

# In this hidden alley, a museum of modern art

By Natasha Mascarenhas Globe Correspondent, April 25, 2018, 1:49 p.m.

6



Jonathan Wiggs/Globe Staff

Stop walking so fast. Slower. No, even slower. And stop looking at your phone. Pause. Look around. There is beauty in the world.

In this hidden alley, the proof is all around you.

Cambridge's Richard B. Modica Way — also known as “Graffiti Alley” — is an 80-foot stretch of constantly changing graffiti, street art, signage, and posters. Now on its 10th anniversary, the alley has become a hallmark of Central Square, and the City of Cambridge.

On a recent Saturday, the stretch was covered with vivid images and urgent calls to action: Two hands, which doubled as rainbows, shook in agreement; a baby carriage painted in different skin tones read “Racism is learned.” Step closer and you’ll notice the rippled layers of paint that have accumulated over the years. Overhead is a ceiling crammed with graffiti tags in metallic reds and shocking greens.

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Sure, for those hustling to work or school the alley may seem like just a gritty passageway between street and parking lot. But for the more leisurely and present, the passage could be a conversation starter, a way to connect strangers.

At least that’s the vision of Geoff Hargadon and Gary Strack, the two friends who started this art movement on the outer wall of Strack’s restaurant, Central Kitchen, which lines one side of the alley.



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“It’s become an unstoppable force,” said Hargadon, 63, a financial adviser, referring to the graffiti that now blankets every available inch. “Everyone wants to be a part of it, somehow.”

Take Mary Leno, for example, a Cambridge resident who has visited the alley every day since it began. Leno, 77, says she has taken over 7,000 pictures of the art on these walls.

“I come every single day; it’s my daily route” she said, with her dog standing beside her. “It changes every day, and I’ve met people from all over the world.”

The alley was born after Hargadon and Strack became interested in the street art scene in 2006, and noted the scarcity of it in most of Cambridge and Boston.

The duo, who forged their friendship years before in the nearby Miracle of Science bar, decided to bring the art closer to home, or in Strack’s case, closer to work.



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The two men decided the zone should be self-policed and self-curated (Someone put up a fake street sign called Graffiti Alley, and while neither of the founders know who it was, they left it up.)

The City of Cambridge has even joined the fun: It added in a mural on the opposing wall, and a paneled glass canopy, maintained by the Public Works Department.

Jason Weeks, executive director of the Cambridge Arts Council, said, the city is committed to providing “robust support and dedication to artmaking in the public realm.”

In fact, he noted that Cambridge is basically OK with letting the art “creep” onto other locations near the alley, but whenever the city gets a complaint the Public Works Department responds quickly.

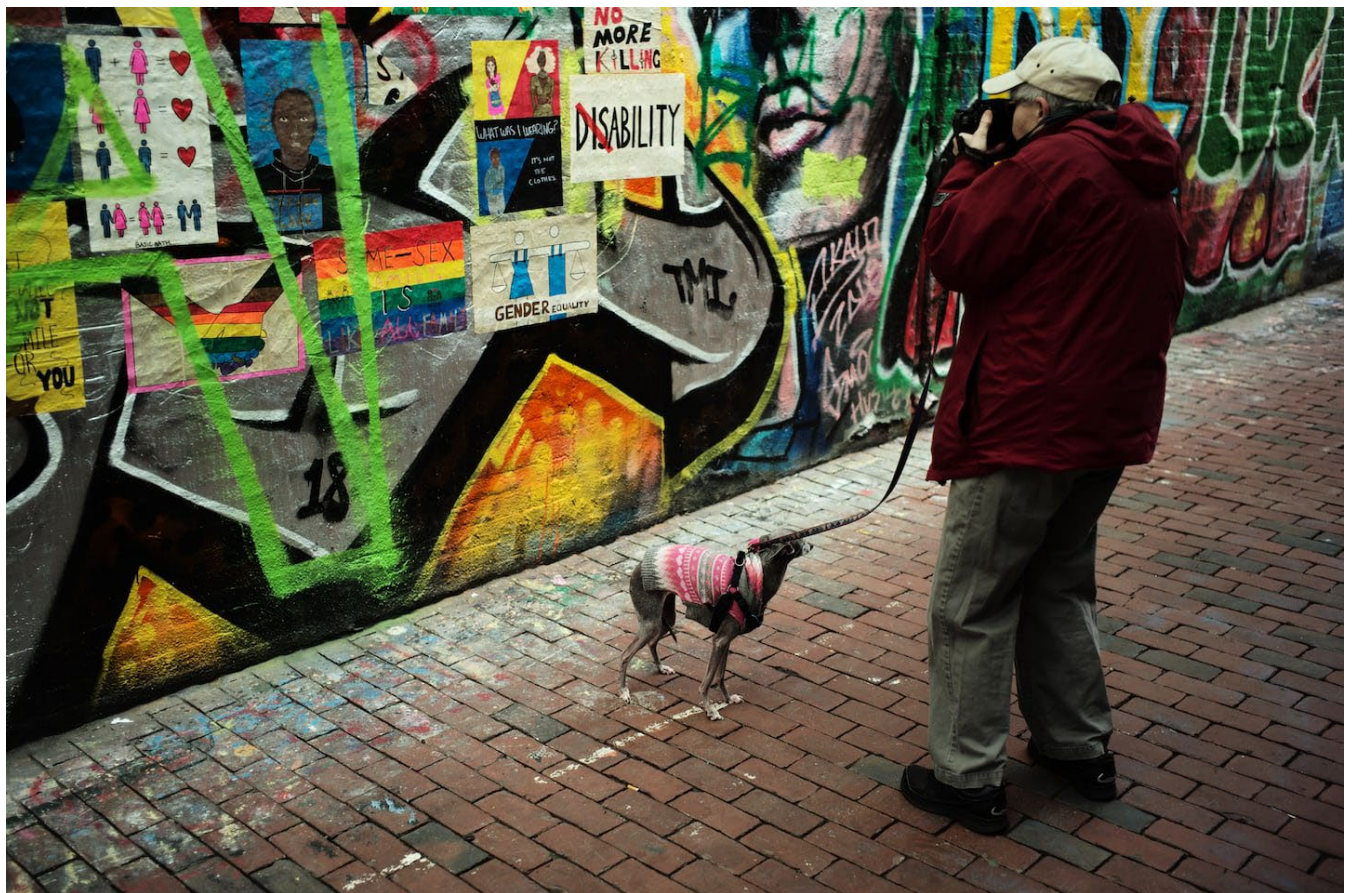
For Strack’s wall, there’s really only one rule: no spray painting during hours that his kitchen is in business. Too many fumes.

A decade ago, when Strack and Hargadon were getting started, they invited more than 30 artists from around the world to make their marks.

Since then other artists have joined in, painting alongside, under, and over each other.

“The work isn’t protected, and it’s not meant to be protected, and to me that’s part of the appeal,” said Hargadon. “You put it out there, and it’s not yours anymore, it belongs to everybody.”

“It’s a constant conversation I’m having with people every day, people respect and admire the street art scene now,” said Strack, sitting in his empty restaurant, hours before opening up the kitchen for business.



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Many agree with this assessment.

On a recent day, a man stood in the alley smoking a cigarette with one hand and eating an apple with the other.

“I can’t afford tickets to Florida, so I just come here when I’m feeling low and I’m just as happy,” said the 46-year-old who goes by “Blue” because a gypsy once told him that his aura was a mix of blue and red.

“I’ve been painting since I was 5 years old, but I’ve never felt like doing something in the alley,” he said, taking a puff. “I just leave this place as a painting that I admire, and that changes.”

However, Brian Wentworth, a street artist who goes by “bdub” and is a teacher at Muse PaintBar, says the wall’s ephemeral quality can be a hard thing to stomach.

“It’s a little frustrating when people spray over your stuff, but I guess it is what it is, it’s the art of letting go you almost never know how to do it as an artist,” Wentworth said, on a recent afternoon in the alley, spray paint can in hand.

Wentworth said he understands why some artists — which he calls Graffiti Kids — reject image and use the spot to tag their block-lettered, abstract names. He, however, likes to stick to pieces that have resonance and make people think.

“If you can make someone pause, and sit back and chat about what you’re doing that’s magical,” he said.

As Wentworth walked away after finishing, he left behind a pensive monkey, staring into the distance. Its hand was on its chin, and its eyes peered toward the parking lot that the alley leads to.

He joked that his art was a self portrait of him, as new, confused father. It’s hard to spend mornings just painting when you have a kid at home, he said. As he took a step back, people stopped, took pictures of the mural, asked questions, and complimented the work.

On the bottom right of the piece was his name tag, and on the other side of the painting, as a final touch, was a quote from scholar Noam Chomsky in white paint against a multicolor background: “The general population doesn’t know what’s happening, and it doesn’t even know that it doesn’t know.”



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