

Toolkits for the Arts

TOOLKIT 6: LEAD A PUBLIC MURAL PROJECT

Few projects are as powerful in transforming a streetscape—and a community—as a public mural. Murals bring art into the daily lives of residents and passersby, transforming bare walls into works of art and beautifying otherwise drab or underutilized spaces. They can also be acts of public revitalization, foster a local sense of place, and encourage wider investment in a community. Mural projects bring community members together one paint stroke at a time.

Looking at the experiences of West Virginia communities who have carried out successful public mural projects, this tool kit is designed to:

- explore the motivation behind and benefits of public mural projects, and
- provide guidance on how to manage a public mural project.

OTHER TOOLKIT TOPICS

This document is the final installment in a six-part series of toolkits published by the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts. Funded by an “Our Town” grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, this series provides straightforward guidance to help individuals, communities, arts councils, and other creative entities implement local initiatives for the visual arts. Other installments in this series include:

1. Create an arts organization
2. Host a pop-up art shop
3. Form an artist cooperative
4. Organize a studio tour
5. Arrange an art walk
6. Lead a public mural project

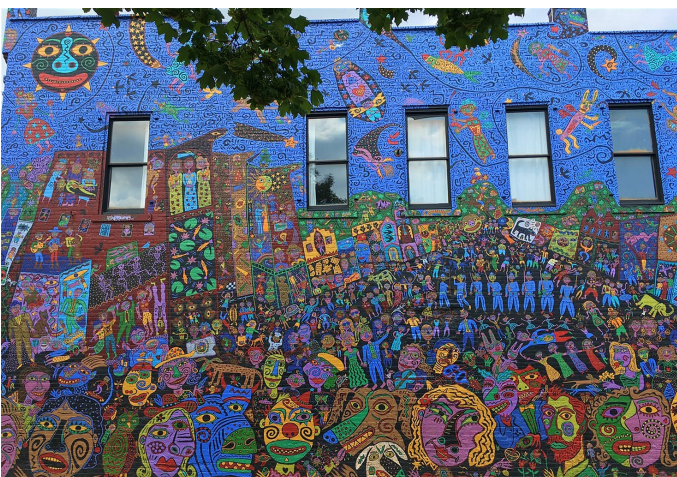
About the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts

The Tamarack Foundation for the Arts (TFA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to cultivating an empowering ecosystem that provides artists, businesses, and communities the tools and support needed to learn, connect, and thrive. TFA convenes a range of initiatives and programming that aim to help West Virginia artists prosper from their creative practice and make meaningful contributions to the well-being of our communities. More information is available at tamarackfoundation.org.

WHY CREATE A PUBLIC MURAL?

Public murals have the potential to make a big and lasting impression on a community. Every exposed, blank wall found on the buildings and public spaces throughout West Virginia offers an opportunity to unveil an artistic creation, tell a story, shine a light on local culture, or beautify a neighborhood with brilliant displays of art. One of the many wonderful parts of Appalachian culture is the art of storytelling, which is a common theme amongst murals spotted around West Virginia. No matter what the motivation behind the mural may be, they are sure to elicit public response, capture attention, and encourage inspiration in the local community surrounding it.

In addition to bringing art to a community, murals can be powerful actors in bringing communities together. They make art accessible, inspire creativity, and can help revive a town's sense of pride. In essence, public art murals are an investment in community revitalization: They can also boost local economies through tourism, improve property values, decrease crime rates, and encourage the use of underutilized public spaces. As such, murals often serve as iconic beacons of hope in some communities.



*A mural in
Charleston, West
Virginia, entitled
"West Side Wonder"
by Charles Hamilton.
(Echo-Lit, 2017)*

WHERE TO START?



Think your community might benefit from a public mural? Here are some suggestions on where to start.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Mural projects take shape in many different ways: Sometimes a building owner knows that they want a certain image or story told on their building's façade, and an artist has an idea for a mural but doesn't know of an available space. Other times, a community knows they'd like to bring murals to brighten up their streetscapes, but they don't know where to start. Regardless of which boat you're in, initial planning is important for setting your mural project up for success. Start by addressing the following initial steps.

Identify local players

Start by making an informal list of the key players in your community, including local artists, businesses and building owners, potential volunteers, and any city and/or county officials who might need to weigh in on the project.

Research the legal framework for public art in your community

Does your community have any codes, zoning, or ordinances that pertain to building facades or signage? We'll discuss this more in detail, but you'll want to research your local rules early on in your project.

Learn from the experience of other communities

Look for examples of other communities who are leading the kind of public art projects that inspire you. Most groups—including many of the West Virginia communities featured in this report—are open to helping others follow in their example. Reach out to these communities to ask questions about what lessons they have learned in carrying out their mural projects.

GENERATE A CONCEPT OR IDEA FOR YOUR MURAL

To get any mural project rolling, you need to start with 1) a design, and 2) a building with a wall available to feature a mural. There's no official recipe for putting these two ingredients together: Sometimes the idea for the mural art comes first, and your task will be to find the appropriate building; On the other hand, sometimes a bare wall or building in your community is just begging to be spruced up, and you just need to find the right design to do the job. Rest assured, there's no right or wrong way to approach your project. Regardless of your path, here are some suggestions for putting your concept together.



Choosing a building

In some towns, business owners are the main force pushing for murals to beautify their buildings and draw visitors inside. In many other cases, business owners might be open to the idea of hosting a mural, if someone else coordinated the project. Reach out to local business owners and take an informal survey of who might be interested in sporting a mural on their building. Start with a call, email, or face-to-face meeting to discuss the overall goal of the project and the benefits to the owner and local businesses.

Ideally, you want to look for buildings that:

- Are located in a desirable location, high visibility to be enjoyed by people on foot, bicycle, or in a car; and
- Have a willing owner who will grant permission for a mural on their building's exterior. (In most cases, your project will require a formal agreement with the building owner, discussed later.)

Choosing a design

In many cases, coming up with the design can be more straightforward than finding the right building. First, you need to come up with a process for *how* you will select a design. Choosing a design may not be an issue if the mural project is being spearheaded by an artist or by a few key individuals. However, if the project is being led by a committee or other group starting without a set design in place, you may need to put out a call for proposals and pick the design that speaks to you and/or your committee. Keep in mind that some mural designs may be subject to town approval, so the content should be appropriate for public consumption. Also be sure to keep the building owner in the loop as you navigate the design process to ensure that they are agreeable to the final design decision.



Unconventional canvases: Don't forget to think outside of the box for ideas on spaces to beautify. For example, artists Lisa Armstrong and Dr. Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy painted dumpsters in Elkins as part of the "Make Elkins Shine" initiative. A project like this may not require a lengthy approval process and could be an inexpensive venture with a shorter timeframe than a traditional mural. (MAD, 2016)

Choosing an artist

Depending on the purpose of the mural, the artist selected to paint the mural could be an experienced muralist, a budding group of local artists, or volunteers. The location and purpose will help guide the choice of the artist for the job. A single artist may also design the project, but volunteers may be needed to help bring the work to life. Local art organizations are great resources to find local muralists. The artist's style will need match the overall theme of the intended mural and the community. Some things to keep in mind when looking for an artist are: *Do they have previous mural experience? Can they provide past references? Do you like their past work? Do they have experience working on community-based projects if volunteers are to be used? Most importantly, does the artist's style match the project and its location?*

West Virginia mural artists: Many West Virginia murals embrace the state's deeply rooted culture and history. For example, Molly Must, a native West Virginian and artist, incorporates history and natural beauty into her artworks such as the mural featured in Marlinton, West Virginia entitled "The Last Forest." Others such as native West Virginian and world renown muralist Patch Whiskey have taken more modern and abstract approaches to murals in West Virginia.

OBTAIN NECESSARY PERMISSIONS

Secure approval from the building owner

For any mural project, it is essential to get formal permission from the owner of the building you hope to use for your mural. While local owners may be easy to reach, others may prove more difficult to track down. Online parcel maps such as mapwv.gov can yield property owner names and addresses.

You'll want to let the owner know upfront that it is standard practice to have a legal agreement in place for the mural project. You may also need early written permission from the owner to secure the initial permission, as needed, from any local government entities. It's also very important to understand the process for moving forward if your desired building is rented out or owned by an absentee landowner. Check with your town and/or county officials for further guidance if this applies to your community.

Access issues: Your project will require express permission from any landowners impacted by your mural. This means the owner of the wall/building as well as any adjacent owners whose property you and your volunteers may need to cross in order to access the mural location. It's important to loop such adjacent property owners in early, as they are not always cooperative. For example, artists in Grafton had to relocate their proposed downtown mural when a local business owner refused access to his land for the needed safety equipment required for the mural project. In the end, the Memorial City mural was completed at an alternate location and unveiled at the 150th Memorial Day celebration.



(WBOY, 2017)

Secure local government approval

While rules vary from place to place, towns and counties often have zoning, codes, and/or ordinances in place that may impact public art projects in your community. As a result, you'll need to find out if your community has a local signage code or regulations on building facades, and whether such codes require getting local government approval for public signage. Be sure to ask your local code enforcement official if a mural painting qualifies as signage and see if there are any ordinances against large signage.

Some towns, such as Princeton, have a signage code that stipulates what kind of public signage (which includes public art) is and is not allowed. When the RiffRaff Collective sought to paint a public mural that exceeded the City of Princeton's allowable dimensions, they had to receive a variance from their local zoning board of appeals. Princeton also requires that such "signage" projects be approved by the City, so for every mural project, the RiffRaff Collective presents their proposed ideas to the local zoning board for local approval. (Create Your State, 2019)

By contrast, the City of Morgantown doesn't require formal public approval for mural projects. However, there *is* a provision in the City code that stipulates that business owners cannot put their sign on another owner's building, though logos and brand names can be acceptable if part of a mural. (Heady, 2019)

Legal Agreements

Assuming all parties are receptive to the mural project and in general agreement, the next step is to formalize a legal agreement between the property owner(s), the artist(s), and any arts organizations officially involved in the project.

A formal contract is always a good idea to create between the party managing the mural, the artist, and the building owner. The contract should include information about location and size of the mural, costs involved, design approvals, copyrights, general timeframes for completion, and insurance requirements.

It's also important to take the mural's anticipated lifespan into consideration and include maintenance provisions in the legal agreement. Specifically, all agreements should include a right-of-way provision, which gives the artist and/or coordinating arts organization rights to access and/or maintain the mural for a set number of years. (For example, murals in Charleston allow for 10 years of maintenance access, whereas Arts Monongahela in Morgantown allows five years.) Generally, mural agreements include provisions in which the owner agrees to not destroy or paint over the mural for a set timeframe.

The agreement should also consider the fate of the mural should the property change hands through sale, inheritance, or other means. While the agreement cannot stop the owner from selling their property, it can include a clause stipulating that, on a best-effort basis, the owner will attempt to preserve art if they sell the property.

Example agreements—Morgantown:

In Morgantown, several prominent public mural projects have been coordinated by a volunteer board member of Arts Monongahela (Arts Mon), the county arts council. For each mural project, Arts Mon uses a three-way agreement between the property owner, Arts Mon, and the artist who is chiefly responsible for completing the mural. Arts Mon also establishes a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Arts Mon and the artist to formally spell out things such as compensation, timeline, additional labor and assistance, etc.

PROJECT COSTS AND SUPPLIES

Every mural project will vary in cost: Those completed entirely by volunteers and donated equipment can cost a few hundred dollars, whereas others completed by commissioned artists can range from thousands to tens-of-thousands of dollars.

Paint, supplies, wall preparation, scaffolding or lift equipment, designs, and labor will all need to be considered when determining a budget for a mural project. Professional muralists often charge between \$10–35 per square foot or roughly \$50–100 per hour and have a minimum fee requirement. Sketches and designs can often incur additional fees. Travel expenses may also need to be considered if the artist is not local to the project location. Fees vary based on experience, the level of detail of the artwork, and size of the piece.

Arts Mon recently coordinated three prominent mural projects in downtown Morgantown, including the cardinal mural at right completed by Malissa Goff-Baker. A small grant was secured to fund each artists' time. (Goff-Baker, 2019)



In addition to the artist's labor, wall preparation and paint supplies will be the largest cost associated with the project. The project wall will require preparation which can vary in cost. Always start by having the wall power-washed to remove dirt and debris. Some masonry work may be required prior to painting. Factors that can affect this are the wall's construction material and condition. Porous walls made from wood or brick will take longer to prepare and require additional materials. It is a general rule of thumb to prime the wall with a neutral, light tone. For best long-term coverage 100% acrylic, water-based primer is recommended. Local paint suppliers should be able to assist with quotes wall preparation and paint supplies. If the artist is not responsible for the wall preparation part of the project, an exterior paint professional will need to be hired. Priming techniques include application by brushing, rolling, or spraying. The appropriate technique will depend on the size and texture of the wall.

Keep in mind, some muralists include costs for paint in their fees. Otherwise, consult with the artist or a local paint supplier to determine how much paint and which supplies will be required. If the mural is a volunteer project without a professional muralist, consult with a local paint supplier, muralist, or arts organizations for guidance on paint recommendations and requirements. High-quality, 100% artist grade acrylic paint will be the best choice for outdoor murals. These paints can last decades but are more expensive upfront than traditional exterior paints. Exterior house paints may only last three-to-five years, versus 10–15 years with higher quality acrylic paint which will reduce ongoing maintenance costs. A good sealant layer should be applied to the mural once it is complete for long-lasting results. There are several types of clear coat sealant available. Avoid sealants that use epoxy systems because they can contain toxic materials and are impossible to touch-up down the road. When determining budget for paint, account for up to two coats of clear coat sealant.

Depending on the height of the project wall, safety equipment may also need to be considered. If scaffolding is required for the project, it can run between \$15–50 per day to rent. An extra painting assistant may also be required for larger scale murals. It is not advised to use scaffolding on volunteer based projects. In addition, costs for brushes, tarps, buckets, rollers and other painting supplies should be accounted for in the budget. Other fees that may be considered in the project budget are on-site water service for cleanup and/or drinking, shade tents, permit fees, and additional refreshments.



POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Once the budget is set, the next step will be to find funding for the project. Some projects may be commissioned by private donors, such as businesses seeking murals on their buildings.

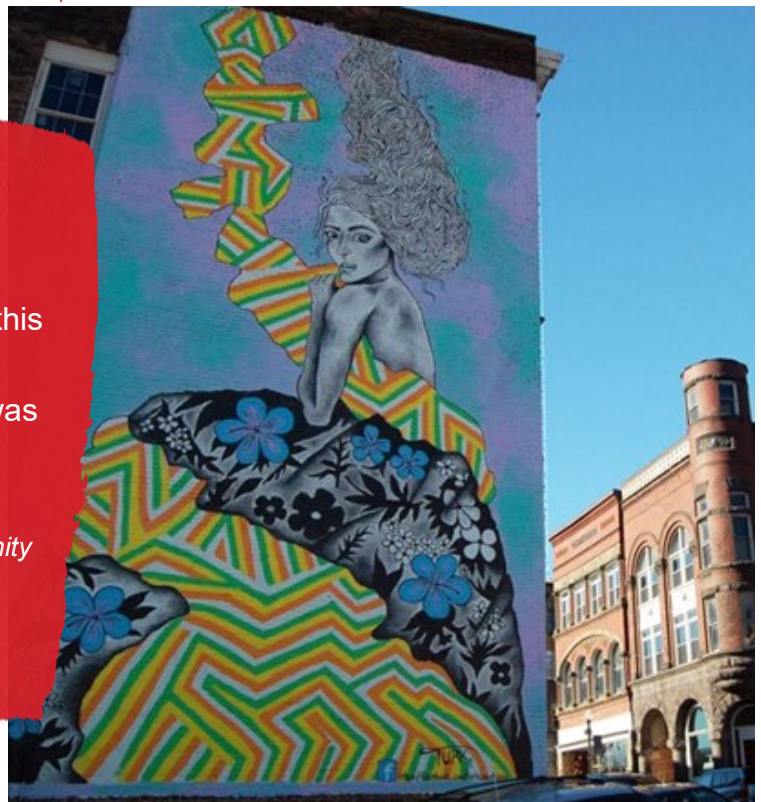
Grants available through community beautification programs, arts councils, local governments, and tourism organizations are a prominent funding mechanism for mural projects. Reaching out to these local organizations are a great place to start securing funding. Cities and counties may also have funds set aside for beautification projects.

Crowdfunding is also an effective tool which harnesses the power of small donations from community members to fund a local project. Sites such as GoFundMe and Indiegogo allow project leaders to promote their cause, set a monetary fundraising goal, and enlist community support for their project. These types of funding campaigns are fueled heavily by social media platforms, such as Facebook.

Helpful funding sources include:

- West Virginia Department of the Arts, Culture and History, wvculture.org/arts/grants
- The Governor's Community Grant Program, wvcad.org/sustainability/community-participation-grant-program
- Community Celebration Micro-Grants, wvhub.org/community-celebration-micro-grants/
- GoFundMe, gofundme.com/c/crowdfunding

A mural entitled "Violet" featured along Main Street in Grafton, West Virginia, was funded by a grant money received through a beautification initiative called Turn this Town Around and the Claude Benedum Foundation. The mural was designed and painted by Amber "Turk" Ross, WVU graduate and Grafton native. *(West Virginia Community Development Hub, 2017)*



PROJECT ORGANIZATION

With permissions obtained and funding secured, it's time to get to work painting your mural!

Final things to consider include:

- If you're planning to use volunteers, map out your volunteer needs, including how many people you might need at what times, and what tasks they need to complete. Then be sure to share your volunteer needs and opportunities widely among your community!
- Murals are generally completed during the warmer months of the year during dry weather. Even if you're in a hurry, it's best to wait until the timing is right and the weather cooperates.
- If your painting team is going to need to work in or temporarily close down any public thoroughways while they work, call your local police department or road crew ahead of time to notify and coordinate any necessary road closures with them.



"The Last Forest" in Marlinton, WV, by Molly Must (Molly Must, 2019)



In Princeton, WV by Patch Whiskey (Patch Whiskey, 2019)

RiffRaff Collection:

Princeton has exploded of over recent years with a colorful array of murals. This movement, spearheaded by Lori McKinney, project manager of Create Your State and owner of the Riff Raff Arts Collective, has been a driving force behind bringing these projects to life through the Princeton Renaissance Project. The initiative has brought community members together to collaborate with artists on public art displays throughout the town. This initiative has paved the way on how other towns in West Virginia can incorporate murals into their public spaces.

KEY RESOURCES

Community contacts:

Arts Monongahela (Morgantown, WV) artsmon.org, facebook.com/arts.monongahela/

City of Charleston Office of Public Art (Charleston, WV) facebook.com/publicartcharlestonwv/

The RiffRaff Arts Collective (Princeton, WV) theriffraff.net/home, facebook.com/RiffRaffArts/

SOURCES:

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