

## Professional Communication – Informal Proposal

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**From:** Arthur Robert, Communications Manager <[arthurrobert@cityto.com](mailto:arthurrobert@cityto.com)>

**Subject:** CHOICE OF MURAL ARTIST FOR CITYPLACE BRIDGE AREA

**Date:** Sunday, July 1, 2012 2:00 PM

### PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

At your request, I have developed an appropriate response to the negative press coverage that the CityPlace neighbourhood has been getting in recent months, namely the *Is CityPlace Toronto's next ghetto?* piece that appeared in The Grid in November, 2011. My solution takes into account the City's limited funds for cultural initiatives and revolves around a mural project. The impact that an artistically powerful and well-chosen mural can have on the development of a community is not to be underestimated. Murals can consciously and even subconsciously have an impact on the denizens of a neighbourhood and also passersby. A good mural will add aesthetic improvement to a person's life as they pass the artwork on a daily basis. It will add to the character, ambience and overall atmosphere of a neighbourhood. A memorable mural can even have a positive economic impact, attracting people to an area where there might be businesses in operation. Best of all – unlike new festivals, buildings and other popular community development initiatives – murals are not incredibly expensive to produce.

The purpose of this report is to provide a clear assessment of the pros and cons of three mural development applications that I've sourced from Toronto-based artists. I will then make a recommendation based on that assessment.

### SOLUTION AND ALTERNATIVES: MURAL ARTISTS (MURALISTS)

I propose that we commission an artist to paint a mural along the rail land wall directly beneath the new Puente de Luz bridge (informally, CityPlace bridge). Figure 1 indicates the area to which I'm referring. The mural should be consistent with the emerging aesthetic of the CityPlace neighbourhood. This aesthetic can be described as youthful, organic, cheeky, unusual, unexpected, vibrant, bright and colourful. The best and most

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well-known example of this type of artwork in CityPlace thus far is the Canoe Landing Park, designed by acclaimed Vancouver-based author Douglas Coupland. Placing a big red canoe in the middle of a city park was a bold and unusual decision, but the canoe was well-received and is fast becoming an iconic symbol of the neighbourhood. We can continue to build on this charming and cheeky aesthetic with a well-chosen mural.

The standards of the City of Toronto should be reflected in the muralist we choose. This artist must conform to our standards of accountability, accessibility and respect for the public. At the same time, we don't want to stifle an artist's creative freedom by telling them what to paint. I have identified and sourced proposals from three Toronto-based artists who can meet our needs for a mural under the CityPlace bridge: Mark Robertson, Jessica Martinez and Jonathan Bird.



Photo by Flickr user "Sean\_Marshall"

*Figure 1: rail land wall directly beneath the Puente de Luz bridge, 2011*

### DETERMINING SELECTION CRITERIA

The criteria that I used to make my selection among the three muralists are based on the proposals received from each muralist, professional articles in the fine arts field, online searches of muralist websites and articles on the CityPlace development, telephone interviews with the muralists themselves and some ethnographic research within CityPlace (*i.e.*, unobtrusive observation of the neighbourhood and

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informal/unstructured interviews with a few residents). The following are the three criteria that I chose to evaluate the muralists:

1. **Experience of the muralist:** This includes the muralist's reputation. How is s/he regarded within the arts community? How many years has s/he been painting? What sort of murals has s/he completed in the past? Which famous artists have informed his/her work?
2. **Tone and feel of the piece:** how will the proposed mural affect the ambience and atmosphere of the neighbourhood? Will it be positive and welcoming? How will the piece make people feel? What sort of thoughts and emotions might it elicit? Will the tone of the piece contribute to the community theme? Will this tone potentially benefit business?
3. **Cost:** For the initial production of the mural and any expenses that might be necessary for its maintenance and upkeep

### QUALIFICATION AND EXPERIENCE OF MURALISTS

Mark Robertson is a 37-year-old muralist, political activist and film director. He has been painting murals around the GTA for about a decade now, which means that he's already built up a fairly formidable reputation. Robertson's work is often controversial because it's politically motivated. He takes inspiration from the European graffiti artists Banksy and Blek le Rat. Like Banksy, Robertson's murals usually offer some kind of commentary on a contemporary political issue, such as CCTV surveillance or immigrant rights. So why should the City of Toronto even consider officially supporting such a political artist? We need to consider the big picture in making this decision, which includes the demographic of the CityPlace neighbourhood. CityPlace is comprised of very young people – mostly twentysomethings. They would, no doubt, see Robertson's mural as “cool” and fully embrace it as part of their emerging community. Robertson's work has a lot of “street cred” and is always enthusiastically embraced by young people, especially those in their teens and 20s. If the City supported such a work, we would be seen as acknowledging the predominant demographic within this neighbourhood and encouraging it to keep growing. This could be a wise move on our behalf.

Jessica Martinez is a 23-year-old Mexican Canadian muralist and graphic designer. She is fresh out of

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her bachelor's program in Drawing & Painting at OCAD University. She hasn't established herself within the Toronto arts community yet, but her OCAD professors speak very highly of her work. In her final year, she won a student competition to produce a mural on a wall within the OCAD student centre. She has been drawing and painting since early childhood and comes from an artistic family. Her murals are somewhat similar in style to Os Gemeos, the graffiti artist twin brothers from Brazil. Like Os Gemeos, her murals usually feature fantastic characters within brightly coloured, organic environments. They are always visually striking but rarely political in nature. The City would be taking a chance if we went with this inexperienced young art school graduate. But if the mural is well-received, we could be seen as helping to kickstart the career of an important artist.

Jonathan Bird is a 70-year-old classically trained painter and muralist who went to the Royal College of Art in London. He taught art history and drawing in the UK for many years. Three years ago, he received an offer from the University of Toronto to teach art history on the graduate level. He accepted that offer and has been living in Toronto since. He has already received a number of commissions in Canada to paint murals within theatres and churches. His murals tend to be very florid, decorative and impressively detailed. Bird specializes in murals of biblical and historical scenes. His painting style is informed by the late British artist Henry Bird (no relation, surprisingly). His murals tend to be very beautiful and religious in nature. Chances are low that Bird's mural would offend anybody, but it might not be appropriate for the CityPlace crowd.

### **STONE AND FEEL OF THE PIECE**

Robertson's proposed mural is somewhat political in nature but not necessarily controversial. He wants to paint a mural in the vein of one of Banksy's more well-known murals, pictured in Figure 2 below. The mural will draw attention to the furious pace of technological advancement within our North American society and ask some critical questions about it. Robertson wants to provoke people into thinking twice about buying that latest iPad or smartphone. Compelling citizens to be critical about their interactions with technology is within the interests of the City of Toronto. And this message would certainly be relevant to the young, consumption-oriented demographic of CityPlace. I suspect that this mural would actually be well-received by CityPlace

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denizens, as it will be challenging them in a clever way to rethink their technological habits. Young people tend to appreciate critical and provocative messages such as this one *if* the message is delivered artfully. So, the fact that the mural isn't necessarily positive and welcoming isn't that important. However, will the tone of this piece contribute toward the community theme? The mural is relevant to the emerging theme of the neighbourhood in that it is directed primarily at young people, but it's not particularly organic. Coupland's big red canoe evokes nature, water, the outdoors and the organic environment. This mural would evoke the complete opposite of that – gadgets, smartphones, systems and the technological world.



Photo by Flickr user "Phillie Casablanca"

*Figure 2: "ATM attacking a girl" mural by Banksy in London*

The mural that Martinez proposes would use vibrant colours to portray an ocean scene. Like the murals of Os Gemeos, it would feature a few fantastic characters who resemble people but are not quite human. The ocean setting is appropriate because of CityPlace's proximity to the Toronto waterfront. The mural would not be political in nature; Martinez is not attempting to deliver any kind of "message" with the mural. I believe that this mural would be well-received by CityPlace residents because of Martinez's striking visual style. The mural

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would add a splash of vibrancy to the rail lands area beneath the CityPlace bridge that is desperately lacking in colour at the moment. Although not particularly critical or thought-provoking, it would be a positive and welcoming mural that people should enjoy looking at on a regular basis. The piece fits the emerging community theme of the organic, the outdoors and the environment initiated by Coupland's canoe. I believe the piece would positively affect businesses by providing a sense of liveliness to the currently drab rail lands, thereby attracting more people to the area.



Photo taken by Flickr user "kempsternyc"

*Figure 3: "Girl resting in sea" mural by Os Gemeos in New York City*

Jonathan Bird proposes to paint a mural inspired by the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale on the rail lands wall. He hopes that this mural will help to bring some sense of morality to the largely secular neighbourhood of CityPlace. I was initially interested in this proposal because of its water theme and Bird's substantial experience with creating beautiful and ornate murals, but Bird's religious motivations are obviously counter to the City's objectives. It's even likely that a painting of such a religious nature – however beautiful – would make many of CityPlace's secular residents feel quite uncomfortable. Jonathan Bird's mural would be something along the lines of Henry Bird's religious murals (see Figure 4). The tone of the proposed mural is more different than similar to the emerging community theme. Although the natural environment would be evoked in a powerful way by Bird's mural, the organic theme of CityPlace has not been overtly religious in nature thus far and I do not sense much desire among CityPlace inhabitants to make it so.

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Photo by Flickr user "j a thorpe"

*Figure 4: "The Conversion of St. Paul" mural by Henry Bird in Northamptonshire*

### **COST**

Figure 5 outlines the cost of each of the three muralists under consideration. The initial production of the mural will be an upfront, fixed fee. Because this mural will be on an exterior wall, it will gradually deteriorate as the seasons change. The Toronto winters will be especially hard on this mural. It should be expected that the muralist will have to be brought in at least once per year – at the end of every winter – to perform touchups on their work. These maintenance fees will be paid by the hour.

Mark Robertson's requested fee of \$8,000 is about the average for an established muralist with some experience in the GTA. Jonathan Bird's requested fee of \$15,000 is higher than the average, even for established muralists. Jessica Martinez's requested fee of \$5,000 is perhaps a little high for a muralist with no public commissions yet, but it's still quite low for a quality mural. Her hourly rate for the mural maintenance is also

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exceptionally low, at \$20 per hour.

*Figure 5: Comparison of costs for hiring a muralist*

	Mark Robertson	Jessica Martinez	Jonathan Bird
Initial production	\$8,000.00	\$5,000.00	\$15,000.00
Maintenance/upkeep	\$50/hr	\$20/hr	\$100/hr

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Jonathan Bird is the most experienced, learned and accomplished of the three muralists, his proposal is inappropriately religious for the CityPlace neighbourhood, which is largely secular. His fees are also excessively high. Therefore, the choice is between Mark Robertson and Jessica Martinez. Robertson has more experience than Martinez. He also has established a solid reputation for himself within the Toronto arts community – his murals are generally well-regarded. The controversial and boundary-pushing nature of his work makes Robertson all the more respected among the younger demographic that inhabits CityPlace. Yet, his mural proposal does not match the emerging community theme of CityPlace, which was initiated by Canoe Landing Park and evokes the natural environment, organic life, youthfulness and vibrancy. Although Jessica Martinez has received no public commissions for her artwork to date, she is a very promising young artist and the City will likely benefit from being seen as initiating her career. The tone of Martinez's mural proposal – bright, vibrant, organic and watery – fits the emerging community theme of CityPlace. Martinez has no history of painting anything particularly controversial, so the mural should be quite pleasant and accessible. The City can also hire Martinez for a substantially lower price than Robertson. Therefore, *I recommend the City of Toronto to hire Jessica Martinez to paint her proposed mural on the rail land wall beneath the Puente de Luz bridge.*

Martinez should be hired by the end of the month. The mural can then be started in August and finished by the end of the summer. Mr. Vaughan, please let me know if I have authorization to proceed with this hiring decision. I will then contact Human Resources.



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