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Cabs' Flower Power Heads to the Big Easy From the Big Apple

By JENNIFER 8. LEE



A fleet of flower-appliquéd New York City taxis. (Photo: Annie Tritt for The New York Times)

As of this week, the city's flower taxi art project is officially over. The colorful decals were supposed to be removed from yellow cabs by the new year, though word is that there are some die-hard holdouts.

But left over: thousands of flower decals that never made it onto the cabs in the first place, in part because of the hurdles in persuading the owners and operators of the cabs to have them. The taxi strike — were there two? — was a bit inconvenient, too. Of the 27,000 panels that were painted by children, enough to cover the city's 13,000 taxis, just over half of them are unused since the project began in mid-September.

Of course, there has been no shortage of interest in the eye-catching floral panels. The organizers have been approached by car shows, city employees, foreign tourists, residents — all wanting one of the decals. Some wanted them for their cars. Others want to frame them for their walls.

But selling them to private individuals or groups proved to be a tricky proposition, because the art was made by children as part of a nonprofit project, Garden in Transit, which was under Portraits of Hope.

“It puts us in a difficult position because we don’t know who those people are,” said Ed Massey, who founded Portraits of Hope with his brother, Bernie. “Are they going to end up going on eBay?”

In keeping in line with the mission of the group, it was determined that the panels should only go to nonprofit, civic or public uses.

Drum roll for the main destination of choice: New Orleans.

“It was unanimous that here in this country, more than any other place, the victims of Hurricane Katrina could use beautification,” Ed Massey said.

About half of the panels are heading to New Orleans — to decorate temporary schools, transitional housing, and reconstruction sites in the storm-ravaged city. A nonprofit group will handle distribution. There will be no cost or time limit to the New Orleans groups and organization that want the flower decals. They simply have to agree to take a picture of the flowers after they are up.

Other panels will be sent to California, the Southwest and various parts of the country. Some are heading for international destinations — China, South Korea, Mexico and Cuba.

Some flowers will be still hanging around New York City, but the bulk of the panels will be leaving. “New York has had its opportunity to see the wonderful cheerful panels, let’s have other cities and town also enjoy them,” Mr. Massey said.

In explaining to the schoolchildren why their paintings would only be on display temporarily (as opposed to their artwork on the fridge that had been up for years), the comparison was often made to a blooming flower: It was only beautiful for a short period of time before it faded away.

The same was true for the flowers on the taxi. But the beauty stayed in memory.

Mr. Massey said, “If you want to see the city look different, you must see it at this point in your life, because it won’t happen again.”

In a way, it was like the February 2005 Gates at Central Park installation, which also was ephemeral.

In recent days, the Taxi and Limousine Commission issued a semithreatening notice regarding the decals, saying its “Safety and Emissions division will be checking vehicles to ensure that the decals are removed at the time of each vehicle’s regularly scheduled inspection.”

Ed Massey said that some cabdrivers have resisted removing the decals — including one cab that he saw from his window while in the room with this City Room reporter. “There have been some holdouts; they want to be the last one,” he said.

The drivers say they love it, their children love it, their neighbors love it.

A common explanation to the project organizers that has been heard: “Until I am asked to take it out, I will take it off.”

When the Taxi and Limousine Commission’s commissioner, Matthew W. Daus, was asked last month at a taxi-of-the-future press conference if the drivers would be fined for maintaining their decals, he quickly said, “No.”

Then he added, “We’re a kinder, gentler T.L.C.”