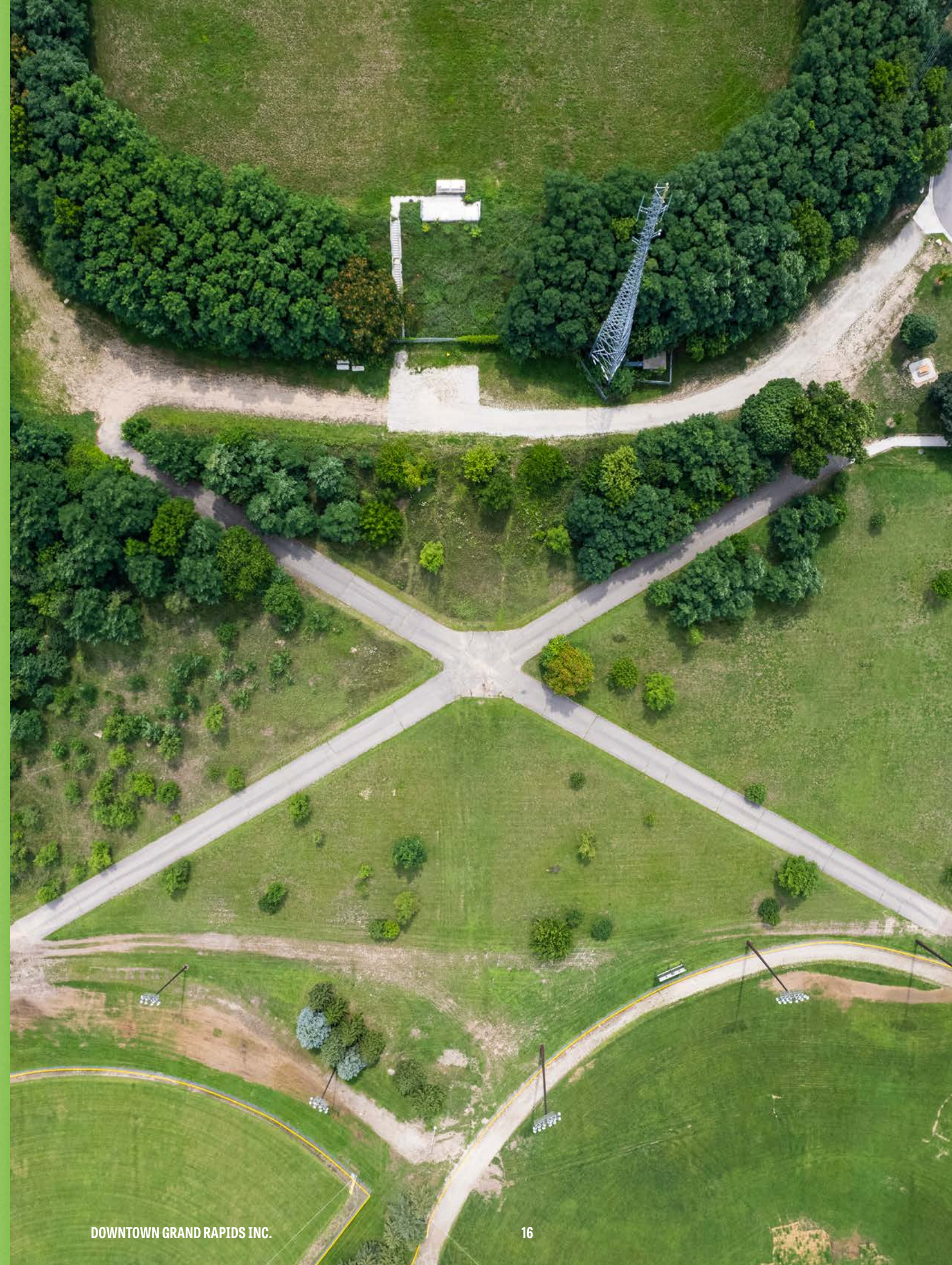




# Project X



The second, commonly known as Project X, sits on Belknap Hill and represents the first major art earthwork supported by public funds. In the Downtown space between these icons exist many other incredible works.







Above: Bird's eye view of Project X.  
Photo Credit: Raúl Alejandro.



Grand

has

Rapids

always

stood at

the  
forefront

of public

art.



# Ecliptic

In the decades to follow, Grand Rapids continued to elevate art in our public spaces. In Downtown Grand Rapids, Maya Lin's Ecliptic serves as both experiential art paying tribute to the solid, vapor and liquid states of water and as the unofficial, yet genuine heart of our City – the Circle is a true public square.



Above: Ecliptic under renovation from the ground and above.  
Photo Credit: (Above) Photo captured for DGRI.  
(Below) Erika Townsley Photo.



Image: Swing Dancing event at Rosa Parks Circle.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.





Above: Visitors participate during the World of Winter Festival at the "Paint the Park" event.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.





**Above:** Figure skating show at Rosa Parks Circle during World of Winter and swing dancers gathered at Rosa Parks Circle.  
**Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.



**Above:** Music performance at Ecliptic and public ice skating at Rosa Parks Circle.  
**Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.





# Back to the Beginning

31  
41  
49

Blue Bridge  
Exit Space Murals  
Electrical Boxes

In the early days of Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI), ideas for new public art were often greeted with all the reasons a project couldn't happen. Fortunately, persistence, creativity and willing partners overcame the status quo. These early efforts catalyzed years of new ideas and an approach to community-powered artworks that continue to positively change the Downtown experience.





# Blue Bridge





Image: Racial justice demonstrators crossing the Blue Bridge. Photo Credit: Sosa Studios/Ariel Sosa.



The Indiana Railroad Bridge needed a new coat of paint. DGRI needed to introduce itself to the people. The question: what color should we paint the Blue Bridge? The process that followed this inquiry led to an open community dialogue and ultimately a new coat of blue paint with one key addition: an innovative lighting array that could adjust coloring for any occasion. The Blue Bridge now lives and breathes as an interactive gathering space and landmark capable of reflecting the mood of the moment.

Above: Community yoga on the Blue Bridge. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





**Above:** The Blue Bridge's lighting array on display and community members creating chalk art. **Photo Credit:** (Above) Captured for DGRI. (Below) Bryan Esler Photo.

**Above:** Mayor Rosalynn Bliss and community members celebrating a new dog park opening and fireworks viewing on the Blue Bridge. **Photo Credit :** (Above) Erika Townsley Photo. (Below) Bryan Esler Photo.







These early  
years of  
ideas and an  
to  
powered

efforts  
catalyzed  
new  
approach  
community  
artworks.



# Exit

# Space

## Murals

Exit Space began as an idea to identify gateways in and out of Downtown that could provide a mural canvas. One particular wall caught the eyes of artists for years. The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) owned the spot in question on Division Avenue North, but conventional

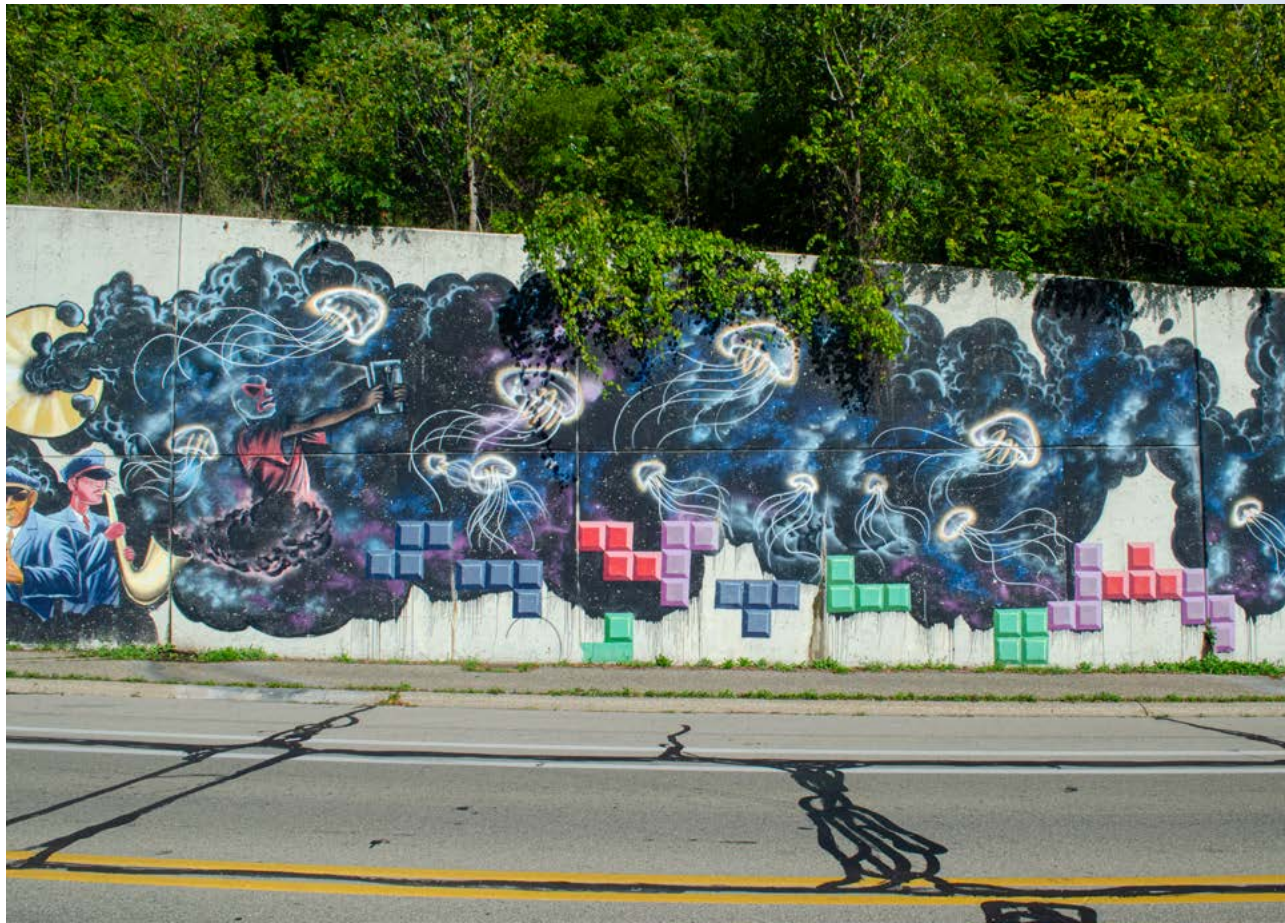
wisdom assumed that bureaucracy and traffic would prevent any activity. Turns out most partners just need to be asked. With the generous help of MDOT and the vision and support from the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, the most recognizable Exit Space project was born.











Above: Exit Space mural by George Eberhardt.  
Photo Credit: Max Vanderforest.



Above: Exit Space mural by Nick Nortier.  
Photo Credit: Max Vanderforest.





Above: Exit Space mural canvas prior to installation.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Above: Finished Exit Space mural by Dave Battjes.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





# Electrical

The right point of view sees canvases everywhere. This perspective helped create another early partnership with the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT). With the guidance of a WMCAT instructor and the imagination of WMCAT students, electrical boxes transformed from drab infrastructure to mini-murals honoring iconic leaders and artists.

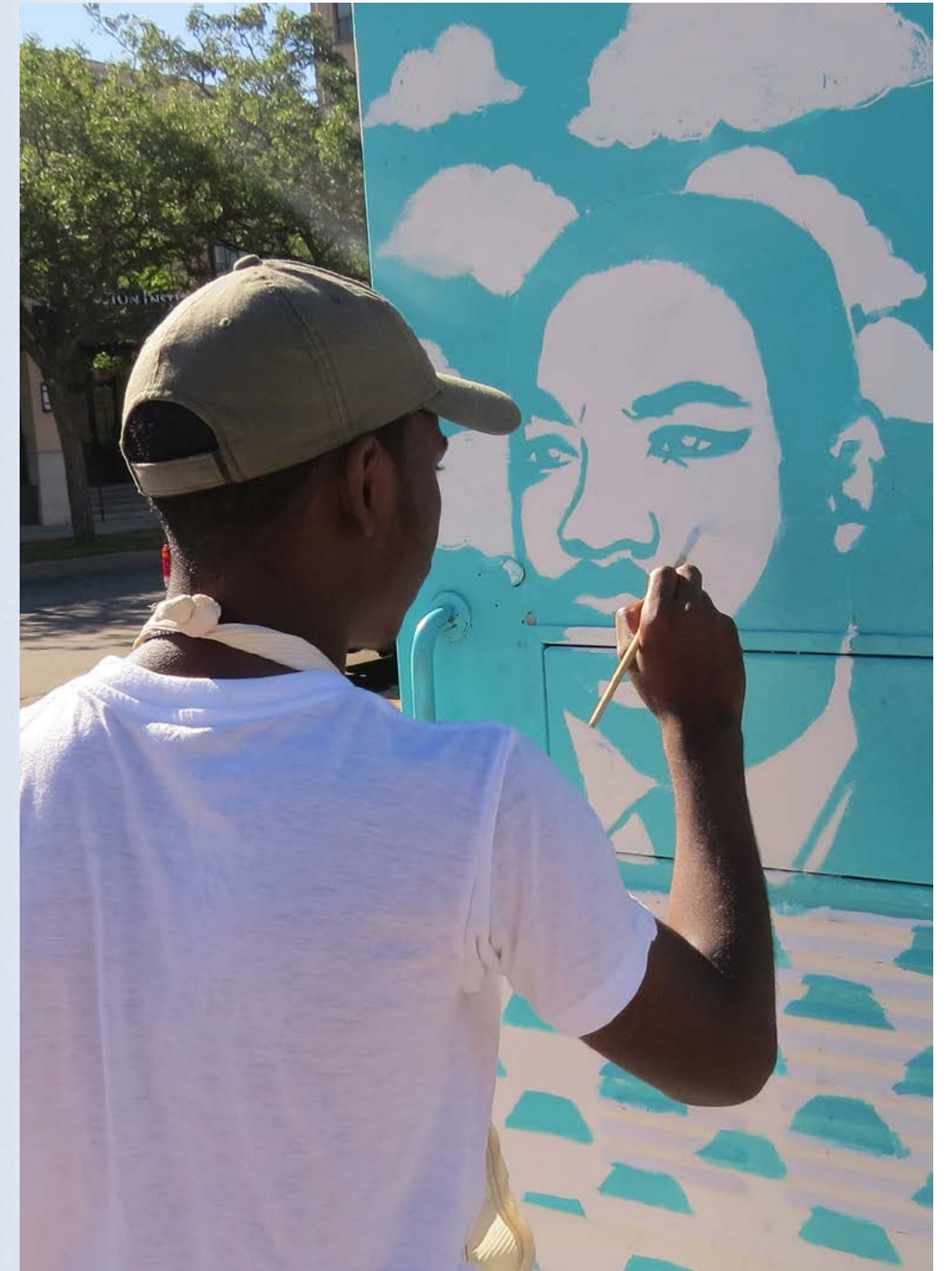


# Boxes





**Above:** WMCAT students and instructors worked together to bring murals from concept to completion.  
**Photo Credit:** Photo captured for DGRI.



**Above:** Student work in progress.  
**Photo Credit:** Photo captured for DGRI.







# Expanding the Canvas

57  
65  
81  
85

Storm Drains  
555 Monroe Ave  
Cloud Corner  
Rainbow Road

The urban environment must be so much more than concrete and metal if a place is to truly have personality. Where some see grey infrastructure, others see canvas begging for color. Beyond engaging design and pleasing aesthetic, the right art can inform, engage and inspire.



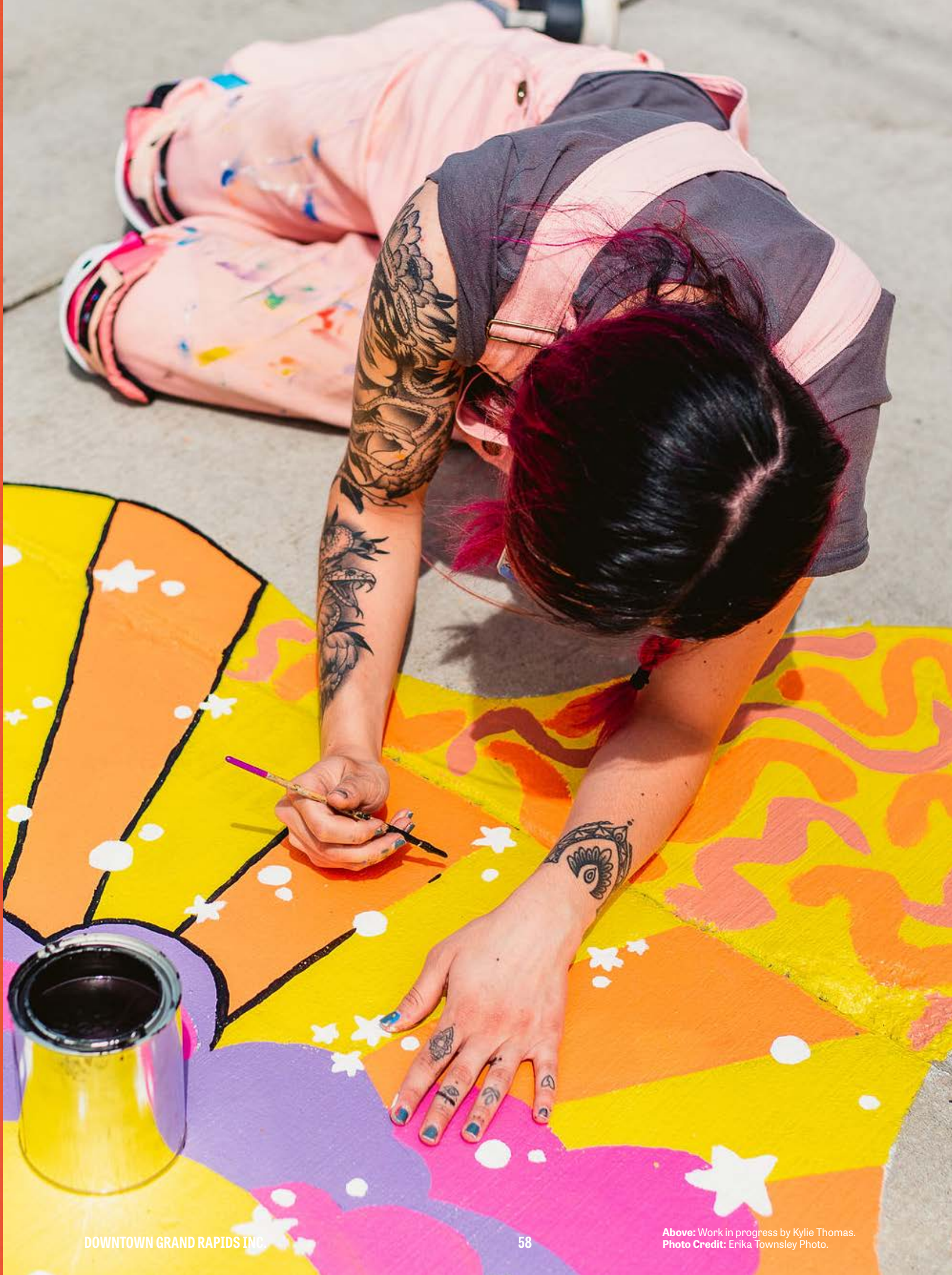
# Storm Drains

The storm drain project places ecological education and conservation awareness unavoidably in the path of anyone moving through Downtown. Each sidewalk mural represents the unique point of view of its creator while maintaining the

common theme of protecting our namesake waterway, the Grand River. Partnership, support and imaginative talent from The Wege Foundation and Lions & Rabbits made this project possible and the effort continues today.

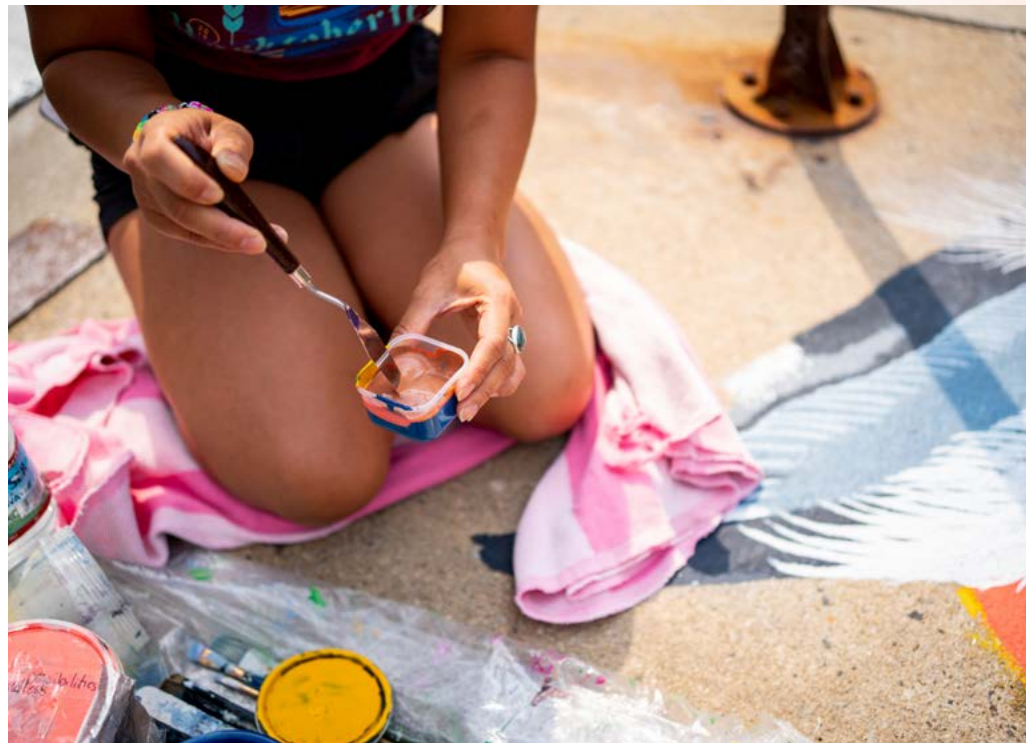


Above: Completed work by Jamie Lee Moonbeam.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



Above: Work in progress by Kylie Thomas.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





**Above:** Work in progress and completed storm drain mural by Diane Nguyen. **Photo Credit:** (Above) David Specht, (Below) Bryan Esler Photo.



**Above:** Completed storm drain mural by Roy Amos. **Photo Credit:** (Above) Bryan Esler Photo, (Below) David Specht.





Above: Work in progress by Ryan Crawley.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.

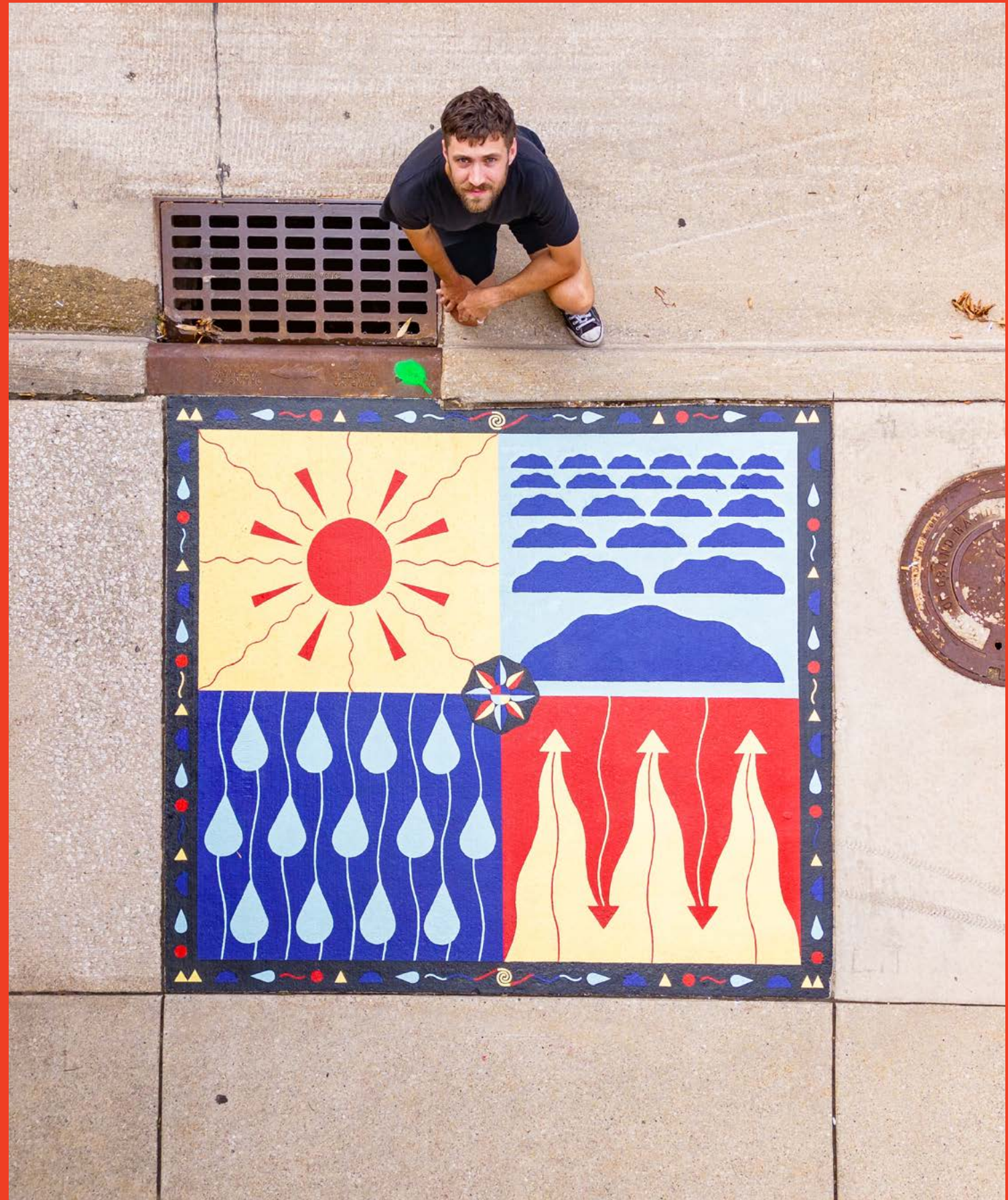


Above: Work in progress by Rhiannan Sibbald.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





**Above:** Emma Bandos posing with her finished mural work and artist Kenzi Goss. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.



**Above:** Completed storm drain mural by Max Vanderforest. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.



555



Monroe

Ave



Any expanse of asphalt Downtown dedicated to temporarily storing automobiles can almost always be transformed for a higher and better use. This is a point of view that DGRI proudly proclaims.

The transformation of 555 Monroe exemplifies this value. Riverfront space once partially filled with cars at sporadic times is now a skate park, event space and massive canvas. A space for people.

555 presented another opportunity for DGRI and the City of GR to engage and create community ownership. The images that adorn the once barren asphalt are the work of the people of Grand Rapids.









From

this

point

of view

everything

is

a

canvas.













Image: 555 skatepark mural in progress by Sophie Rodriguez and friend. Photo credit: Bryan Esler Photo.





**Above:** Patrrck Greenan and Nick Nortier with ground murals at 555. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above:** Ground mural by Nicholas Hartman and ground mural concept and execution by Keyon Lovett. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.









# Cloud Corner

Above: Reb Roberts at Cloud Corner.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Cloud Corner combined the potential of a forgotten external corner of a parking garage with a legendary Grand Rapids artist. The space now provides rest, joy and a burst of color for anyone that happens by.









# Rainbow Road

Rainbow Road is a triumph of ingenuity and Pride. If it's against the rules to paint a crosswalk, then let's paint the whole street.

Above: Rainbow Road after refresh work by Joey Salamon.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Image: Rainbow Road by Joey Salamon in progress.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





Above: Rainbow Road from above.  
Photo Credit: David Specht.





Above: Official ribbon cutting.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Above: DGRI family. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.







# Oral Tradition Reimagined

95	Anishnaabek
99	Women's Way
111	Rad American Women
117	Heartside Historic Murals
125	Grand Legacy Mural

The transfer of knowledge, culture and ideas via storytelling is a sacred practice. Preserving history allows us to honor and learn from the past. Written record, speech, song – all communicate a unique point of view. Telling a story with visual art adds a dimension of creativity and perspective that can rarely, if ever, be replicated.

The history of Grand Rapids can be simultaneously fascinating, surprising, proud and dark. All of our stories must be told to build on the good, learn from the bad and evolve into a better tomorrow.



# Anishnaabek



The Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians lived on lands in West Michigan for hundreds of years. In 2018, the Anishnaabek mural under the Pearl St. bridge was dedicated as part of a larger commemoration ceremony to honor this history.

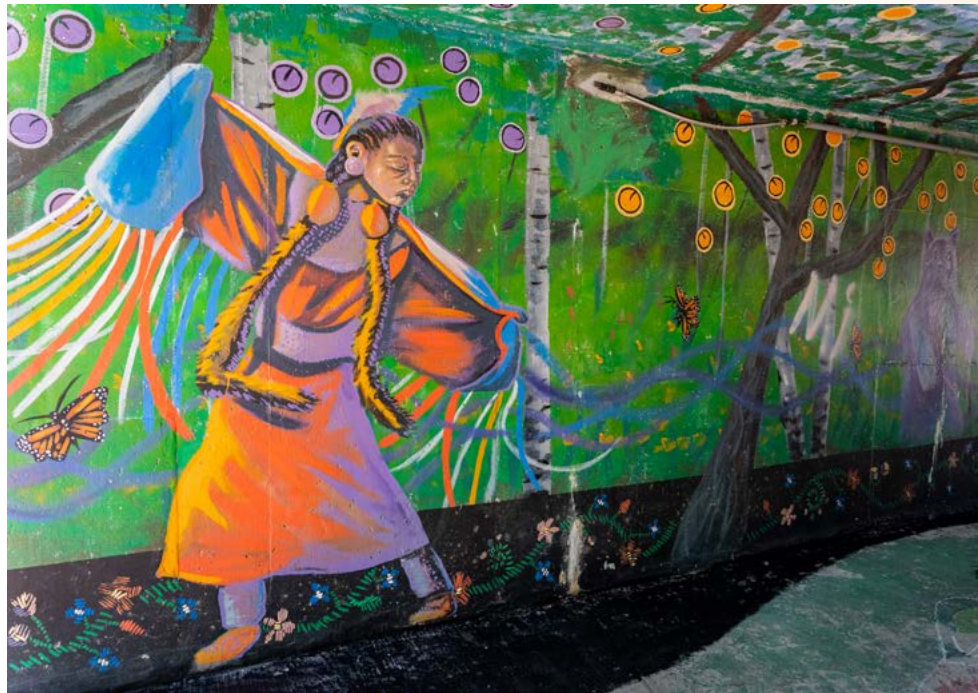
This sacred space on the Grand River was once home to a plum orchard cultivated by the Grand River Ottawa and Chippewa. It is memorialized with a new plumb tree, plaque and sculpture to reestablish its original purpose.

**Above:** Tribal Council Chairman Ron Yob standing with plaque and commemorative plum tree.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above:** Plaque commemorating Native plum tree planting.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.





Above: (Above) Tribal members at mural dedication. (Below) Anishnaabek by Alan Compo. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Image: Water Ceremony. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



# Women's

# Way

The Women's Way Initiative aspires to elevate the historical narratives of exceptional local leaders while adding new energy and creative interest to often-overlooked public

places. The initiative also boldly endeavors to acknowledge the complicated history of women in alleyways and help claim positive ownership of these spaces.

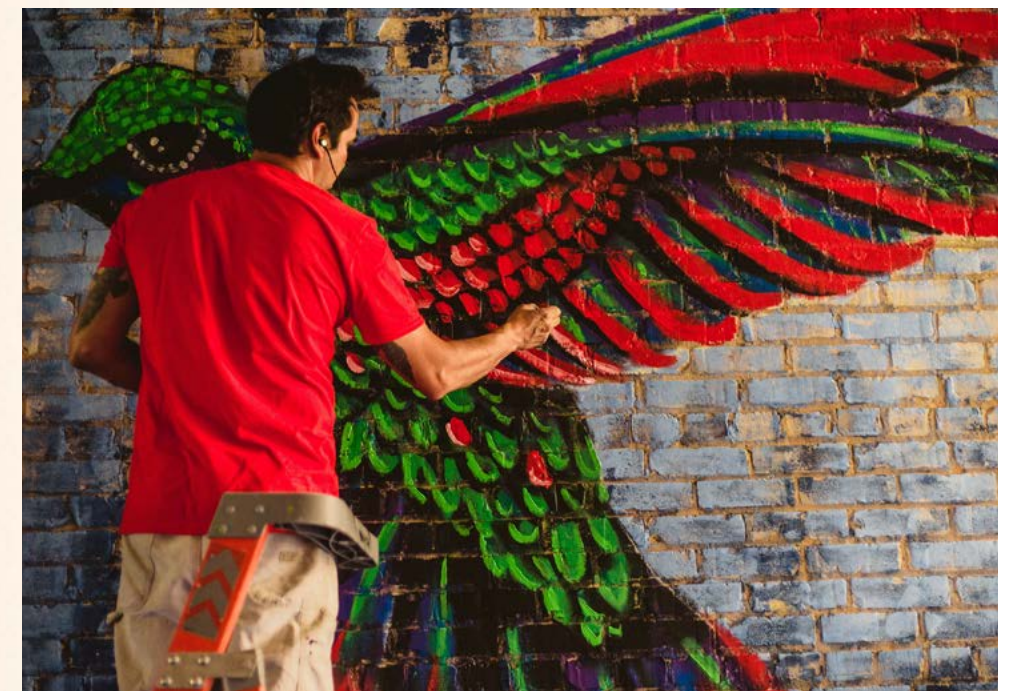


Above & Opposite: Harriet Woods Hill Way by Jasmine Bruce. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



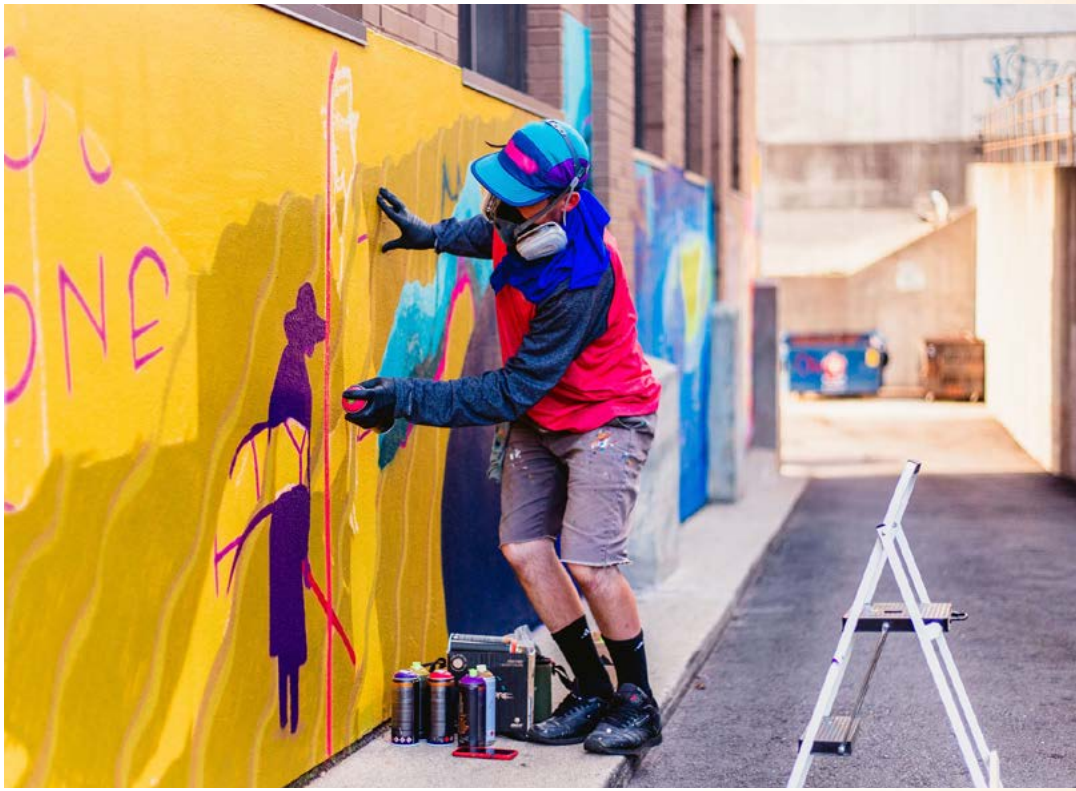


Above: Grand Rapids Chicks Way by Michi Farias.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Above: Angeline 'Naw Kay O Say' Yob Way by Alan Compo.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





**Above:** Work in progress on Dr. Ella Mary Simms Way by Dustin Hunt. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above:** The family of Dr. Ella Mary Simms dedicating her Women's Way Alley. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.









**Above & Opposite:** Maurilia Ortiz Blakely Way by Arturo Morales Romero and commemorative street sign being installed. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.





All of our  
must be  
build on the  
learn from  
and  
a better

stories  
told to  
good,  
the bad  
evolve into  
tomorrow.





**Above :** Kate Bornstein by Maddie Jackson.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.

# Rad American Women



The Rad American Women public art initiative was inspired by the book “Rad American Women A-Z” written by Kate Schatz and illustrated by Miriam Klein Stahl. Original electrical box murals were painted by local female-identifying artists to honor the list of women throughout history featured in the book.

**Above:** Caroline Cook gives a guided tour.  
Author Kate Schatz is seen enjoying the tour and art.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.





Above: Carol Burnett concept illustration by Kerry Murphy Rolewicz.



Above: Finished Carol Burnett mural by Kerry Murphy Rolewicz. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





Above: Angela Davis mural by Corryn Jackson and Rad American Women walking tour. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Image: Zora Neale Hurston by Jasmine Bruce. Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.





# Heartside Historic Murals



The Heartside Historic Murals celebrate the beautiful stories and unsung heroes of the Heartside neighborhood. The neighborhood remains a unique artistic ecosystem and this project pays tribute to its roots.









**Above:** Hearts of Hearside by E'lla Webber. **Below:** The GR Negro League Baseball Teams by George Eberhardt. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Image:** Kevin Wolf from with his completed work. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.

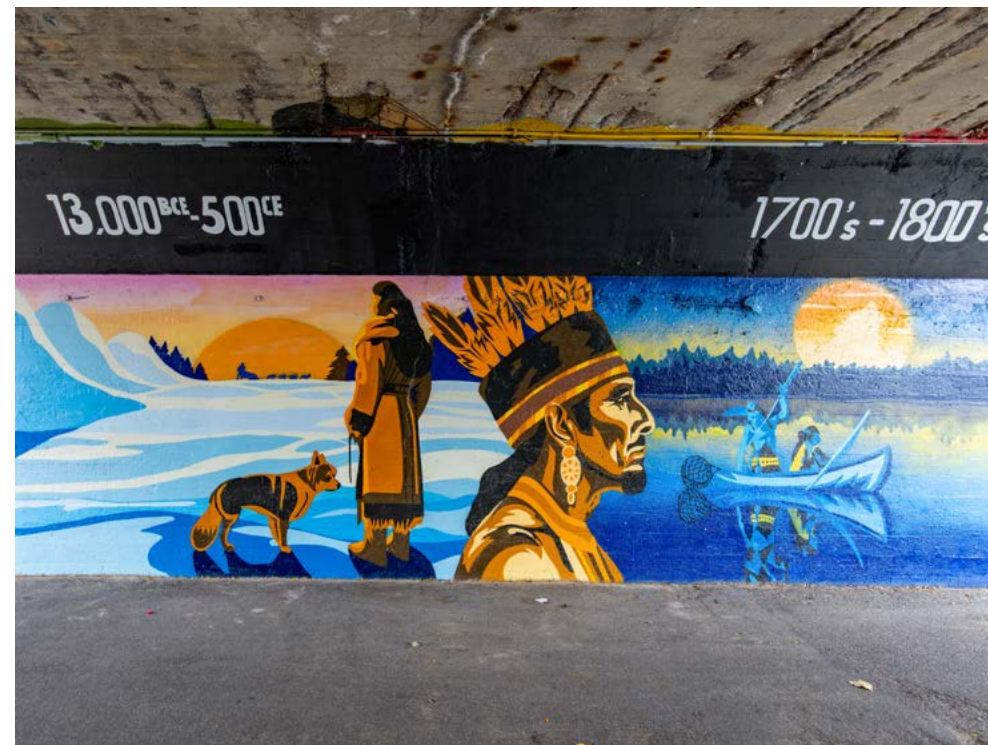






# Grand Legacy Mural

The Grand Legacy mural is an ambitious storytelling piece illustrating the history of the Grand River from the Ice Age to present day. It pays homage to the first people to inhabit this land and recounts the community's more recent journey to present-day Grand Rapids.



Above & Opposite: Grand Legacy by Edwin Anderson.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.







Above: Grand Legacy at night.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



Above: Grand Legacy in progress.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.







# Adaptability and Resiliency

133  
141  
153

Activate This Place  
Windows GR  
Social Zone Barriers

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges unprecedented in modern society. The daily rhythms of all aspects of life were upended as the world worked to adapt and stay safe. As is often the case in the most troubled times, art provided solace, hope and true inspiration.

The Downtown environment was simultaneously desolate and beautiful, marked by streets that were empty one day, alive with protest and activity the next. Within this context, DGRI worked with artists and the community to find opportunity in crisis.

Infrastructure became art, streets and pavement became galleries, and deserted spaces came to life in new and unexpected ways.



# Activate This Place

“Activation” can be a dramatically overused word in the practice of placemaking and city building. However, when applied with creativity and intention, activation fulfills its purpose. The following projects succeed in truly activating their spaces.







MADDI  
SON  
@SON.VISUAL





**Above:** The Kindness Machine by Andrea Zelenak reminded us to stop and take the time to focus on each other.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above:** Ticket Booth mural by Troy and Jonah Bosworth (father and son). **Below:** Mural by Rhiannon Sibbald.  
**Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.





Image: Joyful Formations by Rhiannon Sibbald.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



Above: Cypress Forest by Craig Rhyon Merchant.  
Photo Credit: Raúl Alejandro.



# Windows GR

Windows GR, led by Element 7, united artists to bring together the community during an incredibly painful time. Cynical actors attempted to hijack peaceful demonstrations protesting the murder of George Floyd. Their attempts were overshadowed by the positive collective action and voice of true Grand Rapidians and artists.



Above: The Grand Rapids community marching for racial justice. Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.







Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



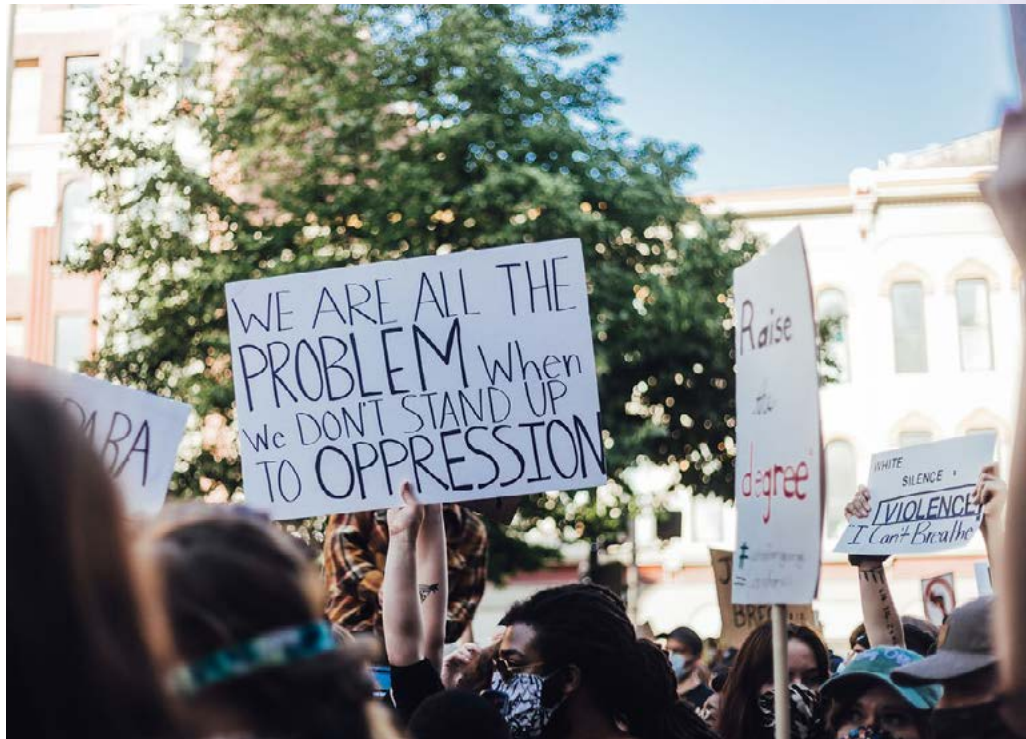
DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS INC.

Photo Credit: Sosa Studios.









Above: Demonstrations in progress.  
Photo Credit: Erika Townsley Photo.



Above: Work in progress by Brandon McCall.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.







Infra-  
became  
streets and  
became  
and  
spaces

structure  
art,  
pavement  
galleries,  
deserted  
came to life...

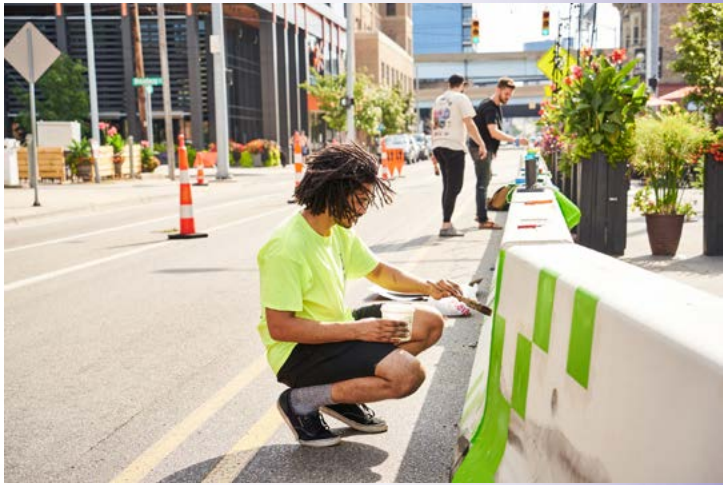




# Social

**Above:** Kelli Lorenz painting. **Below:** Tylan Davis wheat pasting. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.

# Zone



# Barriers

Creating safe spaces for people to gather outdoors during the pandemic reclaimed public space for people. Art elevated these spaces from safe to vibrant.



**Above:** Lisa Pavia painting. **Below:** Max Vanderforest wheat pasting. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.









**Above :** Maddie Jackson work in progress.  
**Below:** Bridgette McGee work in progress.  
**Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above :** Nick Nortier work in progress.  
**Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.







# The Art of Events

163	Movies in the Park & Movies on Monroe
169	Roll'n Out Food Truck Fest
171	Relax at Rosa
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The gathering of community in public space is a beautiful artform on its own. Events of all kinds that provide opportunities for people to celebrate in public space can help us see what is possible when we innovate and push.

From rethinking regulations to embracing the cold, our events represent an innovative point of view.



# Movies in the Park

&

# Movies on Monroe



Above: Movies in the Park from above.  
Photo Credit: Adam Bird.

Above: Movies on Monroe from above.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler.





Image: Families and friends enjoying Movies in the Park.  
Photo Credit: Photo captured for DGRI.



Pack a picnic and watch a movie in the park with a few thousand friends. And trust adults to have a drink without being fenced in like barn animals. Movies in the Park (and later Movies on Monroe) set out to highlight our beautiful riverfront public spaces using an age-old strategy: throwing a party.



Above & Opposite: Moments from Movies on Monroe.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler.

Photo Credit: (Top) Erika Townsley. (Middle) Adam Bird.  
(Bottom) Bryan Esler Photo.





# Roll'n Out Food Truck Fest

Above: The first Roll'n Out Food Truck Fest on Ionia Avenue.  
Photo Credit: Jeffrey Wilkinson.



There was a time when food trucks weren't allowed to operate freely in Grand Rapids. With the help of the community and some wonderful chefs, the Roll'n Out Food Truck Fest helped to raise awareness and change some minds.

Photo Credit: (Above) Bryan Esler Photo.  
(Below) Jeffrey Wilkinson.





Image : Les Creatif playing Relax at Rosa.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



## Relax at Rosa

Above : Visual demonstration of how to Relax at Rosa.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.





Relax at Rosa is a Thursday afternoon summer fixture Downtown.

People, particularly Downtown workers, gather for live music, food trucks and a break from the day.







From  
regulations  
embracing  
our  
represent  
point

rethinking  
to  
the cold,  
events  
an innovative  
of view.





# Rooftop Silent Disco



Dancing in the dark. In silence. On the top of a parking structure. Rooftop Silent Disco continued the DGRI tradition of reclaiming automobile storage space for people. Funky people.



Above : Shout out to Megan Catcho, DGRI's event wizard.  
Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.





Above : Rooftop Silent Disco at Studio Park.  
Photo Credit: David Specht.



# World of Winter







Above : Silent Disco at 555 Monroe from above.  
 Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



Now the largest winter festival in the United States, World of Winter had humble beginnings. By embracing the elements during the coldest months of the year, the festival has changed the Downtown experience and redefined civic life in the winter.

Above : Roaming Gnomes at Ah-Nab-Awen Park by Amigo & Amigo. Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.









# Return to the River

The simple goal of drawing people to the riverwalk to celebrate our riverfront public spaces created a new festival enjoyed by thousands. As the Grand River continues to evolve we plan to regularly welcome the community back for a celebration of music, art and culture.













# Las Canchas & World Cup Watch Party



Futbol is life. Like 555 Monroe, Las Canchas reclaimed underutilized surface parking for people. We now have street soccer courts alive with players of all ages and appreciators of the beautiful game.







# Staying Power



DGRI hosts traveling art exhibits from time to time, but sometimes a piece fits so well that we decide to adopt (buy) it.

This adds to the already incredible public art collection and provides a tangible memory of a unique experience.







**Above:** Massimals by Scroggin and Alley Gators by Cracking Art. **Photo Credit:** Erika Townsley Photo.



**Above:** Installations Starlight by Valerie Wahna and Messi. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.





# Community Led Events

**Above:** The Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians host the Great Lakes Snow Snake Competition. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.



Collaboration allows us to expand our point of view. This is just as important with the art we support as it is with the offering of events Downtown. With a focus on welcoming everyone regardless of background, DGRI supports events that make Downtown unique, vibrant and represent the multitude of beautiful cultures present in our community.



**Above:** Grand Rapids Asian-Pacific Festival and Glimpse of Africa Festival. **Photo Credit:** Bryan Esler Photo.





Above: Global Water Festival. Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.



Above: Grand Rapids Asian-Pacific Festival. Photo Credit: Bryan Esler Photo.







# Where We Go From Here