

Arts & Transportation Rapid Response

Artist-led projects to address COVID-19 transportation challenges

Atlanta, Georgia
Ware, Massachusetts
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Smart Growth America
Improving lives by improving communities

Acknowledgements

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This project was completed under the leadership and guidance of Ben Stone, Smart Growth America's director of arts & culture. The primary author of these case studies was Ebony Venson, program associate at Smart Growth America, with editorial support from Ben Stone and Helen Hope, Communications Manager at Smart Growth America.

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Cover photo of the project in Pittsburgh PA, by photographer Ray Carrington.

Project teams

Smart Growth America & Forecast Public Art

- Ben Stone, Smart Growth America
- Ebony Venson, Smart Growth America
- Mark Salinas, Forecast Public Art

Ware, MA

- Rochelle Shicoff, Artist
- Jen Healy, Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
- Sheila Cuddy, Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation

Atlanta, GA

- Franco Bejarano, Artist
- Katherine Dirga, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
- Tracey Crosby, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority

Pittsburgh, PA

- Janel Young, Artist
- Moira Egler, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Tim Frank, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Kathryn Schlesinger, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Darcy Lynn Cleaver, Port Authority of Allegheny County

Introduction

In partnership with Forecast Public Art and with funding from the Kresge Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, Smart Growth America (SGA) launched the Arts & Transportation Rapid Response initiative during the summer of 2020 right after the onset of the world's worst pandemic in more than a generation. SGA selected five agencies in the Bay Area, CA, Oakland, CA, Las Vegas, NV, west central Minnesota, and Detroit, MI who partnered with local artists committed to addressing COVID-related transportation challenges and systemic inequities in a unique and creative way.

With tremendous support and energy for the second round of this initiative, SGA opened a call for proposals and selected the following agencies:

- **Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority —MARTA (Atlanta, GA)**
- **The Port Authority of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh, PA)**
- **Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation—QVCDC (Ware, MA)**

SGA and Forecast curated three artists to partner with these agencies, who were selected through a nationwide open call for artists, conversations with local arts nonprofits and arts councils, and the review of artists' portfolios. The selected artists included:

- **Franco Bejarano for Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)**
- **Janel Young for the Port Authority of Allegheny County**
- **Rochelle Schicoff for Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVCDC)**

See the appendix for biographies of these distinguished artists.







Images by photographers Ray Carrington, Jesse Pratt-Lopez and John Polak

Project Summaries

Thoughtfully addressing homeless ridership during the pandemic in Atlanta, GA

The challenge

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) saw an increase in the number of unsheltered people seeking refuge in the transit system. To assist these individuals, MARTA partnered with HOPE Atlanta, a local non-profit organization that provides housing, social services, substance abuse counseling, and employment to those who are experiencing homelessness.



Artist Franco Bejarano photographed by Jesse Pratt-Lopez

The project

With assistance from Forecast Public Art, SGA selected and commissioned artist and social worker Franco Bejarano to design an engaging art piece that highlights those experiencing homelessness, and increases awareness of MARTA HOPE resources. Through large-scale portraiture, the team sought to invoke feelings of compassion and raise awareness of individuals who may not be aware of people experiencing homelessness in their community.

Franco began by collaborating with MARTA staff to outline a person-centered engagement process that connected with unsheltered individuals in an ethical manner. Franco shadowed the outreach team at the Five Points station, which is located downtown and is currently the epicenter of homelessness in Atlanta, to gain a better understanding of MARTA HOPE's work. Franco spoke with several individuals, who shared their stories and suggested additional ways that staff could support their needs.



Initial draft Franco's portraits photographed by Jesse Pratt-Lopez

Franco designed ten large-scale pencil portraits titled “Street to Home,” featuring MARTA HOPE clients who frequently use MARTA for both shelter and transportation. Shortly after the first draft of the posters, the MARTA team realized there was a shortage of diversity within the portraits. While the initial goal of the project was to highlight individuals currently receiving social services, the team thought it was important to express that homelessness is not the end point, as individuals are able to emerge from it successfully. The drawings were then expanded to also portray individuals who have experienced homelessness in the past and are now securely housed.

Equally important, the team wanted to make sure they could connect those experiencing homelessness with the various resources offered by MARTA HOPE. Therefore, several posters in the project include contact information for housing and mental assistance and support services for queer youth.



Individuals featured in Franco's portraits photographed by Jesse Pratt-Lopez

The result

These drawings continue to spread visibility of Atlanta’s unsheltered neighbors in a way that instills dignity and humanity in those who can identify with them while also creating awareness in the general audience. Moreover, they serve as resources to help support neighbors in need.

Project team

- Franco Bejarano, Artist
- Katherine Dirga, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
- Tracey Crosby, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
- Jesse Pratt-Lopez, Photographer

Encouraging transit riders to "Respect the Space" at crowded bus stops and stations in Allegheny County, PA

The challenge

At the start COVID-19 pandemic, the Port Authority of Allegheny County saw a drastic decrease in transit ridership due to information about the spread of the virus. Levels continue to be significantly lower overall, however, those who are riding are condensed on certain routes, leading to overcrowding on buses and the stops associated with them.

The majority of these remaining riders are essential workers: individuals who work in healthcare, at grocery stores, and other institutions that have been deemed essential during the ongoing pandemic. Essential workers in the region are more likely to be low-income and people of color.

As part of its COVID-19 response, Port Authority launched a messaging campaign called 'Safe to Go', which informs the public about how to safely ride transit, and what steps the agency is taking to sanitize vehicles and keep riders safe. To expand this program, they relied on the help of a local artist.



Artist Janel Young photographed by Ray Carrington

The project

With help from Forecast Public Art, Smart Growth America selected and hired Pittsburgh artist Janel Young to work with the Port Authority to design an innovative mural that encourages transit riders to respect their neighbors—and their neighbors' space—at local bus stops and on public transit. Port Authority has had to increase or even double frequency on certain routes due to high ridership and crowding on vehicles as a result of reduced capacity.



Mural process photographed by Ray Carrington

Janel began by conducting surveys of local transit riders, to gain a better understanding of their experiences with changing rules, and gain feedback on ways to make their bus stop experience better. Several riders expressed concerns about the "lack of respect" that they experienced at local bus stops and suggested more art and interaction to help improve their transit experience.

She also connected with Pittsburgh for Community transit, a local advocacy organization that includes riders as well as union workers who serve as drivers of local transit, to gain insight into their experiences while riding and working in public transit.

Playing on the concept of space and incorporating feedback she received from local residents, Janel designed a block-long mural along the curb of the busiest bus stops, encouraging local transit riders to not only follow the COVID-19 protocol established by the Port Authority but be respectful of their neighbors as they ride. Janel's mural, titled "Respect the Space" is a bright and playful piece that helps uplift residents and makes them feel safe as they use transit and wait at bus stops.

When Janel heard feedback from riders, they also recommended using music or entertainment to help enhance the experience for transit riders. The mural includes several QR codes that link to a curated music playlist for riders to enjoy on their daily commutes. This playlist helps increase engagement with Janel's artwork while offering relaxing tunes for community enjoyment.

The result

As rules around masking and social distancing continue to change, there is one golden rule that never changes: respect your neighbors. Janel's mural helps brighten the transit experience and continues to provide comfort and entertainment for Allegheny County residents on their daily commute. Shortly after the mural's completion, Janel was named one of Pittsburgh's People of the Year by the Pittsburgh City Paper.



"Respect the Space" mural photographed by Ray Carrington

Project team

- Janel Young, Artist
- Moira Egler, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Tim Frank, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Kathryn Schlesinger, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Darcy Lynn Cleaver, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Raymond Carrington, Photographer

New rural transportation service to support public health, equity amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Ware, MA

The challenge

Quaboag Valley, one of Massachusetts' most rural, least populated, and remote places, was recently classified by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection as an Area of Economic Distress. These areas are generally characterized by declining populations, lower income levels, and fewer transportation and broadband options, all of which can lead to worse health outcomes and reduced quality of life. This results in transportation deserts which impact the health, economic, and social well-being of every member of the community.



Quaboag Connector and large-scale signs created by artist Shelly Schicoff photographed by John Polak



Coming soon posters photographed by John Polak

The Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVCDC) and the Town of Ware, MA launched a pilot shuttle to complement its current demand-response ride service, the Quaboag Connector. Through this new service, QVCDC wishes to address public transportation as a social determinant of public health and social equity.

COVID-19 exacerbated community skepticism of public transportation. To address this problem, QVCDC needed a way to promote the new route that would be inviting and inspire trust from the community, especially during a time when public transportation did not feel safe for many because of the pandemic. Promotion needed to be flexible due to the fact that the project is a pilot and because of the changing safety protocols and messages about COVID-19.

The project

In partnership with Forecast Public Art, Smart Growth America hired artist Rochelle "Shelly" Shicoff to design a campaign that communicates the availability of the new route and to build excitement about the new transit service in the community. Additionally, this initiative provides up-to-date information on COVID-19 and relevant safety protocols to keep riders and drivers safe.

Shelly and the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVCDC) team began by scoping out the key strategies for promotion and identifying the target audiences for this campaign. The team's goal was to create an outreach campaign that reflects the unique identity of the community while also emphasizing the benefits of the service.

Shelly designed an outreach strategy that includes a two-part poster series, notifying residents that the shuttle is "coming soon" and celebrating the access that the service creates, titled "getting there." The poster series emphasizes the shuttle's website and route map and features the phrase "community transportation for ALL," encouraging local residents to feel safe using the new service. Working in partnership with a local printer, Shelly also created large-scale signs uniquely placed in large flower planters to help residents identify key stops along the bus route.



QVCDC staff with the Connector photographed by John Polak

The result

This campaign not only raises awareness about the new shuttle but also directs community members to the new website, which offers frequent updates on the service. The Quaboag Connector will be a community mainstay, linking residents to their most essential locations and providing community transportation for all.

Project team

- Rochelle Shicoff, Artist
- Jen Healy, Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
- Sheila Cuddy, Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
- John Polak, Photographer

Conclusion

In early 2022, as the Omicron variant spread across the country and the pandemic approached its third year, SGA staff checked in with a number of past Arts & Transportation Rapid Response participants, as well as other transportation agency staff members, about the state of these agencies' COVID response. These responses largely mirrored the tenor of the country at large: exhausted by the length of the pandemic, there was and is a shift towards learning to live with COVID and loosening most mitigation strategies. While masking is still mandated on all transit services at the time of this publication, social distancing is no longer enforced and service operates at full capacity. Some "slow streets" and other interventions persist, but most streets have been returned to their pre-pandemic conditions. Many agencies struggled to hire bus and train operators before the pandemic began, and those struggles have only intensified with hiring challenges leading to service reduction in many cities.

On a more positive note, the pandemic did accelerate some positive changes:

- **Construction**: With fewer people traveling for most of the pandemic, cities and transit agencies across the country were able to accelerate repairs and other construction projects with far fewer interruptions to people's ability to commute and travel.
- **Cashless fare systems:** While many transit agencies had already switched to cashless payment systems, the desire to socially distance riders from operators provided an incentive for even more agencies to adopt this policy, with many agencies allowing payments via phones and in some cases via debit cards that can be used by the unbanked.



Poster from MARTA project photographed by Jesse Pratt-Lopez

- **Operator protection:** The separation of riders from operators on buses is likely to remain on many systems, either through enforced social distancing or through the use of plexiglass shields.
- **Redesign to routing:** The upheaval of people's traveling patterns provided an opportunity for agencies to redesign their bus routes to better serve trips outside the typical suburbs to central business district commute, which were already a substantial portion of all trips and became even more so during the pandemic.
- **Virtual community engagement:** With in-person meetings outlawed in many places, cities and agencies began seeking input from community members through virtual meetings reaching a larger and more representative group of people to influence new planning and design efforts. Many agencies intend to continue with this type of engagement, combining it with supplemental in-person community meetings.
- **Willingness to experiment:** The pandemic forced agencies to try new things in a short time frame, especially in the early days of the pandemic. This willingness to test ideas seems to be something that will continue into the next phase of the pandemic, to the benefit of the traveling public.

Appendix - Artist Biographies

Franco Bejarano is an artist and social worker in Atlanta, GA. He received his MSW from UGA in 2016 and currently works in the field of homeless services. Franco uses his artwork as intervention tackling societal issues and mental health through the mediums of portraiture, children's books, and art therapy. His work is rooted in the belief that the therapeutic and impactful powers art has on individuals and communities lie in not just the finished product, but the process, the engagement, and the message it can transmit.



Artist Franco Bejarano photographed by Jesse Pratt-Lopez

Since 2017, Franco has been creating life-size portraits of people experiencing homelessness with whom he has formed strong personal relationships throughout their journey in housing them. In 2021 he was awarded a proclamation by Atlanta City Council for his housing work.



Artist Janel Young photographed by Ray Carrington

Janel Young is a Pittsburgh-raised artist who further developed her work in New York City over the course of five years, focusing on murals, abstract, and landscape works. Her style contains blending, bright colors, and geometric inspiration. She found a love for painting after being selected as part of a mural painting team in seventh grade and later completed an International Baccalaureate art program in 2009.

She moved to New York in 2013 after graduating from Penn State University (B.S. Marketing and International Studies) and held onto art for self-therapy, expression, and activism. She returned to her hometown in 2019 to complete Pittsburgh's first art basketball court: The Home Court Advantage Project. Janel's artwork has been recognized locally and internationally, including being awarded a proclamation by the City of Pittsburgh, within AfroPunk.com, The Apollo Theatre, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Ebony Magazine, at the 2020 U.S. Open Tennis Tournament, Verizon Media, Yahoo.com, and RAW Artists shows in New York City and Sydney, Australia.

Rochelle Schicoff is an artist whose paintings have been exhibited nationally and internationally. In 1980 she was the recipient of the Rome Prize Fellowship in Painting and spent a year painting in Rome, Italy, and traveling throughout Europe and the Middle East. Among her awards are Visiting Artist residencies, community grants, and nominations for the Fulbright, and American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 2001 she co-authored The Mural Book: A Practical Guide for Educators published by Crystal Productions which was specifically written for K-12 educators. Her public art murals can be seen in NYC, Massachusetts, Florida, Georgia, and Mexico. Her murals have been awarded an Art in Action Grant, The Women Waging Peace Award, Youth Friends Award, NYC Dept of Ed., NY State Council on the Arts, and MA Council for the Arts. She is a member of Gallery A3/Amherst, Quabbin Art Association/Belchertown, and Artmakers, Inc./ NYC.



Artist Rochelle Schicoff with large-scale posters photographed by John Polak



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