

A View From...



RAIL-TRAILS

By Danielle Taylor

The vision behind rail-trails is partly functional: Take a disused industrial corridor and convert it into a pathway that people can use for transportation and recreation. But many communities go a step further, using their scenic paths to connect users with visual art.

In some places, pieces are commissioned as part of a master plan to infuse the trails with art for all to enjoy. Elsewhere, guerrilla artists create masterpieces without seeking permission first. Often these pieces are welcomed and left in place.

Here are four great examples of artwork that has helped beautify—and, at times, add intrigue to—trails.

Danielle Taylor is executive editor of the National Recreation and Park Association's *Parks & Recreation Magazine*.

▲ Leonard Swanson Memorial Pathway, South Dakota

The world grieved in December 2013 at the death of anti-apartheid activist and former South African President Nelson Mandela, and one anonymous mourner in South Dakota channeled his emotions into an artistic challenge. Two days after Christmas, users of the Leonard Swanson Memorial Pathway in Rapid City, S.D., discovered that a volleyball net near the rail-trail had been covered in plastic wrap bearing a mural of Mandela and the messages, "Inspire!" and "What are you about?"

No one has come forward to claim responsibility for the artwork, which faced busy Omaha Street as well as the trail in Founders Park. Its existence was short-lived, as it was destroyed by wind just a few days after it was erected. But community members applauded the artist's use of plastic wrap, which didn't cause permanent damage as traditional graffiti would.

"Our philosophy is that our parks are public property, and we respect the joys of free speech," says Lon VanDeusen, Rapid City's parks division manager. "It was a timely memorial."

CHRIS HUBER/RAPID CITY JOURNAL



JEFF SONKSEN (5)

▲ Seminole Wekiva Trail, Florida

Built on the footprint of the Orange Belt Railway in central Florida, the Seminole Wekiva Trail stretches nearly 14 miles near the western edge of Seminole County. Carpenter Jeff Sonksen, whose parents live by the trail, began painting fence panels two years back with small murals that celebrate iconic figures as well as moments in history and pop culture. Unsure whether he would get in trouble for doing so, he hung his first panel over his parents' back fence one night. When nothing happened, he followed it up with another and another. Soon, trail users figured out who was behind the fugitive artwork and began making requests for more.

"[Although] I never asked permission from the county," says Sonksen, "the Seminole Cultural Arts Council awarded me Artist of the Year, and I was basically told that everyone loves it and no one was going to stop me."

Sonksen has created hundreds of murals so far, often using cast-off fence panels and paint scavenged from the dump. His current goal is to cover five miles of trail fence with his paintings.



► **Clipper City Rail Trail, Massachusetts**

Few rail-trails celebrate art like the Clipper City Rail Trail in Newburyport, Mass. With approximately two dozen sculptures, murals, gardens and other artistic elements dotting the 1.1-mile trail, users have something to see, touch and enjoy around every bend.

“The genesis came from a family trip to Paris,” says Geordie Vining, senior project manager for Newburyport’s planning office, who has been working on the trail’s development for more than a decade. “We saw sculptures on the promenades along the Seine,” he explains, “where my children ran and played and interacted with great things. It added a whole other dimension to that landscape.”

During phase one of the trail’s development, Vining worked with a number of local artists as well as local groups, which pitched in to fund parts of the project. More pieces are planned for phase two, which is still several years down the road.

GEORDIE VINING (3)



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◀ **Dequindre Cut, Michigan**

When the 1.5-mile-long Dequindre Cut in Detroit was being renovated for public use as a rail-trail, its organizers found themselves drawn in by—and protective of—the elaborate graffiti art sprinkled along the way. Much of it had been there a decade or more, and the planners wanted to respect the original artists' contributions as well as the street culture that protected these murals over the years.

“There’s an unwritten rule with graffiti artists,” says Marc Pasco, director of communications for the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy. “If something has artistic value, if there’s inherent beauty and the artist obviously put a lot of time into it, people won’t graffiti over it and will leave it alone.”

To further celebrate the unique artistic vibe of Dequindre Cut, planners have commissioned new graffiti murals and established graffiti walls where they encourage community members to contribute their own designs.



Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is proud to announce the 2014 inductee into the ***Rail-Trail Hall of Fame:***

The Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail

The award recognizes the Virginia Creeper’s tremendous beauty and cultural and scenic value, and the hard work done by local communities to maintain and promote the trail.

Thanks to your efforts, “The Creeper” is both a much-loved place of recreation for locals and an important driver of tourism and business in southwest Virginia.



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Learn more about the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame:
railstotrails.org/halloffame