

From eyesore to artistry

Bostonites transform defaced utility and light boxes into works of art.



In Beantown, local artists are turning mundane utility and light boxes into canvasses for vibrant murals.

But don't confuse the city-sanctioned art with graffiti. The Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism, and Special Events launched the public art program — called PaintBox — in 2008 to discourage graffiti while also highlighting local artists.

"Mayor [Thomas M.] Menino wanted to brighten up the streets," explains Joe Rull, special assistant to the mayor and PaintBox liaison between Boston's public works and transportation departments. Menino had heard about similar ventures and suggested that Rull look into starting one in Boston. The public works and transportation departments suggested which boxes would benefit most from the program; some historic neighborhoods chose not to participate due to landmark provisions.

The program is privately funded and uses no tax dollars, depending instead on donations from businesses and nonprofit organizations — the Boston Celtics professional basketball team plans to donate in 2010. A 24-hour call center is also available so residents can report if a box gets tagged, among other concerns (such as potholes and unplowed streets).

Local artists interested in participat-

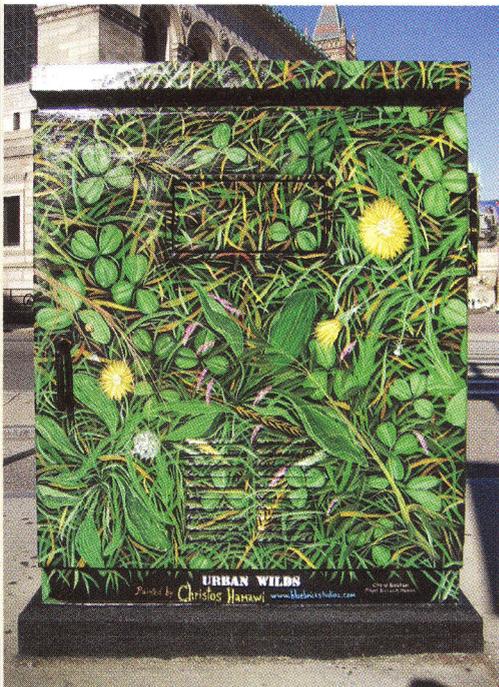
ing submit their designs to the Boston Art Commission, which approves all public art for the city. Although there are no strict guidelines, artists are required to use lighter colors, as dark colors could cause the utility boxes to overheat.

"My favorite aspects of the program are seeing all the cool mini-murals around town, as well as getting exposure and recognition for my work," says Boston artist Adam O'Day. He's looking forward to submitting more designs when the weather gets warmer, since paint dries poorly in cold weather.

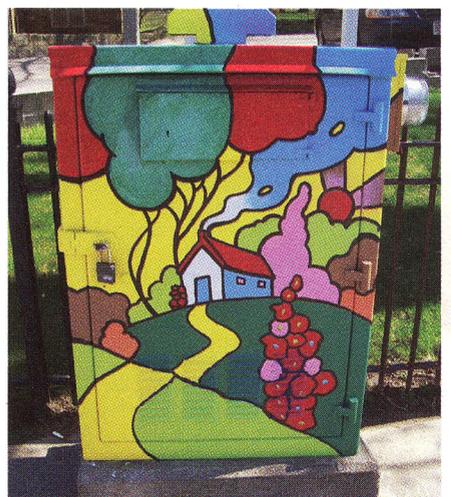
So far, 49 boxes have been painted, with at least 100 more to go in 2010.

"It's still early in the process to see how the boxes hold up to graffiti over time, but only one or two have been tagged so far," says Karin Goodfellow, staff director for the art commission. **PW**

— Matt Hirschfeld



Christos Hamawi, who painted the above mural, says the PaintBox program solves two problems: the need to deter vandalism and improve the appearance of essential but unattractive structures (see top image), and not enough funding or opportunities for public art and local artists. Photo: Christos Hamawi



What qualifies as "art" versus "graffiti" hasn't come up when approving designs, but "it's an ongoing discussion in the realm of public art," says Karin Goodfellow, staff director for the Boston Art Commission. This utility box was painted by Adam O'Day. Photo: Adam O'Day

To learn more about Boston artists participating in the city's public art program, as well as view their PaintBox creations, visit the "article links" page under "resources" at www.pwmag.com.

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