

Public art

Introduction

Winnipeg is steeped in public art, with more than 600 murals adorning the buildings of our city. From historic murals and hand-painted ghost signs dating back to the 1930s to Synonym Art Consultation's more recent mural explosion via their ten-year Wall-to-Wall festival, there is a long tradition of free public art for the public good. Beyond Winnipeg's ubiquitous murals, the municipally-funded Winnipeg Arts Council (WAC) has been leading the implementation of major public art projects in Winnipeg since 2004. Public art in Winnipeg tells our stories, brings specificity and identity to our streets, and ultimately acts as a mirror for who we are and what we value.

Overview

Winnipeggers want to inhabit a livable city where we encounter beauty within our urban environment, including a lush tree canopy, green space, bike paths, and vibrant public art. As public art is a reflection of who we are and the history that precedes us, we engage with public art to challenge and educate us. A collaborative WITH ART project with artist Leah Decter and Peace Alliance Winnipeg raised awareness and engagement with members of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, from whom Winnipeg gets our water. Bloody Saturday by artists Bernie Miller and Noam Gonick is a permanent public art installation of a tipped street trolley on Main Street to commemorate Winnipeg's 1919 General Strike.



Natalie Mark's Chinatown banners / Alanna Yuen

More recently, new street-post banners have been installed in the Chinatown neighbourhood by artist Natalie Mark and in Central Park by artist Bîstyek, reflecting their cultural communities and particular histories with these neighbourhoods. All of these projects were conceptualized, supported, and implemented by WAC's Public Art Program. These spaces of cultural convening need to be strategically planned for through continued support of this work.

The City of Winnipeg's Complete Communities 2.0: An OurWinnipeg Direction Strategy document cites the importance of public art, stating that the City:

1. Promote Downtown as a priority location for showcasing performing arts and time-limited or temporary art exhibits and installations.
2. Integrate public art Downtown to create a sense of place.
3. Incorporate public art into Downtown projects and in public spaces.
4. Encourage public art, artistic features, and other streetscaping features at key gateways to Downtown and its districts.¹

In order for this vision to be realized, significant investment needs to be made. WAC manages the City of Winnipeg's Public Art Program, the funding for which has been decimated to zero. Since the adoption of a Public Art Policy in 2004, WAC received an annual grant of \$500,000 from 2004–2018, \$250,000 in 2019, \$325,000 in 2020, \$125,000 from 2021–2023 before being eliminated in the 2024 budget. WAC's website states: "the goal is to insert the work of artists into city life where ideas can be encountered on a daily basis. The program consists of: local, national and international commissions; artist-on-design team in infrastructure approaches; an Artist-in-Residence in City facilities; a community-based program entitled WITH ART; and various partnership endeavours."²

In 2024, the Executive Policy Committee (EPC) and City Council recommended the public service work with WAC to develop a program that would include public art in major capital projects. This recommendation advances what was proposed in the 2022 AMB, which is to implement a percent-for-art program.

Under the percent-for-art model, when the City undertakes a capital project, such as a bridge renovation or new firehouse, a percentage of that project's budget is reserved to create public art as part of the completed project. It could range from an outdoor or indoor sculpture, a mural, an imaginative display of lighting, an interactive educational display, or even a fountain or creative use of water. A percent-for-art model does not introduce a new tax or create a new expense line for the City. It allocates a small, fixed proportion of existing capital project budgets to ensure that public infrastructure incorporates artistic and civic value from the outset. Percent-for-art programs are already present across the country in Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, and other Canadian cities.

In April 2025, after extensive consultation and work alongside WAC, the public service came back to the EPC with a proposal to include public art in all major capital projects (the percent-for-art model), and to do this using a multi-year pooled approach. Under a pooled percent-for-art model, all eligible investments include a specified percentage of the construction budget for public art. Instead of being tied to a specific project, funds are pooled. This allows for more strategic planning by arts professionals, rather than public art installations being dictated by where the next build is in Winnipeg. This means that all major capital projects will contribute to public arts funding.

The public service's 2025 recommendation³ was for a .25 per cent public art allocation, capped at a maximum contribution of \$250,000.

This is sorely below the provision of other jurisdictions, all of which have adopted one per cent public art allocations.⁴

The public service also recommended that WAC's Public Art Program Manager's salary and administrative costs be included in the annual operating budget of the Winnipeg Arts Council, effectively removing this budget line from the unpredictability that a pooled method brings.

WAC and City staff put forward these recommendations in April 2025. However, the motion was deferred by EPC without discussion or debate to the Strategic Priorities Action Planning process prior to the 2028–2031 budget process. This delays any action on public art until the 2028 City of Winnipeg budget. Public art continues to be unfunded in Winnipeg today.

Central to the value of public art is its universal accessibility, showcasing communities' cultural values and a sense of identity without the price tag of a ticket. Public art functions as a catalyst for civic engagement and urban vitality, inviting locals and tourists to reinvent urban life, making generic urban landscapes unique, increasing a sense of place with a distinctive character, and offering artists the opportunity to bring different ideas and disciplines together, advancing artistic practice. In the absence of public art, urban environments risk becoming interchangeable and devoid of local character.

Actions

- **The AMB will** allocate \$507,000 annually to restore funding for public art.
- **The AMB will** adopt a multi-year pooled percent-for-art model, adding one per cent with each new capital project to the pooled funding bank for public art projects, to be managed by the Winnipeg Arts Council.
- **The AMB will** include the salary and administrative expenses of the Public Art Program Manager under the annual operating budget of the Winnipeg Arts Council. This will be a \$108,000 addition to WAC's annual operating budget, increasing with inflation.

Notes

- 1 City of Winnipeg. (2025). "Complete Communities 2.0 An OurWinnipeg Direction Strategy" Page 48. <https://dmis.winnipeg.ca/permalink/bylaw/119/2020C>
- 2 Winnipeg Arts Council. "About Public Art." <https://winnipegarts.ca/public-art>
- 3 Tooth, D. (2025). "Administrative Report: City of Winnipeg Proposed Public Art Program (Percent-for-Art Program)." <https://dmis.winnipeg.ca/ViewMeeting?documentId=26713§ionId=766764>
- 4 Winnipeg Arts Council. (2025). "Public Art in Canadian Cities: 2025 Snapshot." <https://dmis.winnipeg.ca/ViewMeeting?documentId=26713§ionId=766765>