Community Empowerment: Mural Arts Philadelphia's Community Muralism

Process and Product

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The community-based approach to muralism is defined most simply by community involvement in some capacity in the creation of the mural. In the beginning of Mural Arts Philadelphia, Jane Golden and community activist Lillian Ray went into Philadelphia communities such as Grays Ferry and pitched the idea of a mural to the residents. Mural Arts Philadelphia didn't have much community buy-in initially. In the words of one Grays Ferry resident, "I thought it was a joke. What neighborhood are they talking about?" (Golden et. al 54). Gradually, residents and community members began to like the idea and invest their time into the project. Muralism can become a point of mobilization and a catalyst for community action. When people are engaged in creating histories and representations of their communities, the process is a very personal, yet uniquely collective experience.

This paper examines community muralism as an instance of community empowerment, specifically through a case study of Philadelphia's mural program. The program is called Mural Arts Philadelphia (MAP) and was founded in 1984 as a graffiti abatement program. It is now the largest public art program in the nation, and over the past three decades, public mural programs have been established in many cities across the United States and the world. Informed in part by my first-hand experience with muralism at Jubilee Arts, a mural program in Baltimore, I am curious about community muralism's impacts, both real and perceived.

Generally speaking, community mural programs are designed to address the needs of minority neighborhoods. A delicate balancing act exists between the neighborhood, the participants, the artist, the program's city employees, and the sponsors. Each group has specific purposes for their involvement in the program, and I am interested to see whose voices impact the creation of the mural. This is important because it is clearly stated by most mural programs that their mission is to create unity, amplify voices and inspire change. My core inquiries are

important and relevant beyond muralism because they speak to a larger discussion about the purposes and effectiveness of community antipoverty programs.

Through my research, I am hesitant to make any conclusions about the long-term effects of community muralism programs. I will instead focus on the consistent claim that community muralism empowers individuals and communities. What conditions must exist in order to create the potential for community empowerment? Do these results come in the form of the imagery or the process of creating? To consider these questions, I will examine what community empowerment means outside the context of muralism. Based on this research, the definition I have developed for community empowerment is "a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which members of the 'community' mobilize themselves in community building efforts, in turn gaining greater control over their immediate environment."

Not every mural project will empower communities. I evaluated MAP's high-quality and influential model of community muralism to determine features of the MAP process that would refute or substantiate claims of community empowerment. The MAP mural process has many different impacts, but for my purposes, I will view it as intrinsically valuable. Community empowerment itself is valuable because it allows people to take action and create change. By encouraging the community to define itself both by inviting people to participate and by negotiating the mural image, this development process gives the community greater control over its own environment. I found that due to the way the Mural Arts Philadelphia program is structured and power is shared, participating in the program is a successful manifestation of community empowerment.

Introducing Muralism: Mural Arts Philadelphia

When discussing community empowerment in muralism, it is important to understand the

roots and history of the muralism movement. The first modern muralism movement occurred in

the 1920s in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. During the next three decades, prominent

muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros created politically

charged murals in Mexico and the U.S. Common themes depicted in their murals include

industrialism, capitalism, racism, fascism, unionization and socialism. The murals addressed

poverty-related issues and critiqued the government, which inserted the murals into national

debates. Rivera's clear imagery created commentary about the American worker and reflected

the political climate and labor organization in San Francisco during the 1930s (Lee 90).

In the 1960s, the Chicano mural movement began in the Mexican American

neighborhoods in the southwest U.S., and communities began to participate in the movement.

People began to study murals in the 1970s due to these revolutionary movements and a global

emphasis on public art for its access and visibility. Judy Baca, a Chicana muralist, began work in

Los Angeles in the early 1970s. In 1976, she started the *Great Wall of Los Angeles,* and people

of different races and ethnicities participated in its creation. Two books were published in that

decade, *Toward a People's Art* and *The Mural Manual,* that essentially codified the philosophy

of community murals. Since then, muralism has touched all corners of the United States.

Although muralism is most known in cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles,

flourishing programs, as well as floundering programs, exist across America.

Philadelphia now hosts the nation's largest public art program and has created over 4,000

public artworks in the city (Mural Arts Philadelphia). Jane Golden worked with Judy Baca in Los

Angeles and brought the community mural process back to Philadelphia. The initiative began in

1984 as a small city agency and is now revered as a global model for muralism programs. Mural Arts Philadelphia centralizes the funding process for community murals and receives money from private foundations, the city's recreation department, and grants from nonprofit organizations, such as the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, as well as federal agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts (Van Dahm *Barrio Art* 423, Mural Arts Philadelphia, Beete). The leaders of MAP execute a community participation program that allows residents and members of the community to be involved in the creation process. MAP became a consultant in 2018 and now trains organizations across the country to create similar models of muralmaking (Melamed). The prolific nature of MAP has prompted me to examine the effect of the program on the surrounding community.

My core question centers around the concept of community, which enters at least partially into most muralism studies, given the overt community aspect of public art. It is widely accepted that public art is an expression of the community, as opposed to simply an urban decoration. Community muralism involves a democratic artmaking process, often created on a community scale, that is distinctly different than traditional artmaking processes. Because murals are freely accessible to the public, they imply a collective audience. The concept of community has been prominent in critical writings about murals and has become a key word for advocates. From reading the literature surrounding the topic of community muralism, it seems that most authors believe that muralism empowers communities, but a more in-depth analysis of this concept is necessary to understand if the research, gathered from a variety of fields, supports or rejects this hypothesis.

Along with this information about the MAP program, two important clarifications are in order. First, when examining the literature about community-based mural projects, sometimes it

is difficult to discern between a goal and an outcome. Due to this issue, I will be articulating specific goals and reasoning for community muralism from the MAP's website, Jane Golden's book *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*, and scholarly sources discussing the various goals of MAP and other programs. Many of these sources cover the fundamental driving force behind the project, articulated by Jane Golden, that art "saves lives" (Van Dahm *The Rhetoric of Mural Design* 140). The MAP's set of goals has changed over time, but its current mission statement is "through participatory public art, Mural Arts Philadelphia inspires change in people, place, and practice, creating opportunity for a more just and equitable Philadelphia" (Mural Arts Philadelphia). These are fairly amorphous statements that are not easily measured, but scholars such as Marschall (1999), Moss (2010), and Van Dahm (2017) have begun to narrow down specific outcomes through the examination of qualitative data.

Second, concrete information about murals can be minimal due to limiting methodologies. The discipline of a particular study affects what aspects of muralism that authors focus on, and the methodology that each author employs affects the specifics of their findings. Concerning mural research, the main methodological stances taken by most authors across disciplines is based on field research. Common methods include examining archival research and documentation, observing participants, conducting interviews, and participating in mural tours. Some studies, such as ones done by scholars Kristin Lee Moss (2010) and Stacey Van Dahm (2017), provide information from participants' responses and reactions to the mural content and process. The limitation to these methods is that the researchers' perspective and interpretation is essential to the recorded findings. Some researchers have made the tapes of their interviews public so that others can analyze them. Another limitation of the current knowledge on the topic of community muralism is the lack of quantitative data.

Opposing Muralism: Criticisms

Before turning to my central defense of the value of muralism, it is important to

acknowledge objections against muralism as a form of social improvement. Some critics say that

murals serve consumerism and gentrification by beautifying low-income neighborhoods

(Macdonald). I would argue that beautification and gentrification cannot be so closely linked

because they obtain vastly different goals. Most neighborhoods with murals never turn into

middle-class residential destinations, and this is not a stated goal of most mural organizations. I

believe tourism can be much more closely tied to muralism, and this connection is certainly

present in Mural Arts Philadelphia. Even though part of MAP's programming focuses in part on

bolstering tourism for the city, this aspect of the program does not discount the community

muralism work that the organization does. These community murals may increase traffic into

low-income neighborhoods, as is the case with MAP's "Mural Mile Walking Tours," as well as

its many other guided tours (Mural Arts Philadelphia). If these tours do increase consumerism in

these neighborhoods, I would view this development as positive because it increases local

business. I would argue that community muralism does not drastically change anything

concerning consumerism or gentrification in communities.

Other critics categorize murals as "official graffiti." Originally coined by a local art critic,

Jeff Chandler in South Africa, the term accuses murals of being a controllable and oppressive

form of art, as opposed to graffiti, which is generally more accessible (Marschall 59). People can

make graffiti without the help of non-profits or governmental bodies. This narrative is

particularly interesting, given that MAP began as an anti-graffiti effort. I believe there are some

forms of graffiti that can be less destructive, such as "street art." These are images and tags used

in an artistic manner across cities and are cultivated by various people. Street art is different than

spray-painted expletives and other forms of destructive graffiti that do not have positive effects on neighborhoods. Community muralism on the other hand, has been shown to inspire communities and create an image that the community is hopefully proud of. Muralism is fundamentally different in process and content than graffiti, and I believe that is what makes muralism a positive form of artistic expression and graffiti a largely destructive practice. Just because community muralism is usually spearheaded by people from outside the given neighborhood doesn't discount the value of the activity. Some programs are organized hierarchically, and power dynamics between organizations and communities can be difficult to navigate, given that usually most of the resources to paint the murals come from outside the community. This structure can create power dynamics, but the existence of these dynamics does not inherently invalidate advocate's claims for community muralism, especially because most non-profits and welfare-oriented programs are hierarchically organized bodies.

Funding and efficacy are other issues that mural programs face. Muralism requires funds to pay program staff and artists, as well as to purchase supplies. Should this money be allocated to other issues, such as education, food, or housing? These are considerations that some critics have, especially concerning art-based projects, but many mural programs have programs that attempt to address some of these issues. Jubilee Arts in Baltimore and the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, CA pay their youth assistants wages. Baca's "The Great Wall of Los Angeles" program as a part of the SPARC has systems in place to connect participants with health services, counseling, drug counseling, suicide prevention, and abuse prevention. Mural Arts Philadelphia's Porch Light program organizes workshops, health forums, and paint days designed to address mental health issues and trauma in the hope of achieving "universal health and wellness among Philadelphians" (Mural Arts Philadelphia). Another MAP

program, The Guild, works with incarcerated, formerly incarcerated individuals, and young adults on probation to learn new skills through art instruction, mural work, and community service (Mural Arts Philadelphia). MAP also has an art education program that includes both in-school and after-school programming for over 2,000 students (Mural Arts Philadelphia). There are many ways that programs can address systematic issues through their programming, and MAP's programs focus on health, incarceration, and education.

Other critics question the actual efficacy of mural programs. Most statements about the effects of community art are not backed up by any verifiable evidence in the form of data or "methodologically sound assessments" (Marschall 60). Many people see art as a privilege and a non-essential aspect of life, especially given the lack of data to support it. I would argue that access to arts is a basic human right that deserves the time and money that people dedicate to it, even without the existence of much data-driven evidence. It is important to note that qualification is necessary when discussing what mural programs achieve. Being as precise as possible is important when examining the effects of community art, and I hope to achieve this in my article.

Community Definition

Community muralism is a consensus-building process that can create new communities and enforce existing ones; thus, the idea of community is central to this analysis. "It can be presumed that enthusiastic claims about 'empowerment' apply only to murals painted with at least some degree of active involvement and participation of the local community" (Marschall 60, 61). The different definitions of community from disciplines such as folklife, community-based change, and economic development help examine the community portion of community

muralism. Community is often defined in racial or ethnic terms (Lohman 112). Muralists have

discovered that demographics can define a community much more than neighborhood

boundaries (Cockcroft et. al. 72). Systematized in *Toward a People's Art,* Cockcroft, Weber and

Cockcroft proposed this definition: "Community cannot be outlined on a map, rather, it is built,

and it can be dispersed again. Community is a process of people coming together around

common problems, discovering their common values, and developing their sense of solidarity"

(Cockcroft et. al. 71). The consensus-building nature of the mural process that Cockcroft et. al.

proposed contributes to my argument about community empowerment.

Sense of community can mean transcending differences and arriving at a shared

understanding of belonging and history (Van Dahm *The Rhetoric of Mural Design* 156). This

process can help facilitate community empowerment. Lofquist (1993) put forth the idea that

"'community' or a 'sense of community' exists when two or more people work together towards

the accomplishment of mutually desirable goals (conditions)" (Homan 97). It can also mean

negotiating community identity to build connections with in and out-group members (Moss

Intercultural Communication 194). Due to the power dynamics in muralism, this definition will

become important when discussing the community's' involvement in the mural process. In

simpler terms, community is developed when people share some characteristic in common, and a

sense of community is achieved when people interact in a meaningful way.

There are many debates about the best ways to measure sense of community and

community empowerment, and various limitations on what this paper can establish due to

methodological reasons. A recent study suggests that further research about Psychological Sense

of Community should employ improved scales and methods of measurement than the widely

used four-factor Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Flaherty, Zwick and Bouchey 947). In many

cases, community or sense of community can exist before a community-based intervention program, so measuring the net increase or decrease of levels of community is a complicated task which has not been established in scholarship. Many studies that measure community empowerment use Organizational Domains of Community Empowerment (ODCE), which are categories of outcomes that can be evaluated through processes of self-evaluation and reflection by program participants. The scholarship on this process states that each study's ODCE should be defined by the specific community of study (Kasmel and Anderson 802, 803). It is unrealistic to think I could definitively measure an increase of community empowerment due to lack of accurate data and lack of ability to accurately define each community's specific ODCE categories.[1]

Instead of attempting to evaluate community empowerment at an individual level with quantitative data, I will analyze MAP's mural process at the community group level. Studies have articulated that there is no universal measure of community empowerment, but there are certain community approaches that create the environment for empowerment (Laverack and Wallerstein 180). From examining the community muralism process, given the existing definitions of community empowerment, I will determine whether MAP creates a process that achieves community empowerment. Given the community empowerment literature, this kind of assessment should be more accurate and conclusive than methodologies that analyze participant responses in contested ways. My evaluation depends on understanding the activity itself as intrinsically valuable as opposed to instrumentally valuable. Although assessment of individual experience is valuable, focusing on the model and its utility is equally as important to understanding program quality. In conclusion, I will analyze the mural creation process in order to determine if the MAP program is a successful manifestation of community empowerment.

Defending Muralism: Analysis of MAP's Mural Process as an Instance of CE

Arriving now at the central question of my project: Are mural programs, specifically ones modeled like MAP's community mural process, a successful manifestation of community empowerment? An idea central to my analysis is that "the process of making a mural is of equal, if not greater importance, then the end result" (Marschall 63). By combining knowledge from community engagement and community empowerment literature, my definition of community empowerment will inform a theoretical model of what a community empowerment project would look like. To recall my earlier point in this paper, community empowerment, which I will also refer to as CE, refers to "a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which members of the 'community' mobilize themselves in community building efforts, in turn gaining greater control over their immediate environment." Utilizing information about the MAP's mural process, the MAP program is a successful manifestation of community empowerment insofar as it follows the theoretical model of community empowerment devised from my specific definition.

Community Engagement

Why do people organize and participate in community muralism? How do the organizers and participants share power?

Motivated, group-based community engagement is essential to community muralism, since murals are a permanent change to a neighborhood's environment. Community change literature and the vocabulary it provides allows for a closer look at what community engagement means. Engagement means people mobilizing, and if they are making the effort to take action, it is reasonable to think that they must believe what they are doing will produce a successful

outcome. In addition, action is usually prompted by emotion or some level of feeling (Homan 43). Temporary change is more readily accepted, but murals are a permanent change in a community's environment, even if participation is temporary. "There must be a tension between current discomfort with the present situation and attraction to a new situation. People will act for change only if they are uncomfortable enough with the current circumstances or excited enough by a new possibility" (Hohman 42). Thus, murals can be a catalyst for individual action, and many individuals together can translate into community buy-in, especially if they are truly invested and interested in what the program has to offer.

In order for this situation to be possible, there must be power behind the idea to promote community change, which is the main role of MAP. The leaders of the mural programs can be called "change agents," who have a responsibility to understand community conditions and cultural norms (Homan 42). The organization's power lies mostly in its ability to gather resources and funding. Understanding the leader's motivations behind their power can be found in the field of study, praxeology, which is the consideration of human action that has both personal and social consequences. From examining MAP's website and mission statement, the leaders of the program wish to inspire change, create a more just society, decrease graffiti, beautify the city and increase social programs (Mural Arts Philadelphia). These motivations can be influenced by partners and sponsors, some of whom wish to increase tourism (Solano 71). It is important to examine these priorities when thinking about the impacts of the program on different communities.

For a community muralism project to be successful, the change agents of the program must have respect for all participants' human dignity. "Organizers are partners in learning and acting. They help create the process that leads to collective understanding and participate along

with others in using the products of that shared understanding" (Homan 48). The change agents

create the process and control much of it, but they share the responsibilities with the participants.

In many murals done by MAP, the artists paint the entire design but look to the community for

ideas concerning content. Later I will discuss two murals done in this style, *History of Puerto*

Rico (1991) and *Garden of Delight* (2010). For this process to be enriching for the participants,

the change agents should operate under the "basic and necessary assumption is that everyone has

knowledge and insights" (Homan 48). This system of community input respects the human

dignity of both the leaders and the participants. When stakeholders in the community become

more interested in the murals, they start to play a more critical role in the process, which creates

more potential for community transformation.

How power over the product is shared between leaders and participants during the

community muralism process largely determines the potential for community empowerment. *The*

Community Mural and Democratic Art Processes examines this process and describes a "tennis

game model" where the leadership roles shift back and forth between the artist and community

members (Moser 530). Once MAP got off the ground, neighborhoods began to initiate the

process and apply directly for a mural. When the requested site is approved, the program

organizes meetings between the community groups and the artist. The artist provides examples

of murals and examines the reason why the neighborhood wants a mural. The artist puts together

a potential design, and the neighborhood critiques it. There are usually many voices present in

this negotiation, and tensions tend to erupt when people advocate for different themes and

images. This developmental process of everyone as an active cocreator is essential because

"when those who are to benefit from the change have the power to decide its direction, the

change becomes more relevant and sustainable" (Homan 40). If there is no organized group

available to meet with, the artists will go door to door and ask the surrounding residents for

feedback (Golden et. al. 15). After the artist and community compromise on the design, the artist

prepares the wall and the design and then proceeds to paint, or in some cases, will teach

members of the community to paint. Two murals I will discuss later provide examples of these

two approaches. *Garden of Delight* (2010) was painted by the artist himself after the community

suggested the idea for the mural, while *Ed Bradley* (2018) was painted partially by members of

the community. The artist finishes the decorative elements of the wall, and then the

neighborhood celebrates and dedicates the mural (Moser 529-531). This involvement and

negotiation of the image creates an environment with the potential for community empowerment.

Framework for Community Empowerment

What would a definition of and framework for community empowerment, in the context of

community muralism, look like?

My definition of community empowerment, informed by conceptual definitions of CE in

literature about psychology and health promotion, creates a framework for community

empowerment. Psychologists Zimmerman and Rappaport (1998) emphasized the taking action

component of community empowerment. They proposed the definition: "the connection between

a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public

domain" (Perkins et. al. 108). They also suggest that effective indicators of community

empowerment are citizen participation and political efficacy (Perkins et. al. 108). A later

psychological scholar Maton (2008) comes closer to the definition I will adopt. Maton proposes

that community empowerment is "a group-based, participatory, developmental process through

which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and

environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization" (Maton 5). Scholars Kasmel and Andersen (2011) studied the measurement of community empowerment in community health programs in Estonia and focused on the aspect of agency. They asserted that "through the process of empowerment, communities are able to assume power to act effectively to change their lives and environment" (Kasmel and Andersen 800). Laverack and Wallerstien (2001) studied empowerment in health promotion discourse, and they emphasized mobilization: "The members of the newly formed 'community' organize and mobilize themselves around the programme aims, and this in turn facilitates the means by which they empower themselves" (Laverack and Wallerstein 180). In a psychological study done in 2015 on empowerment and its connection to community-centered intervention programs, researchers marked empowerment as determined by higher levels of hope and community integration (Jorge-Monteiro and Ornelas 821). These definitions and concepts inform how I categorize and build on existing information.

I utilized the critical functions of these community empowerment definitions to create this CE definition: "A group-based, **participatory**, developmental **process** through which members of the '**community' mobilize** themselves in community building efforts, in turn gaining greater **control** over their immediate **environment**." The three main aspects of this definition are a) participation b) developmental process c) mobilization of members of community, in turn gaining greater control over their environment.

Granted that "community building" is a relatively vague concept, this term denotes that the activity is positive and one that aims to improve, not simply react, to a situation. The words "marginalization" and "oppression" were excluded from the definition because while these issues will play a critical role in the process of community muralism and its ability to create

community empowerment, community empowerment can take place within communities who are not oppressed or marginalized. This is an important distinction because I am not attempting to avoid examining these issues, as I will discuss issues of marginalization and its role in community muralism later in my paper. This definition will be used in the context of an art-based community program.

Under this working definition, one can construct a theoretical model of community empowerment:

a) A social program that would attain community empowerment would involve a group of people. It would be each individual's own responsibility to take action to **participate** – not a requirement.

b) The program would create a developmental **process** that could take the form of many different "activities." This could include, but is not limited to, playing a game, learning a skill, visiting a new place, and forming networks/connections.

c) Members of the "**community**," a word which is described in the "Community Definition" section of my paper, **mobilize** around the program's aims. The program is understood to be making community-building efforts. This is when the participants must understand the change agents' motivations and how they wish the program to work. This organization is both the responsibility of the change agents, who have the resources, and the members of the community, who hold more knowledge about their own group/community/neighborhood/church/etc. Through this process, the participants must gain greater **control** over their lives or **environment** in order for the activity to be empowering. To establish this part of the model, one must evaluate the "activity" and its impacts on the participants during the process.

CE Framework Applied to MAP

Does the MAP program satisfy all of the aspects of community empowerment that I have outlined in my CE framework?

This section of the paper will determine whether Mural Arts Philadelphia's community mural program is a successful manifestation of community empowerment insofar as it follows, or doesn't follow, the theoretical model devised from my specific definition of community empowerment. A critical component of this model will be autonomy, and references to literature about identity negotiation, cultural representation, and marginalization will further expand on this concept and how it connects to community empowerment. Utilizing information about MAP's mural process, I will go through the process step by step, borrowing vocabulary from the community engagement literature and evaluating the program based on information from community empowerment literature.

a)   At the beginning of this process, there is a core organization of community members already interested in the mural because they were the ones who initially applied to MAP for the mural. These core members, along with MAP change agents, attempt to **mobilize** other **community** members to join the program. The **participation** levels depend on the project and the neighborhood. The **process** could seem exclusive, given that the core community members or MAP leaders need to reach out to people to let them know the mural is happening – without information, people could be left out. The MAP tries to combat this issue by walking door to door to talk to residents if there is not an enthusiastic buy-in from the community at large. This is obviously not a seamless process, but because the **community** members are involved from the

start, they have the agency to recruit individuals. Jane Golden admitted that MAP made mistakes

in the past failing to invite everyone in a given area, so now the program prompts the residents as

"cultural insiders" to determine who they believe is in their community (Moss *Intercultural*

Communication 206).

b)   Because the MAP's Community Mural program, unlike their other programs such as

Murals on the Move and the Guild, does not usually teach people how to paint, the part of the

process I will focus on is the image negotiation stage (Mural Arts Philadelphia). The portion of

the "tennis game model" when community members help create the design is critical concerning

the potential for community empowerment and is what I will consider the "activity" of the

developmental **process**. The artist talks with the community group to decide what theme the

mural should be. Three predominant themes are historical scenes, nature, and portraiture. The

portraits and history scenes are closely related in genre, while the nature scenes, that can be

described as landscapes, represent a different genre. Once the community group settles on a

theme and a specific idea, the artist develops an initial design and presents it to the them for

feedback (Golden et. al. 15). The artist changes the design based on the feedback. This

developmental **process** brings in the concepts of autonomy and image negotiation, which will

determine if the program gives participants greater **control** over their lives/**environment**.

        When transitioning to step C and thinking about murals and their ability to change an

environment, one must first return to the idea of public art. A Philadelphian community member

once said to Jane Golden: "If I want to see art I have to go downtown and look at White people

on horses or I have to go to the museum, but I don't really feel comfortable there" (Moss

Cultural Representation 379). This idea of Western white elite art being the only version of what

is "good art" is a widely circulated and completely incorrect phenomenon. Marschall's (1999)

study of muralism in South Africa points to tensions between fine art and community art to

enforce this notion of what is "good" art (Moss *Intercultural Communication* 9). The difference

between high and low art is also emphasized by the fact that there is no equality of access to and

participation in the arts. Good art does not only exist in museums, but how would people know

that if they have not experienced public art before? According to Miles (1989), the four main

arguments for public art is that it creates a sense of place, engages the people who see it, assists

in urban regeneration, and provides a model of imaginative work (Moss *Intercultural*

Communication 4). Public art, depending on the context, may attain none, some, or all of these

goals, but murals do have the potential to bridge the gap between high and low art, as well as

engage a more diverse group of viewers. Public art is meant to create some sort of change in the

environment. Whether this change comes from the people of the community is the critical

question I will examine.

c)   When the community members discuss what kind of image they want on a wall in their

community, they are engaging in a **process** that negotiates community identity and individual

identifications (Moss *Intercultural Communication* 194). The MAP program deals mostly with

marginalized communities in neighborhoods comprised of people of different racial and ethnic

minorities. The media often represents these groups negatively. As one example that can

represent the larger issue of misrepresentation of many groups, African Americans are often

associated with either athletics, crime, or poverty when they are shown in the news (Moss

Cultural Representation 380).[2] By allowing communities to decide how they want to be

represented, it gives people the platform to exercise their own agency. They could choose

anything from a person that they feel represents their values to a phrase that connects to their

neighborhood. Moss's intercultural communications study (2010) "adds to existing research that

claims that murals may emphasize the salience or intensity of identifications for ethnic group members" (Moss *Intercultural Communication* 216). There is often disagreement within communities about the mural image. The **community** is not a monolith, and almost every image negotiation goes through a process of conflict and compromise. Many communities want images representing cultural pride, and by fostering these representations, the mural images can work against negative ascriptions found in the media.

The portrait mural *Dr. J* of basketball legend Julius Erving became a watershed moment for the MAP program when it received wide community support (Golden et. al. 82). Erving was depicted as a role model and as a man instead of his typical portrayal as a basketball player. Another MAP mural that represented community pride was of former Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo. He is an important figure in Philadelphia's Bella Vista Italian community but an extremely controversial one for many other communities, especially for African Americans. Rizzo was also an aggressive police commissioner who represents a troubled portion of Philadelphia history (Golden et. al. 99). This mural has been defaced and vandalized many times, which illuminates the idea that while an image may represent one community, it may be censored by others outside of that community. "The reader should not be left with the impression that community response to murals is an unending series of celebrations" (Cockcroft et. al. 94). Sparking controversy does not mean that the mural failed, and many mural projects will contain unavoidable tensions. By negotiating identity during the mural process and making compromises, the product makes a statement about what the community believes in, and while the mural can elicit many different reactions from the community at large, the process and product allows the community to exercise their agency.

The match between what the community chooses to be depicted in the mural and how it is represented by the artist do not always match perfectly, but "the most well-received murals offer a close match between the two" (Moss *Cultural Representation* 388). There can be tremendous value in storytelling. If this is achieved, participants can develop close relationships to the mural. Referring to a mural of Patti LaBelle, a local asked "have you seen Patti?" (Moss *Intercultural Communication* 194). A mural becomes an integral part of the neighborhood because residents see it almost every day, and visitors often encounter it as a landmark. In Moss's field research study, from talking with community mural participants, she concluded that murals were a source of "pride" and "satisfaction" for many community residents and participants (Moss *Intercultural Communication* 195). These feelings are connected to the idea that people are exercising their agency to change their **environment**. Although a mural is a process, the result is permanent. By allowing the community to exercise its agency during this process, if the process is executed correctly, the mural can become emblematic of the neighborhood/community and represent a collective community vision.

∴ The MAP mural process coincides with the framework of community empowerment that I have established. By encouraging the community to define itself both by inviting people to participate and by negotiating the mural image, this development process gives the community greater control over its own environment. The MAP mural process has many different impacts, but for my purposes, it is intrinsically valuable. Community empowerment itself is valuable because it allows people to take action and create change; due to the way the program is structured and power is shared, participating in the Mural Arts Philadelphia program is a successful manifestation of community empowerment.

Visually Analyzing Muralism: Three MAP murals

From my analysis above, it is apparent that an important part of the MAP developmental

process is the content and themes of the murals themselves. There are three predominant kinds of

murals produced by Mural Arts Philadelphia: nature scenes, historical scenes, and portraiture.

There are also many "word" murals of phrases, such as Steve Powers' series called *A Love Letter*

For You, but I will focus on these first three themes because they tend to be more visually

engaging. I chose these murals – *History of Puerto Rico, the Garden of Delight,* and *Ed Bradley*

– because they were each painted about ten years apart and demonstrate continuing values of the

MAP program. Through each prototypical example, I will examine how both the process and

content of the artwork relates and contributes to the idea of community empowerment.

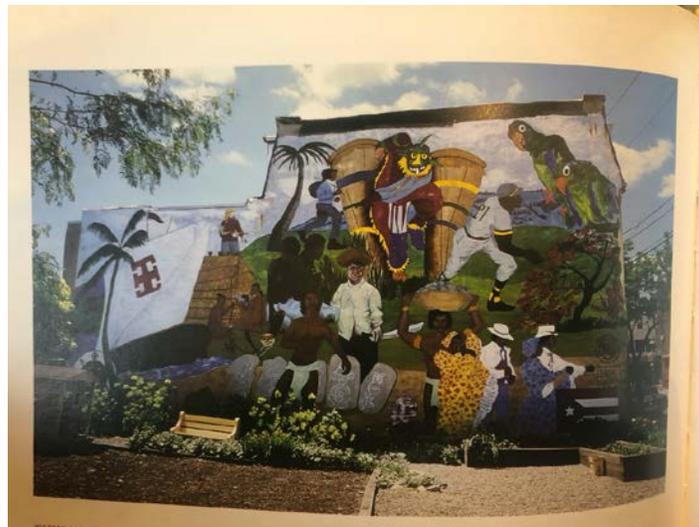**History of Puerto Rico (1991 restored in 2001)**

Photo taken from Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell

This mural on 2nd Street and Susquehanna Avenue was Norris Square's first mural

project. The urban development projects in the 1970s pushed the Puerto Rican communities into

condensed *barrio's* such as Fairhill and Norris Square (Van Dahm *Barrio Art* 442). Norris Square is a traditionally Puerto Rican neighborhood running the span of 20 city blocks. Latino community muralism as a form of protest reaches back to the rich history of Chicano and Mexican muralism. There is a vibrant history of muralism in Puerto Rico, especially connected to activism. This mural taps into that tradition by seeking to preserve Puerto Rican history. "Latino art in Philadelphia creates ethnic pride, builds pan-Latino relationships, empowers youth and the disenfranchised, and demonstrates that art has immense power when it escapes the gallery and takes a role in social justice" (Van Dahm *Barrio Art* 431).

In 1988, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and activists such as Iris Brown implemented a gardening project to bring more green space to the neighborhood (Golden et. al. 69). The program partnered with MAP to produce gardens and murals together. Many residents wanted to use this collaborative program as a tool to teach their children about Puerto Rico. "'Our history is not taught in schools,' activist Iris Brown explained. 'We have been struggling to preserve this culture for many, many centuries'" (Golden et. al. 69). When one's history is omitted from textbooks, creating a visual history in a large, accessible format can be an empowering experience. The mural program provides an outlet and voice for people to visually represent a history that they want their **community** to remember, and this allows them to gain greater **control** over their **environment**. Residents call this mural *Raices,* which means "roots."

History of Puerto Rico was painted in 1991 by Barbara Gishell, and the mural was "designed with the help of residents who were so intent on artistic accuracy that they showed Jane and the artist books and sketches to capture what Brown called 'the *real* Puerto Rico'" (Golden et. al. 70). This group-based **participatory process** allowed the artist and community to work together to create the mural. From the images the community provided, the artist

produced representations of Taino Indians, Spanish conquerors, a masked Vejigante figure from island folklore, and baseball star Roberto Clemente (Golden et. al. 70). The stones at the bottom of the mural depict archeological remnants featuring Taino petroglyphs. The wide range of these figures and symbols demonstrates that the residents wanted to showcase history both as it relates to the distant past and modern times. Since these different figures coexist in the same picture plane, the mural pushes against the chronological and focuses on the cultural aspect that unites all of the images – they are distinctly Puerto Rican. By including indigenous, Spanish, and African figures, the mural comments on the Mestizo culture of Puerto Rico that has been transported to Philadelphia (Van Dahm *Barrio Art* 427). This mixed heritage also references Spanish and U.S. colonization of the island.

The vibrant color palette reflects many colors associated with island life, and the large blocks of color are characteristic of mural painting. This style of painting clearly communicates the overall image and also draws attention to the details, such as the patterned dresses and ornate cultural costume. The background also features aspects of a fortresses, since the island was heavily fortified by the Spanish. The lush green background, sand, and sea demonstrate how intertwined these elements are with life on an island. The emphasis on nature and the outdoors allows the mural to blend in with its surroundings, as it is framed by trees and a garden. The scene appears to naturally belong on the building. Symbolism is very prominent in the image, and it contains many tribal symbols and the Puerto Rican flag in the corner. Another important gesture is the inclusion of the names of the residents who designed the image. Because these murals are often referred to by the artist who painted them, I believe this distinction is a very important reminder to the viewer of the critical role the **community** played in its inception. By displaying the rich and complex history of Puerto Rico, this mural demonstrates all of these

values at a very early stage in MAP's programming. This product was possible due to the

collaboration between MAP and the Norris Square community.

Garden of Delight (2010)

Photo courtesy of Google Arts & Culture

Jane Golden writes in her book that people continuously request nature scenes. "People

liked the idea of outdoor art, but they did not want anything overly political or pointed. They

needed no reminders that they lived in drug-and poverty-infested neighborhoods. Rather, they

needed serene waterfalls and lush landscapes, something to take their minds off the misery"

(Golden et. al. 133). These nature scenes depart from the traditional iconography often featured

in portraiture and historical scenes. In his work, artist David Guinn focuses on the visual aspects

of nature that make it so beautiful, as well as the way nature can make people feel calm and

happy. The community's role in this mural beyond its request for a nature scene is unclear.

Garden of Delight was painted in 2010 by David Guinn, who is one of Philadelphia's most prolific muralists. The mural is in center city at 203 South Sartain Street, which is in the neighborhood where Guinn grew up. Like *History of Puerto Rico,* this work is next to a vacant lot that has been turned into a community garden. The left side of the mural depicts three small scenes from the neighborhood. The two intertwined trees resemble an embrace and a garden blossoms out from between them, symbolizing "the spirit of community gardens and the people who work together to nurture these gardens" (Mural Arts Philadelphia). The mural appears to extend into the garden space. The transparent colors visually invoke watercolor painting (Mural Arts Philadelphia). While this scene mimics the reality around it, the impressionistic painting style is distinctly different from the surroundings. This style, as well as the mural's vibrant colors, draws the viewers eyes to the scene. "'They wanted what they didn't have – nature, beauty,' Jane recalled. 'It was really about craving beauty'" (Golden et. al. 133). Because of the lack of green space in many parts of the city, murals such as *Garden Delight* with its tall trees and soothing lines represent a longing for natural landscapes. Philadelphia, like most cities, tends to look gray in the winter, and this mural brightens the urban landscape, especially in the colder seasons.

This kind of nature mural draws attention to the different ways that images can empower communities. On the surface, the *Garden of Delight* does not seem to represent anything particularly unique about Philadelphia's center city community. In fact, it seems to depict a scene that is not representative of the center city at all, but the image is extremely powerful in its own right. These nature scenes can serve to empower communities because the community was empowered to choose its **environment**. *Garden of Delight* bring a moment of peace, and while it is paradoxical, a non-political artwork like this one can make a strong political statement. In the

words of Jane Golden, "A beautiful landscape mural can be a sign that people care and that

things can change" (Golden et. al. 42). By coming together to decide this, the residents and the

MAP **mobilized** to create a shared physical space that brightens the neighborhood.

Ed Bradley (2018)

Photo taken by Steve Weinik and courtesy of Mural Arts Philadelphia

This 70-by-30-foot mural is a portrait of Ed Bradley, a Philadelphia native and

correspondent for CBS News' *60 Minutes*. This mural was painted at 949 Belmont Avenue by

Ernel Martinez in the neighborhood where Bradley was raised. The esteemed journalist died in

2006 and is revered for being the first black television correspondent to cover the White House

(Mural Arts Philadelphia). Ed Bradley is a local hero who inspires many Philadelphians. This

representation of him is particularly powerful because the content and **process** of the mural

connect to how Ed Bradley and his story continues to empower individuals. Participant Melony

Roy said the mural aims to "continue his legacy" since he served as a "beacon of hope" to so many people during his journey from "West Philly to 60 Minutes" (Mural Arts Philadelphia).

The artist collaborated with many members of the community to create the mural. Students from St. Ignatius School and Senior Center, Blankenburg School, and the Mastery Mann School were involved in the painting process, which goes beyond the normal levels of involvement for a MAP Community Mural project. These schools were chosen because Bradley worked with them when he started out as a public school teacher and administrator in Philadelphia (Mural Arts Philadelphia). Assisting in painting provides youths the opportunity to express themselves and develop artistic talents. Other **community** partners, such as the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists and his alma mater Cheney University, as well as various community members, participated in the mural's creation (Brown). The mural was created by attaching 6-foot by 6-foot painted panels of parachute cloth to the wall (Booker). Some of these panels were painted at the CBS News studies in New York by a group of St. Ignatius children and well-known journalists (Mural Arts Philadelphia).

This high level of community buy-in and **participation** connects to my earlier discussion of community empowerment. In this instance, by actually painting the image, the community is gaining greater **control** over the mural, and therefore their neighborhood and **environment**. "The ultimate way of paying homage to somebody from Philadelphia is giving them their own mural, and he is so deserving for the example that he has set not only as a Philadelphian, as a black journalist, but as a journalist," said participant Cherri Gregg (Mural Arts Philadelphia). From the people who spoke about the mural, it was evident that Ed Bradley was a role model to many and represented values that the community wanted to preserve. "Each stroke represented a part of his memory and a part of his legacy that is now going to be preserved in that mural for future

generations to see," said another participant from the Philadelphia Association of Black

Journalists, Stephanie Humphrey (Mural Arts Philadelphia). In an interview, a sixty-eight-year-

old participant voiced that it was very emotional for her to be a part of creating a mural of a man

she "honored, loved and respected and who was like a mentor" (Mural Arts Philadelphia). This

emotion was echoed in many responses to the community mural.

Ed Bradley's image is a predominant size and celebrates him as a neighborhood and

national hero. Bradley was known for his sense of style, and he is depicted in a pin-striped suit

and with his iconic hoop earring. The portraits within the mural focus heavily on Bradley's

professional life. Martinez said that he created these vignettes to highlight Bradley's

accomplishments and prompt people to ask questions about the scenes (Brown). The vignettes

show people Bradley interviewed and befriended, including Nelson Mandela, Muhammad Ali,

President Jimmy Carter, and Toni Morrison. The mural also shows Bradley's love for music,

particularly jazz. Ray Charles is depicted playing the saxophone and Louis Armstrong, playing

the trumpet. During Bradley's debut on 60 minutes, he is shown wading through waters off the

coast of Malaysia helping Vietnamese refugees in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Laguerre-

Wilkinson). This is an iconic image associated with Bradley, and the mural depicts a house

sinking into the coastal waters. The passport stamps commemorate the many stories Bradley did

in Egypt, Italy, and London. Below these images is the recognizable *60 Minutes* clock, which is

the show's logo and shown between each segment of the program.

The murky blending of each background vignette and the display of vibrant colors creates

the impression of a stream of consciousness narrative. The combination of images seems to be a

living memory in tribute to Bradley. The lighter colors focused in the middle of the composition

brings the viewers' eye to the central image of Bradley, who is positioned to the left, as if he was

posing for a picture being taken by the rule of thirds. The buildings to the right remind the

viewer that this neighborhood was a home to Bradley. The images surrounding Bradley create

the idea of this community that literally surrounds him, much as the people of the neighborhood

came together during the creation of this mural. The mural also depicts Bradley with his wife,

Patricia Blanchet (Dickinson). Blanchet was involved in the design and creation of the image. In

an interview with CBS Philly, she said, "It was really important to me that Ed not be two-

dimensional and flat, but that he come to life," she said. "His life and his legacy he brought to

bear on young minds and young hearts, and hopefully in a transformative way" (Brown).

Concluding Thoughts about Muralism

If both process and content of Mural Art Philadelphia's murals are reasonably expected

to be conducive to community empowerment in this way, the MAP program can be viewed as an

instance of community empowerment. Referring to community empowerment literature,

community empowerment is worth doing because it allows people to take action in the public

sphere to change their environment, which according to community empowerment studies, can

inspire higher levels of hope, community integration, political efficacy, etc. Community

empowerment is not inevitable in art-based programs or social programs in general. As I

demonstrated in my analysis, there must be specific conditions to create an environment where

community empowerment could occur. The quality of the execution of these developmental

processes contributes to the likelihood that community empowerment would or would not occur.

Community muralism is spreading across the world. Due to the nature of arts-based

projects, it is often difficult to make definitive statements about the effects of community

muralism. Many studies rely solely on participant response, so there is a lack of quantitative data

collected from muralism projects. The more scholars and analysts can understand about muralism, the better community muralism programs can be. There are still many lingering questions concerning the impacts of community muralism projects. Are there measurable impacts to health, financial wellbeing, and/or education? How and how much do murals assist in urban regeneration? Do mural projects that involve previously incarcerated people impact recidivism rates? Do these potential impacts have short-term or long-term effects? Measuring these impacts is a daunting task, but one that I hope will be attainable in the near future. Regardless, I hope that people continue to believe in community muralism for the things that are known about it, such as the positive correlation between community muralism and community empowerment found in this capstone.

Notes

[1] Although it would be interesting to examine how to potentially measure if the MAP process leads to a long-term increase in community empowerment, I do not have the accurate information to do so. To do this successfully, one would need Organizational Domains of Community Empowerment categories defined by members of the community and a combination of interviews and observations over a number of years after the mural was executed, in order to make any kinds of conclusions about the long-term effects of the process on community empowerment. Even this approach contains limitations because there could be issues of power dynamics in interviews that impact participant responses.

[2] There are countless issues of inaccurate representations of minorities in the media. By no means do I intend to say that associations in the media between African Americans and athletics, crime, and poverty represent all minority misrepresentations. The opposite is true, that this one example represents a larger issue of misrepresentation of many different groups of people. I wish I had more time to delve into these issues, as they are so important, but would encourage anyone interested in these topics in relation to muralism to read Kristin Moss's "Cultural representation in Philadelphia murals: Images of resistance and sites of identity negotiation" for an overview of the issue and her dissertation, *Intercultural Communication and Murals: Critical Visual and Discursive Analysis of Cultural Identifications and Representations in Mural Programs in Philadelphia, PA and Chemainus* for a more in-depth analysis.

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