

Urban Living

**By Jim Donnelly**

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Article online since December 13 2006

Graffiti artists seek new, legal canvas for their work

Some graffiti activists say they'd like to see a pilot project set to start in the east end brought downtown, to combat alienation amongst the city's youth.



Sabra Ripley, a member of the DeCypher Cru breakdancing troupe, helped pioneer the legalization of the House of PainT graffiti venue on the Dunbar Bridge in the Glebe.

"If they've got a place where they can promote their art without having to do it at three in the morning worrying if they're going to be busted, it gives them an opportunity to be part of the community," says Mike Young, the graf activist and photographer who first proposed the east end idea of erecting legal plywood walls as a legal venue for spray painting.

"The community isn't going to be something they just (throw off)," he says.

"It gives them more ownership," Young continues, adding that legal spaces deter less artistically-minded pursuits like the tagging one's name with marker – a territorial activity frowned upon by most graf artists that's reached endemic proportions downtown.

"If you put up a legal wall, someone that wants to try a bit of tagging can try it there and move on to something else," he says. "Or if you commission some graf artists to put something up on (a wall), it often gets tagged less."

The one-year pilot will see the erection of two eight by 12-foot plywood walls this spring, acting as legal graf walls, opposite the Orléans skate park. It's expected to cost less than \$1,000 and was modeled on Gatineau's successful program. It's even garnered approval from the Ottawa Police Service.

Young says the project compliments the city's graffiti management program and the Ottawa Police Services "4E" approach to graf management – eradication, empowerment, education and enforcement.

And while downtown advocates admit there's already legal or quasi-legal space provided to artists in the form of the Glebe's House of PainT or Centretown's Tech Wall, they say more urban canvases will be a boon to artists and the community as a whole.

Sabra Ripley, of the DeCypher Cru breakdancing troupe, helped pioneer the legalization of House of PainT. It's a legal graf space under the Glebe's Dunbar Bridge on Bronson Street, and features murals and other pieces from some of Ottawa's top graf artists.

She worked with local councillors, the Ottawa South Community Organization and other members of the community to get House of PainT legalized. Following its legalization the quality of the work shot up almost immediately, she says.

"When people have a legal, safe space to paint they put up more elaborate pieces," she explains. "So what's happened with the Tech Wall is that you have John (Brownfield) putting up these amazing pieces, because he knows he's not going to get stopped."

Brownfield, one of Ottawa's most respected and longest-serving graf artists, says the implementation of more free space can only be good for the city's artistic community.

When there's only so much space to go around, "It gets to be an issue of space and who gets to use it," he says, so less-established artists who want to practice on the legal walls are often denied from sheer lack of space. This project could change that.

Brownfield agrees the long-fought problem tagging in the downtown core has become epidemic – he's even had some of his own murals tagged over with marker.

"There are kids that do it for basically the wrong reasons," he says. "They're producing lackluster artwork – I don't really know if I would call it art, to be very honest with you. And then it's just a matter of standing around and drinking beer and patting each other on the back saying job well done when it really wasn't a job well done at all."



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