

Local traffic boxes get a colorful makeover

Fellowship program partnered ASU art students with muralists, city of Chandler

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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A team of Arizona State University students recently helped transform bland, beige traffic boxes in Chandler into colorful works of public art.

"It's amazing," said ASU student Sarai Biggers while taking in a box wrapped in a design by West Phoenix artist Shoreigh Williams during a walking tour on Tuesday.

Biggers met Williams through the Chandler Creative Arts Fellowship Program, which brought students from ASU's [Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts](#) together with local muralists and the city of Chandler.

The yearlong program focused on creating artwork on traffic boxes that typically go unnoticed — art that not only celebrates the city's history and culture but also highlights the power of community.

The collaboration took place in the [ASU Chandler Innovation Center, or ACIC](#), a 17,000-square-foot fabrication shop for ASU students, staff and faculty.

"It screams Chandler — it is as if it is supposed to be here," said Biggers, an industrial design major in [The Design School](#).

"Here" is along Arizona Avenue in downtown Chandler, where the six boxes were located on paths for pedestrians to explore and enjoy.

The five-foot-tall boxes served as large canvases for the designs they were wrapped in. Some featured abstract, geometric patterns, while others reflected the city's rich Hispanic heritage and high-tech culture.

"The designs created by the artists reflect the sense of community in a variety of ways," said Peter Bugg, the city of Chandler's visual arts coordinator and an ASU MFA graduate. "Shela Yu's design highlights the interconnectedness of members of the community by depicting two women joined by a single braid. Bronson Soza used old family photographs ... taken in Chandler as the basis for his design. And Shoreigh Williams' design reflects the wide array of artistic output happening in the city."

[Melita Belgrave](#), associate dean and associate professor in ASU's [School of Music, Dance and Theatre](#), helped create the interdisciplinary fellowship.

There were 121 applicants for 13 coveted spots in the program. Participants received a modest stipend for their work over the two-semester program.

The role of the students was to immerse themselves in the community and serve as researchers and liaisons between the city of Chandler and the artists.

"My associate dean role is all about inclusive excellence and a sense of belonging and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and experiences for our students," Belgrave said. "So getting to be in community and using socially embedded practices. We don't just drop into a community and do something. We work on a long-term partnership — on what the community might need and how we (ASU) might be able to partner while teaching our Herberger students how to do that through arts, design and connecting with the community."

And the partnerships are mutually beneficial.

"We intentionally partner with communities to co-create solutions that address real-world challenges," said [Christina Ngo](#), the executive director of [ASU's Office of University Affairs](#). "Public art is a tangible way to do this — it activates public spaces, sparks dialogue and reflects the identity and history of communities."

Ngo said these kinds of experiences help ASU students apply their skills, build relationships and develop as socially responsible, cross-sector, character-driven leaders.

"This project also offered students the opportunity for interdisciplinary research. They explored themes related to storytelling, placemaking, community resilience and representation," Ngo said. "By engaging in public art, the university shows up as a collaborator and co-designer, listening to local voices and building long-term relationships rooted in reciprocity."

Community and communication

The first step in the program's process was understanding the Chandler community in order to communicate that understanding to the artists and inform their designs.

The students researched the city by attending signature events such as the Chandler Contigo — a month-long series of family, cultural and educational events that honor and celebrate National Hispanic Heritage Month.

That was followed by more arts-based research, data collection and analysis.

[Elijah Verduzco](#) studied writing competitions and painting competitions that Chandler had previously hosted for the kids. He also studied the city's history.

"We then submitted the visual ideas or concept themes that we thought best captured the essence of Chandler," said Verduzco, a film major in [The Sidney Poitier New American Film School](#).

Verduzo said the art was important to the community because it is a reflection of the environment and its history, and that it expresses that in a very tangible way.

"I think it's human psychology," he said. "You may know something, but until you express it through a tangible means, whether it's an essay or movie or art, it doesn't feel real to a person. But when they see it, that's kind of that acknowledgement of the place; it's like, 'We are here; this is like the vibe of this place.'"

[Hannah Seratte](#), another fellow in the yearlong project, said that one of the challenges of the project was critiquing the muralists — a skill that is difficult for most people. The students were provided with training in this area, which will serve them for a lifetime.

"The biggest challenge was to look at the examples of their artwork and try to balance a respect and understanding of their work and style while trying to fit in the vision we had based our research on," Seratte said. "We had to tactfully advise and give opinions of their rough drafts. ... It was helpful for me broadly to know how to get experience with giving critical, constructive feedback while respecting the choices of artists."

Seratte grew up in Phoenix surrounded by public art.

"There were beautiful elements that were influential in my childhood and gave me an appreciation for art and beauty," she said.

She wants the Chandler project to have a similar impact.

"My hope for kids in Chandler is that they notice the public art mysteriously popping up on traffic boxes — art that's outside, not in a museum or exhibit. It's there for no other reason than to be beautiful, and I hope it inspires and shapes them as they grow."

Bugg has his own goal for the project.

"I hope the traffic box wraps make Chandler a more beautiful and interesting place to live, work and play," he said. "And I hope that the research and input provided to the artists by ASU students added depth to their designs."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Devyn Bromley, a first-year industrial design student looks at one of the newly designed traffic boxes in downtown Chandler during a walking tour on Tuesday, April 15. ASU's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts collaborated with the city of Chandler to provide arts students with a yearlong Chandler Creative Arts Fellowship Program, wherein 15 students surveyed Chandler residents and then conveyed the information to six Valley artists, who created designs for the boxes based on the feedback. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Peter Bugg (right), operations manager at the Chandler Museum, leads a walking tour of Chandler's newly decorated traffic boxes in the A. J. Chandler Park on Tuesday, April 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Fourth-year animation student Raf Rios checks out the family photos that decorate one of the traffic boxes in downtown Chandler on April 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Students look at details on one of downtown Chandler's traffic boxes on Tuesday, April 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News