

Artwork sprouts on Fernwood's 'soul poles'



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The telephone pole in front of Beth Threlfall's house bugged her. Beyond the banal nature of an ordinary wooden pole, this one had been targeted.

An anonymous tagger had spray-painted a symbol on the pole. It was a glyph indecipherable to all but the tagger and, perhaps, those with whom he shared his exploits.

Like a dog marking territory, the tagger's mark could be found throughout the neighbourhood.

It was unsightly. The tags also gave the streets a menacing air—a vandal was working freely under cover of darkness.

Three years ago, she attended a talk at the local hall by Mark Lakeman, an urban designer from Portland, Ore., who helped found the City Repair Project. The volunteer-run group builds benches, reclaims parkland, and decorates intersections to make unpleasant urban areas seem, as the group's motto states, "inhabited, known, and loved by its residents."

Ms. Threlfall walked home from the talk, feeling inspired and wondering what she might do to make her neighbourhood more vibrant.

"What do I see around me that brings down our neighbourhood?" she thought to herself. "These telephone poles look absolutely terrible."

The 40-year-old stay-at-home mother of two, who is a self-taught artist, decided she should simply paint over the tagged base of the telephone pole.

"I telephoned BC Hydro and said, 'I'd like to paint my pole. It's a disaster. It's got this signature tagging all over it.'"

She got an okay. Soon, she began painting a pole on Fernwood Road.

It is a narrow street with houses close to the sidewalk. The speed



Beth Threlfall, with a pole she painted in an anti-tagging project. At right: more art. CHAD HIPOLITO FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

limit is 30 kilometres an hour. The act of painting street furniture made her a spectacle.

Cars honked. Neighbours gawked. Her rendition of sunflowers, though no Van Gogh, was appreciated.

Voilà, a soul pole. Some asked her to do their pole next. Soon, every pole in the 1600-block of Fernwood had been decorated. "I'm not going out there and being a renegade. It's not my property. I ask permission. I'm asking people if it's something they want."

Artwork began to sprout on poles on the surrounding streets. Others asked just for a plain coat of paint. She called her project Adopt-A-Pole.

Centred around the city's oldest high school and a church transformed into a theatre, the neighbourhood feels like a village. It is often called funky, a description locals loathe. Outsiders teasingly refer to it as the People's Republic of Fernwood.

The local neighbourhood association recently organized a pole-painting extravaganza, providing

paints, brushes and stencils for volunteers. (The paint was scavenged from the Hartland Landfill, where discarded tins provided a rainbow cornucopia of colours.)

A free barbecue lunch was cooked. One hundred and one poles were identified for a paint job. About 300 volunteers came.

By the end of the day, the streets were decorated by poles sporting cattails in marshy browns and dandelions in glorious yellows; doves and cranes in brilliant whites; jumping frogs in whimsical greens; dragonflies with red bodies and green wings.

A perambulation along the streets offers displays of shocking pinks and funky purples; dashing reds and mundane greys; primitive caricatures and a spectacular Betty Boop, on a pole one block south of Vic High.

At the risk of being a snob, it must be said the art on some poles is more — er, um, successful — than others.

Angela Hemming, a blogger and digital media producer, took part in the paint-in, which she praised for contributing to the hood's art-



sy vibe. She felt for those homeowners whose poles decorated by what she called "kiddie-splatter," noting at least one such pole had been repainted a dignified grey by nightfall.

There have been other critics. The students at the local George Jay Elementary worked with Ms. Threlfall in painting the poles surrounding the school. A neighbour so disliked one immigrant child's rendition of the Mexican Day of the Dead, featuring dancing skeletons with flowered top hats, that she defaced his work by splattering paint over it.

Ms. Threlfall's renewal project has given her insight into the mentality of the tagger. "It became an addiction," she said of her own pole painting. "You start and it becomes a compulsion. You think, 'That corner would look so much better if it had a flower on it.' You see this space and you need to fill it. Which is what they say about tagging."

The difference is that taggers never ask for permission.

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