



# The Search for Sustainable and Meaningful Public Art in the Community of Esquimalt

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SUS-TAIN-ABLE

ADJECTIVE

\sə-'stā-nə-bəl\

: able to be used without completely used up or destroyed

: involving methods that do not completely use up or destroy natural resources

: able to last or continue for a long time



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***This report was written by Eva Grant in the summer of 2014 as part of the Youth in Action initiative in Esquimalt. Published February 2015, all rights reserved by United Way Greater Victoria.***

## Executive Summary

This summer I made the decision to undertake a research project with United Way's Youth in Action Team. The subject I chose was an exploration of the aims and outcomes of the short-lived Tracside gallery, which I hoped would further inform a future project to be undertaken by Youth in Action to benefit - in a meaningful and sustainable way – the community of Esquimalt.

To do this I engaged in conversation with community members, artists and artistic societies; I covered local symposiums on street art; I researched projects and initiatives internationally that might pertain to my work; I examined common thread questions about public and private space, community engagement and accountability.

I've found that reinstating the graffiti wall is not feasible. Alternatively, my vision for the future of the area would be one where the 48 billboards are replaced on a regular basis with art from students of all ages, and both up-and-coming and established artists (through contest and other outreach initiatives), that the art fosters a sense of community pride and reflect the values of the community, and that there is ongoing dialogue about what Tracside means to the community (through, say, a yearly symposium and through frequent sponsor engagement), and how it helps foster a sense of empowerment that is flexible and keeps pace with the times.

## A brief history of the trackside gallery

*Rock Solid Foundation, Jason Guille, the Beige Brigade*

Years ago, Esquimalt's Trackside Art Gallery was being lauded widely as a bold, extraordinary achievement. The project, launched in 2001 by Tom Woods and the Rock Solid Foundation (an Esquimalt-based charity/anti-violence program committed to ending violence in schools through their WITS programs and others), turned a dark, disfavoured little boulevard near the Industrial Park into a sort of urban gallery, a public canvas for youth art and community empowerment.

But that was then.

Now, painting graffiti along the 800-block of Hereward Road is once again considered vandalism and prohibited. The warehouse walls are now a neutral coloring, and volunteers and residents within the township of Esquimalt who call themselves the "Beige Brigade" work very diligently to keep them that way.<sup>1</sup>

The ever-changing art that adorned the walls in years past is long gone, as is the dream of an artsy public space where young graffiti artists and the community could happily co-exist.

All that remains of the bold experiment are the 48 large murals that were painted in the first three years of the project and hung up high on the walls at Trackside, named for the E&N railway that runs alongside it.

After three years trying to mediate conflicts with the Esquimalt Municipality, Rock Solid removed itself indefinitely from the trackside Gallery. The colourful and transient art that once dotted the lower wall has been painted over; the street lights in the area are off now that Rock Solid's no longer paying the hydro bill.

I spoke on the phone recently with local businessman Jason Guille, who attempted recently to garner municipal and communal support for a revitalization of Trackside's street art component.

They were up against a determined group of residents that didn't want to see graffiti return to the area, and they didn't have any support from the local municipal government. What's clear is that nothing's going to happen on the lower wall without a management plan establishing responsibility. "That's the question:" explains Guille, "How would it be sustained? Furthermore... who controls it?"

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<sup>1</sup> Also, community organization "ETAG" - a joint effort by the Township, the Victoria Police Department and citizen volunteers - aims to keep Esquimalt a graffiti-free zone by removing the "tags" or "pieces" from public and private buildings and walls without delay. Many local businesses and residents support these efforts, reporting graffiti and volunteering their time to ETAG. More can be found at the Esquimalt Township's Website: <http://www.esquimalt.ca/businessdevelopment/tags2009/>

Guille recounted to me how Tom Woods knew it was time to let go of Trackside: the day an angry resident dumped a garbage bag filled with used spray-paint cans on the steps of the Rock Solid office. It seems Rock Solid took much of the blame for the problem.

As it is, few people feel neutral about graffiti. Some appreciate it as a vehicle for artistic and teenage self-expression. Others see it as an offensive, unwanted and costly blight on the urban landscape. Both Woods and Guille respect the arguments of those who hate the stuff, but they also see much potential in having a spot where young outdoor artists can cut loose.

Guille came to the Trackside revival project through his Herald Street art and music space, the Sunset Room. He wasn't familiar with Trackside, but artists exhibiting and selling at Sunset always seemed to be mentioning it.

"It kept coming up, mostly as, 'I sure miss that place,'" recalls Guille, "So we brought together everyone who was interested to see if we could find a solution."

Guille wants a solution that keeps everybody happy, and who could blame him. But it seems unlikely that graffiti will be returning to the gallery any time soon, as Guille points out, few people – even the street artists themselves – seem to understand the difference between vandalism and art.

Personally, the Trackside Gallery has always captivated me. While I originally assumed this was a simple "clean up the streets" mural project in an area notorious for its vandalism and crime, I came to discover some amazing graffiti art covering one kilometer of the lower back walls of warehouses bordering the train tracks in Esquimalt, topped by over thirty billboard-like murals commissioned by Rock Solid.

To me, Trackside was a type of community outreach. Not so much a center as just an open and free space for urban artists: a so-called "legal wall." Also the process that goes into the billboard pieces facilitates a type of outreach; youth were involved in the production of the billboards through The Factory Printshop in conjunction with Rock Solid. There was a contest based around the WITS anti-bullying credo (Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, Seek help) and many young artists – both students at high schools, Camosun and Uvic and established community artists – could feel pride in having their art on display as a powerful showing of community *unity* and support for artistic expression. Much of the youth art also focused on current issues: environmental degradation, immigration and identity, homelessness, indigenous issues and more.

So how are community engagement, sustainability, and art tied together? The answer lies in the original goal of the Trackside Gallery. I really believe that Trackside had been about empowerment, about a united community, and it had been for a while. Just looking at the comments of the sponsors and artists present underneath each billboard show the high hopes that were held for the future of this project.

Notes alongside the murals from sponsors such as Thrifty Foods and Odlum Brown touted the project as "unique, exciting and innovative," a "positive force in the community" that had much future promises as the sign of a united community. A young artist, whose art is featured on one of the billboards and who has been active in the street art community for a number of years, describes how his art keeps him grounded and gives him a sense of place.

Unfortunately, a decided lack of management and responsibility gave Trackside an expiration date, and once the graffiti became out of control it turned into a force against the community for which it was built and the whole project was dismantled.

Where Trackside should have been a fixture in our community, it lasted only a few years. In my opinion, sustainability for Trackside would have meant a carefully managed free-wall, a team of volunteers to manage the spread of graffiti, continued support and accountability from Rock Solid (that extended beyond the initial creation of the project) and – most importantly for the future of Trackside, as street art seems presently to be out of the question – a management plan for the upkeep of the billboards. Sustainability means looking toward the future; sustainable art requires continued management and integration into the community.

## Common Thread Questions

- What is public space?
- Who has the right to occupy and use these spaces?
- Do *all* members of society have access to it?
- What should public spaces be used for, and not used for?
- Does public space need to be regulated? If so, by whom?
- Can public space be community-managed?
- If a space is open to the public completely (and ostensibly for any purpose), then how do we govern our relations within those spaces?
- How do we sustain a shared and safe space, and prevent a tragedy of the commons?
- Why are some forms of unsanctioned interventions (often called street art) more socially acceptable than letter-based graffiti?
- What are the differences and similarities between these practices?
- Both are often illegal, but are both always vandalism?

## Pros and cons of street art

The following is based on discussions with Jason Guille and members of the community encountered at the Esquimalt Arts Festival held on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

### Difficulties of Street Art (Why Trackside Gallery failed)

Boundary creep (the “give ‘em an inch, they’ll take a foot” argument) is a big problem for anyone making an argument for a legitimate graffiti space. Give youth a designated place to express themselves with a can of spray paint, and the next thing you know some of them are expressing themselves on all the nearby buildings for six blocks around.

More challenging still is the fact that flouting authority is part of graffiti-art culture. So it’s not like you can just lecture everybody about sticking to the rules and that’s that. Many young street artists, as experienced by both myself and Jason Guille, are against all private property anyway. The graffiti definitely attracted crime to the neighbourhood, and there was little sense of management or responsibility therein.

### Benefits of Street Art

Creative tools can strengthen the understanding and exploration of community values; public art definitely has the capacity to facilitate youth engagement, specifically as regards the ways in which communities can support youth in becoming more positively engaged with public space and art practices. For example, therapeutic art facilitator Katrina Thorsen has found in her 10 years of community-based work that street art can be very empowering and effective when working with at-risk and traumatized youth. Thorsen argues that providing youth with public spaces in which they can express themselves and have their voices heard will help youth integrate themselves into public life, build confidence and strengthen community support structures, all in active, positive, and supportive ways.



## Case study: Open Space Arts Society

*We are the city, and the city is us.*

Founded in 1972, the *Open Space Arts Society* is a non-profit artist-run centre located in Victoria, British Columbia. Open Space supports artists who utilize hybrid and experimental approaches to media, art, music, and performance.

In April 2014, the same month as the launching of the Esquimalt Arts Council, Open Space hosted a two-day symposium that brought together artists, scholars, curators, activists, city officials, community organizations, and engaged citizens to examine the goals, perceptions, problems, and possibilities of unsanctioned public art. Open Space Assistant Curator Sara Fruchtman and local artist-in-residence Cameron Kidd organized this local and international community event. The symposium was the culminating project of Kidd's 10 month residency at Open Space. During this time, he's helped to create 3 murals, and a variety of projects that addressed the need for youth engagement and more publicly accessible sites for street art in the city, such as the lobbying for Commercial Alley to be turned into a new city-sponsored mural zone.

This free and public symposium also featured presentations and a series of round-table panel discussions to encourage audience involvement and participation in these important conversations.

The symposium was generously sponsored by the *City of Victoria* and the *Art Gallery of Greater Victoria*. One panel focused on types of spaces in the city (public, semi-public, private), and featured people like art-activist Kika Thorne, geography professor Reuben Rose-Redwood, sculptor Mowry Baden, and the founders of the The Wayward School, Stefan Morales and Heather Cosidetto. The panel on the benefits of youth art and community engagement included Sue Donaldson of the BC Arts Council, Haida artist Sacha Ouellet, Tla-o-qui-aht wood carver Hjalmer Wenstob, and theatre director Will Weigler. Also, there was a free screening of local director Kay Gallivan's documentary "100 layers of beige," which focused on Trackside Gallery and the conflicts that led to the end of one of Canada's largest graffiti walls.

## Public art in Esquimalt Township

**2002:** Esquimalt Council adopted Public Art Policy to “cultivate a more vibrant community full of visually exciting and identifiable spaces where art in all its forms is incorporated into everyday life.”<sup>2</sup>

**2004:** When the new Municipal Hall was opened, Esquimalt held its first public art competition and three new art works were selected and installed on the exterior of the building: Re-emergence of the Lifebringers by Marianne Nicolson (pictographs), Thunderbird Orca Spindle Whorl by Charles Elliott (carving), and Mosaic Garden (mosaic) by Rosemary and Geoff Murray

**Current:** Public art is being considered as one of the planning criteria for the proposed development and revitalization of Esquimalt’s town core with the Esquimalt Village Project

**Current:** The Esquimalt Municipal Hall currently has several works of art, including original watercolours, acrylics, and limited edition prints, on display in public areas, meeting rooms, and offices.

These undertakings were intended to demonstrate that art is valued as an integral part of society, to increase community understanding of the arts, to promote the arts in general, and to increase community pride. They also show a general trend of increasing interest in using the arts as a tool for community feedback and engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> Township of Esquimalt – Public art: <http://www.esquimalt.ca/cultureHeritage/publicArt/>

## The future of trackside: my proposal for Youth in Action

*Art is not a monologue.*

It speaks to our hearts and minds, and often elicits a myriad of reactions and responses. Art has been valued for centuries to educate, inspire, mobilize and motivate people into response and action. It presents some of the qualities to create interconnectedness and agency for change, because it often critiques and reflects upon the contemporary issues of a time and place. It must reflect the values of the community as a whole.

While street art might never work in the area, as a vehicle for expression which still respects community wishes, the idea of community involvement still stands. Repairing the billboards (and engaging the community in the beautification) and designing a management plan to maintain the project beyond a simple revitalization could be empowering, for the following reasons.

### **Creative tools can strengthen the understanding and exploration of community values**

Traditional tools for community engagement include public opinion surveys, visioning workshops, town halls, meetings, and public hearings. While useful in relaying information to the public and receiving feedback, these tools do not always elicit ample participation and can rarely explore the values and needs of citizens thoroughly. A stronger awareness of citizen values helps connect community perspectives with planning efforts. A revitalization of Trackside in a way that recognizes and engages community values could develop partnerships with schools, grassroots organizations and city agencies to create murals and billboards for community engagement (with the added possibility of including commemorations of history, culture etc).

### **Creative tools can increase stakeholder involvement**

Planning outreach and engagement is a process intended to incorporate all members of the community, including children, youth, young professionals, and working parents. All of these groups are vital parts of a community, and their participation in planning is important. Outreach events that are geared towards community and cultural sensitivity could encourage participation in a way that is fun, effective, and inclusive. These could include a twice-yearly urban arts festival in which artists volunteered to do a general cleanup of the surrounding neighbourhoods in exchange for the right to paint the wall (like the City of Victoria Youth Council did with their “Calligraffiti” project with the Moss St. Art Gallery) or a celebration of new art billboards (like what was done at Esquimalt’s first ever public art competition in 2004).

### **Creative tools can better engage people in community and urban design projects**

Public revitalization of space is one active approach to engaging people in urban design. In this approach, the public physically creates or actively designs street and other outdoor urban-design elements. In Toronto, the Design Exchange<sup>3</sup> partnered with the city to convene two street-furniture

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<sup>3</sup> Design Exchange - Toronto: <http://www.dx.org/>

design charrettes. These partners were able to engage diverse groups directly in the design of urban elements. Design specialists, stakeholder groups, and representatives of the city participated in team exercises where members developed site scenarios for fixed, flexible, and customizable urban-design elements such as garbage boxes, bicycle kiosks, transit shelters, and benches and public murals on low-traffic residential streets. Neighbors collaborate to design, paint, and celebrate their community squares.

I envision a permanent but constantly evolving space where community values can be explored, ideas can be challenged, capacity can be built and people can be brought together through a shared vision of community and a love for art and all that it brings.

I envision a long-term plan of accountability that engages the municipality, businesses, and residents of all demographics to make sure the Traxside Gallery continues to be an asset to the community and to meet the expectations of the stakeholders. This can be achieved through a volunteer task-force, liaising between sponsoring businesses, artists, schools, and the community at-large, symposiums, festivals, visioning sessions, contests for new billboard ideas and surveys.

I envision a revitalization of the space; a beautiful, ever-changing artistic space along the E&N rail (a popular biking and walking path) that brings colour to the Esquimalt Industrial Park, as well as a sense of pride for our shared space that would hopefully manifest itself in a desire to keep the area clean, crime-free, and creative.



## Acknowledgments

- Jason Guille: social entrepreneur, project manager, festival producer, venue owner, musician with an interest in street art and the Trackside Gallery
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- Open Space Art Society
- Tricia Roche – University of Victoria researcher
- Bruno Jayme – University of Victoria student
- United Way Greater Victoria & Coast Capital Savings for supporting this project

## About Eva

Eva is in her final year of High School at St. Michaels University School. She is an engage and passionate person who can be found participating in a number of community initiatives including the City of Victoria Youth Council. Eva is a part of her school's debate team and has been active in this year's musical theater productions. Eva's favourite things in the world are banana bread, turn of the century literature, her amazing wacky friends, and AP European History. She'll be heading to Stanford next year to studying literature and politics.

## About Youth in Action

The Youth in Action initiative is supported by the United Way Greater Victoria and Coast Capital Savings. It seeks to build capacity in young people age 15-24 by supporting them as they explore their neighborhoods. The initiative is active in Hillside-Quadra and Esquimalt and enables youth to create positive change for their neighborhoods. Eva's report represents her hard work in the summer of 2014 where she had the opportunity to take on an independent investigation that complemented the work she was doing as part of the Youth in Action team.

The youth team in Esquimalt started in 2013 facilitating a number of community engagement activities and events with community associations, service providers, government, residents and their peers. Based on information gathered in the community they have identified priority areas for investment. These will be implemented in March 2015 by the Greater Victoria United Way in partnership with neighborhood organizations. The teams are supported by a Community Animator who facilitates the process.

More information about the initiative can be found at <http://uwgv.ca/>