

Halifax Downtown Revitalization Project: Hitachi Inspiration Alley Mural Underway & Upcoming Construction Supports a “Growing Home” Theme

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On August 1, 2023 project partners gathered together to inaugurate the 3rd wall mural bringing bright, vibrant colors and captivating patterns to downtown Halifax as part of the next phase of the ChangeX/Microsoft Urban “Thinkscape” project begun in 2021. After awarding the Hill Studio, PC designed activity and greenspace site improvements to Jerry Epps Landscape Company in May 2022, which were focused only on the alley north of the Hite Insurance building, the project ran into unexpected challenges securing the easements for construction and maintenance. However, thanks to the generosity of Marsha and George T. Hite Jr. gifting a Deed of Easement, together with the enthusiastic cooperation of a new business/building owner team’s vision for downtown, the project footprint has expanded to include the entire “south” alley, amplifying the place-making visual impact seen traveling on South Main Street (US Highway 501), and enticing people to explore the renovated area. “Last year, my husband Robert Townsend and I acquired the 99 South Main Street building in downtown Halifax to create a studio space for event rentals and more. Our initial vision included a mural on the building's side, recognizing it as an ideal canvas,” professional photographer Heather Chipps Townsend noted as conversations with the Town of Halifax commenced. Town Manager Carl Espy shared the mural concepts highlighted in the 2021 [Halifax Downtown Pedestrian-Parking Connections Plan](#), and together with Assistant Manager Denise Barksdale who headed the ChangeX/Urban Thinkscape development stage with Vice-Mayor Gail Bosiger and the “Here’s Halifax!” Beautification Working Group, the reinvigorated team met with landscape architect Chris Lawrie at Hill Studio to revise the low-impact, recycled hardscape features, activity areas, and planting design.



Momentum for the expanded project attracted a tremendous resurgence of local business sponsorship, in-kind services, corporate donations, and increased grant funding. The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) awarded an additional \$5,000 through the Virginia Main Street Program’s Community Vitality Grant after the successful wayfinding sign installation downtown was completed. Over subsequent months, Chipps-Townsend and the concentrated project team connected with Ryland Clark from Hitachi Energy and the two Halifax natives brought in her fellow high-school graduate, mural artist Suzanne Gasperini to help bring the alleyway canvas wall to life.



Enhancement Example – Alleys

This alleyway can be enhanced further by turning the benches and making them more integral with the plant bed, adding unit paving as the crosswalk material, and carrying this paving through the alley, adding potted plants, and string lights across alley. The additional alley to the south can be enhanced as well, as a public pocket park with lights, plantings, murals, and unit paving.



The team worked with the artist who crafted a mural designed to convey a positive community message reflecting the Hitachi Energy plant’s 50-year local employment legacy, which has progressed into innovative manufacturing, focused on pioneering technologies to create a sustainable, flexible, and secure energy future with electrical systems for everyone powered by renewables like wind and solar. "At Hitachi Energy we want to do all we can to support our local community that our employees live and work in each day," explained Ryland Clark, Community Relations & Engagement Manager. "This project started out as a conversation and grew to an incredible mural that will change the look and feel of downtown Halifax for years to come. We are so excited to be a part of the change to hopefully bring a smile and a little bit of encouragement to each person who walks by the mural every day! Being able to work with so many wonderful people and organizations to make this happen has been so gratifying to Hitachi Energy." The corporation became the major donating sponsor of the project, contributing \$21,000 to the mural and alleyway improvements thus far.



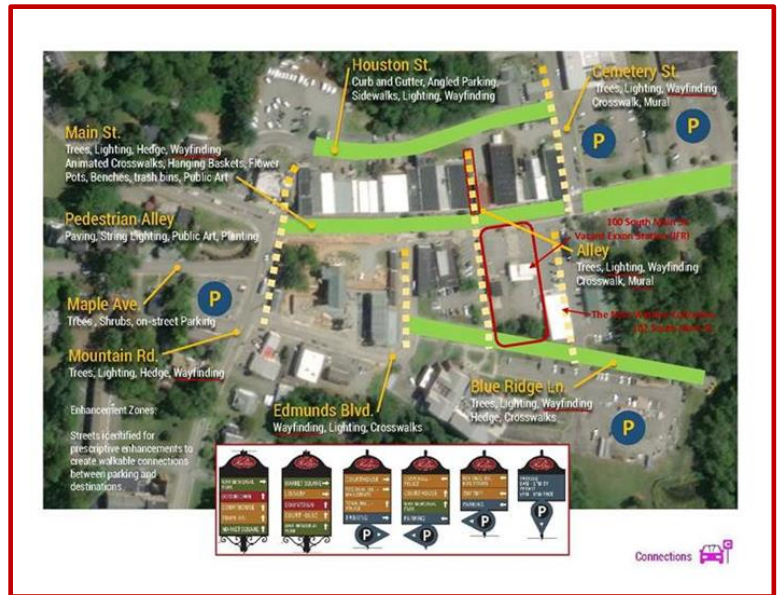


For her part, prolific mural artist Suzanne Gasperini O'Hara , was drawn to a project in the backyard village away from her sleek, urban Raleigh environs having grown up here, "I am so excited to be working on this. I am from Halifax - I took art at the high school, I coached there, taught there. So, this means a lot to me, and I feel like this is really a full circle project." O'Hara explains her style and portfolio include attention to composition, color theory, and movement. For this piece, "to remain aesthetically pleasing and photogenic, and to try not to look too much like a billboard, I used symbolism throughout: The wind turbine here is represented by a flower (I used 3 large petals to show this) with the "wind" aka use of movement with images coming out of the other side. The stripes and floating leaves show the direction and guide your eye across. The sustainability aspect is represented by both color and leaves throughout. The lightning bolts add a nice warm color and show energy in the piece. Lastly, Heather mentioned to me that she wanted it to be inspirational and uplifting for everyone. I felt the 'keep growing' wording could represent many things: growth in the community, growth as a company, individual growth for bystanders, and growth within families staying/living in the area versus moving away. Working on this project has been so fun and I am so honored to be a part of it. This mural is especially important to me because I'm back in my hometown working with such great people in the community. I feel like everyone has come together to get this project going and it's really so special.

I can't wait to see everything all done - it's going to bring color and such a fun energy to Halifax!"



After her mural artwork gets wrapped up on the Atelier Halifax building later in August, Jerry Epps Landscape Company will mobilize first to install an upgraded patio lighting system on both the north and south alleyway passages. The lighting will then illuminate O’Hara’s prominent work along with the colorful artistic map mural of Halifax County by artists Obie Coleman and Alexis Williams on the Hite Insurance north wall completed in October 2021. Next the crew will re-grade the construction easement sections on both alleys and lay down hardscape “urbanite” pathways, using recycled concrete with river rock edging tied to a rain



catchment system to re-direct storm water at the surface away from the building foundations. Other project features developed by the beautification members to turn this underutilized space into a multi-use space include a Little Free Library for all ages, bistro tables for outdoor learning or dining, and custom crafted wildlife track pavers in a hopscotch pattern for families to enjoy. The alleyway project will connect Houston Street serving as the pedestrian “gateway” off Main Street along a prominent east-west axis continuing to Blue Ridge Lane past the former Exxon property the town is seeking to redevelop through DHCD’s Industrial Revitalization Fund (IRF) grant. Lastly, landscaping elements will be installed to soften the alleyway into an inviting greenspace and to frame the mural artwork, creating outdoor activity hubs that allow for socially distanced gathering, dining, and additional foot traffic to Main Street businesses.

The Halifax Village Association and its Houston Street Enhancement Committee will officially “reveal” the completed Hitachi Inspiration Alley during the “ Light Up Houston Street!” social on September 21st from 5:00 p.m. to Sunset (for more information on event: Karen Schopen @ 434-476-6265/<https://www.facebook.com/halifaxvillageassociation>). Heather Chipps Townsend’s Atelier Halifax Studio & Gathering Space is tentatively scheduled to open around that same time (<https://www.facebook.com/atelierhalifax>/<https://www.instagram.com/atelierhalifax/?fbclid>). The photographer and downtown entrepreneur reflected on the project’s outcome, “balancing this tribute to Hitachi Energy’s support with Suzanne’s unique creative flair, we proudly display original, impactful artwork in downtown Halifax. The message of ‘Keep Growing’ mirrors the continuous progress of our vibrant community. As a native of Halifax County, witnessing its transformation is a source of profound joy. I feel the trajectory of growth is unwavering and we are excited to be a small part of this impactful project for years to come.” [To see more of artist Suzanne O’Hara’s portfolio, go to <https://www.instagram.com/suzetheartist/?hl=en>; photos & images courtesy of Heather Chipps Photography, Suzanne G. O’Hara, and the Town of Halifax, Virginia.]

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