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Painting the town: Project creates billboards with historic photos, student art

BY [SARAH SCHUSTER \(/WRITERS/SARAH-SCHUSTER/\)](#) STAFF WRITER

Published [October 10, 2012 \(/2012/10/10/\)](#) at 2:27 am

This year, images old and new come together at the gateway to Armory Square.

The images are part of a project called “Iconic Syracuse,” a collaboration between the Onondaga Historical Association and the Connective Corridor.

Each month a different large-scale image will be displayed on a billboard at the gateway of Armory Square. The billboard will feature a historical photo of a building along the Connective Corridor as well as a painting of that building.

The project was co-founded by Denise Heckman, an [associate](#) professor of art, design and transmedia at Syracuse University, and Linda Hartsock, director of community engagement and economic development at SU and director of the Connective Corridor.

When someone in the community engagement office realized SU owned the plot of land

across the street from the Warehouse that had a billboard, the office saw an opportunity to give something back to the community, Heckman said.

“Syracuse University is not in the business of selling ad space,” she said.

Last year, they used the billboard to promote the Connective Corridor. But this year’s theme, “Iconic Image,” is taking a step further, Heckman said.

In September, the billboard featured a picture of a Victorian fountain that was once located in Fayette Park. The painting accompanying it was the work of Greg Mawicke, a senior industrial and interaction design major.

On Oct. 1, this image was replaced by a historical picture of the Gridley Building paired with a painting by Jesse Handelman, a junior industrial and interaction design student.

Mawicke and Handelman are the two main artists for this project, and will alternate paintings every month.

Handelman has been painting for about five years, and said painting for the “Iconic Syracuse” project will give him good exposure.

“It’s a nice location with lots of traffic,” he said. “This is a great opportunity to get my work out there.”

Students normally work off of archival pictures to paint the historical buildings, Heckman said.

But, for this month’s project, Handelman went to the site for inspiration. He took pictures of the Gridley Building from multiple angles and tried to get a feel for its place in the city.

“I like to let the landscape speak for itself,” he said, “But then add my own perspective with color.”

As industrial and interaction design students, Heckman said both artists have the ability to understand what happened in the past and reinterpret it. They want to know what the place was, because that is just important as what it looked like, she said.

Dennis Connor, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, chose the historical images for each billboard. The OHA is the primary historical association for the city of Syracuse, and has many collections of historic photographs, Connor said.

For Connor, the billboard’s purpose is showing the community the Connective Corridor is more than just a bus route.

“It’s all about the broader idea of trying to get people to expand their vision of what the Connective Corridor is,” he said. “Not just that it’s linking the city, but also that it’s a historical route.”

When the project comes to a close, the paintings will be auctioned off. The money will be split between the artists and the OHA, Heckman said.

Connors said he has already seen the project's positive effects. Friends have mentioned it to him, wanting to know the location of the scene they saw on the billboard.

"It's a creative way to get public art out there," he said. "And it helps show that the actual corridor itself is significant."

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