

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

What's inside the new Gallery mall? First look at Fashion District Philadelphia

By Peter Crimmins

August 14, 2019



A hanging sculpture of the Liberty Bell by perceptual artist Michael Murphy becomes William Penn when viewed from a different angle. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

The nearly one million square feet of the new Fashion District Philadelphia, formerly known as The Gallery mall, are being readied for the scheduled Sept. 19 grand opening. Workers are busily putting the finishing touches on the newly updated shopping, dining, and entertainment complex.

That includes artwork. Through the city's Percent for Art requirement, the developer, Pennsylvania Real Estate Investment Trust (PREIT), budgeted \$1 million for public art, and hired local art dealer Bridgette Mayer to figure out how to spend it.

"They weren't sure what they wanted to do," Mayer said of PREIT. "I think the initial idea was to buy one beautiful sculpture and put it outside the building: here's our Percent for Art project."

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Instead, Mayer wanted to spread out the opportunities to engage with art inside the mall. She curated commissioned pieces by nine artists and art collectives to be hung in ten locations.

This week, Mayer gave WHYY a first look at how the new Fashion District Philadelphia — and its new art installations — are taking shape.



Philadelphia gallery owner Bridgette Mayer pulled together the art that will grace the new Fashion District Philadelphia as part of the city's Percent for Art program. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Art to 'make your day'

The changes are obvious right from the moment you walk in the front doors.

In a notable difference from the Gallery mall, there will be no artwork outside the main entrance at 9th and Market streets. (The stainless steel sculpture that once stood there, Harold Kimelman's "Burst of Joy," is being relocated to the artist's alma mater, Central High School.)

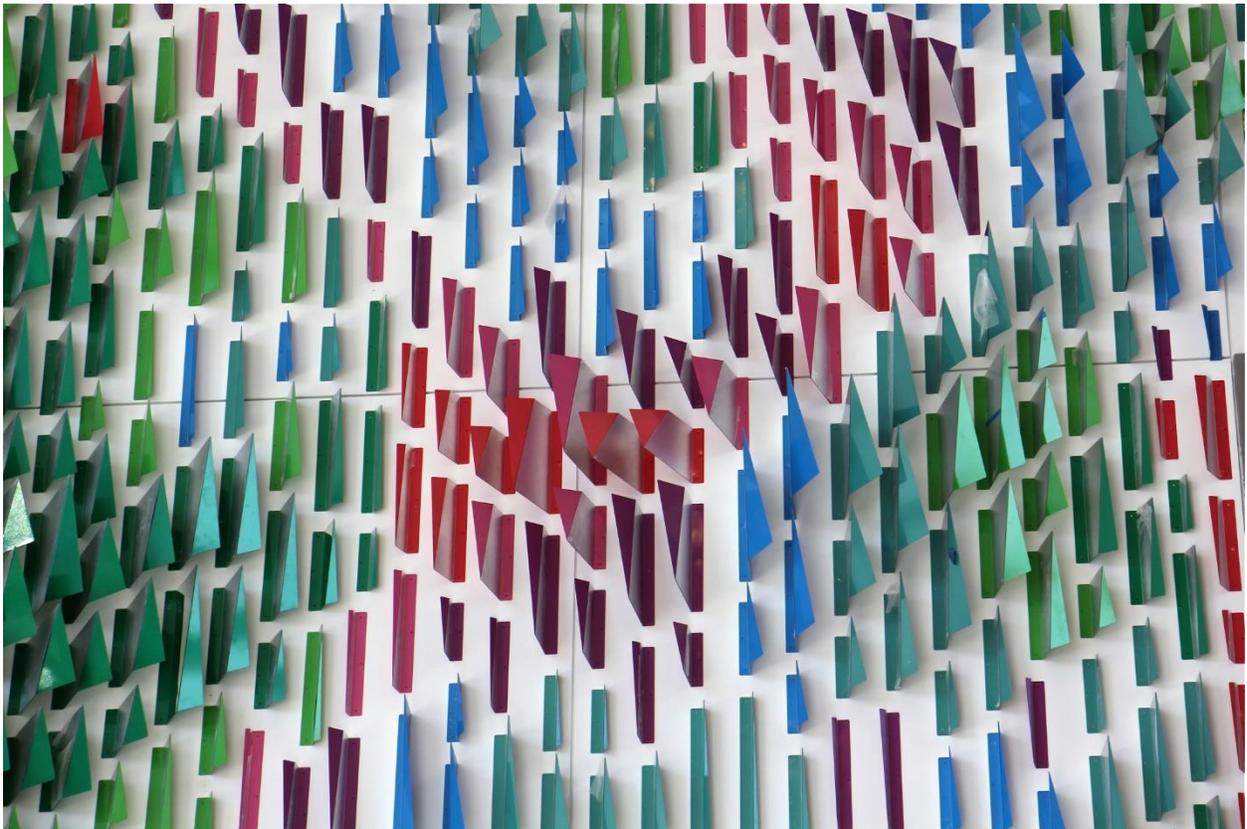
The new developer did not want a three-dimensional sculpture that would take up space on the floor, nor anything that would obstruct the large video monitors fixed to the wall.

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“I had to work with something that wasn’t going to compete with all the advertising in this front-of-house space,” said Mayer.

So she asked New York-based collective SOFTlab to make a sprawling piece inside the new front doors.

Inspired by legendary Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi, “Goniochome” is a wall sculpture made of hundreds of powder-coated aluminum fins with small mirror panels. The pieces spread across and up the atrium like multi-colored fish scales, creating a shimmering effect as you move through the entrance.



Hundreds of colorful fins make up a large dimensional sculpture by Softlab at the entrance to Fashion District Philadelphia, once the Gallery Mall. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

A mural by Newport Beach-based artist Jason Woodside is at the back entrance on Filbert Street.

This week, Woodside used a power lift to paint directly onto the ceiling and walls, wrapping the entrance like a hug of color, with intersecting planes of bright polka-dot and stripe patterns.

“I’m trying to create a canopy that you walk into,” He said. “It’s supposed to make your day as you walk into the space.”

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As you look down a long hallway leading to the parking garage on the second floor, you see how Philadelphia artist Charles Burwell collaborated with the local collective Amber Arts to paint four large panels representing the seasons.

Burwell is known for his vibrant canvases of geometric shapes and dripping paint. Amber Arts took cues from Burwell, creating images structured around honeycomb shapes containing iconic seasonal imagery like summertime sunglasses and wintertime coats.

“They wanted to bring in summer fashion, since it’s a shopping center,” said Mayer. “Besides ideas of fashion and design, they brought African cloth and textiles.”



Eileen Neff's piece, "The Greening," appears on the undersides of the escalators at Fashion District Philadelphia. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Some of the new artwork shows up in unusual places. One on the far west side of the mall, where it connects with SEPTA's Jefferson Station, is a hub of stacked escalators that can quickly move people up and down. The underside of the escalators, the long strips of usually blank space people instinctively stare at while they ride, are fitted with panels depicting abstractions of tree canopies made by Philadelphia artist Eileen Neff.

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More natural light

The overhaul of the old 1980s shopping mall keeps the same basic architecture of the Gallery: an underground concourse with a food court flowing into Jefferson Station, two stories of retail connected by escalators through a central atrium, and a third floor with new entertainment and nightlife tenants — a movie theater, as well as a restaurant and bar.

The most significant change is the elimination of the anchor tenant bisecting the space. Most recently a Big Kmart store sat in the middle of the mall, making it difficult to pass from one end to the other.



Jason Woodside works on his mural at Fashion District Philadelphia. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

The roof has also been opened up with a skylight running the length of the mall that spills natural light through both retail floors, better illuminating the artwork.

“It was always so dark in here,” said Mayer. “You couldn’t get this light coming through.”

There are also updated finishes — glass railings have replaced the iron bars of the atrium, and the floors are now made of large white tiles where brick face used to be. The color scheme is white and grey, with subtle, stained-wood trim.

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Ryan McGinness painted “Details” on the ceiling at Fashion District Philadelphia as part of the Percent for Arts program. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

And the central sculpture depicting Philadelphia icons — including Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, and disgraced comedian Bill Cosby — that once towered over the escalators? That’s long gone.

Heather Crowel, PREIT’s executive president of communications, said the mall is designed to be a blank canvas for the retailers, “getting the tenants and the storefronts to be their own masterpiece.”

‘More than just shopping’

Although the artwork is positioned so as not to compete with commerce, PREIT says the company is committed to local culture, and that the project is supported by four conceptual pillars: style and fashion, dining, entertainment, and art.

“We wanted to create a space that is for more than just shopping — for food, for film, for fashion, for fun, and for art,” she said. “To open up the customer base to the entire Philadelphia community and give people reasons to come in addition to shopping.”

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Workers use a spider crane to place hundreds of colorful fins making up a large dimensional sculpture by Softlab at the entrance to Fashion District Philadelphia, once the Gallery Mall. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Crowell says PREIT plans to roll out public programming related to its new art collection, and a cultural philanthropic effort to distribute \$100,000 over three years.

At the time of its opening on Sept. 19, Crowell says the mall's tenant occupancy will be at 60%. The AMC movie theater, an "amusement center" with bowling and arcade games called Round 1 are expected to open in November. A rotating showcase of interactive art called Wonderspaces is planned for December.

Link to article <https://whyy.org/articles/whats-inside-the-new-gallery-mall-first-look-at-fashion-district-philadelphia/>