

# Cincinnati CityBeat



## The Art of Rejuvenation

*Keep Cincinnati Beautiful's public art program engages and inspires*

**MATT MORRIS** // APR 20, 2010

Last October, simplified paintings of windows and doors began to appear across the boarded-up facades of derelict buildings around Over-the-Rhine. Since then, they've been sprouting consistently around the inner city.

Fittingly, these are the work of Future Blooms, an unusual public-art program initiated by Keep Cincinnati Beautiful. In a small, localized way, it recalls the work of the Federal Art Project, part of the job-creation Works Progress Administration that existed as part of the New Deal during the Great Depression.



The imaginary windows and doors are painted in various bold and soft hues onto the barricades that cover the original architecture's actual windows and doors. Rather than asking two-dimensional representations to struggle against their three-dimensional contexts, as murals often do, these paintings accentuate

their own flatness, thus integrating easily into their host buildings.

"It's really satisfying to have it be such an immediate thing," says Catherine Richards, project manager and art director of Future Blooms. "There are so many buildings that we get to work with public art all over the city. What a gift that we can have permission to do that."

Future Blooms is a \$100,000 grant project funded by (the now-closed, according to news reports) Cincinnati Empowerment Corporation, the Jacob G. Schmidlapp Trusts and trustees of the Fifth Third Bank. According to its mission statement, it is specifically aimed at "the aesthetic enhancement of vacant, abandoned and foreclosed properties within the Empowerment Zone."

"In the beginning of the grant, I really wanted to engage the community, specifically young people or children," Richards says. "The most profound thing that happened in our experience at our first site (at Elm and Findlay) was the children's reaction to what we were doing. They would come across the street and walk over to the playground next to the building. They 'oohed' and 'ahhed' from the first coat of paint."

"At one point, when more door elements and building architectural elements started to be more identifiable, this one girl passed and said, 'I know what you're doing. You're

making it into a house!’ And we thought that was a wonderful way to look at it, because she didn’t see the site as a house or as a piece of architecture before. It was just blank and we were able to help her imagine it.”

The “empowerment zone” is a series of neighborhoods, such as Over-the-Rhine and Corryville, where Future Blooms wall paintings can be placed. In its pilot stage, the project is to paint 130 properties by the end of June. Richards works with another full-time employee, three part-timers and occasional intern support from University of Cincinnati’s School of Architecture. Headquarters are on Main Street in Over-the-Rhine.

Richards recently completed her Master’s degree in Architecture at UC and also works as an artist. Before coming to Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, she worked for the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in New York and designed exhibitions for Victoria & Albert



Museum in London. She and the other Future Blooms employees have backgrounds in the arts and are excited to be working with such an effective instrument for adding art into the community to affect change.

“I think the difference between this project and other community art projects is the level of seriousness we approach the work with,” Richards explains. “We take the painting of plywood boards that other people would throw away very seriously. As artists and designers, we’re trained to commit to what we do.

“The way that we approach our creative process is rigorous; we try to experiment and infuse different kinds of creative thinking into the way we visualize these spaces. To us, the solutions are open-ended, beautiful and abstract. We aim for a high quality, the best we can do in a short time.”

Inspiring imagination is a special part of Blooms' character. The artists never paint figures or types of buildings — for example, never a sign that says “barber” or “restaurant,” which could seem sentimentally false on the outside of a building that houses no business.

Instead, the Modernism-informed paintings keep things open, so that passersby can imagine what is beyond these fantastic doors and windows. The types of doors and even the color schemes they use are drawn from Cincinnati history and research into the psychology of color, tending towards hues associated with calm and happiness, such as pink and more muted tones.

But more than an aesthetic program, Keep Cincinnati Beautiful sees Future Blooms as an economic development effort. It has devised a clear system that not only adds visual information to old, vacant buildings, but also improves the quality of life in the areas around the painted buildings.

In an attempt to quantify specifically how Future Blooms is improving neighborhoods, the team creates a “blight index” for the streets it works on, rating how much litter, vandalized property and blight is found on the street before it begins work. A year later, team members will go back and create another index, hopefully finding great improvement to the quality of the space.

That is, if there are team members a year from now. The future of Future Blooms is uncertain, even as its dreams and aspirations are steadily growing. After the current funding runs out, Richards is hoping the program raises enough to be able to continue for the next three years, adding not only 400 more painted buildings but also expanding into the “cleaning and greening” of 300 vacant lots.

“There’s a lot of work to do,” Richards says. “Cincinnati really has an epidemic of vacancy, which is a large-scale problem to deal with. We haven’t at all exhausted our resources in addressing this.”

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**To see images of FUTURE BLOOMS work so far, go to the programs section of [www.keepcincinnatibeautiful.org](http://www.keepcincinnatibeautiful.org). There's also a place for volunteers to donate money and/or time.**

**<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13014701/the-art-of-rejuvenation>**