



Downtown Jamaica gets splash of color

A parking lot may not seem like the place to use as a work of art, but for graphic designer Niko Courtelis the dark, confined space provides him with a larger canvas to show off his ideas.

Over the summer, Courtelis helped beautify the Jamaica First Parking garage in downtown Jamaica with a 12-foot-by-250-foot color mural featuring a one-of-a-kind look at the five boroughs. The painting, dubbed “NYCamo,” has the outlines of the city’s neighborhoods blended together in a camouflaged pattern across the northern wall of the ground floor of the lot at 162nd and 163rd Streets and Jamaica and 89th avenues.

“The colors show people that it is some sort of map, but the [arrangement] doesn’t make it feel like one of New York,” said Courtelis, who works as a professor at the Pratt Institute in addition to his free-lance graphic design projects.

Courtelis said he was intrigued when the Greater Jamaica Development Corp. put out a request for artists for the beautification project in April because of its scope and location. The graphic designer said he has never had such a large space to do artistic work and the dynamic of the neighborhood gave him plenty of ideas to play around with.

“I like the idea of doing public art, so there was a great opportunity to do some problem-solving with the [garage] wall,” he said.

The graphic designer chose the colors for the mural by associating the colors of each borough with those used by businesses and nonprofits that call downtown Jamaica home.

The yellow used to represent Queens is the color of Jamaica First Parking’s logo, while the dark green for the Bronx is used to represent Greater Jamaica. Manhattan’s light green colors, Brooklyn’s dark blue and Staten Island’s light blue represent the colors of the nonprofit Jamaica Alliance.

“The canvas is tall, so I have a lot to work with,” Courtelis said.

Andrew Manshel, the executive vice president of Greater Jamaica, said administrators were impressed with Courtelis’ pitch because it represented exactly what their beautification project was all about. For years, the nonprofit, urban development organization has been working to provide visitors with positive, colorful art pieces as they explore the shops and venues in the area.



Niko Courtelis, the graphic designer who created the mural at the Jamaica First Parking Garage, poses next to his work. Photo by Ivan Pereira

Manshel said the Jamaica First Parking garage is frequently used by workers and shoppers.

“Whatever we can do to bring synergy between the artists and downtown Jamaica, we try to do it,” the vice president said.

In addition to holding 700 cars, the lot also serves an additional function for pedestrians, according to Manshel. Every day people use the parking lot’s walkway to cut across 162nd and 163rd streets. When Courtelis and his dozen volunteers were painting the mural over a nine-day period last month, people stopped to take notice.

“Everybody from kids to seniors were coming by here and intrigued right away,” he said.

In a couple of months, new lighting will be added to enhance the mural during all hours of the day, according to Manshel. Courtelis said he is proud his work is getting a lot of attention because he put a lot of time and effort into the beautification.

“Getting off the computer and using my hands for once was a really great experience for me,” he said.