

The Right to Play: Snakes and Ladders. A case study

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Abstract

This case study will present learnings from the public art project Snakes and Ladders, a 50-metre ground plane mural in Sydney Olympic Park, in Sydney's western suburbs. This was a collaboration between Digby Webster, an artist with Down syndrome, and Nadia Odlum, an artist without disability who specialises in playful, large-scale public art. Snakes and Ladders was commissioned by the Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA) as a result of a community consultation and co-design process, and was supported by Accessible Arts, the peak body for advancing the rights of New South Wales artists who have disability and/or who are d/Deaf. The result was a public artwork that functions as an inclusive playspace, supporting the right to play for all people who visit or live in Sydney Olympic Park.

The key achievements of this project were the meaningful inclusion of an artist with disability in a significant public art project, and the creation of an accessible and inclusive opportunity for play in public space. This case study focuses on process, including the community consultation and co-design process that led to the commission; the role of peak body Accessible Arts in facilitating and guiding the commission; the methods used to ensure accessibility in the artwork design; and the collaborative process between Digby and Nadia, including the steps taken to support Digby's access requirements and ensure his full participation in the commission from concept to delivery.

Keywords: public art, play, collaboration, inclusion, accessibility

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Introduction

In March 2021, a 50-metre ground plane mural was installed in Station Square in Sydney Olympic Park, in Sydney's western suburbs. Taking the form of a giant snakes and ladders board, the artwork turned this public space into a site of interactive play for locals and visitors.

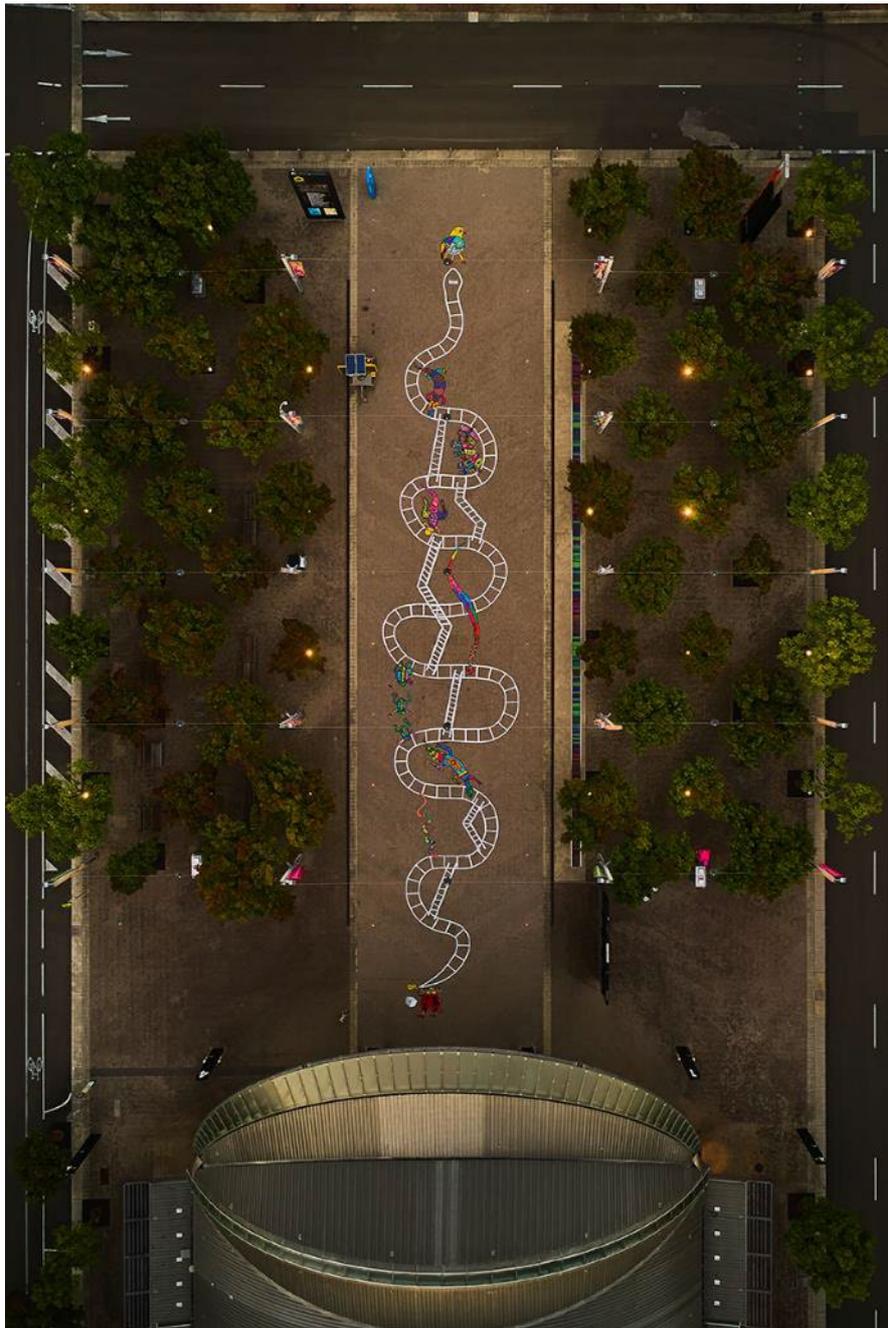


Figure 1. *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Synthetic polymer paint on pavement, 5,000 x 800 cm, Station Square, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia. Commissioned by the Sydney Olympic Park Authority. Image credit: Alex Kess
Alt text: An aerial view of a mural painted on the ground. The mural is a giant snakes and ladders board.

The project was a collaboration between Digby Webster, an artist with Down syndrome whose style is characterised by exuberant colour, and Nadia Odlum, an artist without disability who specialises in playful public art. It was commissioned by the Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA), as a result of a community consultation and co-design process, and was supported by Accessible Arts, the peak body for advancing the rights of New South Wales artists who have disability and/or who are d/Deaf. The result was a public artwork that promotes inclusive play and community connection. This case study will reflect on the process and learnings behind this joyful project.



Figure 2. Artists Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Image credit: Alex Kess.

Alt text: Two artists stand back-to-back, with big smiles on their faces. Behind them is a large mural painted on the ground.

The artwork

The large-scale interactive mural *Snakes and Ladders* draws inspiration from the classic board game of the same name. Painted in white paint on the paved ground, the “game board” is an outline of a snake. The snake’s body is segmented into game spaces, which are linked in places by crooked ladders and brightly coloured animals. The ladders were painted by Nadia Odlum, in bold black, white and grey. Many contain playful three-dimensional illusions. The creatures were designed by Digby, and painted by him, Nadia and a team of helpers. They incorporate Digby’s distinctive style of brightly coloured patterns, with bold black outlines. Describing the artwork, Digby says:

“I’m happy I drew animals based on my own artworks. It’s not like snakes in all; we’ve got lady beetle, frogs, lizards, eels, blue tongue, bird. I really like Nadia’s curving lines. It’s really cool and quirky.” (Webster, 2021b)

The artwork is reflective of the surrounding area of Sydney Olympic Park. Located on the traditional lands of the Wangal people, this Western Sydney suburb contains a unique

mixture of large-scale architecture, most notably in the form of the Olympic stadium, and parks and wetlands rich in biodiversity (Paul, 2020). In the *Snakes and Ladders* artwork, Nadia designed the segmented curves of the snake to echo the stadium and station architecture. Digby painted the native creatures after exploring and being inspired by the nearby wetlands. Digby says: "...I'm listening to the sound of wildlife animals, and water animals. And I thought, 'Let's make these animals from the water and sounds come to life.' It's easy to do. Paint, draw and voila!" (Webster, 2021b).



Figure 3. Details of *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odum.

Image credit: Document Photography.

Alt text: Four photos showing details of the *Snakes and Ladders* artwork. Colourful creatures and white ladders are painted on brown pavers.

Large project signage near the artwork contains instructions on how to play the game, information about the artists and a QR code. By scanning this code visitors can access a custom online “Digby Dice”. Featuring colourful dice drawings by Digby, this interactive digital dice will roll when tapped, allowing for Covid-safe play.¹ The website also contains an audio description of the artwork, read by Digby, and a “making-of” video about the artwork that contains Auslan interpretation.²

Collaboration and co-design

Snakes and Ladders is an example of a collaboration between an artist with disability, a queer female artist without disability, an urban governing body and a peak advisory body. The approach used throughout the project has many of the hallmarks of “community design”, the foundation of which is the belief that “people should have the right to participate directly in shaping and managing the places they live in” (Zamenopoulos, Alexiou, 2018, p. 16). The project emerged from a process of community consultation and co-design, which sought to collaboratively build solutions for improving public space. In the project’s execution, the purposeful engagement of marginalised and disadvantaged groups demonstrates strong principles of inclusivity. The collaborative approach developed by the artists supported equality, equity and access for both parties, enabling an exciting melding of creative expertise.

This artwork was the first collaboration between Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. The two artists were drawn together by the Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA). Established following the 2000 Sydney Olympics, SOPA is the government authority responsible for the management of public spaces within Sydney Olympic Park (SOPA, 2021a). While the park is best known for its sporting facilities, parklands and economic centre, it is becoming increasingly residential, with a population projected to surge by 480 per cent in the next 10 years (Street Furniture Australia, 2020, p. 3). Particularly in the post-Covid context, SOPA recognised the increasing need for quality experiences of public space for locals: “Place activation is now a ‘must-have’ and not just a ‘nice to have’ for a thriving local economy in a post-Covid world.” (Street Furniture Australia, 2020, p. 7)

In 2020, SOPA undertook a period of community consultation and co-design titled Homify, an invented word that expressed a desire to create “a sense of home in our everyday public spaces” (SOPA, 2021b). The process was led by Street Furniture Australia, who deployed a “human-centred methodology” to develop placemaking strategies that would improve the experience of the public realm (Street Furniture Australia, 2020, p. 11). The methodology was supported by a discovery phase that gathered quantitative and qualitative data from those who live, work, play or do business in the park. A key finding of Homify was the need to add “colour, vibrancy and experiences” to the public spaces within the precinct (SOPA, 2021b).

¹ <https://www.sydneyolympicpark.com.au/Snakes-and-Ladders>

² <https://www.sydneyolympicpark.com.au/Things-to-Do/arts-and-culture/snakes-and-ladders-public-art>



Figure 4. *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Synthetic polymer paint on pavement, 5,000 x 800 cm, Station Square, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia.

Image credit: Alex Kess.

Alt text: Aerial view of the artwork *Snakes and Ladders*, and the surrounding suburb of Sydney Olympic Park. The artwork is in a large paved space outside a train station building with an arched roof.

Station Square was identified as a potential site for a public artwork. This large, open, paved space outside the Olympic Park train station provides a movement corridor for the crowds of people who attend sports games in the stadium, or the annual Royal Easter Show. However, at other times the space can feel vast and uninviting, as feedback from residents in the Homify report identified: “I feel ‘small’ when there aren’t crowds of people surrounding me. Designed for large events, but what about going for a stroll?” (Street Furniture Australia, 2020, p. 16)

The decision to seek out an artist with disability for the Station Square public art commission was guided by SOPA’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP). Implemented in 2018, this plan was developed after extensive consultation and engagement with the disability and inclusion sectors. This took the form of multiple meetings and workshops with industry specialists and key stakeholders across the main areas of the park’s business, as well as widely circulated surveys. These activities were overseen by the park’s then Access Advisory Committee, a body comprising members from across the sector with lived experience of disability (SOPA, 2019). The DIAP provided firm guidance for implementing responses to the Homify project, as it outlined a commitment to access and inclusion in all activities undertaken at the park (Nesbitt, 2022).



Figure 5. Artist Digby Webster on the project site.

Alt text: Digby is wearing a white smock covered in colourful paint, crouching amidst colourful dragonflies painted on the ground. He is pretending to fly like a dragonfly.

While SOPA has strong links with disability in the sporting sector, they had less experience working directly with artists with disability, making collaboration with Accessible Arts essential. As a peak body, Accessible Arts works with many organisations (such as SOPA) to help them become more inclusive and accessible in their own practices. Liz Martin, CEO of Accessible Arts explained:

“The arts is one of the most important aspects of our culture and humanity, strengthening our community socially, emotionally and economically. And yet there remains stark under-representation of the one in five Australians with disability, and there are undeniable barriers within the professional sphere. Artists with disability are paid, on average, 42 per cent less than their non-disabled counterparts. Everything we do is about levelling up that professional playing field.” (Martin, 2022)

Accessible Arts recommended Digby Webster to Mantej Singh, the manager of Community Engagement and Social Outcomes at SOPA, who was overseeing the commission. Mantej was already familiar with the work of Nadia Odlum via her public art projects throughout Western Sydney. He identified her as a potential collaborator to work with Digby on delivering the project. Accessible Arts continued to provide advice and access support throughout the project’s delivery.



Figure 6. Detail of *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum.

Image credit: Document Photography

Alt text: A blue-tongued lizard painted on the ground, joining two spaces in the *Snakes and Ladders* game. The lizard is poking out a long blue tongue with a yellow stripe.

Digby and Nadia approached the collaboration as equals and partners from the outset. The artists met for multiple site visits, exploring Station Square and the surrounding Sydney Olympic Park precinct and wetlands for inspiration. Through discussions about their artistic interests, and buoyed by a mutually playful attitude, the pair decided upon the direction of creating an artwork that was interactive. When brainstorming ideas of popular games, it was Digby who first suggested snakes and ladders. This immediately stood out as a good way to combine their different styles, and to divide up the artistic responsibilities. Nadia took care of the game board and ladders, while Digby created drawings of the creatures in his home studio, which were then scaled up and painted on the project site.



Figure 7. An example of how Digby's original drawings were scaled up and translated into the *Snakes and Ladders* mural.

Alt text: A series of three images. The first image shows a frog drawn by Digby, in oil pastel on paper.

The second image shows the outlines of the frogs sketched on pavers. The final image shows three finished frogs painted on the pavers. The final design and colours are similar to Digby's original drawing.

Throughout the project, Digby was assisted by one of his “art mentors”, Rosell Flatley. Rosell worked with Digby in the studio and on the project site, guiding him through the many tasks required to complete this large-scale artwork. He was also supported by his parents David and Jen, and once painting commenced, a large collection of friends and volunteers turned up to lend a brush. Digby refers to this network of people, who are all invested in supporting his art career, as “Team Digby” (Webster, 2022). The scale of the artwork certainly necessitated many helping hands, as did the difficulty of working out in the searing Sydney sun. Digby says: “I remember, on the day that we first painted, I remember that day was like the middle of the desert. Very hottest day!” (Webster, 2022) When reflecting on the value of collaboration, Digby’s mother Jen commented: “All that, all the people who came and helped... that’s inclusion already. And that’s the way you do inclusion, because you’ve got a thing to do together.” (Moxham, 2022) SOPA and the artists worked dynamically to establish reasonable accommodations to support Digby’s access requirements. An example of this was increasing the budget to include a fee for Rosell, to support her involvement in the project. Another was the expansion of the time allowed to paint the mural, from an initially proposed 5-day window to a period of 15 days. This allowed the team to work flexibly in accordance with weather, health and the availability of assistants. In addition, while the artists maintained an equal division of responsibility in the creative side of the project, Nadia took on a more active role in the project administration. Supported by her experience in public art, Nadia handled correspondence and paperwork regarding logistics, risk management, marketing and budgets. In these instances, Nadia’s role in the co-design process resembled the “enabler” or “facilitator”, defined by Zamenopoulos and Alexiou as a professional whose expertise is deployed to support the engagement of others in the co-design process (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018, p. 26). This division of labour allowed Digby to focus on his area of expertise – the creation of an engaging artwork.

Inclusive Play

In conceiving this large interactive artwork, Digby and Nadia were determined to create an inclusive space where all people could play together. In his seminal text “The Right to the City”, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre highlighted play as an essential part of the social oeuvre of the city (Lefebvre, 1968, p. 129). In a recent article about play-based public artworks in Australia and New Zealand, artist David Cross identifies that the social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has only intensified the need to provide opportunities for play within public space:

“No longer is there the sense that outdoor play and recreation is something to be taken for granted, instead, it is widely understood as a gift, as a profound release from confinement and isolation.” (Cross, 2021)



Figure 8. Installation of *Snakes and Ladders*. Jen, Laura, Digby and Rosell are busy painting. Alt text: Four people are painting the mural on the ground. They are working with paint trays and rollers, and many colours.

For children living in high-density urban environments, play goes beyond being merely a means for social encounter. Play is a core part of development for young people – as well as aiding in developing motor skills and physical fitness, children use play to acquire an understanding of the way the world operates, and as such it is key to their social and epistemic development (Krysiak, 2020). When designing opportunities for play within the urban environment, it is essential that the needs and rights of people with disability are considered from the outset. Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines the right to full participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport. In particular, it states that parties must take measures “to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure...” (UN General Assembly, 2017)

The International Play Association identifies that in order to enable all children to enjoy their right to play, it is essential to “remove disabling barriers and promote accessibility” in the space that play occurs (International Play Association, 2015). Similarly, in a new set of guidelines from the NSW Department of Planning and Environment titled “Everyone Can Play”, designers of inclusive playspaces are encouraged to answer three questions: “Can I get there? Can I play? Can I stay?” (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2021) This highlights that inclusivity in playspaces goes beyond physical accessibility. The whole of the play experience, and the environment it occurs in, must be considered. This is in line with the commitment outlined in the New Urban Agenda, and in Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals, to create safe, inclusive public spaces that support access for all (United Nations, 2017, p. 13, and United Nations, 2016).



Figure 9. *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Synthetic polymer paint on pavement, 5,000 x 800 cm, Station Square, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia.

Image credit: Document Photography.

Alt text: A detail of the *Snakes and Ladders* mural, painted on the ground. A child is walking along a painting of a ladder with crooked rungs.

Accessibility considerations

The ground work for the success of the Snakes and Ladders artwork as an inclusive playspace was laid in the pre-existing attention to universal design in the surrounding urban environment. As the site for the 2000 Olympic and Paralympic games, access and inclusion was fundamental to the design of the public spaces of Sydney Olympic Park, including Station Square where Snakes and Ladders is located (SOPA, 2021c). The site is adjacent to accessible public transport and parking facilities. At the entrance to the station there are accessible bathrooms. Drinking fountains and nearby cafes provide water and refreshment (McClelland, 2010). Alongside the Snakes and Ladders artwork are benches set under trees, which provide a shaded spot for accompanying people to observe the game being played. These factors combine to allow children and caregivers to safely and comfortably stay at the site and to play in the artwork. This is an essential aspect in creating inclusive playscapes, for as the International Play Association identifies: “Disabled children have the same right as other children to sufficient time and space to play freely, in the ways they choose, without being unduly overprotected” (International Play Association, 2015).



Figure 10. *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odum. Synthetic polymer paint on pavement, 5,000 x 800 cm, Station Square, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia.

Image credit: Document Photography.

Alt text: The *Snakes and Ladders* artwork meandering into the distance through Station Square. In the background is the Sydney Olympic Park train station.

Accessibility was also addressed in the project through the signage and interpretation. The large signage around the artwork adhered to best-practice design standards for inclusion, including font size and colour contrast (W3C, 2018). To increase access to the artwork for people who are Blind or have low vision, the artists worked with Accessible Arts to commission an audio description of the artwork. A recording of this was read by Digby, and was accessible by QR code on the project site and online. It describes the materiality and imagery of the artwork, how the artwork can be played with, and locates the artwork with reference to physical and geographical features of the surrounding site (SOPA, 2021d).

Inclusion was at the forefront of the artists' minds when selecting a game to base the artwork on. Snakes and ladders is a classic board game that is well known in many cultures, and across generations. The instructions are simple to explain, and success is based entirely upon luck, making it a level playing field and an engaging game for everyone. Digby says: "I am very proud, for everyone who's out there playing with that game. In their mind they are saying, 'Oh, I grew up with this game.'" (Webster, 2022)



Figure 11. *Snakes and Ladders*, 2021, by Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Synthetic polymer paint on pavement, 5,000 x 800 cm, Station Square, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia.

Image credit: Document Photography.

Alt text: Two adults and two children are playing on the *Snakes and Ladders* artwork. A colourful snake stretches across the middle of the artwork.

The type of play that the artwork encourages is open and varied. While some visitors engaged with the artwork by playing the game according to the official rules (rolling a dice, taking turns, etc.), many people interacted in ways that were spontaneous,

exuberant and creative. In a short documentary video made about the artwork, people can be seen hopping on the squares, dancing on the backs of creatures, or riding bikes along the curves (*Snakes and Ladders*, 2021). The shape and layout of the artwork is also designed to support physical access for all users. The width of the path is 100 centimetres, and the curves of the board are large and sweeping. This allows for easier navigation by wheelchair users or visitors with restricted mobility (SAI Global, 2015, p. 9). The artwork also supports intergenerational engagement. As Digby puts it, the artwork is “a big playful thing for little kids and also for grown-ups too, like mum and dad, or, yeah, uncle or auntie, or whoever you come with. They can jump on the game and play, really just go for it.” (Webster, 2021a)

Project outcomes

Snakes and Ladders has had multiple measurable positive outcomes. “Team Digby” has since gone on to complete another large-scale mural, drawing on practical experience built through the Snakes and Ladders project. Nadia has gained a great deal of confidence and experience in collaborating with an artist with disability, and has learnt much about ways to improve accessibility in the arts sector in general. This has already resulted in a large shift in the way she is approaching future public art projects. The relationship between SOPA and Accessible Arts is ongoing. A recent event the two organisations partnered on was “Abilities Alive”, an outdoor concert showcasing 12 musicians with lived experience of disability to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Tony Nesbitt, manager of Events and Activation for SOPA, commented: “...this certainly marked a shift in how we celebrate this key day in the park’s calendar. Usually, we would play to our strong links with disability in the sporting sector; this time, and on the back of what had been achieved with Snakes and Ladders, we thought it timely to work once more with Accessible Arts to focus on musical performance...” (Nesbitt, 2022)

Accessible Arts believes that projects like *Snakes and Ladders* can have a broader impact on improving access and inclusion for people with disability in the arts, and in public spaces. “Representation is key. Seeing works created by talented artists with disability or who are d/Deaf and immersing yourself within these spaces has lasting impacts. The more we see how possible it really is for barriers to be removed, the more we can identify areas where we can achieve real and progressive change and work together towards enhancing access and inclusion.” (Martin, 2022)

During its time in Station Square, the *Snakes and Ladders* work has been seen and/or directly engaged with by approximately 500,000 people.³ It has been the subject of ministerial media releases, drone aerial photography, a short film and consistent positive feedback through social media. The project will also feature in the upcoming “NSW Public Art Toolkit” to be released by Create NSW in 2022. The work stands as a strong example of inclusion of an artist with disability in the design and creation of an inclusive playspace. The artists, SOPA and Accessible Arts hope that it will provide inspiration for similar initiatives in Australia and abroad.

A final word from Digby. When asked what advice he would give to artists or organisations who are working with people with disability, Digby answered:

³ Figure provided by Tony Nesbitt. Based on estimations of foot traffic through the *Snakes and Ladders* site during Royal Easter Show and other events. Nesbitt, 2022

“Well, for me, I think with people with disabilities, just include them, and make sure they are following footsteps of their own. Make sure what kind of activities *they* need to do. If they want to do art, they can do art. Or whatever you do, like art, theatre, film, or whatever. Just go for gold.” (Webster, 2022)

Acknowledgements

All images courtesy of Nadia Odlum, Digby Webster and credited photographers. To learn more about Digby Webster, visit: <https://digbywebster.com/>



Figure 12. Artists Digby Webster and Nadia Odlum. Image credit: Alex Kess
Alt text: Two artists are crouched at the end of the *Snakes and Ladders* artwork. The word ‘finish’ is painted on the ground. The artists have big smiles on their faces.

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