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20 Years of BeautifulCity

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Featured Story
November 2021



<https://youtu.be/1vE66CWQG1s>

In the fall of 2021, the City of Toronto launched [ArtWorxTO: Toronto's Year of Public Art](#). The program, which will run into 2022, features the development of public art projects within the city, both permanent and temporary, by local and international artists. It's the start of the City's [10-Year Public Art Strategy](#), "signalling Toronto's renewed commitment to public art," and "underscores a dedication to the arts sector as an essential component of a vibrant city." The connection of public art, and the arts as a whole, to vibrant cities is an important one: it recognizes the public benefit of having visually stimulating, engaging and thought-provoking artworks in our gathering places.



BeautifulCity Town Hall 2009, Meghan Janushewski, beautifulcity.ca 2009

2021 also marks the 20-year anniversary of [BeautifulCity.ca](https://beautifulcity.ca), a community-based initiative that ultimately transformed public and political support for arts funding in Toronto. Since the start of BeautifulCity.ca — a campaign to put a tax on outdoor advertising, and to invest that money in art in public spaces — an estimated \$100M has been collected by the City’s Third Party Sign Tax, and Toronto Arts Council’s annual grants budget has nearly doubled.

It all started with one billboard. **Devon Ostrom**, who spearheaded the BeautifulCity.ca initiative, was invited to present ideas to the City’s Culture Division for its upcoming culture plan in 2001 at the Creative City Youth Consultations. He was seeking ideas to make the city better, when he looked up: “The first real spark I can remember was after looking at an art piece by Recka [a graffiti artist] where they painted art over a billboard,” he says. “It didn’t make sense to me that advertisers had nearly unrestricted access to shaping the visual environment while people who wanted to make spaces better were buried in permits, fees or much-much worse.”

Ostrom led with two ideas: the first is that public space is for the public. Yet advertisements representing private interests hold visual space that residents can’t avoid. “The billboard tax and regulation aimed to be a moderating force in public spaces,” Ostrom states. The second idea is that

art is for the public, and can lead to the beautification of the city. Therefore, the reasoning was, a tax on billboards must be invested in the public in the form of art, and creative voices should get the opportunity to shape spaces as well. In addition to art in public spaces, BeautifulCity.ca advocated that revenue generated from the billboard tax should be invested in working artists and youth in underserved communities.

It took a lot of work to realize the initial vision. Ostrom recalls sending many emails, making many one-on-one phone calls, and maintaining detailed spreadsheets to mobilize interest and support among the arts community. **Manifesto Community Projects**, at the time led by **Che Kothari**, played a large role in growing support for the idea through its coalition of organizations, artists, designers, advocates and organizers. “Devon Ostrom’s ability to work with and galvanize young artists in support of bringing art to public spaces helped transform Toronto’s arts funding landscape” says **Susan Wright, Deputy Director, Toronto Arts Council**, who helped guide Ostrom through advocacy strategies.



Art is Power Walk, 2012

In all, a total of 60 organizations joined to form a coalition, including **Toronto Arts Foundation**, to advocate for the billboard tax and to have those funds invested in the arts. Deputations, town halls, surveys, an Art is Power walk, and relentless enthusiasm eventually saw the success of the initiative. In 2009 the billboard tax and regulation was passed. Following a legal fight that went all the way to the Supreme Court, the City's new sign tax was legally recognized in 2012.

The artists and community groups agreed that **Toronto Arts Council** should be the recipient of increased funding. TAC's position as an arms-length funding agency to the city, the fact that we're governed by artists, and the integrity of our adjudication process led arguments for this case. In our [Priorities for New Funding](#) visioning document that was released in 2012, TAC identified that of the anticipated increase, 50% would be directed to existing programs, and 50% would go to innovation and communities. For the latter, TAC would come to create seven new strategic programs, including **Animating Toronto Parks**, many of which fund art outside of the downtown core that's free and open to the public. In 2013, TAC began funding the youth arts organization **ArtReach**, which supports community-based arts initiatives that engage youth from equity-deserving populations. Today, TAC invests nearly 23.5 million annually in Toronto's artists and arts organizations.

A moment of inspiration sparked by art painted over a billboard grew to be a mobilizing force that garnered support from across Toronto's arts sector. This youth-led, grassroots, community-based initiative inspired the taxation of outdoor advertising, and ensured political support for a significant increase in arts funding. This year, the city and its residents are celebrating and experiencing the benefits of public art; a continued affirmation that art makes a city more beautiful, in so many ways.

LEARN MORE

[A visual timeline](#) c/o BeautifulCity.ca Facebook

BlogTO 20-yr anniversary article, [A simple billboard tax generated \\$100 million to make Toronto more beautiful](#)

TAC Supports ArtReach: <https://vimeo.com/68339379>

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Vital Signs 2013: Arts funding boost didn't come easily

How to fight city hall? Bring friends. And be persistent. That's how a coalition started by two people sprung millions for the arts.



Artist Devon Ostrom, 34, figured out a way to convince city hall to use billboard tax money to boost arts funding. (NICK KOZAK / FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By **PAUL MOLONEY** Staff Reporter
Tues., Oct. 1, 2013

Artist Devon Ostrom played a key role in convincing city councillors to use billboard taxes to boost long-term funding for the arts by \$22.5 million.

It took him 12 years.

There were times when Ostrom, now 34, felt like quitting in frustration. But he kept at it, and along the way learned some key lessons about how to advocate effectively.

Bring friends. And don't get mad.

Ostrom has since moved on to a new project, helping set up Friends of the Pan Am Path that would close gaps in existing pathways to create an 85-kilometre long, continuous cycling/walking trail from Pickering to Brampton in time for the 2015 Pan Am Games.

That project was warmly received by city council, which approved \$1.9 million in July. Ostrom's group wants to raise an equal amount to animate the route with artistic and community-focused installations.

Ostrom, who has cycled the route twice, said he took a different approach this time, working behind the scenes rather than building a public campaign, in part because the path seemed to fit the city's goal of developing facilities that will remain after the Games.

"We spent eight months pitching it to councillors, getting internal support and refining the idea. There was a deadline, and government was moving, so it was an opportunity to create some community benefits."

In contrast, the arts funding campaign was very public, including rallies in Nathan Phillips Square and boisterous advocates attending city council meetings.

An organization was set up to champion the cause. Called the BeautifulCity.ca Alliance, co-founded by Ostrom and Che Kothari, it consisted of some 60 organizations ranging from the Art Gallery of Ontario to suburban arts groups.

Partners in the alliance were key to moving reluctant politicians, he said in an interview.

"When we had councillors we needed to swing, it was mostly up to the organizations that had developed long-term relationships with those councillors. That was one of the main reasons we ended up getting so much traction."

But it was a long slog.

He had started out in 2001, dismayed by the number of talented artists living in squalor, making no money, despite the fact their work was adding tremendous value to the city.

He pitched the idea of funding arts by taxing billboards. He approached senior city cultural staff. The first politician he spoke to was Olivia Chow, now a Member of Parliament.

City council was giving less money to arts groups than other cities, and councillors vowed to change that. But when it came to doling out the money, other priorities won out.

"Funding increases were very, very small," said Claire Hopkinson, chief executive of the Toronto Arts Council, which receives city cash that it distributes through grants to artists and arts groups.

"There seemed to be goodwill, but we didn't seem to be making very good progress."

An apparent breakthrough came in 2009 when councillors approved a billboard tax. But they didn't take the extra step and earmark the cash for the arts, meaning it would be spent on other things.

Arts groups felt betrayed, and Ostrom remembers being "super angry" and "very frustrated." But he decided it was better to keep smiling.

"If you're angry, not only are you unpleasant to deal with but you also end up burning yourself out pretty quickly."

Councillor Joe Mihevc, who had been buttonholed several times by Ostrom, said it's wise to keep one's emotions in check.

"There is such a thing as a community advocate, full of anger, who wants things done yesterday and almost sets things up for the politicians to say no. That is not Devon. He has been frustrated by setbacks but he's always been a helpful presence."

Ostrom said he “gave up two or three times. There were certain points where I thought this is not a good thing to have in my life. But I guess I’m kind of tenacious.”

That tenacity paid off, the arts council’s Hopkinson said.

“It was such a long campaign,” she said. “Devon brought vision and creative energy but it was sheer persistence that carried the day. He kept reminding people of what they had promised over many years, and really, isn’t that the mark of a great advocate?”

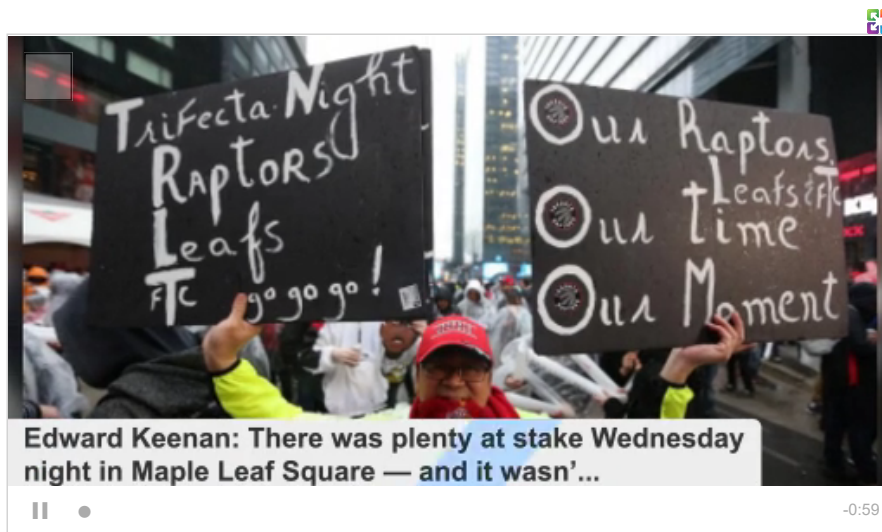
Ostrom built up credibility with councillors during the arts funding battle that helped him sell the Pan Am Path, Mihevc said.

“Credibility breeds credibility,” he said. “Devon became a fixture around here and people know to trust him.”

On balance, the experience has been positive, said Ostrom, who gives talks to community organizations on advocacy.

“In the end, I think it has been quite beneficial for me. I’ve met a lot of very interesting people and I’m able to execute projects at a higher level working with city stakeholders.

“I used to think city hall was the place where good ideas go to die. I don’t think that way anymore. I’m getting a little less jaded as I get older.”



HOME / NEWS /

Finally, arts funding

Celebrations at City Hall mark hard-fought victory for billboard tax campaign

BY **BEN SPURR**

JANUARY 17, 2013 12:00 AM

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Wade Hudson

"Arts programs helped me open up my mind and realize there's a world outside of Jane and Finch." - Jilly Black



The ground floor of City Hall doesn't often host a party. Lined with administrative counters, it's usually where citizens go to conduct the more mundane transactions of local government - applying for permits or paying their tax bills.

But on Monday night, January 14, the rotunda at 100 Queen West was bumping to the sound of hip-hop music, breakdancing and the unmistakable air of celebration. Hundreds of young people gathered to mark a victory that's being called a major turning point for Toronto arts funding.

A week before, Mayor Rob Ford's executive committee endorsed a four-year plan to use proceeds from the new tax on billboards to invest in the arts. Base funding will increase by \$6 million in 2013, and by a total of \$11.5 million in the three years after that. By 2016, Toronto will be spending \$25 per capita on arts programs and grants (up from \$19 per capita today), a target that council has endorsed three times since 2003 but failed to live up to until now.

Council signed off on the proposal on Wednesday, January 16.

The plan's success owes much to visual artist Devon Ostrom, who first floated the idea of a billboard tax to fuel the arts during the 2001 Creative City youth consultations. He and Beautiful City, a coalition of 60 arts groups, have been fighting to make it a reality ever since.

"It's going to do amazing things," says Ostrom of the funding boost. "Toronto is going to be a more vibrant place. There's going to be more art that people can enjoy. More young artists are going to come up and make huge waves internationally."

The billboard tax campaign has been arguably the most successful sustained grassroots effort in city politics in recent years. From the start, Ostrom's idea gained traction because it struck many City Hall players as inherently fair. Ads in newspapers or on television finance media content that the public wants, Ostrom argued, but billboards merely intrude on public space. A billboard tax would force advertisers to give something back in the form of public art.

After years of advocacy by the arts community, council approved the tax in 2009, only to have the industry challenge that decision in court. It was eventually upheld by the Ontario Court of Appeal in April 2012, and in November the Supreme Court sealed the victory by refusing to hear the industry's appeal.

City staff estimate that advertisers owe \$22.5 million in retroactive payments dating back to 2009, and going forward the tax is expected to bring in roughly \$10 million a year.

But it was far from assured that these proceeds would go to the arts, until Councillor Gary Crawford took the issue to Ford's executive this month. The tight-fisted mayor is not generally seen as a supporter of government-funded creativity, but Crawford convinced him to back the plan by framing it as an investment that would have an economic impact on areas like tourism.

The councillor also encouraged Ford to see the similarities between arts programs and his infamous football foundation, which the mayor claims keeps at-risk youth out of trouble.

"The mayor's a big sports buff. He understands the importance of sports to youth," says Crawford, who moonlights as a professional artist and part-time musician. "I said, 'Well, look at the arts - in many ways they're the same as sports. There are kids [who are] not interested in sports but the arts appeal to them, engage them and give them the focus and the desire to continue.'"

How the new money will be allocated has yet to be decided, but Crawford's executive committee motion recommended prioritizing, among other things, youth mentorship programs and two new local arts

service organizations in North York and east Toronto, areas where the arts sector has historically been underfunded.

If recent history is any guide, the new spending could help uncover major talent in marginalized neighbourhoods. Before the party kicked off in the rotunda Monday night, Juno Award-winning singer Jully Black told the crowd how she got her start through Fresh Arts. In the 1990s, that program, administered by the Toronto Arts Council, helped launch her career along with that of Canadian music icon Kardinal Offishall.

"It helped me open up my mind and realize there's a world outside of Jane and Finch," said Black. "I got a chance to share my art, share my craft and the gift that God gave me with others."

Although the new funding plan marks a watershed moment for Toronto artists, the \$25 per capita target the city is now on course to achieve is no longer the gold standard it was when council endorsed it 10 years ago. Since then, cities like Montreal (\$55 per capita), Vancouver (\$49) and Ottawa (\$28) have all surpassed that level.

Claire Hopkinson, executive director of the Toronto Arts Council, acknowledges that we have a lot of catching up to do, but she refused to let anything dampen her spirits as she watched the festivities Monday night.

"This is not a day for disappointment," she said.

"It really is a historic moment. Many of us can hardly believe it's here."

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 Tags **city budget, Toronto City Hall**

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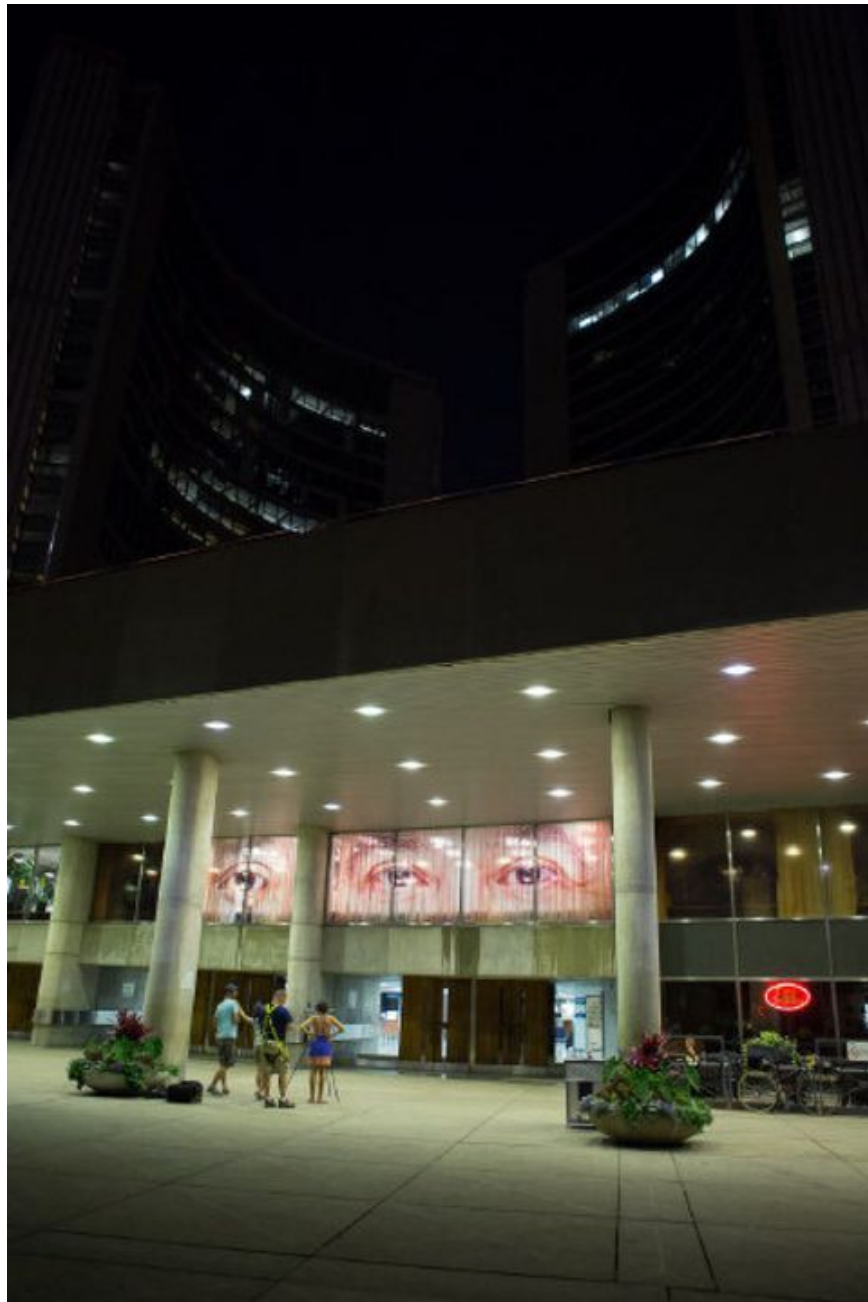
Politicians given a chance to see Toronto through Fresh Eyes

By **ROYSON JAMES** Star Columnist

Thu., July 5, 2012

The second-floor city hall offices overlooking Nathan Phillips Square have always provided a desirable vantage point from which to view the city. It's a prized spot in a prime location.

For decades, the city hall press gallery, led by the Star, the Sun and the Globe and Mail, occupied this elite locale right next to the offices of the Metro Chairman and the Toronto mayor.



'Fresh Eyes' are now looking out from city hall offices, part of a project by Arrivals.ca to highlight the value that new Canadians can bring to the decision-making process. The transparent photos are installed on the windows of city councillors' offices. (TAIWO BAH 2012)

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 1991 — with Star reporter Paul Watson filing dispatches that began with “Bombs dropping as I write” — television reporters doing their standup intro on the Square would signal up to us new developments as they happened.

If there was a spontaneous demonstration — or riot like the one on Yonge St. in the 1990s — journalists didn’t need the alert of a news release.

Skaters, jazz concerts, noon-hour foodfests, farmers’ markets and outdoor art festivals provide a steady flow of events on Toronto’s main public square, along Bay and Queen.

The toughest part about reporting from the centre of the universe was avoiding the distractions of beautiful women, handsome men, cavorting engineering students, irate taxi drivers, mas-playing Caribana delights, robed lawyers, and other diversions.

Above all, the lookout from the offices was a constant reminder that Toronto is a big, complex, diverse city with many parts and many voices. Predictably, the views and voices of newcomers were — and still are — most dimmed and muted.

At amalgamation in 1998, the press moved out to the backside of city hall and city councillors grabbed the prime-time spots. These councillors are today part of a symbolic and stunning art project staged to kick off events for the Pan Am Games, three years away.

For 100 metres along the square, huge eyes greet visitors from the massive windows of the councillor's offices. There is the eye of Mark Mutaahi of Uganda, Haniely Pableo of the Philippines, Luis Flores from Mexico, John McLawrence from St. Lucia and both eyes of Juan Cardama of Venezuela taking up Mayor Rob Ford's double windows over the main doors into city hall.

The transparent photos have been applied to the windows, allowing the city councillors to figuratively see through the eyes of newcomers to the city as the politicians physically look out the window through the translucent images.

Called *Fresh Eyes*, the exhibit evokes the value that new and diverse perspectives and ideas bring to council debate and the city's decision-making.

Toronto needs newcomers to fill jobs, bring new energy and innovation, pay taxes and prepare it for the future. The city's motto is "Diversity our Strength." But a look at the decision-makers on city council — very white, with few newcomers or recent immigrants — leads one to conclude that Toronto has a way to go before living out its ideals.

Till then, projects like *Fresh Eyes* are welcome reminders.

"We want to introduce Toronto to itself," explains curator Devon Ostrom. The values it promotes is a city that is open and welcoming.

The "eyes" chosen belong to diverse, year-old citizens from Pan American countries, who have overcome hurdles and now are giving back to the community.

In another innovative idea connected with the project, Arrivals.ca will run ads in the births and deaths section of Star classifieds, showing the images of the new citizens whose "fresh eyes" are on the windows of city hall.

As you read the birth and death notices in the Star, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays starting July 10, you'll see the stories of these 17 newcomers. It's a fresh way of looking at looking at Toronto: a city of births, deaths and arrivals.

Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. **Email:** rjames@thestar.ca



A hemisphere's worth of eyes will be on Toronto this summer as it hosts the Pan Am Games from July 10 to 26 and the Parapan Am Games from August 7 to 15. With 10,000 athletes, 250,000 visitors, 51 sports, 41 countries and 50 venues, and enough sporting fun to last nearly a month, you could say it's Olympian in scale, but the Games are even bigger than the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montréal and the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, and said to be the largest international multi-sport event ever hosted in Canada.

Negotiating it all is a daunting prospect; unlike other multi-sport events concentrated in one place, the Games are spread throughout Toronto itself and 16 municipalities in the surrounding region. Pick the sports you want to see and treat the Golden Horseshoe – this part of Ontario that wraps around Lake Ontario – as your playground during the Games. As Canadian landscapes go, it's unsung territory, an often surprisingly varied topography dotted with what were once small towns but are now urban centres near many of the venues. The Games are also an opportunity for the people who live in and around Toronto to be tourists in their own backyard, exploring destinations that are often overlooked. Think of the Lake Ontario shoreline, filled with beautiful beaches and bluffs, as a freshwater ribbon connecting it all together. But if that isn't enough to get you exploring, there's even a new Yellow Brick Road to follow: the Pan Am Path.

"The vision of the Pan Am Path is to combine the power of art and sport to create a path across Toronto," says Devon Ostrom, lead curator and co-founder of Friends of the Pan Am Path. "The Pan Am Path is an 84-kilometre, multi-use trail across Toronto and an active living legacy for the 2015 Games." In the spring and summer the path will be brought to life with a 14-week-long arts relay that will pass by community-driven art projects along the route. The path begins in the northwest corner of Toronto by the Humber Arboretum, the sprawling botanical gardens along the Humber River, containing over 1,700 species of plants and animals, making this place, found within Toronto's city limits, one of the most diverse ecosystems in Canada. The path follows

Cet été, tous les yeux d'un hémisphère seront braqués sur Toronto qui accueillera les Jeux panaméricains du 10 au 26 juillet et les Jeux para panaméricains du 7 au 15 août. Avec 10 000 athlètes, 250 000 visiteurs, 51 sports, 41 pays et 50 sites, et assez de prouesses sportives pour durer près d'un mois, on pourrait dire que c'est à l'échelle olympique. Ces jeux dépassent toutefois les Jeux Olympiques d'été de Montréal en 1976, et les Jeux d'hiver de Vancouver en 2010 : ce serait le plus grand événement multisports jamais organisé au Canada.

Le suivre dans son ensemble est un projet colossal, car à l'inverse d'autres jeux concentrés dans un endroit, ceux-ci sont dispersés dans tout Toronto et dans 16 municipalités des environs. Choisissez les sports qui vous intéressent et faites du Golden Horseshoe – la partie de l'Ontario qui épouse le lac – votre terrain de jeu durant cet événement. C'est un peu le parent oublié des paysages canadiens et pourtant, sa topographie d'une variété surprenante est parsemée de ce qui était jadis de petites villes. Aujourd'hui, ce sont des centres urbains proches de nombreux sites des Jeux. Ce sera aussi l'opportunité pour les résidents de Toronto et de la région de faire du tourisme sur le pas de leur porte en explorant des destinations souvent négligées. Les berges du lac Ontario, bordées de belles plages et falaises, constituent un ruban d'eau douce, véritable fil conducteur entre les sites. Si tout cela ne vous transforme pas en explorateur, il y a même une nouvelle Route de Briques Jaunes à suivre : le Pan Am Path.

Previous page

Taking the plunge at the CIBC Pan Am/Parapan Am Aquatics Centre. [Jetez-vous à l'eau au Centre aquatique CIBC des Jeux.](#)

Above left

Panoramic views from the Delta Toronto. [Vue panoramique du Delta de Toronto.](#)

Below

Devon Ostrom, co-founder of Friends of the Pan Am Path. [Devon Ostrom, cofondateur du Pan Am Path](#)





Above
Space to cool down in: the lofty lobby at the Delta Toronto. [Espace détente, le lobby du Delta Toronto.](#)

Right
Feeling peckish? Take a break from the action for lunch at Blacksmiths Bistro in Unionville. [Vous avez une petite faim? Faites une pause-dîner au Blacksmith Bistro d'Unionville.](#)

the Humber from there down to Lake Ontario where it runs along the waterfront, passing through downtown Toronto, and continues up the Don Valley, crossing through the unexpectedly lush Gatineau hydro corridor to Highland Creek where it meanders back to Lake Ontario and eventually Rouge Beach at the Pickering border. Befitting the sporting nature of the event, it encourages visitors to use their own steam to see the Games. Ostrom suggests that people check the path's website (panamath.org) for the events calendar and a map designed for out-of-towners that can be downloaded ahead of time to save on data fees.

Though it doesn't reach the municipalities that are farther afield, the Pan Am Path does connect four venues along its route and can be used as inspiration to venture out and discover locations that stretch from Oshawa to Welland. The Pan Am Games website (toronto2015.org) lists all the ways to reach each venue, including extensive public transportation and cycling options. There are shuttles from train stations to the venues, but in the spirit of the Pan Am Path, take your bike on a GO Transit train or bus and explore the surrounding area, too. As you choose the sports and locations you'd like to see, go to the Pan Am Games ticketing website to easily purchase available tickets (toronto2015.org/tickets).

« Le concept du Pan Am Path est d'associer le pouvoir de l'art et du sport pour créer un chemin à travers Toronto », dit Devon Ostrom, conservateur en chef et cofondateur des Amis du Pan Am Path. « Il s'agit d'une piste de 84 kilomètres à usages multiples qui laissera un héritage actif après les Jeux de 2015. » Au printemps et en été, le chemin prendra vie grâce à un relais artistique de 14 semaines qui suivra des projets lancés par les communautés sur cet itinéraire. Le chemin commence au nord-est de Toronto, près de l'Arboretum Humber, ce vaste jardin botanique près de la rivière qui recèle plus de 1 700 espèces de plantes et d'animaux. Sur le territoire de Toronto, c'est l'un des écosystèmes les plus variés du Canada. De là, le chemin suit la rivière jusqu'au lac Ontario dont il épouse ensuite la rive, traverse le centre-ville et continue en remontant la vallée Don avant de traverser l'Hydro Corridor de Gatineau, à la végétation luxuriante, jusqu'à Highland Creek, d'où il retourne au lac Ontario pour finalement atteindre Rouge Beach à la limite de Pickering. En accord avec le genre de l'événement, il encourage les visiteurs à utiliser leurs muscles pour se rendre sur les sites des Jeux. Ostrom suggère de consulter le site web du chemin (panamath.org) pour voir le calendrier des événements et une carte conçue pour les nouveaux-venus que l'on peut télécharger à l'avance pour éviter les frais d'accès.

S'il ne va pas jusqu'aux municipalités les plus éloignées, le Pan Am Path relie quatre sites et peut servir d'inspiration pour sortir et découvrir des endroits allant d'Oshawa à Welland. Le site des Jeux panaméricains (toronto2015.org) donne la liste de tous les moyens d'accès à chaque site, notamment les nombreux transports en commun et les pistes cyclables. Des navettes relient les gares de train aux sites, mais dans l'esprit du Pan Am Path, emportez votre vélo dans un train ou autobus GO Transit pour explorer les alentours. Une fois vos sports et sites choisis, réservez facilement vos billets sur le site des Jeux (toronto2015.org/tickets).

La gare Union est votre point de départ pour ces Jeux et, si vous venez de loin, descendez au tout nouvel hôtel Delta de Toronto, relié à la gare par le PATH, le réseau souterrain de Toronto.





Devon Ostrom

in the art world. Governments tax things, and the government in question, led by a thin majority of David Miller supporters, certainly seemed to dig on art.

But when we speak, in March 2010, Ostrom is exhausted, and ready to hand over the reins. 'City Hall wasn't designed to be fertile ground,' he says. 'It's barren. It takes an inordinate amount of effort. There

are some serious problems with the way that the City deals with citizen-led initiatives, and that's something which requires a lot of thought at the City.'

Insert a pithy rumination on the relationship between volume of darkness and proximity of dawn: since our chat, the tax's existence was approved, and BeautifulCity.ca, an alliance of Manifesto (with which Ostrom also works) and some of the city's public-space activists secured slim political support for a portion of the money to be directed to the arts-funding envelope.

It's an interesting study in how a simple proposal blossomed – or mutated – into a series of discrete but overlapping struggles. But it's also not what the alliance of mostly young activists was promised: 100 per cent of the tax revenues were supposed to go to the arts. In 2010, a portion went towards creating and staffing the enforcement regime, and even that was hard-won. As this book goes to print in October 2010, the three remaining news-media-anointed mayoral candidates have all promised to devote the money towards arts funding over their first term.

Whatever the outcome, the coalition stands as something of a miracle: dozens and dozens of youth, many from outside the core, poured their spirits into a City Hall often perceived to waver between indifference and hostility. But doggedness knitted a

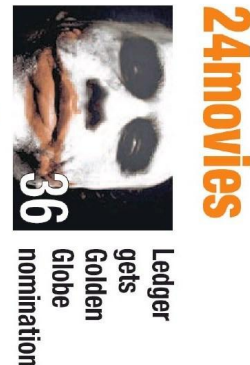
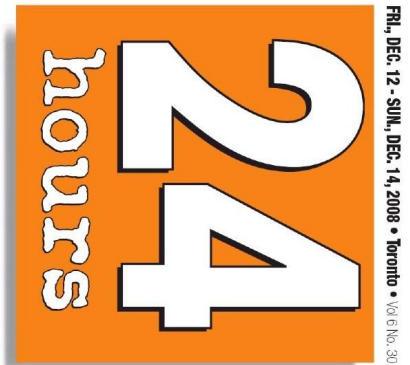
loose network of young artists and arts workers into a constituency that council had to respect and even court. Informal jam sessions organized by the activists and attended by influential councillors – some of them members of the budget committee – did more to illuminate the political process than the entire press corps did in the eight years since Ostrom first proposed the tax.

Those are all guidelines Devon Ostrom also swears by. He is the brain behind the city's new billboard tax. A quiet, unassuming artist, Ostrom came up with the idea eight years ago. It went like this: billboards are ugly. They clog public space to convince us to buy things. Why not tax them for that privilege, and use that money to fund public art? He called it the Beautiful City billboard fee. City Council finally approved it in early 2010.

The story of the Beautiful City campaign is inspiring in many ways. Hundreds of young artists took on City Hall and learned how to lobby: they paid for Environics polls with painted canvasses, they met with the residents' associations of wards with intransigent councillors in the hopes they would apply the right pressure to flip a vote and they often arrived at council meetings with a laptop and internet link, so 4,000 people would be alerted, for example, that Councillor Norm Kelly was trying to exempt electronic billboards.

'There were sixty calls to his office before he finished his speech,' says Ostrom.

A whole other chapter should be written on that organizational flow chart – i.e., how do you mobilize sixty people to call



an office in a matter of minutes? Ostrom is thinking about teaching a course on lobbying for activists. I hope he does.

Throughout the trajectory of his campaign – innumerable public consultations, hundreds of meetings with councillors and all the levels of committees – Ostrom became intimately familiar with the power of the city's bureaucracy to influence the outcome.

Near the end of the campaign, a single word change silently appeared on the proposal to go before council: 'funding' was replaced with 'offset,' meaning the new money brought in by the tax would replace the current arts funding rather than boost it.

Where did that come from? He still doesn't know.

'Bureaucracy can kill,' he says. The flip side, though, was that a bureaucrat alerted him to the change.

Over the years, Ostrom has sought out sympathetic people inside the system. They've become his guides around blockages and red flags to problems.

That's a key, he thinks, to success at City Hall. 'If you get good relationships with civil servants, you are halfway there,' he says. 'Council can wiggle and waffle, but if you can get the bureaucracy to buy in, it's very hard to stop that beast once it's going.'

His other ringside rules? Make sure you are learning stuff and having fun, and don't dismiss your opponents – listen to them. 'It's important to hear what people's concerns are,' he says. 'There's something to be said for not looking at people as enemies right away. People open up channels you don't think will open, and most of the time they have legitimate concerns. Things get stronger if you can at least listen to what they have to say.'

Excerpt by Catherine Porter and Mike Smith, 'Local Motion: The Art of Civic Engagement,' Coach House Books, 2010.



Off the streets, into the ROM

Curator Devon Ostrom looks at works in the Housepaint, Phase 2: Shelter exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum Thursday. It is the first time a collection of street art will be on display in a major Canadian museum and will open to the public on Saturday, p. 6

Asind Poel 24 HOURS

Friday's weather: Cloudy with chance of flurries. High -3 C. Low -12 C

PLACEMAKERS

THE PEOPLE WHO ARE SHAPING OUR CITY

→ DEVON OSTROM

Beautiful citybuilder

WORDS BY TODD HARRISON PHOTO BY JOE LE

In mid-July, the much-loved Hug Me Tree that stood for years at the corner of Queen Street West and Soho Street was restored after being knocked down by a wayward car last summer. Devon Ostrom, co-founder of the urban arts collective THEM, was instrumental in preserving the tree, and he sent *Spacing* photos of the resurrection process — 100 of them, to be precise. Of a tree.

That kind of passion makes Ostrom one of those people who you always want on your side. He's unflinchingly dedicated to his projects, which lately have included THEM, the Manifesto Festival, an urban arts installation at the ROM, and the Beautiful City Billboard Fee (of which *Spacing* has been a signatory supporter from the outset). He has a remarkable ability to get the ear of people you might not expect to have a tremendous amount of interest in street art, particularly institutions and politicians. Best of all, though, he does this in a way that is articulate and impossible to ignore.

Growing up in Ottawa, Ostrom was turned on to street art by a professor at his arts high school. He worked as a set designer after graduating, then created stage backdrops for raves and the World Electronic Music Festival. Soon, though, he began to feel the need to help other artists — particularly those working in the public realm — access resources

and opportunities. "My mom was an artist and community organizer," Ostrom says, "and my father was a civil engineer. So I'm kind of like a weird mix-up of those two fields: somebody who can figure out processes and communication, and then I also have an arts background as well."

From this desire sprung THEM, a Toronto-based organization that supports an international collective of urban artists. With THEM, Ostrom organized exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario and laid the foundations of the Beautiful City Billboard Fee (BCBF) initiative. He also curated two exhibitions for the 2008 Luminate Festival: *Livingspace* in Regent Park, and *Housepaint* — a collection of canvas houses painted by street artists and

installed on the site of the former Tent City at Lake Shore Boulevard East and Cherry Street. When Ostrom decided to auction the *Housepaint* canvases on the steps of the ROM, though, something pretty amazing happened: "They liked them, so they invited us indoors," he says. "But we thought it would be a little bit boring just kind of plunking a bunch of street art inside the gallery. And so the idea we came up with — and this was also because we didn't have enough time to properly plan out a full show — was to have it sort of evolve and keep changing." So Ostrom invited artists to add to the exhibition throughout its run, which ended in July.

Ostrom calls the ROM exhibition "kind of serendipitous," but he's selling himself short; there's a reason the museum opened its doors to him, at the core of which is his disarmingly measured approach. It's a skill he honed while earning a MA in Creative Curating at Goldsmith College, University of London, and it's the reason for the success of the

BCBF. The proposal would see a small charge levied on every billboard installed in Toronto and the proceeds funnelled to a variety of public arts projects, including beautification initiatives and live performance events.

Ostrom's defence of the idea covers a lot of bases: he acknowledges that the funds will mitigate the visual blight of billboards on our city's urban environment, but then goes much further. "This is a chance for Toronto's reputation to pretty much explode on the world stage," he says. "We're not known for being passionate about the aesthetics of the city. It's changing a little bit now, but we're still thought of as a fairly ugly city. And the economic spinoff effects are really amazing, too: for every one dollar spent in the regional economy on art, eight more are generated."

It's sound reasoning from a reasonable guy, and City Hall is paying attention; the proposal nearly made it to an Executive Council meeting in June, but it was put off due to legal concerns about the strength of the bylaw's wording. It will likely re-emerge later in the year, but the setback was a blow to the BCBF team, who had organized a strong lineup of speakers for the meeting. But Ostrom remains confident that, in the end, the proposal will pass: "There are enough councillors and enough people that do see that strong connection between what billboards do and what art does."

For proof of what urban art does, and instructions on how to do it, Ostrom and his projects are as good a blueprint as you could find — in Toronto, or anywhere else for that matter. "My practice is kind of all over the place," he says. "I like to work generally in art in the public sphere, but I like to do gallery shows as well. I like to blur the lines between the two." ↑



Freedom on the inside

Matt Semansky, *Freedom on the Inside*,
EyeOpener Tuesday, November 16, 2004



An inmate-patient in front of the Mural. PC Devon Ostrom, 2002

Stereotypically, artists are seen as lonely, misunderstood geniuses who go mad; social recluses who reflect society while condemned to its margins. From van Gogh to Picasso, the stories of creative brilliance coupled with fragile egos are all too familiar.

And then there's Devon Ostrom.

Ostrom doesn't rail against the world—he investigates and invests in it. At 25, he is already a veteran of Ontario's arts community, having spearheaded and contributed to numerous projects, including exhibits for the World Electronic Music Festival and the Art Gallery of Ontario. He is the curator at THEM, an organization that provides resources for Canadian artists. Ostrom has also received certificates in non-profit management and human resources management from Ryerson, where he is currently in his first year of the Art and Contemporary Studies program. It's a resume that could intimidate people twice his age, but Ostrom is bluntly modest.

"I don't even consider myself an artist most of the time," Ostrom says.

Those who've seen Ostrom's work may call this statement into question, but the lanky Ottawa native can at least lay claim to being an innovative project co-ordinator.

Perhaps the most impressive example is the striking mural that Ostrom and five other artists designed and painted at the maximum security unit at Kingston Penitentiary.

Not only did he contribute creatively, but he also oversaw the financing of the project and worked for more than a year with staff and inmates, incorporating their input into the final painting, which was completed in the spring of 2003.

"Working with the inmates was fairly troubling at first because of some of my obvious perceptions, but in time you start to understand the tragedy in some of these people's lives."

Ostrom was drawn to the Penitentiary project out of a desire to test the ability of art to inspire social and psychological change. Indeed, the gymnasium mural already seems to have made a difference in the lives of the inmates. Jean Folsom, a clinical psychologist at the Penitentiary, collaborated with Ostrom on the initiative and says the results speak for themselves.

"The inmates have greatly benefited from having the dull, drab walls of the gym turned into a beautiful mural. Some inmates were reluctant to send pictures home before, because the background looked so much like a prison. Now they have a nice background to use," says Folsom. She credits Ostrom for both his organizational skills and his insistence on letting inmates contribute to the project. Ironically, Ostrom says the finished mural doesn't appeal to him on an aesthetic level. "I personally didn't find the final product to be something that I'd want in my house. But for the audience we were doing it for, it's exactly what they wanted. My sense of artistic aesthetic probably wouldn't turn them on at all," he says.

All of which goes back to Ostrom's team-player personality. Although he still finds time for his own art, he doesn't intend to pursue a career as a professional artist. Instead, he will continue to add to his education and his experience as an arts coordinator.

"Coordinating is something I find satisfaction and a sense of purpose in," he says. The staff and inmates at Kingston's prison are thankful for his sense of purpose, and they clearly won't be the last to benefit from Ostrom's belief in the healing value of art.

LET'S TALK

Regional News Ontario Region

A Feast for the Eyes

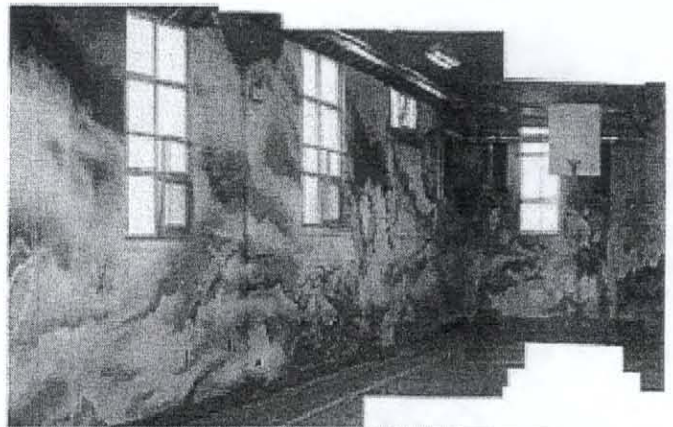
By Jean Folsom, Director of Psychology and Rehabilitation Services, Regional Treatment Centre of Ontario and Devon Ostrom, Co-founder and Artistic Director, Foundation for Advancement of Young Urban Artists



In the summer of 2003, a group of young artists from Toronto transformed the drab walls of the Regional Treatment Centre's gymnasium into a bright and colourful feast for the eyes. In celebration, an unveiling ceremony was held, attended by institutional staff, the citizens' advisory committee, the artis-

tic director and an artist from the Foundation for the Advancement of Young Urban Artists, the patient committee and a local newspaper reporter.

The mural was designed and painted by the Foundation for Advancement of Young Urban Artists, under the leadership of Devon Ostrom. The foundation had obtained funding for the project from the Canada Council's Inter-Arts Program. The artists believe that art, when done with the consultation and involvement of the community, can have a positive effect on the psychological state of its members, thereby improving the quality of their lives. The Canada Council funding provided the foundation with an opportunity to examine this belief in a closed prison setting. Foundation members had been encouraged by reports that large-



An RTC patient in front of the soaring eagle section of the mural.

scale murals in the City of Philadelphia had helped foster a sense of community and a decrease in the rates of delinquency and truancy.

Because of their strong belief in the importance of community involvement in art, prior to beginning the project, members of the Foundation met with the patient committee on several occasions to discuss the general style, provide concept drawings and decide on a final design.

Following the completion of the mural, the foundation set out to assess its effect on the population. A short questionnaire was circulated and two small focus groups were held. The population were very happy to have had input into the design from the start and appreciated that many of their suggestions were taken into consideration. Because of this, the vast majority was pleased with the final outcome. Offenders say the gym is a much nicer place to be now and the mural has generated a lot of pro-social discussion. It has also provided a welcome backdrop for inmate photographs to send home to families.

Perhaps the best indicator of its success is that it has led to murals being created by offenders, with assistance from staff, in two other areas of the institution. This speaks strongly for the appreciation of art and for its value in enhancing the lives of the offenders at the Regional Treatment Centre.