

Streets for Recovery Case Study

City of Chelsea: Community Art during COVID-19



Chelsea artist Nelson Saldana creating a chalk mural. *Photo credit: Katy Rogers*

Project type:	Public Art
Planning timeline:	3 weeks
Project timeline:	June 13 - Nov 1
Location:	Downtown
Scope:	5 blocks
Municipal Lead:	Mimi Graney
Budget:	~\$14K
Materials:	Chalk, paint

Item	Cost	# Units
Artist stipend	\$100-200	15
Chalk	\$1-\$6	500
Paint	\$50	9

Goals

Rapidly adapt the City of Chelsea's public art programming to create a safe and accessible means for public expression and processing the community's trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic, while nurturing and networking local artists.

Background

For weeks, the City of Chelsea was the epicenter of COVID-19 infection in Massachusetts, with a rate six times higher than the state average. Community members were experiencing grief from the health and economic impacts of the virus, and the *Chelsea Prospers* public art program sought to respond with empathy to these experiences.

Summer plans for *Chelsea Prospers* originally involved continued development of a neighborway on Division Street and large cultural gatherings. While some plans remained on track, the team prioritized fast action and widespread accessibility in adapting others for physical distancing. 150 people had registered to the kickoff networking event, "Creative Mystic," before it was cancelled, and from this group local artists were identified to participate in the new or re-envisioned projects. Since the pandemic restrictions limited widespread public engagement via events and intercept surveys, the team prioritized deep engagement with a smaller group of residents. Two major projects rose from the pandemic:

- **Chalk Art Saturdays** - For six Saturdays starting on June 13th, the City invited community members to make chalk art in public spaces and hired local artists to create individual, larger chalk murals, following a calendar of art prompts. This was inspired by the [City of Salem's program](#).
- **Nuestra Mesa** - Unveiled in early August, this project of painted, custom tables and seating emerged from a commitment to support local emerging artists and new needs for outdoor seating, conceptually driven by themes of nature and the "nine days of mourning" to process collective trauma of the pandemic.

Partners

- **City support:** Cultural Council, City Manager, Department of Public Works, Fire Department, Youth Commission, Senior Center, Chelsea Public Library
- **Studioful Design:** Claudia Paraschiv led concept and design for the two projects
- **St. Luke's Episcopal Church's Food Pantry:** Distributed 400 chalk sets with food packages
- **Witch City Customs:** Fabricated the Nuestra Mesa tables and seats

Design & Implementation

Chalk Art Saturdays

The City shared the six themes, including “Imagine Racial Justice,” on social media and encouraged participants to share their creations using #ChalkArtSaturdays. 400 chalk sets were distributed to Chelsea families picking up food from the pantry. The Chelsea Public Library hosted a chalk mural on the building facade.

Cash stipends of \$200 were given to artists commissioned to create two murals each.

Nuestra Mesa

In a Dominican tradition of mourning, friends and family celebrate the deceased for nine days, including three days of grieving, three days of silence, and three days for acceptance. For this project, nine local artists, including five from Chelsea, painted custom-built public tables to illustrate these days of mourning. Each artist received a \$150 stipend and \$50 for supplies. Detailed information by the project designer can be found [here at Studioful Design](#).

Most communications were publicized via Facebook and Instagram.

Initial Response & Adjustments

A team of youth, inspired by the #ImagineRacialJustice art prompt, became active in the public art program for the first time. They suggested a spin-off program to Nuestra Mesa. These youth are writing poems inspired by the tables and “Nuestra Palabra” will share the writing in a series of videos (accessible via QR codes on the tables), in a storefront gallery exhibit, and 200 issues of a mini-zine.



Photo credit: Katy Rogers

What's next for Chelsea?

- Continue Division Street Neighborway with a series of painted murals, creative crosswalks, and pilots to counter heat islands, including a water fountain and solar reflective roadway coating.
- A series of wheatpaste murals to engage youth and emerging artists, with webinar trainings.
- Virtual community forums to develop the content for a history-oriented mural by David Fichter to be installed in Summer 2021.

Tips for Success & Lessons Learned

- Understanding that the community was undergoing a crisis, and focusing on low-impact, **accessible** projects that could be deployed quickly. Let art serve as therapy.
- Tapping into institutions to bridge the digital divide - material exchange, stories, and information through library and food pantries.
- Individual project champions can bring together siloed communities.

Interested in public art in your community?

Technical Assistance and Grants may be available from MAPC:

<https://artsandplanning.mapc.org/funding/>