

THE MUST LIST

Discovery Green's New Tunnel Is Actually an Interactive Light Show

The sci-fi structure is on display until October 6 and lets you play with over 10,000 LED lights.

By [Meredith Nudo](#) • September 17, 2024



The TUNNEL allows visitors to come up and play with over 10,000 LED lights arranged into 75 different pre-programmed sequences.

IMAGE: NICKI EVANS

Houstonia's *The Must List* tells you about something going on in Houston that you absolutely cannot miss.

DISCOVERY GREEN HAS A TUNNEL NOW. It's not connected to the rest of downtown's [underground tunnel system](#). It's not even underground, for that matter. At 12 feet tall and 105 feet wide, *The TUNNEL*, created by Canadian artist collective Big Art and produced by Creos, kicks off [Discovery Green](#)'s fall programming with an otherworldly tribute to liminal spaces. Until October 6, visitors can walk through the dazzling lights and colors on the Sarofim Picnic Lawn, near the playground and dog runs.

"I'm infatuated with gates, portals, tunnels, doors, anything that kind of represents some journey, some transformation, especially if you don't know what's on the other side," says Big Art's Paul Magnuson, the Calgary-based creator of *The TUNNEL*. "That's always my favorite."

The [installation](#) interlinks 12 different frames, set six feet apart from one another. Originally, this was meant to encourage social distancing so visitors could still interact with the artwork despite COVID-19 restrictions.

"When we were making *The TUNNEL*, it originally had one shape and one style. Then we were going through COVID, so we amended the style to fit a cohort of four [people] wide, two adults, two children," Magnuson says. "Each of the frames would have a sensor, so if someone was in the frame, it would turn red. Then it would open and turn green. The point was to move through it as a collective. We're all getting through COVID, and then the other side of the tunnel will be something much better."

As social distancing requirements loosened and public spaces began reopening, Magnuson and his team rethought their approach. The framework stayed, but the red and green lights were replaced with over 150 LED bars (and over 10,000 individual LEDs) that cycle through 75 different programmed "scenes," as Magnuson calls them. Every 16 seconds, the lights switch out to represent [Pride rainbows](#), strobes, swirls, and more.

That is, unless someone decides to press some buttons on a console located just outside one of *The TUNNEL*'s entrances. Every push changes the scene, regardless of how many seconds have ticked by. A particularly hyperactive child or *Houstonia* editor could rapidly cycle through all 75 [light programs](#) to bypass the 16-second rule.

"Once we got through COVID and we could touch things again, we added our control surface," Magnuson says. "Walking up to the giant sculpture, seeing buttons and being able to touch the buttons and the entire structure reacts. Those are what we call 'shock and awe moments.'"



Paul Magnuson shows off the console while presenting *The TUNNEL* at Discovery Green.

He cites Burning Man as an inspiration for working on interactive art at such a massive scale. While Magnuson himself has yet to design anything for show at the 38-year-old festival, he always marvels at the size and scope of the art pieces on display. The sheer scale of the works helped inspire *The TUNNEL*, as well as other Big Art collaborations. Many of the creators he encounters at "[the playa](#)" work as engineers who enjoy tackling creative projects outside the office.

"The problems you need to solve for a piece of art that complicated in the desert are challenges that people at Boeing would have," Magnuson explains.

A similar ethos is at work with *The TUNNEL*, and Big Art as a collective, as both require an interdisciplinary approach to crafting large-scale pieces. A coder is called if the Arduino or Raspberry Pi control systems need troubleshooting. A lighting expert is called to ensure the LEDs can withstand the varying climates at display sites. A structural engineer is called when the installation needs to be brought up to code before it can go on display. And so on.

"We're this place where we can take professionals who are an expert in their field, bring them into a project that we've imagined, or create a vision, and then give them problems to solve throughout the process," Magnuson says. "That's how we work."

As such, *The TUNNEL*'s overarching themes of teamwork are just as present behind the scenes as they are at the sci-fi structure itself. The piece doesn't function as intended without the human element coming together to craft something greater than any individual could do alone.