

Voice Column for June 2019

Nine new murals decorate outdoor public spaces

By John Groh

No invitation or RSVP necessary. No ticket required. Always open, and open to all.

That's public art. Public art defines public spaces and emotionally connects us with our communities and neighborhoods in ways that mere buildings or strips of concrete never will.

If you see the Bean, you're in Chicago. If the Arch looms above, you're in St. Louis. When you pass Symbol, you know you're in Rockford, Illinois.

Lately, the way public art has been blooming around Rockford can be viewed as a metaphor for the renaissance the community itself is undergoing. Recent additions of public art in downtown Rockford will speak to generations of residents, helping them connect to and value this place we call home.

The latest distinctively Rockford additions to our growing collection of public art are nine large-scale murals that were painted during RACVB's five-day CRE8IV (pronounced "creative") festival in mid-May. Rockfordians and visitors joined us during the fun-filled festival for music and activities to watch local and internationally known artists create these spectacularly imaginative works.

Setting Rockford Apart

So, why is RACVB focusing on public art in our city? Well, it makes sense economically, socially and culturally to take steps that set our city apart from other places.

The Public Art Network, a division of Americans for the Arts, puts it this way: "American cities and towns aspire to be places where people want to live and want to visit. Having a particular community identity, especially in terms of what our towns look like, is becoming even more important in a world where everyplace tends to look like everyplace else. Places with strong public art expressions break the trend of blandness and sameness, and give communities a stronger sense of place and identity."

Perhaps the most important element of the mural project is the long-lasting impact the artwork will have as, over time, the city itself becomes an art gallery. The local and visiting artists who formed the inaugural class of CRE8IV artists are an impressive and creative bunch. Each artist's work and approach are unique and distinct, and they produced a vibrant mix of murals for all to enjoy and appreciate.

They must be seen to be believed! With great professionalism and ingenuity, the artists tapped into our city's history, natural beauty and cultural identity to express a new vision of who we are and to what we may aspire. Come downtown and see them!

Many Made This Possible

CRE8IV was inspired by Rockford's vibrant art scene and patterned off successful mural festivals in Montreal, Denver and Detroit. It was made possible, in part, by a matching grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce, Office of Tourism. The tradesmen and women of Painters District Council Local 607 also have been invaluable to this project.

We also owe our appreciation to donors and sponsors who made CRE8IV possible. They include the Brubaker Charitable Trust, the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, Collins Aerospace, Secure Staffing, Aunt Martha's, GrahamSpencer, Jennifer Furst, David and Colleen Anderson, Bobbie Holzwarth and Norm Lindstedt, Members Alliance Credit Union and Sherwin Williams. Many thanks!

We also must thank the building owners and the City of Rockford for allowing their structures, and the lower level of the Jefferson Street Bridge, to be used for the murals. What a gift they've given to the residents of our city.