



## The Public Eye

Subsidized street art is here to stay in DC, no matter the administration | *By Brendan L. Smith* |

### OFF THE WALL!

*Clockwise from top:* MuralsDC helped fund the Sherman Avenue project, *Seasons in the City*, to teach kids about urban blight. Nonprofit Albus Cavus advances its art-focused mission in outdoor classrooms. *From Edgewood to the Edge of the World*, supported by a grant from the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities, came from DC's Summer Jobs program, which included 10 workshops for kids. MuralsDC's wood mash-up came from a city-funded Media Arts Camp led by artists Billy Colbert and Tim Conlon.

Mayor Adrian Fenty seemed to have unleashed a torrent of energy and talent to make Washington a more artful—and art-filled—city. It turns out he had some help, and those folks are here to stay.

In the war against graffiti, city workers usually fight paint with paint. But whitewashed walls merely offer a fresh canvas for taggers who return in the dead of night with shaking aerosol cans. Enter MuralsDC. The partnership between the DC government and local arts groups offers would-be vandals a chance to create something more lasting. Established in 2007 by former Fenty ally Councilman Jim Graham, the nonprofit has enlisted local artists and students to create 27 murals across the city, transforming graffiti-prone walls into public artworks that help erase urban blight.

"People love to see more art in the street and their lives," says Peter Krsko, co-founder of the public art group Albus Cavus, which works with MuralsDC. "It's a very thoughtful response to graffiti and vandalism in the city, one completely different from the usual means of painting it gray and sterile again."

MuralsDC has channeled the outsider vibe of street art into public art projects that reflect the unique identities of District neighborhoods. Disengaged youth can learn to "look at themselves as artists rather than as rebels without a cause," says Gloria Nauden, executive director of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, which oversees the program's \$100,000 annual budget. The commission plans to add up to eight new murals in 2011, along with a new program to create 25 temporary public art installations at pop-up locations around the city. "There will continue to be a lot of investment in public art and expanded definitions," she says.

To wit, the latest project by MuralsDC isn't actually a mural. As drivers slope down Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue into Anacostia, they see a single-story building covered entirely by wood blocks in a jigsaw puzzle of contrasting pieces. As the sun tracks westward, shadows dance across the wall, creating a surprising depth in the organic work comprised of salvaged wood scraps. Local artists Billy Colbert and Tim Conlon created the installation with help from students in the city-funded Media Arts Camp. "I wanted it to be green and sculptural," says Colbert, "and really fit the environment when you come over that bridge."

Meanwhile in Capitol Hill, John Philip Sousa and his world-famous band are practically marching off a brilliant pink wall onto Pennsylvania Avenue, not far from where the DC native is buried at the Congressional Cemetery. Decoy, a local artist who teaches art classes through Albus Cavus, worked with high school students on the mural and let neighborhood residents design the mustaches for the musicians in Sousa's band. "I definitely learned that the more you involve the community and relate it to the community, the more you get to know the area," she says.

Albus Cavus, which fittingly translates to "white cave" in Latin, hosts free workshops everywhere from the National Museum of African Art to the Virgin Mobile FreeFest. The nonprofit that sprang from Krsko's mission to bring art to the masses is hosting a hipster gala on December 11, at The Fridge in Southeast, to continue funding its outreach programs. "The goal became that you don't need to bring the audience to a special space to show artwork," Krsko says. "You can bring the artwork to the audience." ■