

Urban art as an early warning system

Text and photos by Aleksandar Janicijevic — Toronto, July, 2021 — urbansquares.com

How arts, culture and nature can help people absorb and process accelerating changes manifesting in mental health burdens, emphasized by climate change and the ongoing Covid pandemic.

Through urban art, participants seek opportunities for play and creation as they interact with the city's spaces. They are involved in a variety of explorations of the physical and psychological landscape and the cultural and human geography of the city. Urban art, in Toronto for example, is accepted as a valued and approved art form. It can be observed that the vast majority of visual themes deal with the environment. More than just descriptive images, they are symbols celebrating nature.



Symbols are transformed objects with great psychological importance, expressed most often in religion and visual art. To define symbols we need to use words. They are, however, not enough to interpret the role of symbols in our lives. Symbols reflect the psychological condition of the modern world.

Photos above are from Toronto and one on the right is a message from St. James Town, within an area locally called “Little Filipino Town”. It is the most densely populated area of not only Toronto, but all of North America. Maybe this language is more understandable for the young generation that will carry the burden of improving the **RESILIENCE**.



Examples above, from The Esplanade Street, are already famous Toronto landmarks. They have appeared in numerous movies, TV shows and advertisements. Sight is frequently used as a popular photo and event location spreading, consciously and unconsciously, the word about climate problems. It was created in 2014 by a group of sixteen young artists called 16 Jamii Esplanade.

While our sensory receptors are constantly collecting information from the environment, it is ultimately how we interpret that information that affects how we interact with the world. Perception refers to the way sensory information is organized and consciously experienced.

On the other hand, how we interpret those sensations is influenced by our available knowledge, our experiences, and our thoughts. Although our perceptions are built from sensations, not all sensations result in perception. In fact, we often don't perceive stimuli that remain relatively constant over prolonged periods of time. Motivation can also seriously affect perception.



Examples above are from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Coburg, Ontario and Lisbon, Portugal. In the last couple of decades, urban art (sometimes called street art or graffiti art) has become very popular and influential. It is, in most places, legal, encouraged and even financed by local authorities. Some artist, past and present, like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Whils, Manco, OsGemeos, Bordalo or Banksy, have become famous influencers precisely because of this type of work.

The excessive production and consumption of “stuff”, which results in the continuous production of “garbage” and consequently in the destruction of the planet, are the central themes of Bordalo’s work [photo above right]. “This “garbage” assumes itself as the unusual and unique raw material that Bordalo uses in the construction of large scale pieces that he has spread around the world and that, above all, intend to be the vehicle of a universal manifesto towards the pollution and climate change”.

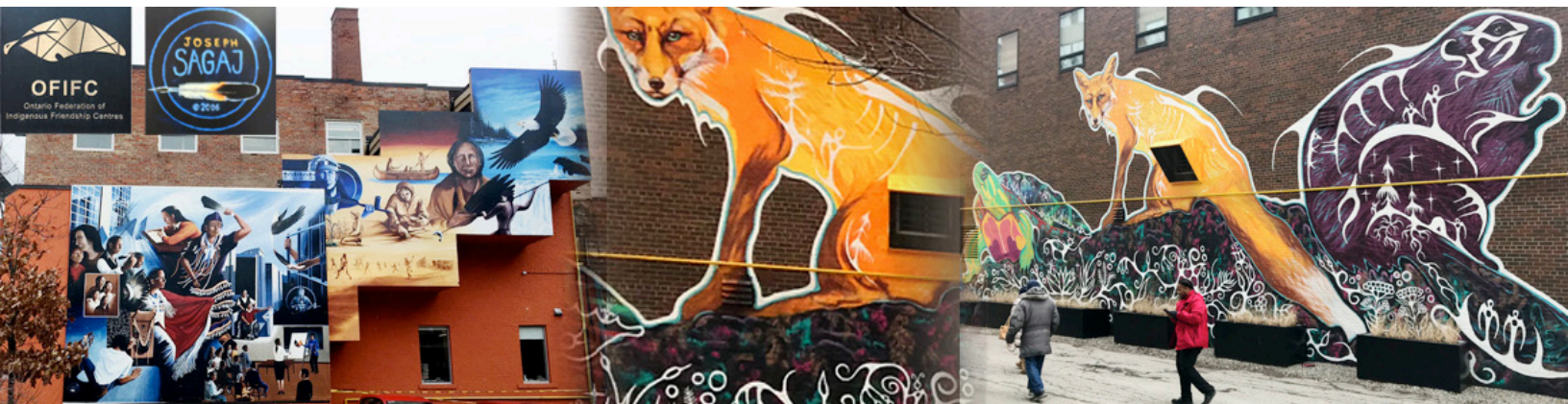
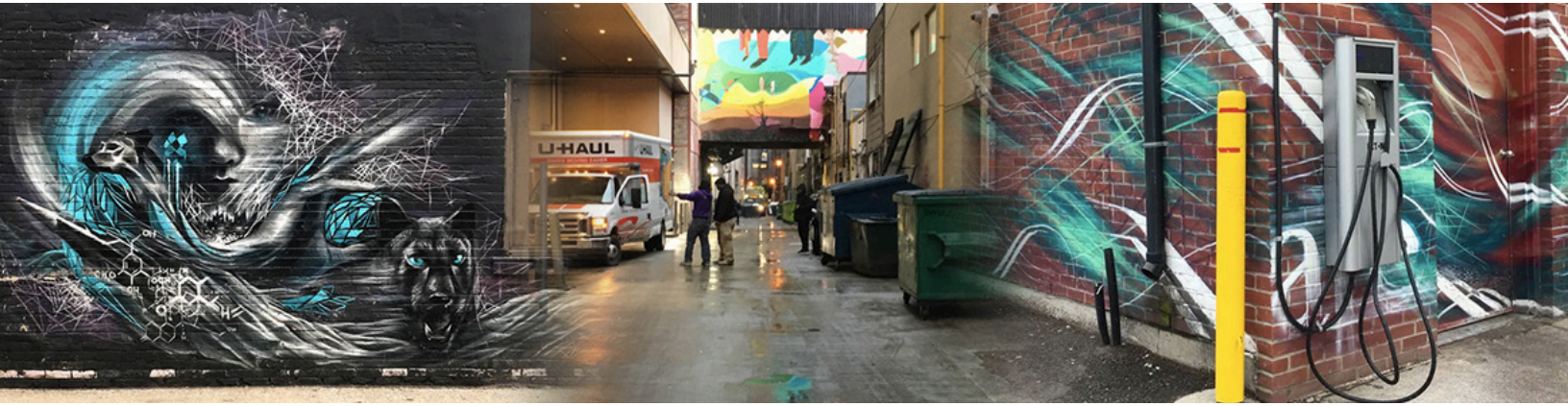


Photo above left is a vista of the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres [OFIFC] on Front Street East in Toronto, with very impressive mural - The Seven Stages of Life. The mural was created in 2006 by Joseph Sagaj. It is back up after intensive restoration.

When is mural not just a mural? When it is part of a healing process? Image in the middle on the previous page is newest addition to the neighbourhood, at Nicholson Lane in the old town Toronto. This initiative by the Laneway Project, supported by Kristyn Wong-Tam the city Councillor for this area, led to this magnificent mural created by artists Monica Wickeler or monica on the moon and Miigizi or Wiishkoonseh Miigizi'enh meaning Whistling White Headed Eagle in the Chippewa language. One may notice nature themes are reoccurring in the indigenous art.



Carl Jung once said: "Groups of people can become especially receptive to specific symbols due to the historical situation they find themselves in." They are created by long gone but not forgotten memories of life in harmony with the environment. In this case they are not early but late warning signs. As we already know, I prefer visuals over words so three photos above are from around Toronto, one at the right at Baka Restaurant on Bloor Street is attracting visitors with this mural incorporated in electrical vehicles charging station. How smart!

Examples bellow are from Lisbon, my favourite Urban Art location, another Bordallo II creation is in the middle.



How do we observe and interpret symbols around us? How does our education shape us into being specific observers? Artists have an important role to play in the composition of urban space. Moreover, inspiring city dwellers to live within their environment actively and creatively, playing out their own ideas and concerns simultaneously involving unconscious and conscious interaction with urban space.

As Marshall McLuhan said many years ago: "Art, at its most significant, is a Distant Early Warning System that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it."

Let's pay attention and heed the warnings of the artists around us.