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Taking art to the streets of L.A. County

New program allots 1% of new buildings' costs to paintings, sculptures. In South L.A., employees and clients take notice.

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Link to article photo gallery

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The new Los Angeles County Administration Building rises four stories above Vermont Avenue, between 83rd and 84th streets, its clean lines and green-glass front striking a contrast with the auto body shops and parking lots nearby.

But something else also sets the county social services hub apart from the squat concrete structures around it: tile murals inside and outside the building, glazed with digitally manipulated photographs of oak trees to soften the bustle of South Los Angeles.

Completed this December, the building is the first developed under the Civic Art Program, which allots 1% of new county buildings' construction and design costs for art.

Betty Frazer, waiting in line for homeless assistance in advance of her pending eviction, said the wall-sized mural in the lobby, which depicts a fence threading across rolling hills and alongside majestic oaks, gave her a "sense of beauty."

"It makes it look peaceful," said Frazer, 44, of South Los Angeles, "even though it may not be. You come here and it's a headache."

The program, launched in December 2004, brings L.A. County up to date with other local governments, said Julie Silliman, civic art director with the Public Arts Commission.

Civic art is "something that's becoming more and more expected and more of a common factor in all public buildings across the country," she said. "The county is rather late in a sense."

The oldest public art program in the Southland is Los Angeles' Community Redevelopment Agency, which traces its roots to the late 1960s, according to Susan Gray, the agency's cultural arts planner.

One of the oldest such programs in the nation has been transforming Seattle's public landscape since 1973. Today, the city has 400 permanently sited works and 2,800 portable works.

"I think it has become part of the urban fabric here," said Ruri Yampolsky, director of the Seattle program. "It allows people to be engaged in the civic dialogue in a certain way."

Silliman hopes the nascent county program will encourage the public to think about the community where the art is placed.

"Los Angeles is very big, and we go from one neighborhood to another," and public art "helps you know where you are, because it's custom," she said.

L.A. County's process for commissioning art for a new building begins by gathering a project coordination committee for each project, made up of county officials, architects, developers and community representatives who discuss what would be most appropriate for that particular site.

In the case of the 220,000-square-foot administration building on Vermont, one of the architects for the project, James Young, said they were looking for something "colorful, beautiful, serene, calm. And in that building, for what they do in that building, those were some of the things we thought was important."

The artist the committee chose for the \$372,600 project, Ken Gonzales-Day, whose work is in the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, was on the same page. "I wanted to give a sense of calm," he said.

Besides Public Social Services, the building also houses the departments of Children and Family Services, Mental Health, and Child Support Services. About 1,000 employees serve approximately 1,400 daily visitors, in a building the county intended to be a "family centric" facility.

Emblematic of this, a day-care playground in primary colors is just outside the packed waiting room of the public assistance office.

"Kids might be there for very private treatments. . . . and I used the idea of the surrealist uncanny, repetition," Gonzales-Day said. "I thought that kind of imagery might evoke a better emotional state."

Towering above the swing sets, on the elevator shaft of the facility's parking structure, is a mural with a kaleidoscopic view of an oak tree, as seen from below, perhaps from a child's perspective. But the art is not just for the kids who play and the adults who come to fill-out paperwork.

Alex Fortune, 59, is a Los Angeles County police officer who works at the front desk. He said the mural he faces is in stark contrast to the "dull, drab" county building he worked in before.

"I've already picked out a spot by the trees where I want to build my house," Fortune joked, pointing to a clearing beneath the branches of a massive oak. "It makes you want to come to work."

Although the administration building is the biggest art installation completed, the program has allotted money for about 40 small beautification projects, including ones at four county fire stations, the community building at Allen J. Martin Park in La Puente, and the La Crescenta Library.

Yet there are those who wonder whether the art is worth the price.

When the Board of Supervisors voted to create the program, Supervisor Mike Antonovich cast the only "no" vote. An aide, Lori Glasgow, said he still harbors reservations.

Glasgow referred to the addition of female barracks to the Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic, where the 1% provision would allocate about \$1 million for art for the facility.

"Do we really need to spend \$1 million? Could we take the \$1 million and spend it on" [rehabilitation] services? Or just spend \$500,000 on art?" Glasgow said. "The problem with the ordinance is that it is rigid; it doesn't allow for flexibility."

But Silliman said the program allows for the money to be spent on art-related programs, not just art works. Creative writing, graphic design and theater classes are being considered at Pitchess, she said. And Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke said the investment could lead to higher returns in other ways.

The area surrounding the Vermont Avenue administration building has long been rundown, she said. Now, "there is a revitalization being discussed and moving forward.

"A lot of business owners now say they're confident about making an investment there."

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