

→ DEVON OSTROM

Beautiful citybuilder

WORDS BY TODD HARRISON PHOTO BY JOE LE

In mid-July, the much-loved Hug Me Tree that stood for years at the corner of Queen Street West and Soho Street was restored after being knocked down by a wayward car last summer. Devon Ostrom, co-founder of the urban arts collective THEM, was instrumental in preserving the tree, and he sent *Spacing* photos of the resurrection process — 100 of them, to be precise. Of a tree.

That kind of passion makes Ostrom one of those people who you always want on your side. He's unflinchingly dedicated to his projects, which lately have included THEM, the Manifesto Festival, an urban arts installation at the ROM, and the Beautiful City Billboard Fee (of which *Spacing* has been a signatory supporter from the outset). He has a remarkable ability to get the ear of people you might not expect to have a tremendous amount of interest in street art, particularly institutions and politicians. Best of all, though, he does this in a way that is articulate and impossible to ignore.

Growing up in Ottawa, Ostrom was turned on to street art by a professor at his arts high school. He worked as a set designer after graduating, then created stage backdrops for raves and the World Electronic Music Festival. Soon, though, he began to feel the need to help other artists — particularly those working in the public realm — access resources

and opportunities. "My mom was an artist and community organizer," Ostrom says, "and my father was a civil engineer. So I'm kind of like a weird mix-up of those two fields: somebody who can figure out processes and communication, and then I also have an arts background as well."

From this desire sprung THEM, a Toronto-based organization that supports an international collective of urban artists. With THEM, Ostrom organized exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario and laid the foundations of the Beautiful City Billboard Fee (BCBF) initiative. He also curated two exhibitions for the 2008 Luminate Festival: *LivingSpace* in Regent Park, and *Housepaint* — a collection of canvas houses painted by street artists and

installed on the site of the former Tent City at Lake Shore Boulevard East and Cherry Street. When Ostrom decided to auction the *Housepaint* canvases on the steps of the ROM, though, something pretty amazing happened: "They liked them, so they invited us indoors," he says. "But we thought it would be a little bit boring just kind of plunking a bunch of street art inside the gallery. And so the idea we came up with — and this was also because we didn't have enough time to properly plan out a full show — was to have it sort of evolve and keep changing." So Ostrom invited artists to add to the exhibition throughout its run, which ended in July.

Ostrom calls the ROM exhibition "kind of serendipitous," but he's selling himself short; there's a reason the museum opened its doors to him, at the core of which is his disarmingly measured approach. It's a skill he honed while earning a MA in Creative Curating at Goldsmith College, University of London, and it's the reason for the success of the

BCBF. The proposal would see a small charge levied on every billboard installed in Toronto and the proceeds funnelled to a variety of public arts projects, including beautification initiatives and live performance events.

Ostrom's defence of the idea covers a lot of bases: he acknowledges that the funds will mitigate the visual blight of billboards on our city's urban environment, but then goes much further. "This is a chance for Toronto's reputation to pretty much explode on the world stage," he says. "We're not known for being passionate about the aesthetics of the city. It's changing a little bit now, but we're still thought of as a fairly ugly city. And the economic spinoff effects are really amazing, too: for every one dollar spent in the regional economy on art, eight more are generated."

It's sound reasoning from a reasonable guy, and City Hall is paying attention; the proposal nearly made it to an Executive Council meeting in June, but it was put off due to legal concerns about the strength of the bylaw's wording. It will likely re-emerge later in the year, but the setback was a blow to the BCBF team, who had organized a strong lineup of speakers for the meeting. But Ostrom remains confident that, in the end, the proposal will pass: "There are enough councillors and enough people that do see that strong connection between what billboards do and what art does."

For proof of what urban art does, and instructions on how to do it, Ostrom and his projects are as good a blueprint as you could find — in Toronto, or anywhere else for that matter. "My practice is kind of all over the place," he says. "I like to work generally in art in the public sphere, but I like to do gallery shows as well. I like to blur the lines between the two." ↑



Ryan Chong, Information Technology Management '08 and **Humphrey Ho**, Management of Technology and Innovation (MBA) '08 These two young entrepreneurs in their early twenties know the value and potential of online social networking. Founded in September 2008, their business SpeechBabble has already secured \$500,000 in investment capital, including funding from the Ryerson Angel Network, and is well on its way to becoming a major online player. The company, which employs a staff of 12, is working towards becoming revenue-positive in its first year. "The biggest challenge we have is housing all the staff as we double every three months," says CEO Ryan.

Dale Lynch, PEng, Civil Engineering '02 Leading free basketball programs on Saturday mornings at Toronto high schools is Dale's way of connecting with Toronto's youth and giving back to his community. "We foster a positive environment, introduce some new expectations and allow healthy competition," says Dale, an associate with Mark Engineering and co-founder and CEO of Ellipse Wireless Solutions. The 29-year-old has also organized games at Ryerson after which players talk to educators and mentors about career aspirations. "My dream is to get them to dream."

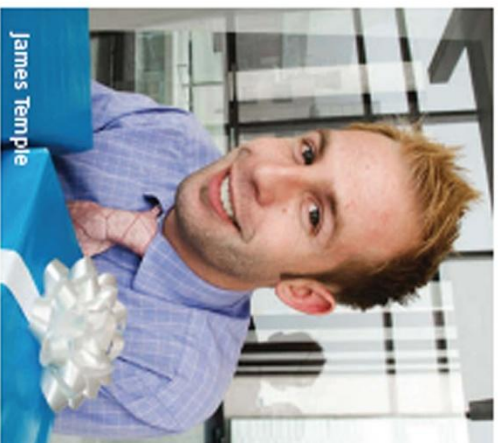
Devon Ostrom, Human Resources Management and Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Management Certificates '04 Devon has been an art organizer since he was 14. The son of an artist and an engineer, Devon, now 29, brings organizations together to produce extraordinary results. He has curated countless shows and installations, including a mural project at the Kingston Penitentiary, Streetscape programming for Luminato 2008, and exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum. Ryerson's Arts and Contemporary Studies program developed his critical capacity and ability to articulate his ideas – launching him into an MA in curating in the U.K. "I've always had a lot of ideas," he says. "My Ryerson education gave me the technical and managerial expertise to pull them off."

Stephanie Asare, Social Work '01 Stephanie signs her emails with an African proverb: "In times of darkness, one must stop searching for the light, and become the flame for others to follow." It's a saying that she lives by: after earning a master of social work degree from the University of Toronto, Stephanie worked for the Stephen Lewis Foundation and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in New York. She also founded Social Workers Beyond Borders, an organization that enables social work students and professionals to volunteer in developing countries. This spring, SW'08 will send students, including students from Ryerson, to Ghana for a three-month placement. Visit www.socialworkersbeyondborders.com.

Matthew Rodrigues, Biomedical Physics (MSc) '08, only 26, helps train medical first responders to properly handle radiological or nuclear emergencies. Working at International Safety Research in Ottawa, he develops emergency response plans and procedures for such clients as the Department of National Defence. "We're preparing our clients and health-care providers to take the right steps so that society is protected in the event of an accident," he says. ISR provides services worldwide in nuclear safety, biomedical physics radiation protection, counter-terrorism and emergency preparedness and response.



Devon Ostrom



James Temple



Dale Lynch

Freedom on the inside



Inmate in front of Mural at Kingston Penn

Tuesday, November 16, 2004

Written by [Matt Semansky](#), EyeOpener

Stereotypically, artists are seen as lonely, misunderstood geniuses who go mad; social recluses who reflect society while condemned to its margins. From van Gogh to Picasso, the stories of creative brilliance coupled with fragile egos are all too familiar.

And then there's Devon Ostrom.

Ostrom doesn't rail against the world—he investigates and invests in it. At 25, he is already a veteran of Ontario's arts community, having spearheaded and contributed to numerous projects, including exhibits for the World Electronic Music Festival and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

He is the curator at THEM, an organization that provides resources for Canadian artists. Ostrom has also received certificates in non-profit management and human resources management from Ryerson, where he is currently in his first year of the Art and Contemporary Studies program.

It's a resume that could intimidate people twice his age, but Ostrom is bluntly modest.

"I don't even consider myself an artist most of the time," Ostrom says.

Those who've seen Ostrom's work may call this statement into question, but the lanky Ottawa native can at least lay claim to being an innovative project co-ordinator.

Perhaps the most impressive example is the striking mural that Ostrom and five other artists designed and painted at the maximum security unit at Kingston Penitentiary.

Not only did he contribute creatively, but he also oversaw the financing of the project and worked for more than a year with staff and inmates, incorporating their input into the final painting, which was completed in the spring of 2003.

"Working with the inmates was fairly troubling at first because of some of my obvious perceptions, but in time you start to understand the tragedy in some of these people's lives."

Ostrom was drawn to the Penitentiary project out of a desire to test the ability of art to inspire social and psychological change. Indeed, the gymnasium mural already seems to have made a difference in the lives of the inmates. Jean Folsom, a clinical psychologist at the Penitentiary, collaborated with Ostrom on the initiative and says the results speak for themselves.

"The inmates have greatly benefited from having the dull, drab walls of the gym turned into a beautiful mural. Some inmates were reluctant to send pictures home before, because the background looked so much like a prison. Now they have a nice background to use," says Folsom. She credits Ostrom for both his organizational skills and his insistence on letting inmates contribute to the project.

Ironically, Ostrom says the finished mural doesn't appeal to him on an aesthetic level. "I personally didn't find the final product to be something that I'd want in my house. But for the audience we were doing it for, it's exactly what they wanted. My sense of artistic aesthetic probably wouldn't turn them on at all," he says.

All of which goes back to Ostrom's team-player personality. Although he still finds time for his own art, he doesn't intend to pursue a career as a professional artist. Instead, he will continue to add to his education and his experience as an arts coordinator.

"Coordinating is something I find satisfaction and a sense of purpose in," he says.

The staff and inmates at Kingston's prison are thankful for his sense of purpose, and they clearly won't be the last to benefit from Ostrom's belief in the healing value of art.