



Minnesota Department of Transportation Artist-in-Residence Program

Highlighting the work of Marcus Young



Acknowledgements

The Minnesota Department of Transportation's artist-in-residence program would not have been possible without the dedicated work of inaugural AIR Marcus Young 楊墨, and MnDOT staff's support and commitment to using a creative approach to achieve their goals and create a safer, more equitable, and healthier Minnesota. We would also like to thank Jessica Oh, Strategic Partnerships Director at MnDOT, for her assistance in selecting an artist as well as the invaluable support and expertise she provided during the residency. This project was completed under the leadership and guidance of Ben Stone, Smart Growth America's director of arts & culture. The primary author of this case study was Ebony Venson, program associate at Smart Growth America, with editorial support from Ben Stone and Helen Hope, Communications Manager at Smart Growth America. This program was made possible with generous support from the Kresge Foundation and the McKnight Foundation. Seed funding was provided by ArtPlace America.

Cover photo from the breath pages of *Turn Highways to Rivers: An Art Appendix*, provided by Prakshi Malik

Introduction

Embedding artists in government is a decades-old concept that has helped agencies pioneer innovative and creative solutions. Currently being piloted in agencies across the nation, artist-in-residencies (AIR) have proven effective in rethinking design challenges, increasing community buy-in, fostering deeper community engagement, augmenting planning goals, building relationships with traditionally underserved constituents, and improving outdated processes in routine work.

The concept for MnDOT's AIR began crystallizing out of the [Arts, Culture, and Transportation: A Creative Placemaking Field Scan](#), produced by Transportation for America (T4America) with ArtPlace America in 2017. Which explores how artists are contributing to transportation solutions and identifies state DOTs as a promising but untested venue for artistic intervention.

Embedding artists within state DOTs not only helps drive new and creative approaches to achieve their ambitious goals, but the artists themselves can also benefit from learning how to better engage with the complex processes and projects overseen by state DOTs and therefore producing better and more meaningful work.



We were able to execute this need in 2019, when both MnDOT and Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) launched their inaugural programs, in partnership with Transportation for America (T4A). What made these residencies unique is that they not only were the first programs to occur at state departments of transportation, but at any agency at the state level.

The Transportation Equity Fellowship, as MnDOT calls it, was designed to involve deep thinking on the following ideas:

- How to build innovative and different partnerships—with artists, arts and culture organizations, and more—to improve transportation outcomes;
- How to embrace innovation, flexibility, and creativity;
- How to be responsive to communities, elevate their voices, and elevate the cultural values within a community in the transportation system;
- And how to address the impact of transportation facilities.

The Challenge

When behavioral artist Marcus Young 楊墨 was selected to join the MnDOT team back in 2019, it was not his first foray into government, having served as the city artist for the City of St. Paul for nine years prior to his residency. While Young was an experienced artist-in-residence, he had never worked within a state agency.

Marcus began his residency with rotations through MnDOT's different divisions, discussing with hundreds of MnDOT staff members their thoughts about their work, their relationship to the communities they serve, and the idea of working with an artist. Staff members acknowledged that some of their challenges would benefit from an artist's creative energy, as illustrated by these comments:

- We are “bound by technical process.” We offer “technical solutions to deal with spiritual land.”
- “We spend a lot of our resources being predictable. ”
- “We build roads. We know numbers and facts. We don't know what to do with emotions. MnDOT is not the only agency with this problem. I wonder if that's where art fits in. ”
- “We are part of the community. We're not just a road going through it. ”

As the majority of his residency took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of Marcus' initial plans for engagement with the community were drastically altered. However, Marcus was diligent in adapting his technique and plan to connect with folks virtually and continue advancing MnDOT's work.



Image courtesy of Marcus Young

Project Summaries

As a result of these conversations, Marcus designed The Land Acknowledgement Confluence Room (pictured above), a renovated conference room where MnDOT employees can gather, be creative, and explore new everyday cultural practices of land acknowledgment and recognition.



A rendering of the future “Land Acknowledgement Confluence Room” which will be created at MnDOT’s headquarters in 2022. Image courtesy of Marcus Young 楊墨.

This room, which features a gallery of transportation-themed art; a diversity and inclusion library; furniture, tea, plants for relaxation and meditation; supplies to support the creative expression and brainstorming of staff members, exemplifies how space can be reimagined to foster creativity, whole-self engagement, deeper connection with one another, and humanizing our work.

Young shares that the Confluence Room will not only be a place, but it will be “a placeholder so that we can all practice acknowledging land in better ways. And by acknowledging land in better ways, we acknowledge history. We acknowledge our whole selves in different ways.”

Like so many projects produced in 2020, the Confluence Room was a work in progress as the COVID-19 pandemic enveloped the world and forced MnDOT’s employees to work from home, leaving the headquarters building empty. Once the agency decides to return to the office, the Confluence Room will be ready to fulfill its purpose.

What is a land acknowledgement?

“An Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgement is a statement that recognizes the Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed from the homelands and territories upon which an institution was built and currently occupies and operates in.” Learn more at landacknowledgements.org/

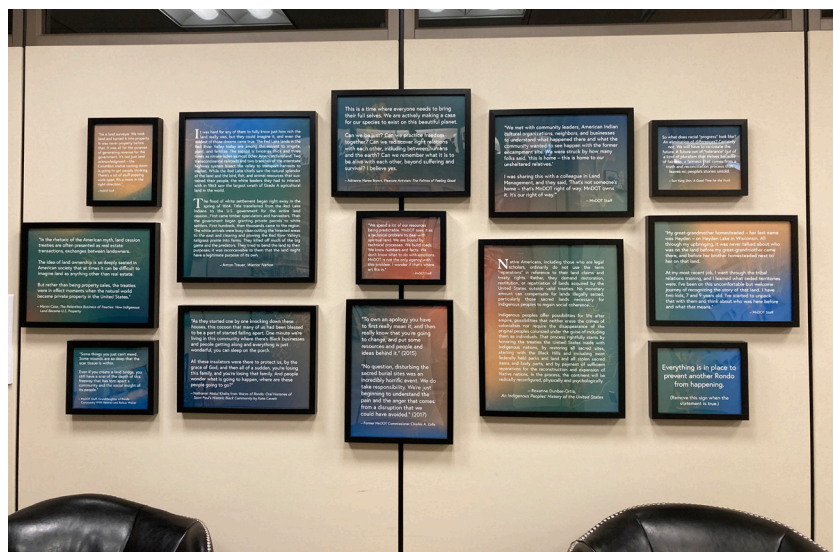


Image courtesy of Marcus Young.

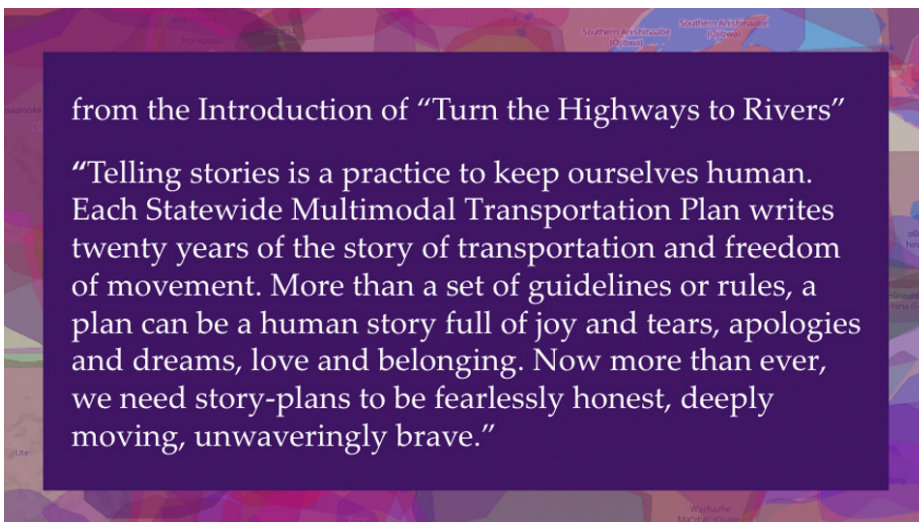
During his residency, Marcus Young also used the art of storytelling and listening to advance MnDOT's Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan (SMTP). Birtthed in a visioning session led by Marcus with a group of community members, notably called the "Council of Old and New Wisdom", the 48-page multimedia appendix, "Turn the Highways to Rivers" explores the possibilities for pushing the state plan beyond traditional boundaries to explore fictional thinking and planning.

While existing in this world of fiction, the Council, whose stories, history, and heritage are inextricably linked to the land, helped explore this paradigm shift, and further explores an original premise of the SMTP, to tell the story of transportation in the community and outline plans for the future freedom of movement.



Image courtesy of Marcus Young.

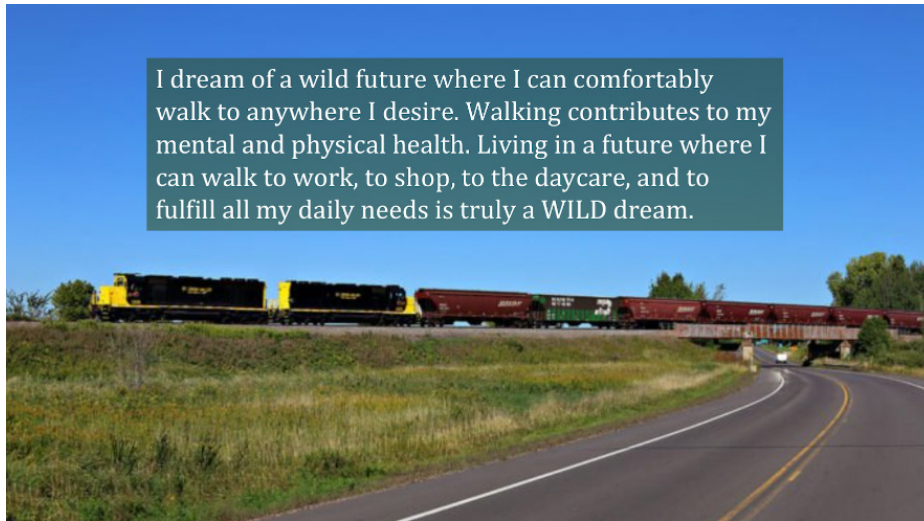
Excerpt from "Turn the Highways to Rivers: An Art Appendix" included in the MnDOT Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan (SMTP).



plan and their future work. This 90-minute workshop titled, I Dream of Wild, included over 200 attendees who collectively imagined the future of transportation in their state, and created another opportunity for agency managers to practice vulnerability and deep listening as individuals shared their perspectives.

As the new transportation plan decides what happens for the next twenty years, it is critical to understand the community's history before charting a course forward. The work of this project not only pushes the SMTP to explore these stories but also expands the role of Black and Native elders and artists who can help guide MnDOT to new ways of working and relating.

Continuing to exist in this fictional space, Marcus also hosted a conversation with MnDOT personnel during the Annual Managers' Workshop, encouraging participants to "dream of wild" goals for the




I dream of a wild future where I can comfortably walk to anywhere I desire. Walking contributes to my mental and physical health. Living in a future where I can walk to work, to shop, to the daycare, and to fulfill all my daily needs is truly a WILD dream.

Excerpt from the "I Dream of Wild" session during the MnDOT Annual Managers' Workshop

The Results


Marcus reflects on his two-and-a-half years as MnDOT's inaugural artist-in-residence, describing what he has been able to accomplish in this role as "Art Within and In Relation," which he defines as:



An art-making that starts by looking at what we have and who we are, not the "empty" spaces to fill or places to change.



Art that invites participation overlooking, acknowledges the artist in everyone and prioritizes how we relate, not how we are separate.



Art of how instead of what—art of processes, behaviors, systems, gatherings, the soft and everywhere in-between.