

Designing a Future

TV journalist turned public arts consultant and activist Robyne Robinson discusses how design can pave the way forward for everyone—and how she’s not missing any chance to play her part.

BY SHAWN GILLIAM



▲ Robyne Robinson’s current projects include work with Minneapolis’s Phelps Park and collaborating with the Dakota Community Council on revitalizing Fort Snelling.

During the planning stages of a mural at 38th and Chicago in Minneapolis nearly three years ago, Robyne Robinson and community leaders walked up and down the street. They sought to know what residents and business owners wanted from the mural before landing on its artist, Reggie LeFlore, and the subject for the painting, the women who helped shape the neighborhood. That kind of “legacy-building design,” as Robinson calls it, represents a key professional focus for her public arts consultancy, fiveXfive—and a personal passion.

Q: Describe why legacy-building design is so important to you.

A: It’s important to have designs that people can say they were a part of and that they helped to create—where they have a sense of ownership. And when they go down the street with their kids or their kids’ kids someday, they can say, “I helped make that. This is who we are. This is our community.”

Q: And now you’re taking the same approach a block down the street.

A: Yes. Phelps Park is the project that’s really feeding me right now. It’s the park closest to 38th and Chicago that became a part of the community movement following George Floyd’s death, and I’m working with Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the Minnesota Timberwolves, Bill Costello of Streeter Homes, and others on basketball courts and a community mural project that should unveil by the fall of this year. We’re working closely with the community on how the murals should represent them.

Q: It sounds like listening factors significantly into your work.

A: I’m a big believer that in any development project, from start to finish, there needs to be a community voice and there needs to be an arts voice. Not at the very end, not 70 percent in. They’ve got to be there from start to finish. It takes all of those voices around the table. So there’s a lot of listening going on.

Interview



▲ Robinson has collaborated with artists Reggie LeFlore (his State Theatre mural, above) and Stacia Goodman (one of her MSP Airport mosaic installations, left). Robinson's personal pursuits include urban photography (top left) and jewelry (right), sold at Textile Center and the Walker Art Center.

Q: Did inclusive architecture and design come, in part, from your time as art director at the MSP Airport?

A: Coming from a place that doesn't have that structured background in architecture really allows me to think outside the box. And I found that at the airport I was attracted to working with the architects. I loved what they were doing in terms of changing space to be for the people, for the public. Those democratic ideas really stuck with me.

Q: How did working with the Twin Cities chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) at that time factor into your perspective?

A: NOMA helped expand my understanding of how important minority voices are in the design world—knowing that less than 4 percent of the country's architects are African American and less than 3 percent of the country's influential designers are people of color. How do you get a foot in the door of talking about our community's needs if you're not allowed to design for the community's needs?

Q: You now divide your time and energy between the Twin Cities, the San Diego area, and Santa Fe.

Will you continue to work on projects here?

A: I'm never going away. I just need blue skies and 80-degree weather and mountains in the winter.

Q: Besides your projects, what do you make sure to hit up for inspiration when you're back in town?

A: I can spend an hour in Hunt and Gather and love Indigo for African antiques. I also make sure to visit shows at Soo Visual Arts and the M [Minnesota Museum of American Art], both organizations whose boards I've served on. And I'm a big fan of finding places to hold court and have business lunches. Barbette is my headquarters, because I can count on seeing artists and creatives I know.

Q: And you'll make sure many of these creatives play a role in our cities' future.

A: What was good about the years at Channel 9 was that you learn to never lose a source or a contact. And the redesign of Minnesota is going to be reflected in these artists and in this community that really believes in itself and doesn't look to anybody else for answers. I want to be a part of what's happening, and I want them to be a part of it, too. ■