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The Economic Case for Public Art

Business Improvement Districts are investing in art, but what's the return?

BY ROB HULLUM NOV. 13, 2018 2:52 P.M.

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One of the murals in Black Cat Alley

In May, the Milwaukee Downtown Business Improvement District (BID) hired Gabriel Yeager as its first Downtown environment specialist. The new position is responsible for looking at spaces in the district—privately owned plazas, parks and sidewalks—and finding ways to bring life to them. A key component of this job is managing public art initiatives, which are becoming marquee projects for BIDs across the city.

In 2016, the East Side BID helped manage a \$43,000 effort to transform an alleyway between Prospect and Farwell avenues into **Black Cat Alley**—an outdoor street art gallery consisting of more than 17 murals. In 2017, Sculpture Milwaukee, a massive, 22-sculpture, \$850,000 project managed by the Downtown BID, came online. The Downtown BID also created Arts on Wisconsin Avenue—10 utility boxes painted by muralist Mauricio Ramirez. The now-defunct Kinnickinnic Avenue BID developed Bay View Street Canvas, which commissioned five local women to paint murals on the sides of neighborhood businesses. And the list goes on.

The rise of public art as a BID strategy is surprising even to some of the people most responsible for it. “Who would’ve ever thought 10 or 20 years ago that a BID would have a Downtown environment specialist?” asked Beth Weirick, CEO of the Downtown BID. “I think it speaks volumes that commercial property owners and stakeholders understand the return on investment affiliated with enhancing our public spaces.” But, what exactly is the return on investment and how is it measured?



Robert Indiana's "LOVE," which was a part of Sculpture Milwaukee in 2018

Quantifying returns based on coffee, beer and food sales to tourists at nearby businesses would make it hard to justify the costs. It is also difficult to imagine a business owner renting a storefront based solely on a mural. “I think that, if you tried to do a very linear mathematical evaluation of it, you may not find the answer you’re looking for,” said Tim Gokhman, East Side BID board member and director of New Land Enterprises, which owns much of the Black Cat Alley properties. “But, if you’re looking at it in a wholistic sense, you will.”

Anchoring Neighborhoods

Looking at it in this wholistic sense, art installations can become anchor institutions that define a neighborhood. Since Black Cat Alley was created, [Sip & Purr Cat Café](#) and [AXE MKE](#) have opened adjacent to the alley; [Crossroads Collective](#) food hall is slated to open this month; and the [Oriental Theatre](#) has recently undergone extensive renovations. Black Cat Alley program director Stacey Williams-Ng admits that Black Cat Alley alone did not spur that development but noted that “the eccentricity level is definitely ratcheting up” in the area. “People see that this is the neighborhood where you can go and eat pokē and pet a cat and throw an axe and do all of these fun things,” she said. “They all play off each other, and I 100% think that the street art grounds all of that.”

In many cases, the economic impact of public art on a business district is anecdotal. Gokhman noted that “there has not been a single time” he has walked by the alley without seeing people shooting videos, taking selfies or just admiring the artwork. “If you see a gaggle of teenagers that drove in from Shorewood or another neighborhood that have come to take pictures in Black Cat Alley, they stop to get a cup of coffee from Sip & Purr, or, if they’re older, they will go and get a drink at AXE MKE,” Williams-Ng

said. The alley has also been used for wedding photoshoots, advertising campaigns and fundraising events.



A mural in Black Cat Alley

There are other, less tangible, benefits to investing in arts and cultural amenities. In his seminal book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, author and University of Toronto professor Richard Florida writes, “By supporting lifestyle and cultural institutions like a cutting-edge music scene or vibrant artistic community, for instance, it helps attract and stimulate those who create in business and technology.” This way of thinking has seemingly been applied at the Downtown BID.

Attracting Today’s Workers

Weirick said that Sculpture Milwaukee—along with the other public art and placemaking projects the BID is working on—helps add the necessary “cachet” that will attract both companies and a talented workforce to the area. She cited technology giant Amazon’s search for a second headquarters as an example. “When you look at the things that they identify as being critical—sustainability, high quality of life, connectivity, transportation, a variety of things to do and safety—placemaking addresses almost every one of those aspects,” she said.

Still, effectively measuring these projects’ returns is an issue the arts community must address according to Sara Daleiden, a public art consultant for the Greater Milwaukee Committee and the Los Angeles County Arts Commission. “I work on this conversation nationally, and a big part of it is what our metrics are and how we are showing impact,” she said. “The arts, in many ways, have not been great at that. You can’t just say how many people [came to the installation]. Sometimes, it’s better to figure out how many dollars were spent there or nearby. We need some creativity around how we are assessing value, and then we need a commitment to tracking. It’s all possible. It just takes focus.” While more tracking may be needed in the future, public art has hardly reached its peak in Milwaukee.

The Cesar E. Chavez Drive BID, through its arts and culture program known as the Farm Project, recently partnered with Clarke Square Neighborhood Initiative on Soy

Quien Soy, a community art space that plans to install an outdoor art piece in the neighborhood.



The Migration mural while it was still in progress

On a Monday morning in late October, the Downtown BID unveiled the latest project from its Downtown Placemaking Task Force. Titled Migration, Philadelphia-based MIAD graduates CERA and Katie Batten painted a mural featuring birds and local landmarks on the inside of a Jefferson Street pedestrian bridge connecting Downtown to the Third Ward. The BID funded half of the \$30,000 project, with additional funding coming from Johnson Controls and a number of other sponsors.

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