Starting Conversations Through Public Art

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Photographs by Cheryl Adams Johnson Photography, courtesy of The Avenue Concept.

If you've spent any time in the neighborhood around RISD lately, you've probably noticed an interesting transformation: what were once plain black electric boxes are now canvases for artistic expression.

Painting the electric boxes was part of a workshop led by **The Avenue Concept**, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting public art and artists in Providence, in conjunction with a new program at RISD aimed at helping incoming freshmen engage with each other and the community. "The idea is to use art and design as a way to help these students, who are coming from all over the country and the world, feel connected as soon as they arrive," explains Yarrow Thorne, founder and artistic director of The Avenue Concept. "It felt like transforming these four electric boxes was a really great way to start to do that."

In early September, Yarrow led a workshop with the students who then worked in teams of 2-4 people and painted four boxes around the RISD campus in less than three hours. "They were very limited with using spray paint, basic acrylics, markers and a very short timeline," adds Yarrow. "It was fun to see them come to the challenge and take ownership of it."

Throughout the process, people stopped to watch and ask questions, which is ultimately Yarrow's goal for this project—and for all public art he promotes through The Avenue. "For me, it's not always about making the most beautiful art in the world, it's about creating conversation pieces that build connections with people."

RISD students transform electric boxes into works of art with the help of The Avenue Concept.

Yarrow Thorne leads workshop for incoming RISD freshmen.

RISD students transform electric boxes with the help of The Avenue Concept.

Noting the fact that art in the public realm is constantly changing, these boxes provide an opportunity for a lot of different people to try something they've never done before. "The idea is to create different avenues for people to share ideas and interact with each other. With this project, each box has its own story—and that's part of the fun of it," he adds.

Yarrow hopes this project will continue to start conversations and build connections for people on the east side—and throughout the city—while helping The Avenue Concept take on more projects that are community-based.

To learn more about The Avenue Concept, visit: **theavenueconcept.com.**