

East Village unveils public art of ‘movement’

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Artist Julian Opie stands next to his statue called Promenade, public art that is part of the East Village development, unveiled by the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation on Wednesday.
Photograph by: Dean Bicknell , Calgary Herald

If you were passing through the East Village Wednesday, or, perhaps crossing the flyover by the Calgary Drop In Centre, chances are you noticed the strange animated figures who are newcomers to the neighbourhood.

These computer animated urban dwellers, nearly five metres tall and faceless, with no necks joining their heads to their bodies were in perpetual motion, moving around all four sides of a bright new LED (light emitting diodes) tower erected at the corner of 4th Street and 5th Avenue S.E.

What you saw was Promenade, a permanent public art installation, approximately 7.3 metres high and nearly two meters wide, which has been erected as part of the city's ongoing plans for the revitalization of the East Village.

The installation is the work of Julian Opie, an internationally acclaimed British artist associated with the New British Sculpture movement. Opie is renowned for his minimalist animation style and his outdoor LED installations which can be found in such major cities

of the world as London, Toronto, Prague, Seoul, Miami and Phoenix. He's even crossed over into the world of popular music, his work gracing U2 stage sets and a Blur album cover.

The theme of Promenade is movement explains Opie, in town to see his work brought to animated life. Indeed, as the pedestrians of Promenade pass each other busily, moving from LED panel to panel around the tower, the image is meant to represent the hustle, bustle and liveliness of the future East Village, now in development.

"It's all about crossroads and cars and the movement of the river and people moving down the walkways," says Opie. "And it's in a good spot. It's very tough, gritty and urban, in between the road and the flyover. And there's another whole area underneath with homeless people and people passing through the area."

Opie chose the spot in conjunction with the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC), established by the City of Calgary in 2007 to realize plans to redevelop the East Village, including the path along the river (RiverWalk), with public art being a significant focus in the community.

Opie was selected by a seven member committee which consisted of members of the RiverWalk design team, the City of Calgary's public art program and Yves Trepanier and Kevin Baer of TrepanierBaer Gallery. As part of the process, world class artists were invited to take part in a competition to design the public art piece, which Opie won. A second outdoor public art installation will be introduced to the community later this year reveals Susan Veres, vice-president of marketing and communications for CMLC.

"The purpose of this organization is to build a new community and attract private investors," says Veres. "We need to transform the neighbourhood to attract people to live here. So while the developers come in and build residential and commercial products, we want the future residents of the East Village to look at this neighbourhood as a place where they would want to live."

Great works of public art like the \$650,000 Promenade project are one major step in that direction, adds Veres. "We consider it an iconic piece for the East Village. It's a marker that will identify the neighbourhood."

As for Opie, as he makes his way back to London he just hopes that Calgarians enjoy his work.

"Public art is a tricky thing," the artist says. "It can be fantastic and it can be really annoying too, so I tread lightly. I'm aware of the dangers. I just hope it isn't offensive to anybody and that people like it."

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