

# The Vancouver Mural Festival continues to paint over its gentrification

Inclusive art project or invasive development project?



*A mural by Paige Bowman painted as part of VMF's #MakeArtWhileApart campaign. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Mural Festival*

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If you've taken a stroll in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant area, you may have noticed a concentration of colourful shapes, people, animals, and words covering some of the walls. That's because it's the city's hub for murals and mural makers, and also where the Vancouver Mural Festival (VMF) has been held every year since 2016.

The [Vancouver Mural Festival](#) is organized by the non-profit Create Vancouver Society which, according to their website, aims to “provide a platform for Vancouver’s diverse art scene to contribute to the city’s cultural legacy.” The actual festival would have been held in August of this year if not for social distancing concerns, but the organizers have still continued with initiatives like [#MakeArtWhileApart](#). For this endeavour, the festival teamed up with local artists, businesses, and the City of Vancouver to “brighten streets, celebrate resilience and connect communities” by [painting boarded up storefronts](#) along Robson and South Granville.

Throughout the year, the festival organizers also continue to engage the City of Vancouver through other events and workshops, particularly focusing on [Indigenous youth and communities](#). They have also [highlighted](#) the work of many Indigenous artists over the years and put money back into the artist community by [paying them](#) for their murals.

I always love stumbling upon one of these murals on a downtown excursion and reveling in how it gives life to Vancouver's otherwise monotonous grey and blue colour scheme. It feels like entering a hidden slice of the city, all radiant and abstract among the dull conformist concrete of the cityscape.

At the same time, these paintings cover up the very thing they are trying to preach against: injustice.

According to the [VMF website](#), they are committed to providing a “platform for the local [First] Nations’ contemporary and traditional cultural expressions and histories.” Meanwhile, the festival is [funded by real estate developers](#) who then evict those same people. It seems as if the whole festival actually [hides and contributes](#) to the gentrification of areas like Mount Pleasant,

Strathcona, and the Downtown Eastside through “artwashing” — the idea of gentrifying a neighbourhood through public art to the benefit of developers and not its residents.

VMF has also easily received over \$400,000 from the City of Vancouver over the past four years while other arts establishments like the Arts Club only received a grant of \$152,000 in 2019 after a “rigorous grant application process.” In addition, many of the city’s murals are also funded by government programs, and these paintings are the ones that often do not criticize city-blamed conditions like lack of affordable housing, funding for health care, and income inequality.

Murals have the potential to offer hope, tell stories, and call for social change. This shouldn’t be overrun by the need to make a neighbourhood “nicer” in the hopes that a developer can swoop in and reap the financial benefits. If the VMF truly cares about making the city better through art, they need to cut ties with developers in order to truly serve the people they claim to. We also need to be critical about the art that we consume and not take it at face value.

However, murals aren’t all corporate tools — there are still some beautiful ones out there that don’t cover up the suffering of marginalized people. If you spot a colourful swatch of wall from the VMF, take a second to appreciate it, but also to remember that, like the gentrified buildings they are on, that they always have more than one side.