

# A Handbook for Public Mural Projects

A practical guide to funding, approval, design and painting processes for public mural artwork



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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR PUBLIC ART .....</b>	<b>3</b>
START WITH THE WHY .....	3
CASE STUDY: REDWOOD CITY .....	3
MURAL ART VS. OTHER PUBLIC ART OPTIONS .....	6
<b>EMBARKING ON A PUBLIC MURAL PROJECT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
FUNDING A MURAL .....	7
ESTIMATING COSTS .....	8
FORMING A STEERING COMMITTEE .....	8
SELECTING A LOCATION .....	8
SELECTING AN ARTIST .....	9
DEVELOPING A GREAT DESIGN .....	9
ASSESSING THE THREAT OF VANDALISM .....	10
CONTRACTS .....	11
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>12</b>
NOTES FOR THE ARTIST: BEST PRACTICES FOR PAINTING A MURAL.....	12

## Introduction

Vibrant and engaging public art can transform listless or ho-hum community spaces into thriving public destinations. Public art marks a respect for the humanity and individuality of its community members by offering something beautiful or thought provoking that has a non-commercial purpose.

The City of Redwood City and mural artist Morgan Bricca have created this handbook as a template to build a thriving public mural arts program in Redwood City, and also offer it as a guide for other cities interested in launching successful public art programs of their own.

## Laying the Groundwork for Public Art

The primary factor that enabled Redwood City to successfully launch the “Commercial Way” mural alley project was the coalition of support for the arts already established in Redwood City. This coalition of support was built up over many years through city/public/private collaboration on other city enrichment projects including public concerts, art fairs and a utility box art program. Working cooperatively with policy makers by obtaining proper approvals, allowing input, and showing success in smaller projects establishes trust between the art advocates and the city. This framework of cooperation, which included a handful of stalwart cheerleaders from both the City of Redwood City and involved citizens who are art advocates for the cause of public art is the foundation of a successful public arts program. This may be obvious, but it is worth underscoring that even a handful of citizens who embrace the innate value that art brings to a place are going to be at the heart of any successful public arts project.

## Start with the Why

Every beautification project starts with a problem. Begin with a clear understanding of what problem the proposed public art project will be trying to solve. This will bring clarity to whether a mural is the right solution.

## Case Study: Redwood City

**Problem:** *Neglected back alley of plain stucco buildings on Commercial Way as an entry point into the downtown area.*

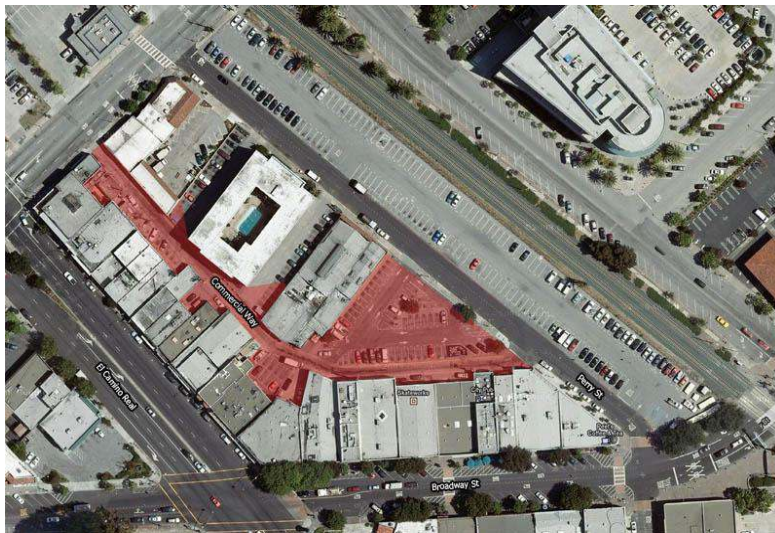
**Solution:** *Colorful murals by a variety of artists beautify and bring vibrancy to the Commercial Way corridor.*

For years, downtown Redwood City had an image problem relative to its desirable San Francisco peninsula neighbors. Many people referred to Redwood City as “Deadwood City”. The downtown restaurants and businesses were struggling, and some of the legacy assets, including a historic theater, were underutilized. In

2007 the City completed a major \$60 million dollar renovation to its downtown core (including a new public plaza, a new 20-screen movie theater, a parking garage, landscaping, and space for shops and restaurants), but the foot traffic remained extremely light. Redwood City had given its downtown a facelift, but residents were so used to downtown being vacant and less-than-inviting that they were still not visiting. The problem was how to create buzz and activity that would attract people to Redwood City as a destination.

The Parks, Recreation and Community Services (PRCS) Department came forward to help lead the effort of increasing business in Redwood City's downtown. Seeing an opportunity to make a difference, PRCS presented an economic impact plan to the City's Redevelopment Agency (RDA) detailing how we could bring large numbers of people downtown through programs and events. Their proposal focused not only on the ultimate outcome of supporting economic development, but on strengthening community image and sense of place, strengthening safety and security, increasing cultural unity, and providing valued recreational experiences for the community.

The idea for the Commercial Way alley mural project was initiated by arts advocate and Redwood City resident Jason Newblanc, to solve a challenge inherent in the city layout. The city is dissected by Caltrain train tracks, which creates a jog in Broadway, the main street downtown. The train runs along a parking lot and a plain alley of the back entrances of the businesses along Broadway, the street that runs through the heart of the downtown. For many downtown patrons, this alley is a point of entry into the city. And for people approaching Redwood City by train, this alley is often the first visual impression they receive of the downtown area.



The first building to be painted along Commercial Alley was selected because it was the largest, and also because the business owner was open to the idea of having a mural on the exterior wall of their building. The first artist was selected because she had significant experience specifically painting murals. Working with an established mural artist increased the chances of the first project going well and creating positive momentum for the project with the community as well as the other more hesitant business owners along the alley. The first mural was completed in February 2015. As of August 2015, two other murals in the alley are in the works, with more planned for 2016.



Before



Before



After



Before



After

## Mural Art vs. Other Public Art Options

Once you have identified the primary visual, flow or layout challenge of the site, the next step is to ask what kind of art best suits the space and budget. Plantings, sculpture, and fountains are all great beautification elements, but there are many instances when a mural is the best solution to the problem.

### **Advantages of a mural:**

- **Offers a fast and inexpensive solution**  
The materials and installation costs of a mural are often a fraction of the cost of other beautification solutions and have low ongoing maintenance costs. Furthermore, the time it takes to complete even a large mural project is usually significantly less than the time required to complete many other types of beautification projects.
- **Adds color and visual interest**  
Against the concrete background of cityscapes, a mural creates a focal point of color.
- **Resolves awkward city growth**  
City use changes over decades, and the result can create unintended building arrangements. For instance, an office building may look out onto a solid concrete wall of an old warehouse, or a city center may expand while parking is moved to the perimeter and neglected sections of the city become passageways between more desirable destinations. Murals can help mitigate the visual and special awkwardness inherent in these situations.
- **Adds character and a unique sense of place**  
A mural is a visual collaboration between the community and an artist's unique voice. The public arts organization running the project are selecting an artist and collaborating with that artist to curate a work of art and communicates something unique. Whether the art is avant-garde, quaint, whimsical, hip, street, multicultural, or celebrating the history of a community, the art will reinforce and amplify an aspect of the character that is already part of the community.
- **Tells a story**  
A mural can communicate a more compelling and complex story about a community than plants or a fountain could.

## Embarking on a Public Mural Project

### Funding a mural

Cities can raise funds for mural projects in a variety of ways and sometimes the funding might come from multiple sources. Examples include:

- **City discretionary funding**  
The City of Morgan Hill used Redevelopment Agency (RDA) funds to help fund a mural in the downtown. (2009)
- **Business alliances and sponsorships**  
Business Alliance Redwood City has an Alliance of the Downtown Businesses that pay a voluntary tax for beautification projects in the public spaces. Sponsorships are another source of funds for installation projects.
- **City and commercial business alliances**
  - The City of San Pablo allowed a storage facility to exceed its maximum height for signage because they were painting a mural that highlighted the history of San Pablo. The storage facility paid for the mural, and it did not include any logo or advertising for the business. (2015)
  - The city of Sunnyvale helped Goodwill Industries fund a three-wall mural depicting the history of the city on the exterior of the building located in the historic part of downtown Sunnyvale. (2014)
- **City and art organization alliances**  
The City of Redwood City co-funded a Commercial Way alley mural with the Peninsula Arts Council and public art money from the Civic Cultural Commission. Additionally, the Redwood City Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department co-founded the Redwood City Parks and Arts Foundation to raise money for parks, recreation programs, and public art efforts.
- **“Percent for the Art” tax on new construction**  
Some cities are able to pass laws that require a percentage of construction costs to be earmarked for art installations and public spaces.
- **Capital Improvement Project Funds (CIP)**  
Many cities have CIP funds that pay for utility upgrades, road improvements, park renovations and more. The City of Redwood City Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department recently added a line item in the CIP account for Public Art, which was approved by City Council.

## Estimating Costs

The cost of a mural is typically between \$20-\$40 per square foot. This estimate is inclusive of design, materials, wall prep and labor. Some of the variables affecting this range include geographic region, the condition of the wall, the experience of the artist, and the level of detail desired in the mural painting.

It is essential that the mural be executed properly, so be sure the budget allows for an experienced professional who will use the best materials and process available. This will ensure that the quality of the final artwork meets or exceeds expectations and that the mural will last as long as possible. An inadequate budget will not attract the talent or experience needed for an exceptional work of art. If your budget is inadequate, reduce the scope of the project.

## Forming a Steering Committee

The steering committee is in charge of selecting the artist, guiding the design and overseeing the project. Ideally it is comprised of individuals with the highest stake in the outcome of the project. Steering committees that are small (two or three) work extremely well, as they can be more nimble with the process. More than five is too many; it becomes difficult to build consensus with respect to artist selection or creative direction.

The steering committee might include:

- The business owner that owns the wall to be painted.
- A representative from the city or someone that can oversee budget, timelines, and contracts.
- A volunteer from an arts organization or volunteer with a background in the arts. Having someone with a design or arts background that can offer critical feedback improves the art, and this individual can also be a valuable ally when trying to pitch the merits of a certain design to the other members of the committee who might have a different skill set.
- A representative from the historical society.
- The architect, if it is new construction.

## Selecting a Location

For the most impact, select a wall that has good visibility. The ideal wall for a mural has few windows or architectural interruptions and offers a relatively smooth surface. If the wall is in poor condition, there may be additional wall preparation or remediation costs required.

## Selecting an Artist

In addition to budget and site location, the steering committee should have in mind the purpose for the artwork, and main qualities they would like to see in the art before beginning the artist selection process. This ensures that the artist selected has a body of work that reflects the qualities the committee wants to see in the mural.

Ideally, the best candidate can be found within the community. However, since mural painting is a unique specialty, experienced professional mural artists typically cover a wide geographic area. Be clear the look and feel of the art, and the purpose, as you begin your search. If you send out a general request for proposal (RFP) through the city website, or local or national “call for artist” job listings, this scattershot approach will net a huge range of styles and abilities. If you selectively reach out to the artists you have discovered either through firsthand experience of their work or online, their work is essential prequalified as being a good fit for your project, and your team can focus on reviewing just a handful of bids from qualified individuals.

The importance of hiring a mural specialist cannot be understated. Artists accustomed to working on a smaller scale in an art studio will be working with materials, environments, and a scope that is unfamiliar. The typical pitfalls of artists new to mural include improper wall preparation, taking exorbitant amounts of time to complete the work, drips and spills, low quality paints that won’t hold up well over time, and difficulty with the collaborative nature of the work (collaborating with the building owner and related feedback).

Key skills to identify in your mural artist:

- **Facility with the medium**  
Murals are typically painted using exterior commercial grade paints, so artists should ideally have specific experience painting murals, or at the very least working on large projects with acrylic paints, the closest crossover medium.
- **Experience**  
Past mural experience means the artist can accurately estimate timeframes, budget, and respond appropriately to the specific conditions and challenges of the project.
- **Ability to Collaborate**  
One of the most famous mural artists, Diego Rivera was notoriously un-collaborative. Because of this he was fired from several of his projects. You do not want to have to fire your artist halfway through a mural project and then restart the whole process! Find an artist who shares a common vision for the purpose of the artwork and who can address concerns about the development of the work as it evolves.

## Developing a Great Design

There are many ways that a great design can come together. There are also plenty of pitfalls that should be avoided. Here are a few guidelines:

- **Provide clear direction**  
The overall purpose and intent of the artwork should be established before selecting the artist.

Knowing the scope and desired outcome will help in selecting the right artist for the project. Design requirements for the mural should be communicated to the artist during the application process, or at the very beginning of the design process. This will save the artist and committee time and avoid frustration in multiple design iterations. Not providing any creative direction invites unwanted surprises in the outcome.

*Alternative: If the artist is selected before the scope and artistic direction are set, the artist can often offer their creativity, vision, artistic direction and expertise to the city in the earliest phases of design.*

- **Avoid design by committee**

This is a tricky area to navigate, but if there is substantial editing in order to please multiple parties, the art can lose originality and focus. This is another area where selecting an artist with prior mural experience is important, because they can provide informed feedback as to why certain design changes might not work well.

- **The design process should be a paid component of the artist's work**

Designing a mural represents a significant investment of time and effort on the part of the artist. Depending on the size and complexity of the mural, the design can take as long as the execution. Select an artist based on the creativity and style represented by their portfolio. Requiring applicants to submit a detailed design with their application is akin to requiring architects to create a rendering of what is to be built before you decide to select them for the project.

*Alternative: Pick your top three candidates and pay them a set design fee (ballpark: \$500-\$1000) to create a design specific to the project. Then the committee can make a more informed selection and still be respectful of the time and professionalism of the artists.*

## Design Approval

The artist should provide a rendering of the design that can communicate all the main components of the mural. The City of Redwood City has a unique review process that involves their Civic Cultural Commission, a Public Art Task Force that includes two City Council Members who act as an advisory body, and then City Council approves final recommendations for art.

## Assessing the Threat of Vandalism

### **Case Study: Morgan Mural Studios**

Many clients express concern over the possibility of the artwork being “tagged” by vandals. I have various theories why this outcome is unlikely, but the track record for the 60 public murals I have painted over the past 15 years throughout the Bay area in all types of neighborhoods is this: Not a single one has ever been tagged. There have been instances of vandalism in the immediate vicinity in several cases, but the mural is left untouched. Vandalism of the public art is certainly a risk, but it might be a lower risk than imagined, and can be mitigated by a top-coat of anti-graffiti varnish. On most public projects, the city provides the graffiti varnish and

also takes care of the application of the varnish. This is a good way to ensure the mural is properly protected with the right product.

## Contracts

The contract should include:

- **Agreement of rights and responsibilities between the city and business owner**

This should include a statement of intent to preserve the mural for a specific number of years and a specific maintenance agreement.

- **Scope of work and agreement with the artist**

This document should include a detailed description of what will be included in the mural, payment milestones and timeframes, included and excluded fees and copyright agreement. This document should also include a statement that the artist agrees not to sue the business or city if the artwork needs to be painted over. With murals, the artist owns the copyright to the original design, but the business owns the wall and, with consideration, retains the right to change what is on the walls (especially when the mural starts to degrade, or for building renovations). Artists that specialize in mural tend to embrace the temporality of their art form, while artists accustomed to gallery and museum pieces are accustomed to thinking in longer timeframes about the preservation of their work. To avoid misunderstandings later on (20-30 years is the life expectancy of a mural, depending on weather and exposure, when a work is faded and ready to be replaced) include an “end of use” agreement in the original contract.

## Conclusion

A public mural is a gift of art from the city to itself. It should be a source of pride and should be celebrated! It is a great idea to set up an “unveiling” or some kind of media event to mark the end of a successful project and inaugurate the artwork into the city. Public figures such as the mayor and the city council should be invited to reinforce the value of the project and its impact on the city. It is important to curate a story about the art and what it represents for the city, and share that in the newspaper or city website so that citizens can identify with the art and feel proud of their city.

## Appendix

### Notes For the Artist: Best Practices for Painting a Mural

#### **Two weeks before beginning work**

- The artist should receive the deposit for the mural at least two weeks before the beginning of the project in order to pay for supplies and scaffolding.
- A timeline should be established as to the milestones of completion and communicated to the business owner and the city. Communicate your workday hours and keep the city and business owner updated as to any days you will not be coming to the jobsite.
- Survey the area and establish what kind support structures will be needed (i.e. ladders, scaffold or scissor lift). Arrange delivery and set up of the scaffolding.
- Establish with the building owner access to water, bathrooms, and electrical outlet if needed.
- Communicate with the city to obtain portable traffic cones.
- Develop of strategy of when to work on different sections of the mural in order to minimize impact to the patrons of the local businesses.
- Schedule a professional painting company. If the wall is in excellent condition (Painted in the last two years, no cracks or debris) then a single base coat layer of a self-priming paint (Benjamin Moore Aura is excellent) is sufficient.

If the mural is being painted directly on the wall the first step is to prepare the surface for the painting. This includes power washing the wall if there is peeling paint or surface debris. All holes should be patched and re-stuccoed with matching texture. Small holes and large cracks can be covered with an elastomeric primer such as PermaPatch. Hairline cracks can be sealed with caulk. Finally, apply a coat of tinted primer (such as 3-2-1 Bullseye) and a base coat of color in the same brand of paint that will be used for the artwork. These steps will create a solid foundation for the artwork so it will look the best it can for as long as possible. It is ideal if a professional paint contractor prepares the wall for the artist. Use local businesses! For the Redwood City projects I recommend Pro Staff Painting, Duane Asbra at 650-867-8668

- Create a poster that explains the mural project, and has a rendering of the design so the community knows what is going on.
- Call the local paper to give them a heads up on the project.

#### **Two days before beginning work:**

Make sure you have all the painting supplies you will need.

- For exterior commercial work I cover the ground with heavy-weight red rosin paper, taped down on all four edges. If rain is expected, I put down rubberized tarps, and take them up at the end of each workday.
- Paints: I highly recommend Exterior Benjamin Moore Aura in a low luster finish for all the larger areas of the mural. This paint is self-priming so there is a lot of adhesion between layers, and it is low VOC. It also offers the best coverage (opacity) over other brands. DO NOT water down the paint or it loses its integrity. The mural should have at least two coats of paint covering all sections of the mural. I estimate one gallon per 200 square feet, which is conservative relative to the guidelines on the can.
- For artistic details, I recommend Heavy Body Golden Artists Acrylics. The colors are vibrant and durable.
- Rollers and Brushes: Make sure the nap of the roller matches the texture of the wall. For porous surfaces like stucco, I find the stiffer artists brushes, those typically recommended for oils, work the best.

#### **While you are painting:**

- Define your workspace with cones and caution tape to avoid collisions with pedestrians or cars.
- Set up a table for your supplies to avoid back strain/working on the ground. It also helps diminish the chance of you or of someone else tripping over your paints.
- Use reflective cones and caution tape to alert drivers and pedestrians where they are passing into your workspace. If you are using scaffolding or a scissor lift, this workspace will be the entire length of the mural. If you are working on smaller sections, keep the cones and caution zone a size that minimizes impact on the flow of pedestrians and cars around the worksite.
- Accommodate for weather. When painting outdoors you are exposed to all the elements. If temperatures are extreme, it compromises the adhesion and performance of the paint. I typically avoid painting hours for the day when the wall is in full sun; the heat of the wall dries the paint so fast there is little “working time” to blend the colors. For some projects this means starting at 6 am, and stopping at noon. Excessive wind can kick up dirt into the paints, and can be a factor particularly in the afternoons. If rain is forecast, the low barometric reading means lots of moisture in the air, and it will take longer for the paint to dry. Make sure you stop work 3-4 hours before the rain begins.
- Check in with the clients! Once the main areas have been blocked in with paint, I like to get general feedback from the client - their initial reaction to seeing “the sketch on the wall”. It is easier to make adjustments early on, and if you are listening carefully, all comments contain important information about the client’s expectations. Here is a handy “Client Comment” translator:
  - “I thought \_\_\_\_ was going to be bigger” means you should step back, double check the scale matches the design and looks right on the wall.

- “It’s a little dark, I was hoping for more color.” I get this one frequently because I start out in darker colors, but it is useful to hear them reiterate they are going to be pleased with a brightly colored finished product.
- “Is that finished?” translates to: “I can’t wait to see more detail there!”
- “That doesn’t look right to me.” Try to have them be as specific as possible. If you can verbalize their specific concern back to them, they will feel heard. Sometimes clients want to be reassured that you know what you are doing.

You know your process, your clients don’t. By inviting feedback, and translating it so you can identify their primary concern, you can make sure early on that your visions are lining up. If you get a comment that is different than what you are planning, or if it wasn’t in the agreed upon design, it is important to address that immediately, not at the end of the project.

### **Design Tweaks**

It often happens that I find an improvement to the design once I am working in the space, on the wall. I am careful to point out these changes early so the client is not surprised.

If the client suggests a substantial change, I usually listen carefully and tell them I will get back to them. Take a break, think about it, try it on. To create great artwork, you do need to stay in integrity with your gut instincts on the design. If you don’t think the suggestion will improve the artwork, let the client know as diplomatically as possible. If you agree and think it would improve the work, but it adds to the scope of the project, you need to have the new cost approved by the client before you begin the work.

If the client points out a legitimate flaw or a major departure from the agreed upon design sketch, a discussion should follow about how to best mitigate the issue.

### **A Successful Finish**

When you are a few days away from completing the project, let the business owner and the city know the status of the project, and set a time to meet and review the work. I like to schedule this meeting about a day before I am finished. That way I have plenty of time and work still to go on the mural, so I can easily integrate any small tweaks without inconvenience. If you have been communicating throughout, there should be very few surprises at this stage. I find accepting influence from my client, and making small changes that are requested makes them feel more connected to the process and the piece.

Being clear with completion timeframe of the mural also gives the city a heads up that it is time to schedule the anti-graffiti varnish coat. This is also a great time to follow up with the local newspaper to get an article in the paper about the new mural.