

Decorating Providence homes with more than paint

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The HousEART Project that began last summer with the creation of colorful murals on three abandoned homes in Smith Hill is expanding into Olneyville and possibly South Providence this year, bolstered by a state grant and the participation of artists from outside Rhode Island.

The R.I. State Council on the Arts this year provided a \$3,500 grant to the program that has artists decorate vacant homes in an effort to keep away vandals and graffiti-scribbles, as well as help beautify blighted areas and forge connections between neighborhood youths and the artists.

"It's an exciting development," Lydia Stein, Providence artist and community organizer who heads HousEART, said of the RISCA support. The grant allows artists to devote more time and energy to house art because it provides modest stipends for them and for their local teenage assistants as well. Last year's effort was entirely voluntary.

Three homes were decorated on Smith Hill last year, said Stein. Two were completed in Olneyville this year, with two more in Olneyville scheduled for later this year. And, if she can find willing property owners, three vacant houses on the South Side will be added to this year's list. The city of Providence, she said, is poised to finance those last three.

So far, the decorated homes have been owned by neighborhood housing associations that plan to rehabilitate the structures, Stein said. But individual owners who are not sure yet about the eventual fate of their homes, and are worried

about maintaining property value, can be reluctant to take part.

"The value for the community is immense," Stein maintained. She suggested that absentee owners in particular are not always aware of how great a burden a vacant home can place on a neighborhood.

Value to the community can be seen in the way that none of the decorated homes - so far - has been the targets of vandals or graffiti-writers, Stein said, while the interaction of artists and neighborhood teens can benefit both parties.

"I enjoyed getting to work with the teens," said Andrew Ames, a Boston artist who worked on the house at 41 Kosuth St. during the weekend of Aug. 7-8.

A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design who received a master's degree in fine arts in 2008, Ames said one of the teens wants to become a professional artist someday and would like to attend RISD, so Ames encouraged the youth to stay in touch with him.

"Getting to work with the community and meeting a new set of people" are the key benefits Ames said he got out of the program. "Even the folks who were kind of wandering around would come over and thank us, so there are different levels of benefits," he added.

What Ames and his crew - which included fellow artist Alexia Mellor of New Mexico - painted on the vacant Kosuth Street home is nearly as unusual as the HousEART program itself.

To explore "the intersection of technology, art and destruction," Stein said, the artists painted the house façade with



HOME DÉCOR: Lydia Stein, head of HousEART, near a recently completed mural on Kossuth Street in Olneyville.

PBN PHOTO/DAVID LEVESQUE

an oversized orange-and-white QR Code (Quick Response Code, similar to the barcode found on products). The QR Codes are quickly read by Smartphones or scanners, sending to users a computer link that provides details about the project they are looking at.

Stein, a Smith Hill resident who has been painting urban murals for several decades, estimated that the cost of decorating each house is roughly \$1,000 to cover the modest stipends for artists and youths and pay "for supplies we can't get for free." Luckily, each house so far has

been covered by insurance, but Stein said she is prepared to take out liability insurance if needed.

As for the future - when more vacant homes are sure to become available and more artists will always be seeking work - "I can feel the momentum building," Stein said. "Providence HousEART is getting on the map, and we're having artists applying from other parts of the country. I'm already thinking about how to grow this even more, and I'm wondering if it could become national." ■

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