



Poet in Place 2024-2025

In 2022, the City of Hamilton's Tourism and Culture Division was directed by Council to pilot a Poet Laureate program to raise the profile of literary arts and engage in placemaking initiatives to achieve meaningful community interactions. Lishai Peel was named as the City of Hamilton's inaugural Poet in Place serving a two-year term from 2024-2025.

The position holds four key objectives:

- Serve as a literary ambassador for the City of Hamilton for audiences both within and outside of the City;
- Advocate for poetry and literary arts within the City;
- Raise the profile of writers in Hamilton; and
- Create an artistic legacy through public readings and civic interactions.

Lishai Peel

Lishai Peel applied for the position and achieved the highest score during the adjudication process with her work receiving high praise from the adjudicators. In particular, the adjudication team recognized her poetic voice, impactful performance ability, and her experience in creative project management. They also noted the high level of community engagement demonstrated in Lishai's application and the potential to build connections between the general public and the poetic arts through the power of words.

Read more about Lishai at
www.hamilton.ca/PoetinPlace

The City as Story

“My approach to the Poet in Place role was guided by a core belief that a city is not only a physical environment, but a living text shaped by memory, imagination, and shared experience.

I understand public art, and public poetry, as a form of civic storytelling. When language appears on a wall, a banner, or along a pathway, it alters how people move through space. You do not simply walk the city; you read it. Public art invites a different mode of attention, one in which streets, buildings, and parks are experienced not only as infrastructure, but as carriers of meaning.

This framework informed my work throughout the term. Whether performing at City Hall, collaborating with libraries, or installing poetry in public space, I approached each project as an invitation: to pause, to notice, and to see the city anew. In this way, the Poet in Place role functioned not only as an artistic position, but as a bridge between public art, civic space, and everyday experience.

The Poet in Place program contributed to increased visibility for poetry in public space, deeper connections between literary arts and civic life, and a viable model for integrating writers into municipal placemaking efforts.

Long-duration installations, filmed performances, and digital documentation ensure that the work completed during this term will remain accessible beyond the pilot period. More broadly, the program demonstrated how modest municipal investment can yield sustained cultural impact and reinforce Hamilton’s reputation as a city that values artists and creative expression.

Over the course of this pilot term, I came to understand poetry in public space as a practice of civic storytelling; an ongoing dialogue between residents and the places they inhabit. The Poet in Place program affirmed that Hamilton is a city willing to let its walls speak, its streets carry meaning, and its public spaces reflect the care, imagination, and diversity of those who call this city home.”

- Lishai Peel, Inaugural Poet in Place
for the City of Hamilton, 20242-025

Poet in Place at the Hamilton Public Library

In her role as Poet in Place, Lishai worked with the Hamilton Public Library to perform original poems and offer workshops to the public.

Hamilton Reads Launch Events

In 2024 and 2025, Lishai was invited to emcee and perform original works of poetry at the annual Hamilton Reads launch event. Dubbed “An Evening for Book Lovers”, the launch event announces a book by a local author that will be featured as the Hamilton Reads book of the year.



Hamilton Reads Launch event (L-R) on May 2, 2024 and March 20, 2025



HPL Writing Workshops: Poetry and Place

In partnership with HPL staff, Lishai developed and lead 2 free workshops focused on poetry and place. Registration for both workshops reached capacity (30 spaces for each workshop) with a wait list.



Workshops (L-R) April 14, 2025 at Red Hill Branch and April 17, 2025 at Central Branch

Placemaking Projects

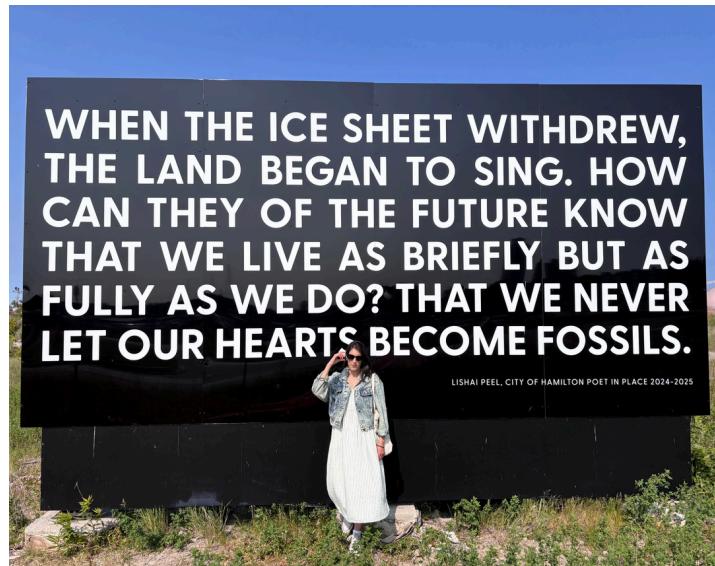
These projects enhance public spaces and increase the visibility of the poetic arts in the city.

“Bones” at Pier 8

Inspired by Hamilton’s waterfront, Lishai Peel composed “Bones” a new, original poem that is installed as temporary artwork at Pier 8. The artwork was installed in July 2025 and will be on display for approximately 1 year.

The artwork can be viewed in 3 ways:

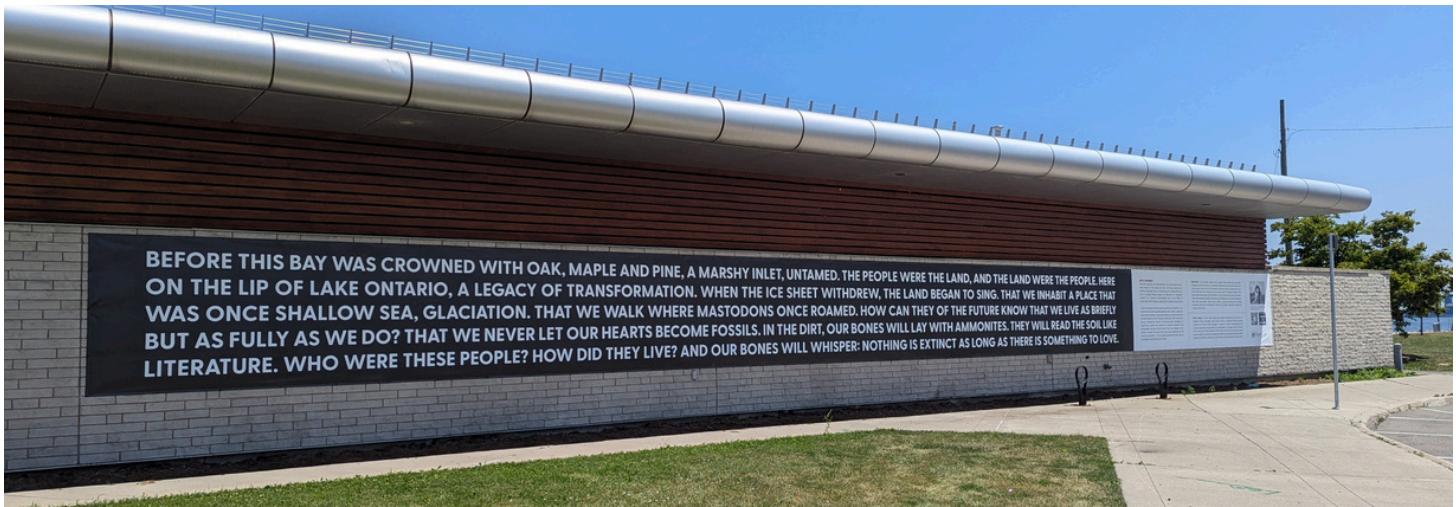
- An abridged version of the poem has been installed on a billboard located at Discovery Drive and Haida Ave,
- The poem is displayed in its entirety on the front of the former Discovery Centre building, 77 Harbourside Way,
- A performance of “Bones” was recorded and a video is available on the City of Hamilton’s YouTube channel ([link](#)). It can be viewed via the Poet in Place website and a QR code displayed at Pier 8.



Lishai Peel in front of billboard installation

Bones by Lishai Peel

BEFORE THIS BAY WAS CROWNED WITH OAK, MAPLE AND PINE, A MARSHY INLET, UNTAMED. THE PEOPLE WERE THE LAND, AND THE LAND WERE THE PEOPLE. HERE ON THE LIP OF LAKE ONTARIO, A LEGACY OF TRANSFORMATION. WHEN THE ICE SHEET WITHDREW, THE LAND BEGAN TO SING. THAT WE INHABIT A PLACE THAT WAS ONCE SHALLOW SEA, GLACIATION. THAT WE WALK WHERE MASTODONS ONCE ROAMED. HOW CAN THEY OF THE FUTURE KNOW THAT WE LIVE AS BRIEFLY BUT AS FULLY AS WE DO? THAT WE NEVER LET OUR HEARTS BECOME FOSSILS. IN THE DIRT, OUR BONES WILL LAY WITH AMMONITES. THEY WILL READ THE SOIL LIKE LITERATURE. WHO WERE THESE PEOPLE? HOW DID THEY LIVE? AND OUR BONES WILL WHISPER: NOTHING IS EXTINCT AS LONG AS THERE IS SOMETHING TO LOVE.



The poem “Bones” installed on the front of the Discovery Centre



They will read the soil like literature.

Screenshot from the video for “Bones”. In the video, the poem is performed by Lishai Peel accompanied by local musical duo Malfiore. The video was created by Bawaadan Collective and features imagery captured along the water’s edge.

Artist Statement about “Bones”

“The piece explores our relationship to time and the way the topography of the land has changed over millions of years and will continue to change long after we’re gone. It reflects on the deep history of the place we now call home, tracing the shifting landscape from an ancient sea to a glaciated land. Over time, this place became a pristine fishery known as Macassa, or “beautiful waters,” before transforming into a heavily industrialized bay. In the 1980s, a reclamation effort began, shaping the shoreline we see today.

I tried to imagine what this land would have looked like in its wildest forms: submerged beneath ancient waters, walked by mammoths, and later sustaining Indigenous communities who thrived along its shores. The poem reminds us that we walk on ground shaped by cycles of transformation, both natural and human-made. It meditates on how fleeting yet profound human life is in the context of vast geological time.

We inhabit a world that carries the memory of ancient creatures and landscapes, but also of the hands that have shaped it, for better or worse. The piece asks how future generations will perceive us and how they will read the traces we leave behind in the soil. In the end, it suggests that while our physical forms may decay, love—our capacity for connection and care—is the enduring force that transcends extinction.”

“Poetry Corner” at James St N & Wilson St

The North-East corner of James St N and Wilson St in downtown Hamilton is the inspiration for a temporary installation by Lishai Peel featuring a “little poetry library” and new banners on the flag poles. A new poem called “Claim Me” was written for the installation and has been printed on to the banners and provided as a postcard and zine for anyone to pick up from the poetry library. Completed in mid-August 2025, the installation will be on display for approximately 1 year.

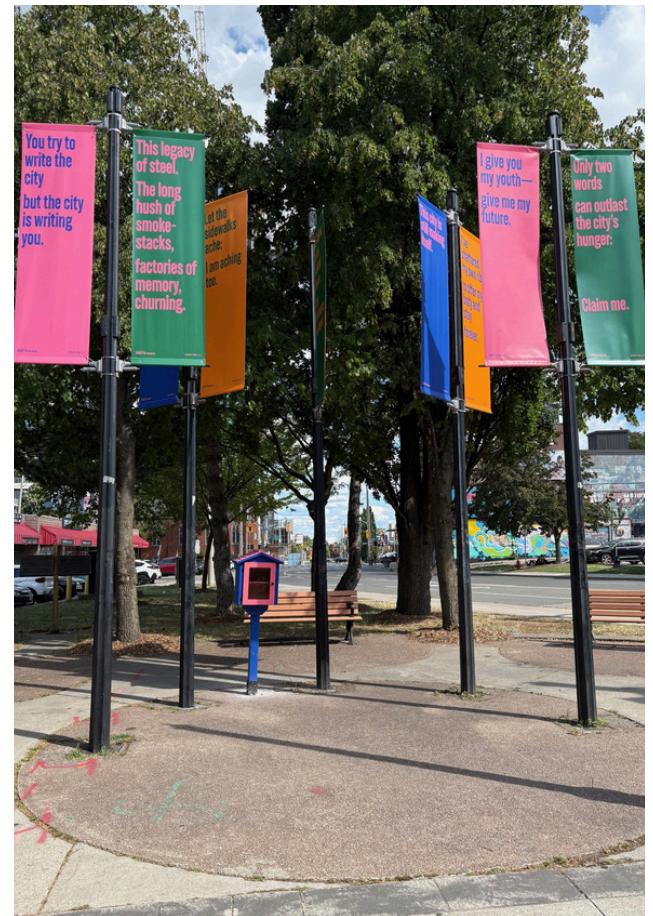
Artist Statement about “Poetry Corner”

“Poetry Corner reimagines an underused downtown intersection through a neighbourhood-scale literary installation.. The project emphasizes poetry as an everyday civic encounter and demonstrates how small-scale interventions can activate overlooked spaces while fostering a sense of belonging.”



“Claim Me” by Lishai Peel

You try to write the city but the city is writing you.
This legacy of steel.
The long hush of smokestacks, factories of
memory, churning.
At the edges of lost things, such white heat of
want.
Let the sidewalks ache;
I am aching too.
The insatiable sumac and jeweled brick buildings
— murals and decay and the crush of half-lived
lives.
On James, in the slanted hours this ordinance of
prayer.
This city is still making itself.
I've shattered my own rib to offer my body and
stay forever.
I give you my youth — give me my future.
Only two words can outlast the city's hunger:
Claim me.



Poetry Corner installed August 2025

Poet in Place Performances & Workshops

- Hamilton City Council (performance) - April 24, 2024
- Newcomer Day at City Hall (performance) - May 24, 2024
- Hamilton Arts Awards (performance) - June 5, 2024
- SuperCrawl in collaboration with Hamilton band, Malfiore (performance) - September 14, 2024
- Hamilton Literary Awards (performance) - December 12, 2024
- Hamilton Arts Awards (performance) - June 12, 2025
- Supercrawl (workshop) - September 13-14, 2025



City of Hamilton Arts Awards, June 2024



Pitch Blender, July 2024

While these performances were not included in the Poet in Place contract, the invitations to participate in these events came directly as a result of serving as the Hamilton Poet in Place.

- Write Like: A Literary Comic-Con (HPL and Hamilton Verse) - March 23, 2024
- The Great Hamilton Poetry Show - May 22, 2024
- gritLIT Hamilton Writes - April 19, 2024
- Hamilton Canada Day at Bayfront Park - July 1, 2024
- Pitch Blender at the Pier - July 21, 2024
- King William "Wood Gate" Inauguration - August 28, 2024
- LitLive - September 2024 Poet Laureate Stage Takeover - Word on the Street Festival - September 28, 2024 (Toronto)
- Interview for Howl895fm - December, 2024
- gritLIT Festival Season Launch - February 2025
- Telling Tales Festival - October 2025

Media Mentions

- [Municipal World](#)
- [The Hammer](#)
- [CBC](#)
- [Hamilton City Magazine](#)
- [The Hamilton Spectator](#)

“

Poetry, when taken off the page and placed in public spaces, can be an act of civic engagement. That's exactly what we're planning to do this spring at The Discovery Centre at Pier 8 — take poetry out of the confines of academia, literary festivals and coffee shop open mics, and bring it into public spaces where everyone can engage with it.

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Excerpt from The Hamilton Spectator,
Opinion article by Lishai Peel, March 1, 2025



“

My job [as Poet in Place] is to reflect the city back to itself... We have a legacy of steelmaking. We have a working-class legacy. We have a legacy of immigration. But the storytellers, the writers, the poets, the artists: their job is to really hone into those different divergent legacies and tell stories about them. That's how we understand ourselves.”

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Excerpt from Municipal World Magazine
September 2025 issue with Lishai Peel

Testimonials

“

Through thoughtfully researched, community- centered programs like Poet in Place, we’re investing in our shared stories, our own voices, and our own future.

”

Programs like Poet in Place are vital to Hamilton’s cultural landscape. While it might cost each resident a few cents annually, these grassroots initiatives create lasting connections between artists and communities that define our unique cultural identity.

As Canadian artists, we can’t afford to let our voices be drowned out by the cultural behemoth to the south. We’ve seen how arts austerity hollows out communities - but here in Hamilton, we’re choosing a different path.

Through thoughtfully researched, community- centered programs like Poet in Place, we’re investing in our shared stories, our own voices, and our own future. This isn’t just about supporting individual artists - it’s about nurturing the vibrant cultural ecosystem that makes Hamilton distinctly Hamilton.

- Jaclyn Desforges, 2023/24 Mabel Pugh Taylor Writer in Residence and Membership Committee Chair of the League of Canadian Poets

I have spent the last two years touring across Canada with my book and consistently, from coast to coast, people know Hamilton has an amazing arts scene. It’s something special, something everyone wants to be part of or replicate. But it hasn’t happened by magic. It has taken continued investment from the City in things like grants and awards for artists and arts organizations.

Unique initiatives like Poet in Place, a position that celebrates local talent and gives meaningful, visible platforms for the arts, is vital in keeping our reputation as an arts hub alive.

In the big picture of the municipal budget, it’s a small dollar amount with a significant cultural impact, giving us yet another reason to be proud to call Hamilton home.

- Anuja Verghese, author of Chrysalis and winner of the 2023 Governor General’s Award for Fiction