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# Art Competition Adds Beauty to NYC's Scaffolding

Artists submit their work to an expert panel that chooses which to showcase at construction sites around the city

By Verena Dobnik | Saturday, Aug 11, 2012 | Updated 2:50 PM EST

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AP Images / Seth Weng

Cecilia Schmidt stands in front of one of her works that is displayed large on a construction site in New York. Schmidt is one of a few local artists whose work was chosen to be displayed by ArtBridge, which mounts large-scale public art exhibits.

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New York City has about 1 million feet of construction scaffolding at any given time, and some of it is turning into art. Artists submit their work to an expert panel that chooses which to showcase at construction sites around the city. “Art has the power to inspire kids — to make the difference between picking up a gun or picking up a paintbrush,” said Linda Harris, a retired city bus driver who stopped before an installation in Brooklyn’s high-crime East Flatbush neighborhood on a hot August day. Eight artists’ works grace plywood fencing around an apartment building going up for special needs and low-income families. Minutes earlier, a little girl almost tripped as she suddenly stopped to admire the colorful panels before dashing on.

This is not graffiti or street art.

The project is run by ArtBridge, a nonprofit mounting high-level art on streets. Advisers have included artists and curators from world-class institutions including the Guggenheim Museum, Parsons School of Design and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. “We strive to show the kind of art one might expect to find in a gallery or contemporary museum,” says ArtBridge director and curator Jordana Zeldin, who oversees the organization’s gallery and studio in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood.

About a half dozen installations have been mounted in New York City. They cost \$5,000 to \$30,000 each depending on location, scope and size. Other art adorns scaffolding in Brooklyn’s Dumbo, a tony redeveloped neighborhood of galleries and boutiques. There, a work by Yugoslav-born New York resident Aleksandar Macasev spans 306 linear feet of scaffolding. Called “ChromaTweet,” stripes of color represent his moods on any given day during a two-year emotional journey, as recorded in his blog-turned-social-network.

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ArtBridge is partnering with a handful of big New York developers to expand the program — in the city and to upstate Kingston, N.Y., which is sprinkled with artists. Rodney Durso, an artist who teaches at Parsons and founded ArtBridge in 2008, is also speaking with community advocates in L'Aquila, Italy, where a 2009 earthquake left much of the city's downtown still in scaffolding.

And artists and architects in Christchurch, New Zealand, are in touch with ArtBridge for possible projects there, Durso says. A magnitude-6.1 quake struck there in 2011, killing 185 people and irreparably damaging 1,400 downtown buildings. Funding for ArtBridge installations comes from private donors big and small, developers and businesses that donate goods and services like paint and printing. United Hoisting & Scaffolding, one of the largest New York companies in the business, installs the art at cost.

“Our goal is to get up-and-coming artists exposure for their work,” says Durso. At least a dozen scaffold projects are expected to be on display in New York City by early 2013, he said. Chosen artists receive a stipend of up to \$100. Each work is first photographed and transferred to a computer, then printed on weather-proof vinyl that lasts outdoors for up to a year during construction. The next installation will pop up at a yet-unnamed New York location in October. When the scaffolding comes down, homeless or unemployed women tool the artsy vinyl into tote bags, which are sold for \$55 each online and at the Chelsea studio. About 200 have been purchased. Proceeds go to the women and ArtBridge.

“If my art were to be a tote being sold at a department store, I'd feel terrible, but I feel wonderful that it's going to a community in need,” says artist Cecilia Schmidt, whose “Point of View” in East Flatbush depicts white birds flying high over the Earth. “There's another way to look at ourselves and the world,” she says. “This is a bird's-eye view of Earth.”

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