

Millions of years ago there was no plant color on earth but dense Jurassic green. Then, a silent explosion: seed-borne plants blanketed the world with color. This is the introduction to enlivening our own urban environment: public art that can inspire with light and color as it engages, educates and nourishes the spirit. Though not easily measurable, art has a fundamental human value. “We feel it when we see it” applies. Fortunately, cities around the world are increasingly realizing the social and economic bounties of public urban art ¹.

In Marin County a coalition of artists and organizations² is advancing the Canal Arts Initiative, promoting the creation and use of public art in East San Rafael and the Canal, home to the North Bay’s largest immigrant community.

San Rafael is a city divided, by a freeway: West, Downtown, merchants, office, retail, government and comfortable residences climbing into the hills. Galleries. Studios. Art.

East, to the Bay, flooding flatland, service and industrial businesses, dense housing and the overcrowded, underserved, immigrant community of the Canal, but a vibrant mix of mostly Latino cultures with colorful histories and traditions of food, music and visual arts, culminating in the annual

¹ <https://opticosdesign.com/blog/the-power-of-public-art-murals/> and <https://crpbayarea.org/painting/benefits-of-murals/#:~:text=Murals%20create%20a%20tangible%20sense,mentally%2Dill%20and%20homeless%20populations.> and <https://cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?t=63001.25&BlobID=73346> and <https://www.americansforthearts.org/2020/03/23/10-reasons-to-support-the-arts-in-2020>

² [Canal Alliance](#), [San Rafael Chamber of Commerce](#), [Marin Society of Artists](#), [Artworks Downtown](#), [Marin Open Studios](#), [Marin MOCA](#), [Team Works](#), [Parent Services Project](#), [MarinSEL](#), [Storek Studio/Architecture](#) and mural artists who created <https://canalalliance.org/other/you-are-home-mural-project/> and <https://canalalliance.org/other/canal-alliance-unveils-new-mural-empowered-through-education/>

gala Dia de los Muertos festival. But, among many other things, little visible art and color in its environment, art that could express the voices of its people, on the streets.

The California Arts Council recognizes the Downtown San Rafael Arts District. The next critically important step is to focus attention and resources on East San Rafael and the Canal.

Good news: The Canal area, historically the victim of benign development neglect, is now the center of a newly adopted Priority Development Area (PDA) ³ by the City of San Rafael, slated for planning for new development. Although San Rafael is without an Arts Master Plan, its draft 2040 General Plan for Arts and Culture commits to many initiatives, including:

“...create a San Rafael Arts and Culture Master Plan.”

“...develop a city-wide San Rafael Arts Council or similar leadership vehicle representative of the diverse government, non-government and community stakeholders that contribute to the vibrant arts and cultural activities that enrich the entire San Rafael community.”

“Recognize the value of the arts to the economy of the city, and the role of the arts in community revitalization.”

“Promote a stimulating and engaging environment through the greater display of public art.”

“Improve cultural equity and access to arts programming among lower income and non-English speaking residents.”

“Recognize the arts community as important stakeholders in local community and economic development strategies. Support artist engagement in planning and governance.”

“Support the efforts of nonprofit, private, and community organizations to apply for grants, raise funds, develop arts endowments, and promote community and business investment in art, cultural, and literary activities.”

“Establish a broad range of public and private funding sources to supports arts and cultural programs and activities.”

“Promote a stimulating and engaging environment through the greater display of public art.”

“Evaluate the feasibility of an Art in Public Places Ordinance (or “percent for art” program) that would establish a funding source and/or mechanism for increasing public art.”

“ Support participatory public art projects that engage the community, such as murals, 3D art, and street painting. Such projects should foster a greater understanding of local cultures, arts, and history and provide an opportunity to express neighborhood identity.”

“ Recognize space for the arts as a community benefit in municipal code and density bonus programs. Expand incentives for incorporating arts space and arts features in new projects and in vacant and underutilized space.”

³ <https://neighborland.com/sanrafael2040/plan-bay-area-2050-southeast-san-rafael-canal-pda>
and

<https://storage.googleapis.com/proudcity/sanrafaelca/uploads/2020/05/6.b-Plan-Bay-Area-2050-%E2%80%93-Priority-Development-Areas.pdf>

We propose three initiatives to match these lofty goals for the future:

1. First, with City support, an alliance of businesses and building owners, community organizations, citizens and artists bring visible transformation to the Canal, expressing its colorful mix of cultures.

We have a start. A public mural project that was originally intended for the Downtown, but now for the Canal, will be completed in 2021. A California Arts Council grant, with matching funds by Artworks Downtown, Marin Society of Artists, Storek Studio/Architecture and other donors will fund art work that will show the way to visually enlivening East San Rafael and the Canal environment.

2. Promote the use of color on buildings. A wall or an entire building, simply repainted with a lively palette, can make an engaging difference at little cost.

An inspiring example is the story of transformation is Tirana, capital of Albania: an artist is elected mayor of one of the world's most depressed, colorless, cities. Faced with no budget, he paints one building orange. Provoking surprise and interest, he continues with several buildings, and soon sees citizens responding, shops and galleries opening, streets cleaned, people gathering, and economic growth. Tirana is now a tourist attraction of color with a growing economy; the artist mayor is now the Prime Minister.⁴



⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/edi_rama_take_back_your_city_with_paint?language=en#t-2116

San Rafael’s Canal can become known for art and color on its buildings, coordinated, designed and facilitated by the Canal Arts Initiative and others as a service to building owners and the community.

A few samples of the many thousands of outstanding public mural artworks found around the world: ⁵



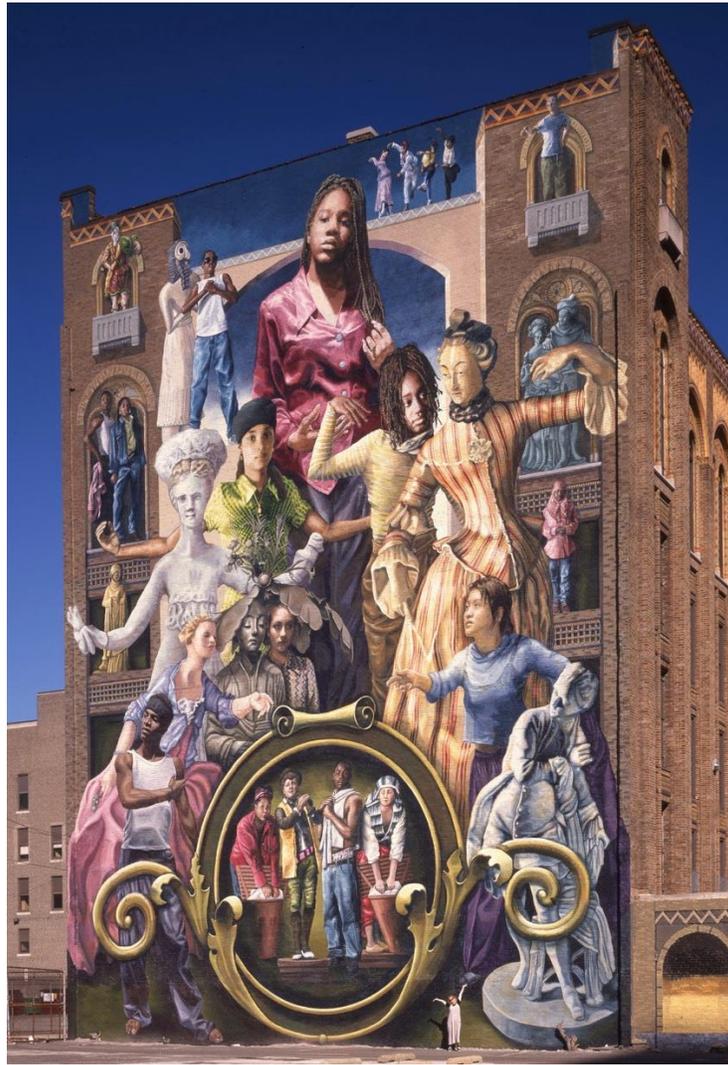
⁵ <https://streetart360.net/category/street-art-best-of/>





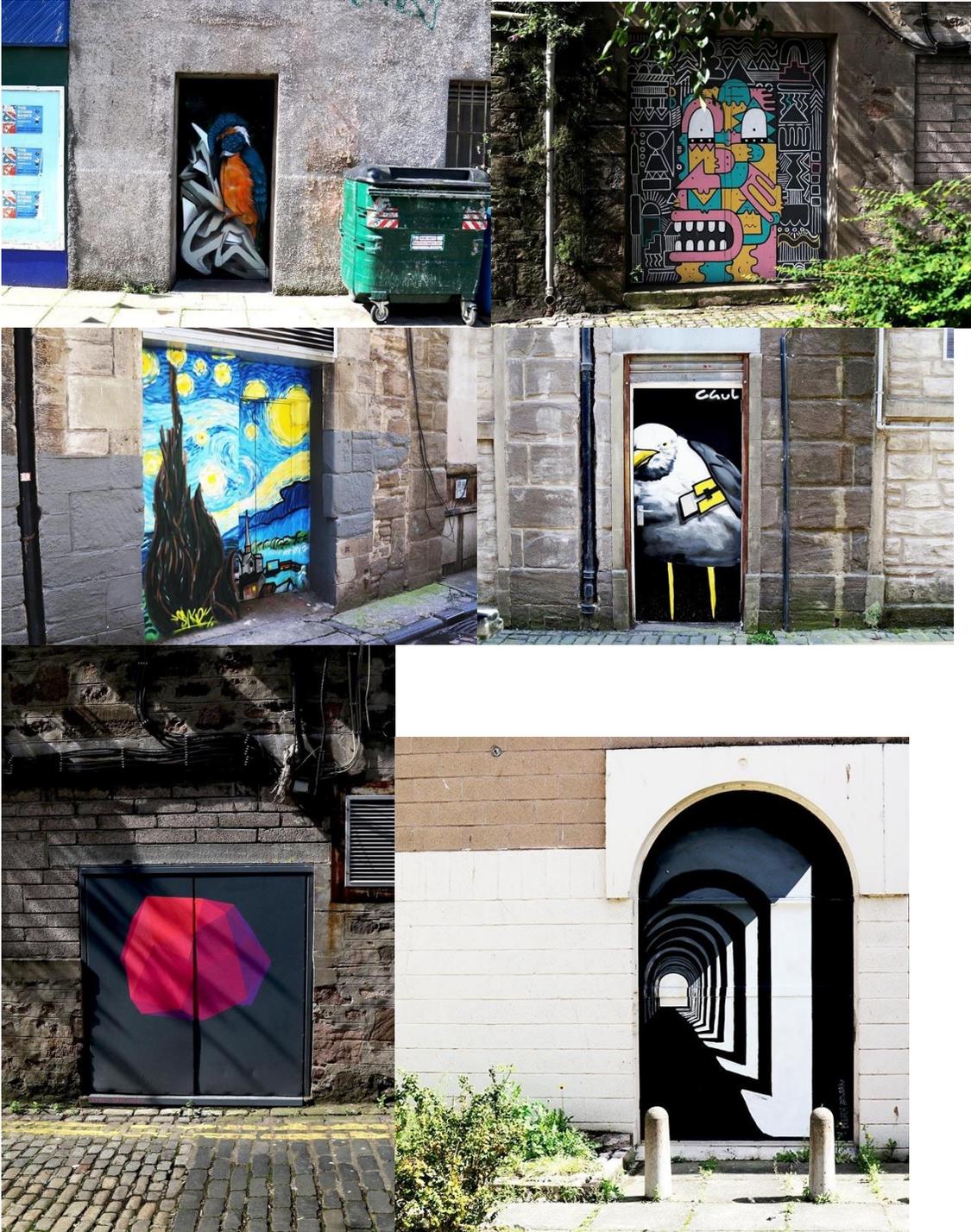






These last two are in Philadelphia, the U.S.A.'s largest public art program, recognized as the *City of Murals*. Since 1984, over 4,000 murals and works of public art have been created in Philadelphia. For 60 years the city's *Percent for Art* ordinance has required that one percent of the dollar amount of any construction project that includes City funds be devoted to the commissioning of site-specific public art, a policy typical of many cities. Their Mural Art Program employs approximately 250 producing and teaching artists every year, contributing about \$2.7 million annually to the economy.

Street Art work can be done simply: just a repainted wall, or, here in Scotland, art on doors: *Art Trail* in the streets of Dundee:



From StreetArt360:

“Thanks to the skills of 18 talented local artists, the Art Trail was created over the summer of 2017 and has been a massive hit! Monthly guided tours of the doors have been extremely popular, and maps are also available from a variety of independent cafes and shops so that you can grab one and get

exploring by yourself. The Art Trail has had fantastic support, with half of the doors being painted by artists who generously supported the project by donating their time and skills to help create something special in Dundee. Locals, visitors, businesses and the press have all been incredibly supportive, really showing their appetite for street art. Amazingly, the pieces have almost all survived without a scratch or tag, again showing the respect and appreciation people have for the project.”⁶

3. A public art program for the Canal would include participatory education elements throughout its conception and creation, with an emphasis on history and meaning, and reflection on its impact.

Canal Arts Initiative is inspired by the rich history of mural painting in the San Francisco Bay Area, crowned by Diego Rivera’s giant Pan American Unity mural for the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island, visited recently during its restoration by our muralists, and soon to be exhibited in the SFMOMA⁷.



The Canal Arts Initiative is being coordinated by Storek Studio/Architecture.

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⁶ <https://creativendee.com/2017/05/street-art-trail/>

⁷ <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/diego-rivera-mural/>

and <https://riveramural.org/fullmural/>