

Golden Triangle BID

No Spectators: Beyond the Renwick

Collaboration with the Smithsonian to Bring the Art of Burning Man to Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. is known for government and politics, and for historic monuments and national treasures. The central business district, however, is not necessarily known as a hub for artistic creativity or for being... well, “cool.” This is one of the neighborhood’s largest challenges, as new, trendy neighborhoods are being developed throughout the city, and the CBD competes to attract residents, visitors, and tourists. But thanks to an innovative collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and a forward-thinking business improvement district that is laser-focused on altering that perception, a *burning* spark for just such a transformative cultural change has been lit.

In the heart of the CBD lies the Golden Triangle BID – a 43-block neighborhood that spans from the White House to Dupont Circle. In addition to keeping the streets clean and operating a nationally recognized safety and security program, the Golden Triangle beautifies and activate public spaces. This includes a strategic public art plan to create opportunities for both temporary and permanent installations.

Birth of a Project Built on Partnership and Collaboration

In 2017, the BID embarked on a groundbreaking partnership with the Smithsonian’s historic Renwick Gallery. The fruits of this collaboration, six breathtaking, large-scale public art installations, are on view now through December 2018 at strategic locations throughout the Golden Triangle, all within a short walk of the museum. The installations are part of a gallery-wide exhibition dedicated to the art of Burning Man, an annual festival and cultural phenomenon that takes place in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. Burning Man art is unparalleled in creativity, ambition, and scale.

The collaboration was a perfect fit. The Renwick had access to more artwork than they could physically fit into the gallery and the Golden Triangle BID had a vision for increasing its portfolio of temporary outdoor public art. Thus was born the first-ever outdoor extension of a Renwick exhibition and the opportunity for six massive, thought-provoking artworks onto city sidewalks and parks to transform the cityscape into an unexpected platform for artistic exploration.

No Spectators: Beyond the Renwick leverages the core skills, expertise, and resources of the Golden Triangle BID to bring to life this landmark collaboration. The BID was able to deploy its understanding of the neighborhood, relationships with building owners, and deep expertise in public space, planning and permitting matters, which required working with several city and federal agencies. Among the many steps needed to bring the project fully to fruition:

- Collaborating with the museum’s curator to select the best and most appropriate artworks;
- Working with office building property owners and, in some cases, the National Park Service to identify appropriate locations for the installations;
- Negotiating agreements with the participating artists and working concurrently with six artists and teams, including all aspects of project administration;
- Securing permits and approvals from city and federal agencies;
- Overseeing the various logistics associated with large-scale artwork installations;
- Community engagement and outreach to various audiences;

- Planning and execution of the ongoing activation program, including walking tours and special events in association with the exhibition.

This was not just a collaboration with the Smithsonian; it brought together partners from the National Park Service, DC government agencies, local residents, the historic preservation board and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, among others. The BID team also collaborated closely with major building owners, business leaders, and property managers in the selection of locations. Activations associated with the Burning Man artworks are being integrated into our signature “Farragut Fridays” summer event series in Farragut Square, which attracts more than 40,000 visitors to the park over the course of the summer months. A robust community engagement plan has been developed that includes periodic walking tours and presentations by storytellers, performers, and other artists.

The Golden Triangle also built a powerful corporate partnership with Lyft, which became a major financial supporter of the outdoor extension and a valued partner.

Transforming Landscape and Culture: A Model for Building Community in a Downtown

In the first week since the six artworks were installed, they have sparked the imagination and curiosity of the area’s professional audience, along with thousands of tourists and other visitors. The exhibitions have generated national and international press coverage that has included *The New York Times*, the BBC, National Geographic, Reuters, *The Washington Post* and dozens of other outlets.

To track community engagement, the BID has installed pedestrian counters near the artwork locations to develop estimates on visitors. The team will also track interest in the exhibition through web analytics and ongoing monitoring of social media engagement.

The six artworks are varied in the materials, themes, and forms that they employ. But they are all united by the spirit of the maker, do-it-yourself creative and inclusive culture that is celebrated each year at the Burning Man festival. Now erected in their various locations around the business district, the artworks seemingly form temporary monuments and gathering places. In the first few days that they were up, BID staff observed dozens of interactions with the pieces by office professionals, construction workers, families on sightseeing visits, and even homeless persons who found wonder in iconic artworks such as the 6,000-ton sculpture of Maya Angelou.

Although the *No Spectators* exhibition is part of a temporary exhibition, permanent improvements made by the BID, such as a concrete sculpture pad in the median of a major corridor, help to build an infrastructure for similar public art projects to follow. Just as significant has been the human capital that has been built in the relationships formed with the participating artists and other artists and funders who want to be part of future collaborations.

A Blueprint for Infusing Other Cities with Public Art

While there are many elements of this initiative that may be unique to a BID in Washington, D.C., there are many more that make this kind of collaborative effort to bring public art to downtowns one that can be replicated by any BID. All BIDs have powerful relationships with property owners that can be maximized for the good of their communities. All excel on issues related to the improvement of public space and have a detailed knowledge of those spaces within their districts, as well as programs for activating them. And all BIDs have strong ties to local governments and enjoy symbiotic relationships with arts and cultural institutions that can help to bring about the kind of opportunities described here.

Artistic Inspiration

As a result of the collaboration that turned the vision for *No Spectators* into a reality, residents, and tourists now have the opportunity to experience these extraordinary artworks on a daily basis – right in the central business district. The artworks alter the look and feel of public spaces, shift expectations, and shake up people’s daily routines in a way that is joyful and unexpected. They inspire people to look up, look around, and engage with one another. They redefine the cityscape and are reminders to those who are served by the Golden Triangle to slow down, to contemplate, and to find joy in unexpected encounters with art and with each other.