

# Public pianos prompt unity

Whimsical idea encourages a 'tickle of ivories'

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Katie Bogle plays a piano Saturday that was placed downtown as part of a collaboration among Bohemian Foundation, the Downtown Development Authority's Art in Action Program and the city of Fort Collins' Art in Public Places Program. / Derek Broussard/The Coloradoan



Written by

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Live music erupts spontaneously before small crowds at such places as the Old Town Ice Rink or Foothills Mall through the keys of several vibrantly colored, upright pianos across Fort Collins.

"Play Me!" says the instrument that began the Pianos About Town program, encouraging anyone walking by to take a break and tickle some ivories.

The artwork adorning the pianos illustrates the whimsy they're meant to inspire. Terry McNerney, who painted the first one with the exclamation in the same Old English-style

font as its logo, also included Beethoven, Horsetooth Rock and John Lennon among the features.

"It was fun, just a free for all," McNerney said.

But it's not meant to last. After spending many days in the outdoor elements, the pianos are re-painted with new artwork.

The program began last year as a collaboration among Bohemian Foundation, the Downtown Development Authority and the City of Fort Collins. About 10 of the pianos, some freshly coated and others nearing their recycling, were on display Saturday at the foundation's Mitchell Block Building at Mountain Avenue and Walnut Street.

And people are getting into it.

Cheryl Zimlich, board member with the foundation, said a piano placed at the Lory Student Center plaza on the Colorado State University campus has proven popular.

"Kids stand in line to play it," she said.

All the pianos are designed by local artists, and even the painting process is exposed to passersby. During the summer, pianos are painted in Old Town Square, and people can stop and ask the artists questions. Sometimes a person will be playing on one side while the artist paints the other, Zimlich said.

Through winter, the pianos are painted in the Mitchell Block Building but are situated so people can see the artists through the windows.

"If you tap on the glass, I'll come outside and talk," said Stan Scott, as he worked on painting a depiction of the piano's inner guts on its outer wooden box.

The design is intended to "make it fun" and "be true to what it is," he said.

Other pianos have been covered with beetles, bicycles, mountains and even beer-brewing hops.

Zimlich said the pianos, placed for lengths of time in public places, have been victim to "very, very little vandalism."

A local tuner ensures that the notes come out correctly, and local businesses "adopt" the pianos, covering them when it rains or snows, she said.

"Businesses have really embraced it," she said.

The pianos join the city's electrical boxes, covered with paintings such as honeycombs, as an element of color in unexpected places across Fort Collins.