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Let's do something about the blank canvasses in Toronto



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An image is projected onto a tower at City Hall as part of the 2012 edition of Toronto's all-night art party, Nuit Blanche.

Tyler Anderson / National Post

In this instalment of our occasional series about what Toronto can learn from other cities, we look to Berlin and Philadelphia to see how they promote public art.

In Toronto last weekend, grown adults could be found spooning with human-shaped mounds of grass, new immigrants were taking part in a high-five championship and teenagers perched on skateboards watched a robotic chair collapse and then rebuild itself — they were so eager for it to succeed, they started chanting, “Chair! Chair! Chair!” as it finally raised itself up again into full form.

It was Nuit Blanche, of course, and a prime example of how Torontonians of all ages and backgrounds want to engage with public art. The problem is that it only happens once a year. For the other 364 days, we're left with the gallery scene (which can be intimidating), theatre and music events (which can be expensive), and urban art — graffiti, paper-and-paste murals and sculptures — which is more accessible and, for many, the “gateway” to our city's arts scene.

Though Toronto's street art is far from lacking, it could use a boost. Never mind New York and London, it's places such as Berlin and Philadelphia that offer plenty of inspiration for how to create an art-drenched cityscape without a ton of resources. The process involves reaching out to artists of all backgrounds and skill levels, adopting policy that encourages street-level art whether commissioned or not, and reevaluating where funds are coming from.

“In Toronto, there are a lot of blank canvasses,” says James Gen Meers, co-producer of an upcoming documentary called *Between The Lines*, about street art in the wake of Mayor Rob Ford declaring “war on graffiti” last year. “In Berlin, you see prolific graffiti everywhere.”

Indeed, since the wall came down in 1989, Berlin has steadily cultivated a reputation as one of the world's top art destinations. It boasts the highest concentration of practising artists in the world (about 5,500 of them) and the second-highest number of galleries (450), after New York. The cultural affairs department spends more than \$25-million annually on a total of 27 arts funding programs, while each neighbourhood also has its own separate budget for local projects.

Walk along the streets of Kreuzberg, in former West Berlin, and you'll encounter massive wall murals — a mix of paint, paper and glue — around every corner, usually by renowned street artists Blu, Roa, Vhils or Ash. There are so many sites that a new mobile phone app, Street Art Berlin, has just been developed to track each piece; 42-year-old artist and tour guide Uli Schuster is behind it.

"Berlin is a city of gaps and industrial ruins, which is like an open invitation for artists," he says. "In most of Western Europe, almost every square metre is owned by someone and has a specific use or design, so there's no space for change ... and street art demands space."

It also demands a relaxed approach to vandalism. While the majority of Berlin's largescale murals are commissioned works, there are plenty of others that are illegal — prosecution, however, is unlikely. This means tagging is prevalent and you're likely to see labour-intensive, politically motivated pieces alongside random scrawled names. But, all together, it makes the streetscape bold and colourful.

The artists — many of whom create street art one day, then work on private commissions the next — are drawn to Berlin for a number of reasons, the most important being that rent is dirt cheap. Miriam Bers, an art historian with GoArt! Berlin, explains: "The city understood in the early '90s that its creative people would be the ones to boost the economy, and so the government decided to let artists live and work in all the empty buildings in the eastern part of the city during the restitution process, which is ongoing today."

Obviously, these are different circumstances — Toronto isn't dealing with vacant apartment buildings and reunification. However, there appears to be a different approach to both making and experiencing art in Berlin, and it's something we might try to mimic.

Alice Gibney is an artist who grew up in Toronto, earned her MFA at Parsons in New York and then moved to Berlin to work. The 30-year-old describes the art scene there as "down to earth" and eclectic, "like do-it-yourself meets established galleries meets guerilla performances. It always surprises, and it's very accessible. Berlin has the energy you find in New York, but with more space and slowness.... No one is focused on how much money you make, but rather what impact you're making intellectually and creatively. And the turnout at art shows is huge, which is really exciting."

She is quick to clarify, however, that Toronto isn't a dead zone when it comes to art or the number of people who appreciate it. The Art Gallery of Ontario's programming has improved, she says, and there are new galleries opening all the time, "but the general atmosphere is more conservative."

The AGO, to its credit, might be trying to change this — its latest artist-in-residence is Mark Titchner, an edgy, Turner Prize-nominated artist from London who has just begun work on a large-scale mural going up on the west side of the Drake Hotel. This project is being executed in conjunction with the Oasis Skateboard Factory, based out of Scadding Court Community Centre, and the AGO Youth Council; it's also a collaboration with the city's new StreetARToronto (StART) program.

StART was launched this year to replace the roughly 20-year-old Graffiti Transformation program. Its main objective is to tackle vandalism (illegal tagging, for instance) while supporting the creation of high-quality street art, whether that's a mural painted by schoolkids or a more challenging Banksy-esque piece. Its funding hasn't changed — the annual budget is \$325,000, which in 2012 has been distributed to 23 projects — but the aim now is to "meet the new needs of street art in the city" and better reflect a new bylaw that allows graffiti on private property if the owner agrees to it.

"Street art is a new phenomena," says Elyse Parker, who is part of the team managing StART. "So the question is, what should the role of the city be in dealing with it? Certainly we're not out there reviewing every piece of art that goes up, nor should we be. But what gets painted on city streets is something all of us have to experience. So we're focusing on art as a vehicle, getting artists involved to raise the level of street art across Toronto, hoping it sets an example for others to follow."

In other words, if more buildings, bridges and tunnels are covered in high-quality murals with fewer examples of tagging, this leads to more of the same — better street art, less vandalism. It may sound like shaky logic, but this is where Philadelphia comes in.

Back in 1984, Philly launched the Mural Arts Program as part of its strategy to combat illegal graffiti. Local muralist Jane Golden was hired to reach out to those in the underground arts scene and try to redirect artists' talent into mural painting from tagging. It was a huge success — socially, economically and aesthetically — and the city now boasts more than 3,000 murals, while its related art education programs help thousands of at-risk youth in cultivating their talents.

“We’ve made some connections there,” Parker says. “Certainly, in terms of what Philadelphia has been able to accomplish, it’s been a great model — they have different funding structures and legal structures, so it has to be something that works for Toronto, but we’re excited to learn from them.”

Gen Meers echoes Parker’s enthusiasm for Philadelphia (which also launched North America’s first public art program in 1959), but is critical of StART, which he says requires signing waivers, providing contact information and completing other paperwork that many street artists are hesitant to do. Essentially, he says, when street art gets bureaucratic, it gets problematic. His co-producer, Kelli Kieley, agrees, pointing out this can “interrupt the organic creative process that is street art. ... I think the city should consider a more integrative approach.”

While they’re at it, the city might also want to speak to its planning department about the Percent for Public Art mandate, which was approved by council in 2010 and “recommends that a minimum of 1% of the gross construction cost of each significant development be contributed to public art.”

In other words, condo developers have to cough up funds for art that everyone in Toronto can appreciate. In theory, this is a good thing. But the art is always the same: A red canoe by City Place, a big thimble at Spadina and Richmond, a pair of what appear to be giant, wrought-iron testicles at Queen’s Quay. Some of it is fantastic, iconic even (Michael Snow’s *The Audience* bursting out the side of the Rogers Centre) but public art shouldn’t be relegated to fanciful sculptures that complement buildings. These may help the city achieve its “clean and beautiful” goal, but aren’t always challenging fare for audiences.

Ultimately, as Gen Meers puts it, “there’s so much the city could do if it stepped up its game.” What’s reassuring is that many people involved — artists, bureaucrats, average citizens — are doing just that. Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, for instance, recently enlisted mural artists to paint on the construction hoarding boards near Allan Gardens, which will remain in place for three years. It’s not officially part of the StART program, nor does it have to do with Percent for Public Art, she just did it and it works.

Peter Kingstone, a visual arts officer at the Toronto Arts Council, which is funded by the city and saw a record number of grant applications this year, believes small initiatives like this have an important snowball effect. The more art there is in the public sphere, the more people engage with it, the broader our definition of art becomes and the more we’re willing to spend on it.

“We’re trying to engage a more visual culture here,” he says. “There’s a palpable desire to look at things, to get out and experience art in the community. And I think all that should lead to more pressure to fund the arts. The problem is, everyone seems to want art, but no one wants to pay for it.”

