



Covering Construction Sites with Art
Rodney Durso (COM'87) founded ArtBridge to beautify the New York cityscape—and help artists

Rodney Durso came up with the idea for ArtBridge by walking around his neighborhood. "My neighborhood was covered with scaffolding for abandoned renovation and construction projects," he says. "And I was like, hey, those ugly plywood panels should be a canvas." Photo by Nisma Zaman

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BY JOEL BROWN

X f SHARE

In our My Big Idea series, we bring you interviews with BU alums and other members of the University community who have launched a business, built a new product, or solved problems big and small. We ask them about their inspiration, what were their biggest stumbling blocks, and what's next for their big idea.

[Rodney Durso](#) studied advertising and marketing at BU and went into graphic design after Commencement. His career went really well for a while.

"For about 10 years I had my own branding and design agency called Stormhouse Partners. And then somewhere along the line, I just got really burned-out," says Durso (COM'87). "It was a lot. The buck stopped with me in a lot of ways. So, I started painting. This was right around the financial crash in 2008.

"I would walk to my painting studio every day, and my neighborhood was covered with scaffolding for abandoned renovation and construction projects. And I was like, hey, those ugly plywood panels should be a canvas."

A great idea, but not necessarily 100 percent altruistic.

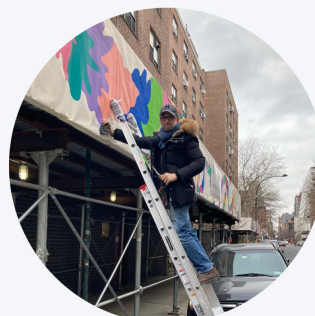
"There was a secondary motive, and it was more selfish," Durso says. "I was having difficulty getting my artwork seen by anybody. If you didn't go to Yale or have the right connection, they don't care about your art. And here I was in the middle of the art world, essentially in Chelsea, in New York City, thinking, how am I gonna get anybody to see my art?

"And I thought, well, I'm gonna put it up on scaffolding, and everyone's gonna be forced to see it on their way to galleries.

"As I started to flesh out the idea and talk to my fellow artists about it, I realized that it seemed a little too self-serving. And then a better idea emerged from it, which was to make the scaffolding a gallery for all emerging artists, not just me."

The motives may have been a little mixed, but the results aren't. Durso's brainstorm led him to found [ArtBridge](#), a nonprofit that empowers local artists to transform construction fencing into canvases for art.

At any given time, construction fences at dozens of commercial sites and public housing in all five boroughs have become temporary open-air galleries, displaying more than 60,000 square feet of art by



Durso working in 2022 at the New York City Housing Authority's Fulton Houses development, installing art by Hisham Bharoocha and Maria Lupianez. Photo by Stephen Pierson

showcasing more than 60,000 square feet of art by hundreds of artists.

"ArtBridge's mission was to transform scaffolding into a canvas, give a voice to the local artist, and bring access to every passerby," says [Manjari Sharma](#), president of ArtBridge's board and an artist herself.

More than a decade after it launched, ArtBridge has a half-dozen full- and part-time employees, a 15-member board, and a \$1.6 million annual budget. But it didn't start out so grandly.

The first exhibition Durso put together was on London Terrace, the 1,000-plus-unit Art Deco building where he lives, on 23rd Street in Manhattan.

"I went to the management company and said, 'You can cough up \$5,000. I'm gonna surround your building with art.' Of course, there was scaffolding around London Terrace for three years at that point. And they said okay."

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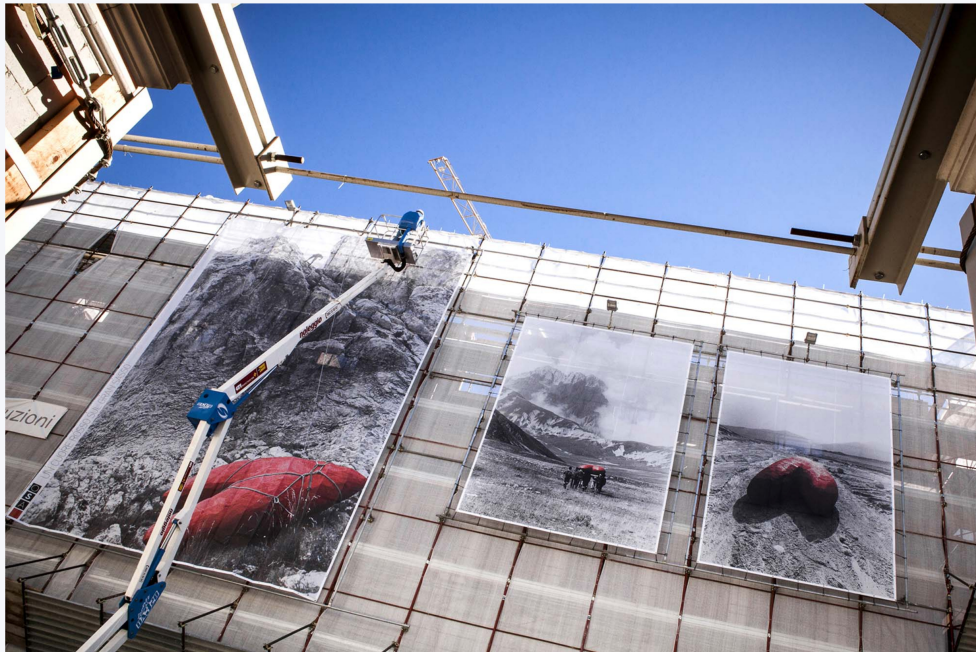
He dug into his Rolodex of artists and friends and came up with a group of gallery members, gallery owners, educators, and established artists. "And I said, 'You are gonna be my jury panel. Now I've gotta find artists.'"

Urban dwellers know that construction scaffolding is often a slapdash display of wheat-pasted advertising posters and photocopied gig flyers, with the occasional political entrant. Durso turned it around.

"I posted flyers around the neighborhood, on telephone poles and that kind of thing. I got 26 offers from artists to contribute their work," he says. "Because of my graphic design background and production, I knew how to do this—I photographed all the artwork and digitally converted it into giant Photoshop documents, had them printed at massive size, and ended up with a 450-foot-long exhibit on the side of this building."

The images were printed on a weatherproof vinyl, and a company installed them on the plywood panels. The exhibit stayed up for more than a year.

"Once the scaffold needed to come down, we removed the vinyl and had it manufactured into messenger bags—upcycling," he says. "And then we would sell those messenger bags in order to raise money for the organization."



An ArtBridge installation in L'Aquila, Italy, of work by Sandro Visca. Photo by Claudia Pajewski

Durso started out thinking the project would be one-and-done. But the feedback was great, and 300 people attended the opening party. "My older brother said to me, 'You've got to keep doing this.' And I'm like, 'OK.' But I thought, really? And he said, 'I'm gonna write you a check.' He kicked in \$5,000."

And they were off to the races. More scaffolding, more construction fences, and more artists. A few years down the road, Durso assembled the first board and incorporated ArtBridge as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

One of their biggest early projects was during the construction of Barclays Center in Brooklyn, now a major concert venue and home to the Brooklyn Nets basketball team.

"They were getting real pushback from the neighborhood, because basically they were displacing artists and low-income housing, and they needed a good PR push," he says. "So at that point we're a little bit of a pawn, I think. But that's fine, because it's going to be built anyway, and basically we're bringing lots of art to the construction site."

These days, ArtBridge works at as many as 15 sites a month. Artists are paid between \$5,000 and \$10,000 for the use of their art. The total cost of the projects is covered by multiple sources, including ArtBridge fundraising and grants, plus contributions from the commercial developers or government entities doing the building or remodeling. (Construction barriers also go up when building owners conduct regular inspections of their masonry required under New York laws, Durso says.)



An installation at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan, in 2022, by artist Ebony Bolt. Photo courtesy ArtBridge

Some developers suggest an artist they're interested in, or ArtBridge will seek out local artists or ones with a connection to a site. On some projects for public housing authorities, the artist must come from within that development.

In nine years with ArtBridge, Sharma has seen a clear impact on artists and neighborhoods across New York City. "When art is held within the four white walls of a gallery or a museum, behind gated doors and ticketed entry fees, it creates an undeniable barrier," she says. "Rodney Durso began ArtBridge in an effort to democratize the experience of art, solve the nuisance of way too much construction fencing, and deliver art to the streets."

Did the project ever help Durso with his original aim, getting his own art seen?

"I didn't have my own piece in any show until our 10-year anniversary show," he says. "Which was right back on the original building that we started on."

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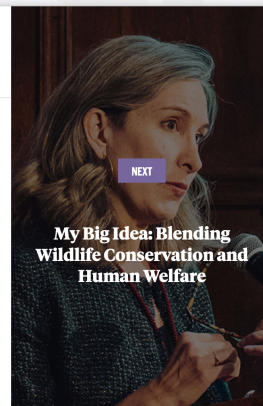
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