

# The impact of murals essay



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The impact of murals: the process and the paintings Jeanine Guidry, 10 July 2011, Richmond, VA Introduction Ron Chew, in his excellent essay “Community-based arts organizations: a new center of gravity” mentions the interesting, and widespread, acknowledgement that traditional European art forms like ballet, opera, and the symphony can no longer be considered the sole windows into a community’s artistic soul and the sole measure of this country’s creativity (Chew, 2009, p. 1-2).

A segment of arts organizations – once viewed as less attractive distant cousins to the “big boys” – has emerged at the center of this more expansive vision of the arts. These typically small and mid-sized arts organizations, often community-based in their mission or practice, provide a canvas for the works of emerging artists and are bustling laboratories of experimentation and innovation. The work of these organizations moves people to understand that art can be about more than engaging in an aesthetic experience.

Art can also comfort in times of trouble, heal personal wounds, inspire community participation, and foster a more compassionate society. That last sentence is what inspired us to start Arts in the Alley in 2008. Situation Analysis and Research Questions Arts in the Alley is a Richmond, Va. -based initiative that brings together volunteers of diverse backgrounds to revitalize run-down inner-city alleys by cleaning the area and painting murals, thereby turning the alleyways into colorful outdoor art galleries.

Goals of the project are making the neighborhoods better places to live, work and play; impacting the lives of volunteers and especially at-risk teenage

volunteers; and increasing community engagement among current Arts in the Alley volunteers. Up to this point we have grasped the results of Arts in the Alley solely through observation and experiential learning – in order to plan for the future as well as better communicate with potential funders, volunteers, and building owners, we need to find out what the proven expected results will be.

In this paper I will start with a definition of some important terms, provide a brief historical background of murals and mural painting, provide a brief outline of public arts projects and murals in particular, continue with a literature review exploring and examining what others have found the effects of public arts projects to be, and conclude with potential next steps. The research questions: 1. To what extent does an Arts in the Alley project affect the community in which it takes place? 2.

To what extent does an Arts in the Alley project affect the life of a volunteer who participates in the project? 3. To what extent does an Arts in the Alley project affect the life of the artists/designers who (help) design, and often paint, the murals for the project? Definition of terms Jack Becker, founder and artistic director of FORECAST Public Artworks, defines public art as “work created by artists for places accessible to and used by the public” (Becker, 2004, p. 5), and as such, Arts in the Alley is a public arts project.

However, Seana Lowe gives a specific definition in her doctoral thesis for a subcategory that applies to Arts in the Alley: Community art is a form of public art that is characterized by its experiential and inclusive nature. With community art, artists work with non-artists in grassroots settings, creating

art in the public interest (Lowe, 2000, p. 364). Most literature, though, refers to public art and does not further break down into categories like community art, so for the sake of this literature review we will primarily research public art projects.

Joshua Guetzkow, in a literary review on how the arts impact communities presented at Princeton University, emphasizes the importance of definitions when trying to determine the impact of public arts projects on the community (Guetzkow, 2002, p. 1). We have already addressed the definition of public art – but an important distinction, again according to Becker, is the difference between public art (which takes into account its site and other contextual issues) and art in public places where art is simply placed in a public place (Becker, 2004, p. ). Another important definition for our purposes is inner-city, which Merriam Webster defines as “ the usually older, poorer, and more densely populated section of a city. ” (Merriam-Webster, 2008) History The idea of painting on a wall is an ancient one – dating back to the Chauvet Cave Paintings in France, which are said to be more than thirty thousand years old. Almost every major ancient culture use some form of mural painting, including the ancient Egyptians and Mayans (Gyekis, 2009, p. -7). In the modern western world, murals came again to the forefront in the beginning of the 20th century in Mexico, when Mexican artists used murals to express the social concerns of their era (Mueller, 1979, as cited in Gyekis, 2009, p. 6). The community mural movement exploded in the United States in the late 1960s and often represented the struggle against racism and poverty. As murals grew in popularity over the next three decades, they became more diversely themed.

One of the most famous mural projects is the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP). MAP has created more than 3, 000 murals since its inception in 1984. In its first few years, MAP worked exclusively with graffiti writers – often low-income, minority youth – in learning more positive ways to express their creativity. After a few years, professional artists came into the project, and over the course of the years, Philadelphia has been transformed by thousands of pieces of incredible art. ((Mural Arts Project, 2011).

Their core values are worth mentioning – this is a selection; for the complete list visit their website, mentioned in the references: Art Ignites Change – Art heals, art unites, and art changes minds in a convincing fashion. Art drives the agenda. Great art is never silent, can't be ignored, and serves poorly the status quo. We Beats Me – It's simple. We work in conspiring teams whose goal is gestalt. Everything we do is by and for the community. There's no " I" in mural. It Ain't About the Paint – What we do is deceptively complex.

What drives us is the opportunity to help life triumph over the forces of despair. We just happen to be good at painting murals. Think Deeply, Create Fearlessly – The surface is something to get beyond. And because we have each other's back, we go beyond in bold fashion. Literature Review Since the research questions focus on three different groups – the community as a whole, the volunteers who participate, and the artists/designers who design the murals – I am going to organize the literature reviews in the same categories.

Community In his earlier mentioned literature review Joshua Guetzkow discusses the mechanisms through which public arts projects are said to

have an impact on communities (Guetzkow, 2002, p. 2). Among other things he lists the revitalization of neighborhoods, an increased sense of collective identity and efficacy, the attraction of visitors – and perhaps residents and businesses, although that is more complicated to prove since public arts projects likely just are one reason among many (Guetzkow, 2002, p. ).

Becker counts among public works of art major landmarks and monuments like the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower. He describes the impact of public art as follows: they enhance our experience of a place and our quality of life; they engender a sense of pride and community identity; they reach audiences outside museums, galleries, and theaters; and they add to the beauty of everyday life (Becker, 2004, p. 6). Cultural participation also builds bridges across a city's ethnic and class divides.

According to Stern approximately 80 percent of community cultural participants travel outside their own neighborhoods to attend cultural events – a fact that separates culture from other forms of civic engagement (Stern, 2002, as cited in Mallonée, 2010, p. 18). Public art can engage civic dialogue and community; attract attention and economic benefit; connect artists with communities; and enhance public appreciation of art (Becker, 2004, pp. 6-9). As an example, Becker cites the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which featured over 70, 000 individual quilts, and has been displayed on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

Beyond the spectacle of a colorful folk art installation, the quilt raises awareness of the AIDS epidemic, generates significant media attention, and leverages increased support for research and education (Becker, 2004, p. 7). Not all murals projects have the same, positive effect on their communities.

Mark Stern and three colleagues conducted a case study of wall art in two Philadelphia neighborhoods to examine some of the dimensions in which community art is embedded in communities.

Through a set of observations and interviews, they concluded that the wall art examined had strong, but extremely different, impact on their neighborhoods. In one, the wall art and its park became a center for community life that was viewed positively by a wide range of different groups within the community. In the other, the wall art and its park had become the center of community tension; the space was apparently used most intensively after-hours for drinking and possibly drug use (Stern et al, 1994).

In the neighborhood where the mural was positively regarded, there were plentiful other murals; in the other neighborhood, all the other wall art was commercial or quasi-commercial in nature. Individuals/volunteers Guetzkow, once again, mentions several effects public arts projects can have on volunteers' lives - the overarching one being the building of social capital by boosting individuals' ability and motivation to be civically engaged. It builds interpersonal ties and promotes volunteering at later dates, which improves health and psychological well-being.

In addition, public arts projects improve a sense of belonging or attachment to a community, they increase tolerance of others, foster trust between participants, and they increase a volunteer's sense of individual efficacy and self-esteem (Guetzkow, 2002, pp. 3, 10). Lowe also mentions positive family interaction, facilitation of neighborhood friendships, and fostered

connections across social boundaries (Lowe, 2000, p. 367). Lowe provides a great quote from a participant, Jana, in her public arts project: “ We started as individuals. But there was lots of support from one another, and we had unity as a group.

We went from individuals to a community of individuals. ” (Lowe, 2000, p. 369) Finally, Lowe makes the interesting point – very valuable for Arts in the Alley since so many of our volunteers are children under the age of 12 – that participating in a public arts project provides a unique opportunity for children younger than 12 to express themselves verbally and artistically on par with adults (Lowe, 2000, p. 375). Artists/designers Becker mentions the fact that in painting murals, artists can deliver messages – unfiltered by galleries, agents, or the media – to targeted audiences (Becker, 2004, p. ). For many artists, seeing their work on a large scale and on a public wall is very satisfying. Daniel Lawson, a painter now based in New York City, expressed after participating in an Arts in the Alley project “ I have been able to leave my mark on Richmond – what an amazing concept. ” (Lawson, 2008)

Conclusions and recommendations What we have thus far expected and hoped the outcomes will be through our observations and experiences during the Arts in the Alley projects turns out to have a basis in the available literature on the topic of public art projects.

This will provide crucial support as we seek to communicate our vision and mission with potential funders and volunteers, as well as with the press, city officials and schools. The available research also provides us with a different angle to communicate with prospective sites and volunteers. Arts in the Alley is not just a worthwhile project from a personal experience standpoint, but



there is proof that projects like Arts in the Alley have numerous benefits for the community as well as for the individuals who volunteer.

Guetzkow mentions that case studies tend to focus on arts programs developed for marginal populations (like at-risk children); and he posits that it would be interesting to see what could be learned from comparing these programs to ones where most of the participants are middle- or upper-middle class (Guetzkow, 2002, p. 21). Arts in the Alley may have a possibility to do exactly some of that research, since our participants come from all strata of society and, as far as Richmond goes, all parts of the city and surrounding counties.

Also, it may be worth hosting an Arts in the Alley in a more affluent neighborhood and do research to compare it with a more traditional project in the inner city. Finally, some of the results found among mural project volunteers appear to be indicative of an increase in Emotional Intelligence (EI), especially the aspects of self awareness and social skills (definition per telephone conversation with Professor Tim Howard, GWU facilitator). I would like to recommend a case study among our next set of Arts in the Alley volunteers focused on that particular topic.

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