

Kramer, Peter D.. "MTA brings public art to its Mount Vernon bridges," *LoHud*, 13 December 2019.

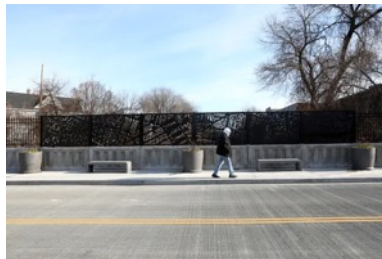


MOUNT VERNON - A bridge gets you from here to there. The MTA wants some of its bridges in this city to start doing something more: To inspire, to reflect their surroundings, to give pedestrians a reason to linger.

That's where Yaling Chen comes in.

A couple of years ago, Chen's MTA Arts & Design team asked artists to submit portfolios for site-specific public-art projects. They received more than a hundred portfolios and pared them down for review by a selection panel of arts professionals and the MTA project team.

"Around 2017, we selected the first three artists for the first three bridges," Chen said. "And just a few months ago, we completed our selection, choosing the last three artists for the last three bridges."



A pedestrian walks along the 14th Avenue bridge, which features Frances Gallardo's "Line to Line" in Mount Vernon, on Dec. 12, 2019. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

The vast transit agency owns the Verrazzano Narrows and the Henry Hudson bridges, but it also has dozens of smaller spans over its Metro-North Railroad train tracks, said Michael Feinberg, the MTA's director of Tunnels, Bridges and Track. When those spans show their age, they are dealt with under what's called the Overhead Bridges Replacement Program.

Six MTA bridges over the New Haven line in Mount Vernon are being replaced by Metro-North: Five as part of the current five-year capital plan, the sixth in the capital plan proposed to begin next year.

They are: The 14th Avenue bridge, 6th Avenue bridge, 10th Avenue bridge, Third Avenue bridge, Fulton Avenue bridge, and the South Street bridge.

When they reopen, each will have more than here-to-there capacity: They'll have a dash of art.



Yaling Chen, the deputy director for MTA Arts & Design, and Michael Feinberg, the MTA's director of tunnels, bridges and track, at the recently unveiled art by Frances Gallardo in Mount Vernon on Dec. 12, 2019. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

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'Line to Line'

Take, for example, the 14th Avenue bridge – linking First and South Boyd streets – the first art-bridge unveiled. Built in 1894, when Grover Cleveland was in the White House, it originally had a wooden road deck. When the MTA rebuilt it, bringing it up to modern engineering standards, Frances Gallardo's "Line to Line" added a modern artistic standard.

"Line to Line" is a dozen black powder-coated aluminum panels into which are cut lines based on the blueprints of Mount Vernon's original street plot. Gallardo, a Cornell University artist originally from Puerto Rico, took that source material and extrapolated it, creating a new, fanciful and intricate grid on either side of the short bridge.

"She took the printouts of all those vintage maps and then sort of stitching all those pieces together into a patchwork," Chen said. "Then, in order for the metal shop to be able to finalize her vision, those final designs would then be converted into computer files for metal cutting. And now, there they are, fully integrated into the bridge."

The artistic effect is that when a train passes under the bridge, pedestrians become spectators, peeking through the curving holes in the panels to see the New Haven Line hard at work.

On her blog, Gallardo wrote last month: "More than anything, I am overjoyed that my work is now in a permanent public space, where it can affect in a positive way the daily routes of individuals."



The MTA is making over the six bridges that cross over its tracks in Mount Vernon with a public art project. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Permanent public art

Art and transit is certainly nothing new, but it's typically reserved for stations, to give commuters something to look at. The overhead bridge art project is about the community above the tracks, said Chris Norris, an MTA senior structural engineer.

That's what sets the new project apart, Chen said.

"This is the first time we have this opportunity to introduce permanent public art on the bridges in one city," she said. When the project is complete, the bridges could easily constitute an art walk of sorts, all within a mile or so of each other.

Feinberg, the engineer, said the art projects account for less than 1% of the budget for each bridge replacement.

"It's something different and it's probably going to become the new normal," he said. "It's a nice addition. It really didn't cost anything additional to the bridge."

In a statement, Metro-North Railroad President Catherine Rinaldi said: "Rebuilding the bridges will support the city's economic growth and vitality, and creating an art streetscape will only further enhance Mount Vernon's quality of life."

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Construction is already underway on several of the other bridge replacements on a timeline that stretches from now till the summer of 2021 and beyond, depending on whether the New York Legislature approves the capital plan when it comes up for consideration.



Construction at the 10th Avenue bridge in Mount Vernon which will display art as part of an MTA project Dec. 12, 2019. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Other art-bridges

Here's what's planned for other Mount Vernon MTA bridges, and when:

6th Avenue bridge (Summer 2020). Bronx-based artist Josué Guarionex's interactive "Crosscut," with geometric lines akin to crossing train tracks, will include forms based on percussion instruments that will be playable.

10th Avenue bridge (Summer 2021). New York-based artist Mark Fox's work will fill one full side of the bridge with stylized, decorative text that involves local history, geography, architecture, and conversations with local residents.

3rd Avenue bridge (Work to begin 2020). Brooklyn artist Damien Davis, who teaches at Purchase College, will create a work the MTA says "invites the public into discourse and interaction, providing myriad cultural reference and entry points for the multifaceted Mount Vernon community."

Fulton Avenue bridge (Contingent on 2020-24 capital plan). Brooklyn-based artist William Villalongo's work "focuses on themes of human and natural migration that connect to Mount Vernon's past, present and future." The piece, the MTA said, "depicts flowers, twigs, and animals that pollinate and migrate for survival, along timelines related to human and animal migrations related to the City of Mount Vernon."

South Street bridge (Construction schedule not set). Adrienne Elise Tarver, based in Brooklyn and Atlanta, has a plan to mix inspiration from Mount Vernon's Caribbean and West Indian people and marry it to the city and Lower Westchester's agricultural past. Said the MTA: "The artwork draws upon experiences and narratives of idealized and mythologized environments."