THE CREATION OF A NEIGHBORHOOD GARDEN MURAL AS
PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AND OUTCOME

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ABSTRACT

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“Participation” is a term that is widely used in discourse on community development. Community-driven participatory initiatives are likely to produce greater and more long-lasting positive effects than those implemented without citizen participation. One example of a community building strategy that emerged in recent decades is participatory public art, whereby residents work together to design and create a piece of public artwork that visually conveys their thoughts and opinions. This study evaluates the creation of a community mural project in Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati as a participatory project. I conducted personal interviews with those who were involved in the project (student assistants, gardeners, and grandkids) about their breadth and depth of participation in the project, and considered how they perceived the impact of the mural upon themselves and/or the surrounding neighborhood. I then turn to other public art programs across the country and look at if (and how) they structure participation and what this means for the long-term effectiveness of their work. I show how participation in public art projects, depending on how it is structured, can contribute to community improvement. My research, based on my experiences and the experiences of other organizations, contributes to my own search for how to best organize a participatory arts program.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Nearly every major American city has one – a distressed and decaying inner-urban neighborhood beset by numerous socio-economic problems such as crime, drugs, unemployment, inadequate housing, and economic failure (Research and Policy 1995; Ewalt 1998; Kromer 2000). The end of the industrial age and a boom in suburbanization was the beginning of several decades of disinvestment in American cities, triggering a barrage of complex political, economic, and social ills within increasingly isolated urban centers. It is imperative that these issues be addressed seriously, for they affect the overall economic well being of our metropolitan areas.

Research and applied problem-solving brought attention to distressed inner cities, but their initiatives were often unsustainable because they did not give community residents the tools with which to affect change without outside intervention (Research and Policy 1995). Most past efforts treated inner city residents as passive recipients of treatment (Research and Policy 1995; Ewalt 1998), and thereby failed to gain local support. In response to such concerns, “community building” emerged in the 1960s as part of the “Model Cities Program”, an urban improvement initiative created for President Johnson’s War on Poverty (Millet 1977; Chaskin et al. 2001). Under this community-building model, residents were seen as community experts to be consulted and included in developing improvement initiatives (Research and Policy 1995; Kromer 2000). While sound in theory, community-building initiatives were often criticized for their token approach to participation. To be truly meaningful, citizen participation must put power into the hands of the “have-nots” so they can affect the outcome of the process (Arnstein 1969). The extent to which an
initiative changes a community is directly related to how planners obtain and utilize participation (Arnstein 1969). In other words, community-driven initiatives are likely to produce greater and more long-lasting positive effects, such as strengthened community identity, discussion and implementation of viable solutions to community problems, and significant social reform (Arnstein 1969; Research and Policy 1995; Isenberg 2000).

One example of a community building strategy that has emerged in recent decades is participatory public art, whereby community members work together to design and create a piece of neighborhood art that visually conveys their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Public art as a means for civic expression can be traced back to The Mural Movement of the late 1960s (Cockcroft et al. 1977). Beginning in Chicago and California, the movement pushed for a “people's art” that would go beyond the visual improvement of a space and into serving as a voice for deeper community issues (Cockcroft et al., 1977; SPARC 1993; Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000; Prigoff and Dunitz 2000; Golden et al. 2002). Using a participatory process to create public art is linked to positive impacts upon the surrounding neighborhood space.

**Statement of Research Purpose**

The primary goal of this study is to evaluate a community mural project in Over the Rhine, Cincinnati as a participatory project with a long-standing community effect. Over the Rhine, an area just north of Cincinnati’s central business district, is an example of a struggling inner-city neighborhood. Since the 1920s, organizations, individuals, and the city government have implemented strategies for improvement that have been criticized for their limited impact and absence of community support (Miller and Tucker 1998). This study looks for indications of
meaningful citizen participation in the creation of the Over the Rhine mural, and by analyzing how this project and ones like it across the country structure participation, I show how local participatory public art projects can contribute to civic strength and, in turn, community improvement.

I’ve found substantial support for community-based improvement strategies in my review of the literature on urban revitalization initiatives. However, “public art” is rarely, if ever, mentioned as an example of one of these strategies. In contrast, books and quotes from community muralists discuss how public art means very little to a community unless there is meaningful participation and ownership in the project (Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000; Prigoff and Dunitz 2000). I identify a gap in our understanding of public art. Public mural projects show the potential to change more than just the appearance of a wall, yet little assessment has been done on the process and impacts of participatory art programs. In an attempt to better understand how this gap may be bridged, I build my study around two main objectives:

1. The Over-the-Rhine Mural Project as a Participatory Activity
   a. What forms of participatory action were involved in making the mural
   b. What level of community participation was achieved?
   c. How do project participants perceive the impact of their participation upon the finished mural?

The first objective seeks to understand the role of participation in creating the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood mural. The first question – “what forms of participatory action were involved...” – allows me to evaluate the breadth of participation, while the second – “what level of community participation was achieved...” – is an attempt to evaluate depth of participation. Question three reveals ways in which community residents see their participation as affecting the mural.
2. Assessment and Application
   a. Case study comparison
   b. Mural projects as participatory process and community impact

Objective #2 takes the results from the Over-the-Rhine project and compares them to what is being done in the public art sector around the country. I am interested in how other public art organizations and grassroots groups structure their programs, if (and how) they foster community participation, and what this means for the long term effectiveness and sustainability of their work. The section concludes with some critical analysis on the implications of my findings for participatory public art programs.

This study is a contribution to both applied and basic research in more than one area of discourse. As basic research, the study changes the way urban planners, architects, policymakers, city government, sociologists, and citizens…anyone involved in improving communities and urban areas, think about the process of community development. It raises questions about the effectiveness of participation in community development projects, offers means of measuring participation, and discusses how participation affected the impact of a specific project on urban space. For anyone planning on leading a participatory community art project, this study functions as applied research and provides suggestions for how to structure the project so that the experience is meaningful and worthwhile to all participants working for a better community.
How are distressed communities working toward improvements in the urban environment?

Impoverished communities in need of revitalization usually share a few key characteristics. First, they were established and grew up before 1950 when the nation's industrial sector was booming, and have since suffered from prolonged economic disinvestments (Kromer 2000). Secondly, they're marked by high levels of physical deterioration, evident in the many vacant properties, run-down housing units, and aging infrastructure. Finally, these communities lack the capacity to handle their multiple social problems (Rebuilding 1995; Chaskin et al. 2001). This last characteristic is of particular importance because it highlights an important change in city planning philosophy – from trying to fix a community's social problems by improving physical infrastructure to addressing social problems by focusing on the neighborhood's people.

During the 50s and 60s in postwar America, a new city-improvement program, “urban renewal”, swept the country (Levy 2000). Urban Renewal advocated improved city economies and the elimination of substandard housing stock through development initiatives. Urban Renewal, however, was built upon the assumption that improving the physical aspects of a community would naturally improve social conditions, and more importantly, that city officials and planners knew best when it came to these physical improvements (Research and Policy 1995; Levy 2000). The result was that whole neighborhood blocks were bulldozed under to make way for new and improved developments and the original residents, usually poor minorities, were forced to relocate. A
passage from a book published by the National Urban League (1974) highlights the situation with incredible irony – “claiming to seek solutions to the problem of the involvement of residents and businesses in the preparation and execution of relocation plans.” People should first be involved in deciding \textit{whether or not to relocate at all}, instead of merely deciding how to minimize the negative effects. Urban Renewal projects failed because, as the above quote illustrates, they lacked community support (Levy 2000). New strategies emerged from city governments and policymakers that aimed at directly involving the community in improvement initiatives (Research and Policy 1995).

Citizen involvement in the improvement of their neighborhoods first emerged as a strong guiding principle in the 1960s and 1970s as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty (Chaskin et al. 2001). Over the past few decades, urban development has moved from "community organizing" directed primarily by officials to "community building" directed by community members (Ewalt 1998). Community members define community interests, existing assets, needed assets, strengthen shared responsibility, and identify local leadership capabilities (Ewalt 1998). Community building initiatives focus on “improving the participation of all populations in decision making” (Ewalt 1998, 4).

There are many examples of communities that are putting these principles into action, whether it's a partnership among families, schools, and public policy officials to prevent early school failure in Garfield County, Oklahoma (Poole 1998), a community in Chicago pulling together to purchase an ailing bank with the pledge to use it to revitalize the community (Rebuilding 1995), or the small town of Guadalupe, California raising community consciousness about a history of oppression by painting a town mural (Doss 1995). These community initiatives ascribe to the belief
that improvements “handed down” from above do little, and the way to successfully address urban problems is to give power to the community in identifying and implementing strategies for change (Cockcroft 1977; Research and Policy 1995; Ewalt et al. 1998; Treguer 1999).

**How can citizen participation be measured?**

Following an increased emphasis on community participation came methodology on how to evaluate its effectiveness (Arnstein 1969; Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan 1997; Francis 2001). It wasn't enough to say that an initiative was “participatory”; there needed to be some way to measure the quality of participation. Although some literature explores measuring citizen participation from an urban planning perspective (Arnstein 1969), the majority of this work is being done by those involved in Participatory Rural Appraisal programs (PRA), which are development programs for impoverished nations (Francis 2001). PRA gained respect in the late 1980s as a way to use local people’s knowledge, capabilities, and capacities to develop local empowerment and sustainable local action (Francis 2001). The methods, desired outcomes, and overall philosophy of PRA and community building are similar – both view citizen participation as the best path for positive change.

Citizen participation may be measured by its **breadth** and **depth**. Breadth describes the diversity of activities (Thomas-Slayter et al. 1993), while depth refers to the amount of power participants are given over decisions and outcomes (Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1995). For example, one participant may have been involved in every stage of the activity but was given few decision making powers (lots of breadth, little depth), while another was given sole responsibility
over one particular portion of the activity (depth but little breadth). Breadth and depth are both considered important and need to be evaluated separately.

Methods for measuring breadth of participation

One simple yet effective method for measuring breadth is to construct an Activity Calendar (Thomas-Slayter et al. 1993). Activity calendars are commonly used in PRA and other development programs to identify tasks and responsibilities within a community, and “categorize responsibilities by season, gender, age, and intensity of activity” (Thomas-Slayter et al. 1993, 22). The goal is to get a better understanding of who is involved in what and for how long – in other words, the breadth of participation.

In one case study, the activity calendar was used to generate information on divisions of labor and responsibilities in a family living on an island in the Philippines (Thomas-Slayter et al. 1993). An entire calendar year was laid out on a graph with the months running along the top, and specific activities along the left side. Horizontal lines represent the duration and intensity of activities, while accompanying symbols show who is involved in that activity. This same method can easily be applied towards measuring participation within a community building activity. Recurring symbols throughout an activity calendar would mean that different participants were involved in a wide variety of tasks, meaning that there was a fairly high breadth of participation on the project by the community. Another way to analyze an activities calendar is to look at how many different activities an individual participant was involved in, which reveals breadth of participation for an individual.
Models for measuring depth of participation

One way to visualize depth of participation is along a **continuum** (Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan 1997). At one end is “Information-sharing”, meaning citizens are informed but not integrated into the processes. At the other is “Empowerment”, by which decision-making power has shifted into the hands of community members. In between these two extremes are the two methods most commonly used in PRA work by the World Bank (Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan 1997). The first - “Consultation” - where people are consulted on their thoughts and opinions, but there is no guarantee that this information will be included in the decision-making.

“Collaboration” involves a working partnership between outside interveners and local people. Although helpful in beginning to understand the levels of participation in development work, the continuum model is somewhat simplified and lacks specific evaluation criteria.

A second way to visualize depth of participation - used in urban planning (Arnstein 1969) and community development (Nemarundwe and Richards 2002) - utilizes the image of a **ladder**, where participation level increases with each rung (Fig. 1). With 6-8 “rungs”, this model provides more criteria to compare the depth of participation. Different research presents different versions of the participatory ladder, but the basic premise of these models is the same, so for sake of space and understanding I describe the steps proposed by Sherry Arnstein (1969) who wrote
about community based urban planning. At the low end of the participatory ladder are “Manipulation”, “Therapy”, and “Informing”, all of which exclude actual participation in lieu of something resembling a “top-down” approach that essentially co-opts participation in an already set agenda (1969). Arnstein describes “Manipulation” as an illusory form of participation “which signifies the distortion of participation into a public relations vehicle by powerholders,” (362). “Therapy” and “Informing” treat people, respectively, as victims of pathological ills in need of curing or recipients of information about what will happen or already has happened.

“Consultation”, “Placation”, and “Partnership”, the next three rungs, invite citizen opinion and influence. “Consultation” shares a name and definition with step one from the continuum model. Again, the problem is that there is no guarantee that people’s opinions will be taken into account. “Placation” involves placing a select few on a board or committee but withholding ultimate decision-making powers from them. “It is at this level that citizens begin to have some degree of influence though tokenism is still apparent” (Arnstein 1969, 366). A “Partnership” exists when citizens and facilitators share decision-making powers. This is the first rung that reflects an actual redistribution of power.

At the top of the participatory ladder are “Delegated Power” and “Citizen Control” – two rungs representing the highest forms of citizen participation. “Delegated Power” puts dominant decision-making authority of a particular plan or initiative into the hands of the citizens, but “Citizen Control” is just what the name implies. Local people are empowered with the knowledge, tools, and understanding to fully take on decision-making responsibilities. Power shifts into their control.

When using the participatory ladder to evaluate depth of participation, it is important to note that a participatory activity may not fall into one of eight clear-cut categories. In fact, it's
unlikely that one would. Most initiatives draw characteristics from several “rungs” (Arnstein 1969) 
because they are comprised of many activities that may differ in depth of participation. The 
purpose of using the participatory ladder is to gain a better understanding of where a specific 
activity falls on the participatory scale and why.

None of the methods and models explained above is a simple recipe for pinpointing the 
breadth and depth of a participatory initiative; instead, these tools help answer the question of “how 
participatory?” If “participatory” is to ever move away from an empty adjective towards a real and 
meaningful redistribution of power, researchers, officials, facilitators, and developers need to 
assess the participatory nature of development initiatives and improve those initiatives accordingly.

What are some of the problematic issues surrounding participatory practices?

Participation shows potential for positive change in community development initiatives, but 
there are plenty of scholars who critically question how well practitioners move concepts like 
“participation” and “community empowerment” from the drawing board to the field. One of the 
more obvious issues is the sheer popularity of words like “participation” and “empowerment” within 
development theory (Mayo and Craig 1995; Henkel and Stirrat 2001). These terms have become 
buzzwords in development literature, but the meanings behind them are varied, even contradictory. 
Writes Robert Chambers, a well-known researcher on the topic of participatory development, “The 
reality of development practice lags behind the language” (1995, 30). He is speaking about a 
common critique – that the rhetoric about participation and empowerment does not always reflect 
how the same concepts are being applied in the field. While there are plenty of instances where 
participation is arguably used to affect real and meaningful change, there is also the potential for it
to be used for purely cosmetic reasons, to make development proposals look good (Chambers 1995; Hailey 2001). The fear is that participation has become a “development fad” echoed by NGOs and donors in an effort to secure funds, and the result is that participation has been reduced to a state of tokenism (Hailey 2001, 97). These are serious claims. Even if they do not completely refute the potential benefits of participatory practices, in the very least they necessitate continued research on the topic, especially in reference to the motives and agendas of those promoting participatory methods. I identify three areas of concern that have implications for public mural projects – the pressure for participatory projects to yield measurable results, questions of compensation, and assumptions about community homogeneity.

First, those organizations that do employ participatory methods will often find themselves in conflict with the donor agencies they rely so heavily on for necessary funding. At the root of these tensions is the fact that most donors today require, “measurable outputs, definite time schedules, and a pre-planned process” (Constantino-David 1995, 165), requirements that do not fit in well with the very process-oriented dynamic of community participation. But because NGOs operate almost exclusively on donor monies, there is a great pressure to conform, whether or not the requirements hinder the participatory process (Constantino-David 1995; Mosse 2001). As a result, for example, projects may be rushed to meet deadlines, or forced to adhere to strict budgets or goals regardless of participant input and involvement. It’s a problem that is primarily the product of fundamental differences between NGOs and donors, two actors that vary in operational structures and expectations, but nevertheless are forced to work hand in hand in development projects.
Participant compensation is a second problematic issue for participatory development (Nelson and Wright 1995; Eyben and Ladbury 1995). Within NGOs, there is often the expectation that participants will freely donate their time and efforts to a project simply because they will perceive the project as being "good", or out of appreciation for being asked to participate (Nelson and Wright 1995; Eyben and Ladbury 1995). As an extreme case, there is even the danger that participants could be used as a cheap source of labor (Hildyard et al. 2001). Eyben and Ladbury (1995) identify issues of compensation as one of the primary reasons why community participation does not occur – “The economic argument for non-participation is that sustained collective action will only be achieved when beneficiaries perceive that the opportunity cost of their participation is more than offset by the returns brought by the project” (193). "Returns" do not necessarily imply monetary compensation of course, but if it doesn't, participants still need to feel that their involvement will yield some sort of worthwhile benefits. From the literature on participation and community empowerment, it is clear that while compensation is not an issue that's oft talked about within development circles, it's something that carries great consequences for the success of a project.

Third, there's the debate about the meaning of the very word “community”, a theoretical debate that affects participatory practice. Some scholars argue that the term “community” is problematic because it assumes a certain level of homogeneity, which undermines the “wealth and complexity of local networks of resource use, decision-making, and interaction” (Cleaver 2001, 45). The word also conjures up romanticized notions about consensus and harmony within a community, which sometimes causes facilitators to put extra pressure on participants to ignore difference and arrive at a premature consensus. As Frances Cleaver writes, “More realistically, we
may see the community as the site of both solidarity and conflict, shifting alliances, power and social structures” (2001, 45). Any amount of success in participatory development depends on practitioners acknowledging inherent stereotypes within the word “community” and structuring participatory development in recognition of those stereotypes.

I draw upon these critiques of participation when I critically analyze the role of participation in the making of the Over the Rhine mural, and in public art programs around the country. Despite the pitfalls and difficulties that these critiques draw attention to, there is a substantial amount of literature in support of the potentially positive effects of participatory art, not just from a theoretical standpoint, but also observations from practitioners in the field.

**How can participation affect perceived impacts of public art?**

*“Should public art and public good be equated? My answer has always been ‘Why not?’” – Judith Baca* (Doss, 1995).

The 1960s and 1970s were decades marked by extreme social changes in America. Amidst the civil rights movement, a surge in grassroots organizing, and mass protests for democratic rights, something new emerged onto the scene – the Mural Movement (Cockcroft et al. 1977). Prior to this, murals were public art, but not community art (Cockcroft et al. 1977; Golden et al. 2002). They were painted by outside artists and installed in public places to be admired as visual objects. What the Mural Movement did was to make art a means of community expression. Murals began showing up in Chicago, in San Francisco, in Los Angeles (Cockcroft et al. 1977; SPARC 1993; Golden et al. 2002). They were not commissioned by the city or even painted by professionals, but were community-funded efforts to express local issues. The Mural Movement marked a revolution in the way we think about art’s place in society. Art was not just created for
the elite or the museum-goers anymore, it was created “for and with the masses” (Cockcroft et al. 1977).

These initiatives by definition were community-driven activities designed for a community impact. Today most major American cities have an organization devoted to various community art programs, including neighborhood murals. In Philadelphia alone, the Mural Arts Program (MAP) is responsible for the completion of over 2,000 murals since 1980 (Golden et al. 2002). Organizations such as MAP were founded because people realized the power that participatory arts have to fuel social change – they’re not just about prettifying our cities, or stamping out graffiti, or giving gang members something to do with their time. It’s possible for community art, when implemented properly, to break down social barriers, encourage cultural democracy, and stimulate political action (Cockcroft et al. 1977; Doss 1995; Brow, 1997; Isenberg 2000; Golden et al. 2002).

Murals and other community art projects are capable of physically bringing together neighborhood groups that might otherwise not interact. Most murals are very large and require cooperation between different groups of neighborhood people just to get the job done (Isenberg 2000). The satisfaction of coming together and completing a mural can be very empowering. In recognition of this, some projects are designed with the expressed intent of breaking down social barriers. In 1996 a leader of the El Rio Neighborhood Centre in Tucson organized the painting of a wall that marked the frontier between two warring communities – one Hispanic and one Yaqui (Treguer 1999). He encouraged the two teams to paint pictures of their cultural roots and in the process realize what their ancestries had in common. Despite some initial tension, the wall was completed and stands as a geographic and artistic symbol of partnership between the two groups. This story also begins to hint at another possible outcome of community art – when people are
physically brought together on a project they often engage in meaningful dialogue about community identity and neighborhood issues (Cockcroft et al. 1977; Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000; Golden et al. 2002).

Ideally, the creation of a mural or other piece of community art is a participatory activity and relies on many people's input. The potential benefit of this process is that it promotes cultural democracy and community-conscious raising (Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000). The planning stage for community art acts as a forum for civic dialogue, where people may exchange ideas freely and in the process strengthen community identity. Many muralists and organizers even argue that in a community mural project the physical painting on the wall is secondary to the process of creating it (Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000; Golden et al. 2002). Tim Drescher, a leading writer on community murals, writes "While the murals can be objectively described in terms of their subject matter, color, style, and size, the impact they have on a community's interpersonal and social relationships can only be captured anecdotally. The really important aspects cannot be quantified" (Golden et al. 2002: 8).

Murals may function beyond the process as precursors to political action (Doss 1995; Brown 1997). In the course of fostering civic dialogue, citizens may find themselves discussing community issues, their causes, and possible solutions. Combined with the high visibility of being placed on an outdoor wall, murals have the potential to stand as politically-charged statements about the community and its relationship to socio-political structures. The Wall of Respect (1967), painted in the South Side of Chicago by various community members, marks the beginning of the Mural Movement. It contained images of heroic, significant recognizable African Americans. At the time, it was difficult to find images of blacks on television or in film, but here was an entire city wall
with pictures of Muhammad Ali, John Coltrane, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X. The importance of *The Wall of Respect* in inspiring thousands of other mural projects cannot be over emphasized (Prigoff and Dunitz, 2001). People began to reclaim neighborhood walls by covering them with portraits, images, quotes, and symbols. Ideally, the images that find themselves on the walls are direct reflections of who lives there and what they think (Isenberg 2000).
Chapter Three

Processes and Outcomes of a Community Mural Project

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the Over the Rhine mural project in Cincinnati as a community building, participatory activity. My first objective focuses on process and analyzes the project for meaningful forms of participation. I consider breadth and depth of participation, and then look at what participants perceive the impacts of the mural project to be. I discuss these findings in relation to critiques on the role of participation in development projects.

Research Area

The focus mural for this study was painted in the summer of 2003 in the Over the Rhine People's Garden, a community garden located at 45 E. McMicken Ave. in Cincinnati, Ohio. The garden is one of more than fifty community-run gardens in Cincinnati, all of which were started with the help of the Civic Garden Center of Greater Cincinnati (CGCGC 2003). The Over the Rhine People's Garden was created in 1980, marking the beginning of the Center's neighborhood gardens program. Previously an empty lot, the garden is located between two brick housing units. Along the front is McMicken and along the back, an alley. The garden clearly stands out as an island of green within the neighborhood (Fig. 2). Local residents pay an appointed garden leader $10/yr to rent out a personal plot. In return, they are given a key to the garden's chain link fence gate and membership responsibilities that include voting on any garden decisions.

The surrounding neighborhood of Over the Rhine (OTR) is one of Cincinnati’s oldest. Around the 1900s, OTR’s population peaked at over 44,000 (Miller and Tucker 1998). It was the
epicenter of German culture, then a haven for Appalachian immigrants traveling north in search of work in the 1930s, and finally a refuge for thousands of African Americans displaced by urban renewal projects in the 1960s. Today, OTR is home to fewer than ten thousand people, 71% of which are African American (irhine 2003). In 1990, a quarter of the neighborhood's apartments stood vacant and average median household income was $5,000, only $5,000 of the city's average figure (Miller and Tucker 1998). Unfortunately, when people say “Over the Rhine” a host of negative associations spring to mind, including poverty, crime, joblessness, and homelessness.
In spring of 2001 Cincinnati became the center of national news when a white policeman shot and killed the 15th black male in six years, which sparked the most intense civil unrest the city had seen since 1968 (Cincinnati Enquirer 2004). These events brought several issues into the spotlight, most notably race relations. Since the civil unrest, the city made Over the Rhine the focus of numerous policies and plans for improvement, not all of which were well received by the community. Different factions in Cincinnati promote competing visions of Over the Rhine’s future and often clash over who controls that future (Miller and Tucker 1998). The historical events and debates in Over the Rhine shaped the neighborhood in lasting ways. However, despite opinions from city council, the media, and the public; crime, violence and poverty are not the only factors defining Over the Rhine’s identity. The Over the Rhine People’s Garden is just one example of the many good things happening in Over the Rhine today.

**The Mural Project**

I was contacted by the Civic Garden Center in the spring of 2003. They had heard that I was interested in painting a mural for the summer. One of their gardens, the Over the Rhine People’s Garden, had an old mural that was in very poor condition, and they were looking for someone to retouch it or paint over it with something new. The CGC’s president suggested that I call Frank Russell for advice. Russell is a professor at the University of Cincinnati who founded a public arts program ten years ago in Over the Rhine called Art in the Market. Instead of giving me advice, he asked if I would like to join their organization for the summer. Being adopted by Art in the Market (AITM) meant that I was given a position as a “Teaching Artist”, along with two UC art education graduate students and one professional artist from Cincinnati. We were each given
teams of teenagers to complete one of four public art projects – two murals (including mine), a wire sculpture, and a sign project. Before the program officially started I attended a Saturday meeting of the Over the Rhine People’s Garden and met several of the gardeners. I told them that in a week or so I would be returning with a group of students and all of us would hold a brainstorming session. I was involved in this unique collaboration between the Civic Garden Center, the Over the Rhine People’s Garden, the University of Cincinnati, and Miami University for eight weeks.

In June I was assigned a team of three teenagers\(^1\) from Citizens’ Committee on Youth (CCY). CCY is a youth employment organization in Cincinnati that provides job placement and training for hundreds of teenagers each summer. CCY assigns teens with affiliated agencies or businesses, such as AITM, based on their interests. Teens are paid for 20 hours of work per week for eight weeks.

My responsibility as a Teaching Artist was to make sure that the mural was completed for the Over the Rhine People’s Garden, and to lead the students through their work experience. I was their boss, teacher, mentor, and friend. Because they were getting paid, I held the students accountable for their work as if they were employees. I explained to the team that the gardeners were our “clients” and it was our job to take their vision and turn it into something artistic. I taught the students drawing and painting skills, as well as all of the technical aspects involved in creating a mural. Working from the gardeners’ ideas and images, together we planned and painted an 18’ x 18’ mural in two months (Fig. 3).

\(^1\)With three weeks left in the program, I was assigned two more students, but they were not involved nearly as much as the “original three”.
Project participants

I split the participants who worked on the mural project into three categories – the students, the gardeners, and the gardeners’ grandchildren. Each group possessed unique characteristics related to the nature and duration of their participation. The gardeners are a small group (4-8) of adults, most elderly, whom regularly attended informal meetings in the garden (Fig. 4a). They are all local residents of OTR. Several have been around since the garden's beginning.
Figure 4 Subject participants: a) gardeners; b) grandkids; and c) students.
in 1980. For my study, I was able to interview two of them, including the “grandmother of the garden”, who is considered to be the unofficial leader. She calls the meetings, organizes events, and acts as moderator when discussions get heated. She also showed up almost every Saturday during the summer with a vanload of grandkids, sometimes a dozen or more. She treats her grandchildren (Fig. 4b) as if they are the new generation of gardeners, instructing them in how to weed, rake, and water, and encouraging them to speak up at meetings. I was able to interview five of them. (This number includes a 5 yr. old grandchild, who was unable to answer some of the more abstract questions). The students comprise the third group (Fig. 4c), and out of the five, I interviewed two of the “original team”. All interviews were conducted in the fall, several months after the project’s completion.

Research Question #1 - What forms of participatory action were involved in making the mural?

Creation of the Activity Calendar

I first gathered data on the breadth of participation by showing an activity schedule to the participant and asking him/her to mark what activities he/she was involved in during the project and for how long (Fig. 5; Thomas-Slayter et al. 1993). The calendar is based upon my own observations, photographic documentation, and a detailed daily journal that I kept over the summer. I separated the activities into three main categories – planning, prepping, and painting.

“Planning” refers to the meetings, discussions, and sketching that preceded the physical work of making the actual mural. Our first week of work was spent touring the neighborhood to look at other murals, taking photographs of the old mural we had been hired to revamp, and sketching out ideas to show to the gardeners. At our first gardener meeting, the students
presented their ideas as a springboard for “Brainstorming/critique”. I instructed them to take detailed notes at that meeting, which we used to develop a composition for the mural (“Sketching from ideas”). After receiving the gardeners’ approval on our sketch, the students and I measured off the sketch as well as a large piece of butcher’s paper. I wanted them to gain confidence in their ability to look at a very small sketch and draw it bigger using a grid. The project – “Painting mockette” – was also a color study for the final mural.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PLANNING</strong></td>
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<td>Brainstorming/critique</td>
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<td>Sketching from ideas</td>
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<td>Painting mockette</td>
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<td><strong>PREPPING</strong></td>
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<td>Scraping wall</td>
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<td><strong>PAINTING</strong></td>
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<td>Painting mural</td>
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<td>Cleaning up materials</td>
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<td>Making fliers for closing night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning and donating time/supplies for BBQ reception</td>
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</table>

*Fig 5 Participatory calendar as handed to participants*

“Prepping” includes all the activities that prepared the brick for a durable and long-lasting mural. First we removed all the chipped paint from the old mural (“Scraping wall”). Just in case our scraping wasn’t thorough enough, we spent a Saturday morning “Powerwashing”. After a few days drying in the hot July sun, our wall was ready for “Priming”. This was followed by several
days of drawing involving two measuring tapes, painter’s string, laminated copies of our gridded sketch, and a lot of permanent black markers (“Measuring/sketching”).

“Painting the mural” is followed by - “Cleaning up materials”, something we saved at least a half hour for at the end of each workday. The “Painting” category also contains a few miscellaneous activities that took place after the painting of the mural. “Making fliers for closing night” is in there because the gardeners planned a fundraising BBQ on the same night as the AITM opening reception. Most of the gardeners and all of the grandkids planned for and participated in the fundraiser. Although the BBQ was primarily for raising funds for the garden, I included it in our mural activities calendar because it also celebrated the completion of the mural. It brought all of us together and encouraged neighborhood interaction and discussion. I divided the calendars by population category – student, gardener, or grandkid – and made for each category one composite calendar that shows who was involved with what tasks and for how long (Thomas-Slayter et al., 1993).

Research Findings

The student activities calendar contains the most participation lines per participant (Fig. 6). Student #1 reported participation in all eleven of the listed activities and Student #2 indicated participation in all but two of the activities. Student #2 perceived longer durations of participation in the “Planning” stages than Student #1, but this phenomenon is reversed for the “Prepping” category. Student #1 recalls spending much longer on scraping the wall, powerwashing, and priming, than does Student #2. Both students' lines show a chronological progression of involvement from June till August.
In comparison, the grandkids activities calendar reports concentrated participation of a shorter duration (Fig. 7). Grandkids #1, 2, and 3 reported painting the mural, although the length of the lines varies from a few days to an entire two months. Grandkid #4, who is five years old and was not allowed to climb on the scaffolding, reported (with the help of an older brother) helping to clean up materials. Grandkid #3 is the only other one from the group who indicated participating in clean-up. His line indicates that he perceived this activity as lasting for all of July and August. All four of the grandkids recall “Planning and donating time/supplies for BBQ reception” and their lines are of similar lengths. Although the reception was only one evening out of the month, most report planning for this activity for most of August.

The gardeners’ activities calendars show lots of involvement at the beginning and end of the process, but not much in between (Fig. 8). Both of the gardeners that I was able to interview drew lines after the “Brainstorming/critique” activity that stretch almost completely across all three months. Gardener #2 recalls helping prime and paint, indicated by two lines covering the entire month in which the activities took place, but these are the only lines between the first and last entries on the calendar. Both gardeners participated in planning and donating time for the BBQ reception. However, Gardener #1 saw this activity as taking place during the two months before the event, while Gardener #2 considers it to have taken place just during the month of August.
<table>
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<th>Activities</th>
<th>June</th>
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<td><strong>PLANNING</strong></td>
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<td>Brainstorming/brainstorm</td>
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<td>Sketching from ideas</td>
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Figure 6 Combined student activity calendars
### Activities

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<th>Activities</th>
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<td>Grandkid #4</td>
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*Grandkid #5 did not fill out calendar*

Figure 7 Combined grandkid activity calendars
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<th>Activities</th>
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<td>Gardener #1</td>
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<td>Gardener #2</td>
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*Figure 8 Combined gardener activity calendars*
Research Question #2 - What level of community participation was achieved?

Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative information on social patterns and processes can be best obtained using the personal interview (Seidman 1998). For years interviewing as qualitative research was considered poor practice, because critics argued that the subject is human and therefore prone to giving untrue data (Seidman 1998). Interviewing has recently regained respect in the research community. “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth” and the assumption that the meaning people make out of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience (Seidman 1998, 3). Therefore, the interviewer’s job is to approach the process humbly, armed with the honest desire to listen and understand the subject’s story.

One must also be conscious of issues of equity that are affected by the social identities of the interviewer and subject (Seidman 1998). This was of special concern to me because as a white, female, college student coming into a black, mostly poor, neighborhood, there were obvious issues of power to think about. While I was consciously respectful and sensitive of these issues during the interview process, it helped that I had gotten to know all of the subjects over the course of the summer. I felt as if the biggest barriers to trust and understanding had been hurdled during that time. I cannot imagine conducting these interviews without us having known each other.

After the subject completed his/her activity calendar, I asked that he/she respond to some open ended questions (Table 1). I designed the first three questions to encourage subjects to reflect on the level to which they felt involved in the project. I wanted to find out what factors influenced their participation, how much power they had over the process. I deliberately structured
### Table 1

**List of interview questions with anticipated data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Rationale/Explanation</th>
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</table>
| 1. How did you hear about the mural project? | - Determines what factors brought subject to the project  
- Introduces structure of power that existed during the project |
| 2. Why did you decide to participate? | - Determines what incentives drew participants to the project |
| 3. Can you please describe for me the roles you played in creating this mural? In what ways did you contribute? | - Reveals activities in which participants possessed decision-making powers  
- Determines which activities subjects were not involved in, and possible reasons why |
| 4. Who do you feel that this mural was made for? | - Encourages participant to comment on perceived goals of the project  
- Completes the second half of the question, “By whom, for whom?”  
- Determines perceived notions of ownership over the finished mural |
| 5. Does the mural have any personal meaning for you? If so, can you please describe what it means to you and why? | - Asks participant to reflect upon the experience of making the mural  
- Determines what meaning they take away from the experience and/or the finished product |
| 6. If a visitor came to the garden and said, “that looks like it was so much work, what was the point?”…how would you respond? | - A way to rephrase question #5 that asks the participant to validate their involvement in the form of a personal response  
- Determines what participants perceive as the purpose of making the mural |
the interview so that it began with simple (factual) questions, and then eased into more personal inquiries. The point was to build trust with the subject (Douglas, 1985) and to encourage honesty and openness.

**Research Findings**

Subjects’ responses to questions #1-3 vary, but when grouped according to participant group, response patterns emerge (Table 2). For instance, all five of the grandkids that were interviewed reported hearing about the project from their grandmother. The grandmother heard about the project from me, and it was she who called the other gardeners to invite them to meet with the students and I. Both students said that they were placed with AITM by CCY after filling out job placement worksheets. They simply checked the boxes next to activities that they enjoyed doing, such as “working with my hands” or “working outside”. We had the students fill out surveys on the first day to get a feel for which of the four projects they were interested in. Student #1 happened to be assigned to her first choice – our garden mural project.

Over half of the participants, regardless of group, responded that they chose to participate in the project because they like to draw and/or paint. The only other response in the student category was from Student #2, who said that CCY and AITM made the decisions for him. The grandkids and gardeners often chose to mention the garden in their answers. Two of the grandkids and one of the gardeners said that they wanted to see improvements in the look of the garden and/or the neighborhood, while one from each category expressed an interest in “spreading the message of the garden to others”. The only other answer came from Grandkid #5, who admitted that he saw “everyone else up there working” and it made him want to help too.
Table 2 Chart of responses to questions #1-3. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of subjects who gave that response.
Answers to the question “What roles did you take in the project?” are interesting because they include activities that were not mentioned in the calendars that participants filled out. This is especially noticeable for the grandkids. All five of the grandkids interviewed recalled participating in activities that were listed on the calendar – four remembered painting, three said they cleaned up materials, and two mentioned helping at the BBQ. However, Grandkid #1 felt that his taking photographs of the process with my camera was important enough to mention (something my students did frequently but failed to include in their responses), and Grandkid #4 said that he helped mix paint. The gardeners also recalled a diversity of activities. Both said that they helped brainstorm for ideas and help plan the BBQ (items included on the calendar), but the two of them also emphasized their role in not allowing us to paint over the old mural with a new design. The had insisted that we touch it up and add to it. And finally, Gardener #2 expressed some sadness over the fact that health problems during the summer prevented him from helping more with the painting of the mural. Out of the two students interviewed, both talked about their roles in gathering opinions, making sketches of ideas, scraping, powerwashing, measuring, gridding, priming, and painting. Only one divergent response emerged from this group. Student #2 explained how we toured the neighborhood on the first day of work to look at other murals for inspiration and ideas.

Research Question #3: How do project participants perceive the impact of their participation upon the finished mural?

I also asked participants to reflect upon what kinds of personal meaning, if any, that the mural holds for them (Table 1). I made qualitative lists that noted the frequency of each response.
Questions #3-6 tended to elicit longer and more detailed responses (Table 3). The only exception was the third question – “Who was the mural made for?” Seven out of the eight subjects answered, “everybody/anybody”\(^2\). Grandkid #1 was more specific, saying that the mural is for people who live and work in the area. The gardeners also said that the mural might be for everybody, but it’s especially for the gardeners themselves.

The gardeners went on to give relatively long and varied answers to Questions #5 and 6. When asked what personal meaning that the mural has for them, both said that it is a symbol of breaking down barriers between people who wouldn’t normally interact and a sign of someone trying to make a difference in the community (Table 4). Gardener #2 repeatedly stressed how the mural was something to be proud of, and Gardener #1 called it a sign of beauty and hope. Her grandchildren gave similar answers. Three of them brought up how the mural is an expression of love, joy, growth, and/or sharing. One of them replied that it has meaning in its power to improve the appearance of the garden, while another said that it the meaning comes from the mural’s ability to renew community interest in the garden. One of the most striking contrasts in this study was that neither of the students mentioned the garden once in their responses to this question. Instead, both of them highlighted their newfound ability to better work with a group of people to complete a project. Student #1 even said that the mural has no personal meaning for her, although she can see how the process gave it meaning for the gardeners (Table 4).

Student #2 discussed how the mural for him is a sign of a job well done. It shows that he was able work with the same group of people on something over a long period of time and

\(^2\) The youngest grandkid, who is five years old, was not able to formulate answers to these questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions for evaluating impact of participation on finished mural</th>
<th>Students (2 interviewed)</th>
<th>Grandkids (5 interviewed)</th>
<th>Gardeners (2 interviewed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Who do you feel that this mural was made for?</td>
<td>Everybody in the neighborhood (2)</td>
<td>Everybody / anybody (3)</td>
<td>The gardeners (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does the mural have any personal meaning for you? If so, can you please describe what it means to you and why?</td>
<td>Ability to work with other people better (2)</td>
<td>Expression of love, joy, growth, and/or sharing (3)</td>
<td>Power to break down barriers between people who normally wouldn't interact (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. If a visitor came to the garden and said, “I feel like it was so much work, what was the point?”... how would you respond?</td>
<td>Working together and bringing people together (2)</td>
<td>Spreading awareness / inviting outsiders to garden (4)</td>
<td>Working together and bringing people together (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 3 Chart of responses to questions #4-6. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of subjects who gave that response.
Responses to #4 – Who the mural was made for
- "Well the mural is for anybody to just come walk past and look at. Because it's big enough so that other people can see it, so I guess that anybody who comes to look at it might stop and say 'Wow, that's a nice garden.'" – Grandkid #2
- "For real, I think it's for everybody because basically, everybody who lives in Cincinnati is gonna go downtown so everybody is gonna see it. It's for everybody." – Student #2
- "Basically it's for the gardeners and the neighborhood." – Gardener #2

Responses to #5 – Personal meaning of the mural
- "Umm, I like the mural but it doesn't have any personal meaning. I think it changed us though. Like at first I didn't like bein' around a lot of people and stuff. But now I like a whole lot of people around me, since I worked with that group – I'm for real! It was fun." – Student #1
- "Yeah, the mural has meaning because at first the garden wasn't really nothin' and then people started coming and they made it from an open lot into a garden. It looks better, they start plantin'. And now we're coming to the garden and planting too!" – Grandkid #1
- "The mural is about painting stuff over. Like opening the garden over again...open the garden and tell people to come over and buy a box of something or they could have their own garden." – Grandkid #5
- "Painting that mural...you had practically every color of person in there painting. You had a little bit of everybody...all races, painting that mural. My grandkids had a chance to meet your students. Had they not painted, they wouldn't have met." – Gardener #1
- "I'm gonna tell you the truth. Where I'm from I know that the hand-holding part (of the mural) ...all that handholding where I'm from ain't considered cool! And from making the mural, it made me feel different about it. Like, I used to think it was gay. But I got used to it...I see where they (the gardeners) are coming from. So I ain't so much mad anymore." – Student #2

Responses to #6 – Purpose in making the mural
- "I'd say that we did it so everybody can see that we have a garden and we grow food and things. Now everybody knows that we have a garden in there and they can see what we do." – Grandkid #4
- "The mural lets people know that 'I'm welcome here in the garden. It's not just for certain people. I'm welcome just as much as anybody else.' This is what people see in the mural. It shows that peoples is holding hands and it's not about any certain race, gender, or creed. It's about coming together in a garden and growing things and love. You can meet friends there." – Gardener #1
- "What was the point? You mean besides the fact that we got paid for it? (laughs) I dunno, we got to work together. Believe it or not, I actually started to look forward to coming to work some days." – Student #2
- "One thing that comes out of it is that all the work was done by teenagers and with all the stuff that's going on in OTR – saying these kids are doing this and that, tearing up stuff – well I say 'Take a look at that mural!' I mean, those kids were loud and their language was a little past me, but once they decided they were going to work, they worked, it's beautiful!" – Gardener #2

Table 4 Chart of quotes from various subjects in response to Questions #4-6
complete what he set out to accomplish. He also said that the mural is a reminder of how his ideas changed over the summer – ideas about the people, the job, and especially about the images in the mural (Table 4).

Question #6 asked subjects to provide reasoning as to the purpose of the mural. Again, the two gardeners came up with the largest collection of responses. They each said that the mural brought people together and will continue to do so, and that it gives participants and community residents something to be proud of. Gardener #1 went on to say that the mural publicly expresses the story of the garden, spreads awareness of what the garden is about, and is an invitation for community members to join their group (Table 4). Gardener #2 finished his interview by talking about the importance of the mural in providing inner-city teenagers with a sense of accomplishment. He felt that the project is proof that not all “kids these days” are getting into trouble (Table 4). Again, the grandkids gave answers similar to the gardeners’. All four who were asked this question said something about how the mural lets people know what the garden is about, and how that message might lead people into the garden and into their group. Two grandkids mentioned how the mural tells the story of the garden. Grandkid #2 went so far as to suggest that the mural might persuade potential donors to give more freely to the garden because they would look at the mural and see how the gardeners are able to work together on a big project. Along those same lines, Grandkid #1 said that the mural proves that a lot of people could get something done in the garden. Again the students did not specifically mention the garden. Both said that the project was about working together and bringing people together, but Student #1 broadened the purpose of the project to say that it was about helping to stop the violence in the
neighborhood. And, in my very favorite response due to its honesty, Student #2 responded that part of the point was that he got paid for his work (Table 4).

**Discussion**

The findings from my research show that participatory art projects do have the power to affect people and neighborhoods in positive ways, but that the number and types of activities that subjects take part in, as well as the autonomy that they possess in carrying out those activities heavily influence the affects. I will discuss in detail how such factors influence subjects’ perceptions and conclude by suggesting ways, based on the interviews and my own observations, that neighborhoods may ensure public art projects are participatory, thus, means for positive neighborhood change.

**Evaluation of Breadth of Participation**

As a whole, the nine activity calendars indicate high breadth of participation. This is visible in the number of activities that the entire participant community recalled being involved in. There were a total of 35 lines drawn on the calendar. However, it is important to understand not only what the calendars show, but also what they *don’t show*. Three main themes emerge from taking a careful look at these results – the diversity of activities involved in the project, constraints of time and resources, and the need for leadership “behind the scenes”.

One of the most important points to come out of the activity calendars is that there is a lot more involved in creating a mural than just painting. Many people of all different ages and experience levels can provide assistance. Paid students did most of the physical work for this
particular project, from scraping to priming to painting. They had the greatest breadth of participation, and could probably recount to someone all of the steps that it takes to create a neighborhood mural. However, there were plenty of ways for the more elderly gardeners to participate. Health problems and a lack of mobility didn’t get in the way of them brainstorming for ideas and planning a BBQ reception. Likewise, the grandkids’ were able to paint, plan, clean, and take photos, evidence that children of all ages can make worthwhile contributions to a public art project. One of the benefits of a participatory mural program is that it doesn’t just work with one segment of the population (Cockcroft et al. 1977; Doss 1995; Isenberg 2000). Being able to accommodate such a wide variety of people means that murals are a versatile means of building community (Chambers 1995; Schwartz 2001; Golden et al. 2002).

What the activity calendars do not reveal, however, is also worth mentioning. What I want to be able to illustrate with these participation calendars is, as Thomas-Slayter et al. puts it, a “highlighting of community constraints” (1993). For one, a regular paycheck seemed to be a big factor in increasing the number of activities that a subject was involved in. My students were there partly, maybe solely, because they were paid for their work – minimum wage, 20 hours a week, eight weeks out of the summer. I might argue that high breadth of participation among the students is partly due to the circumstances under which they were involved (i.e. reimbursement for their time). I fear that if we had been operating on a purely volunteer-driven project, we would not have been able to complete a mural of such size and complexity within eight short weeks. Therefore, I would say that limited free time and/or willingness to donate free time is one community constraint that influences the success of a neighborhood art project, a problem I was able to overcome by hiring paid workers. On the other hand, participation on the part of the
gardeners and the grandkids was voluntary. The gardeners were, however, working under the constraints of poor health, inability to handle the heat, and limited mobility. They were more likely to be more connected to the ideas behind the mural than the process of painting it. Constraints of time, resources, and health will not cause a mural project to fail, but it is important for program leaders to recognize and respond to them (Cleaver 2001). This way, facilitators can structure a program that draws upon community and individual strengths, but is realistic about limitations.

Third, having participants include activities in their responses that were not part of the calendar made me realize that the calendar also failed to mention all of the administrative activities that I had to do myself in order to make this project happen. Renting and setting up scaffolding, purchasing materials, securing proper documents from the building's owner, and general scheduling of the workday – all of these things I did during off-work. There is a lot of behind-the-scenes organizing that goes on during a mural project and when community members are pressed for time and resources, someone needs to stay on top of all of these matters (SPARC 1993; Golden et al. 2002). If not the community, then perhaps it can be an outside coordinator.

**Evaluation of depth of participation**

There are several ways to approach a discussion on depth of participation within the garden mural project. For this research study, I have chosen to organize the discussion around how the three groups of subjects – gardeners, grandkids, and students perceived their participation, and how and why depth of participation changed from activity to activity. I also chose to map out the participation on Arnstein’s (1969) participatory ladder (Fig. 9).
Conceiving of the project

In her article about using the image of a ladder to measure depth of participation, Arnstein (1969) writes that some of the major roadblocks to achieving genuine levels of participation include, “inadequacies of the poor community’s political socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base” (361). The gardeners may have been thinking about how their old mural needed touching-up, but it was ultimately me who approached them with the project idea. I brought money, labor, and administrative resources into the equation. As Gardener #1 said, “I tell people, ‘well Katie brought her students down and they repainted the mural’.” Her words are characteristic of the third rung of Arnstein’s ladder, “Informing” (1969). In this step, citizens are notified of their rights, responsibilities, and options, but the information tends to run one-way, and people “have little opportunity to influence the program designed ‘for their benefit’” (1969, 364).

The grandkids were also “informed” of the project, only in this case it was their grandmother, not me, who passed along the information. “I was with my grandmother and she said that we were gonna go down to the garden because a couple people was working on a mural,” explained Grandkid #2. As for the students, CCY placed them with AITM based on assessment worksheets that they filled out. Once they were in AITM, the group of teaching artists, along with the program coordinator, ultimately decided which project they would be placed with.
Fig 10 Location of activities on the participation ladder, organized by subject group
In order to achieve a high depth of participation in this phase of the project, all of the participants would have ideally come together and decided 1) that the garden needed a new mural and 2) how this would be accomplished. Instead, I introduced my own agenda into the community. 

To my credit though, the project was not forced upon anyone. All participants supported the project, either by continuing to show up to work everyday or by stopping by the garden on Saturdays to help paint. Almost everyone said that a love for painting and/or drawing drew them to participate. The gardeners and grandkids were also able to foresee benefits for the garden, which drove their interest. “I wanted to help paint because I think it put a real good view on the garden, made it look better than before, and basically showed what the garden was all about” said Grandkid #2. The gardeners and grandkids may not have recognized a need for the project before, but once I proposed it, it seems that they jumped in wholeheartedly.

**Designing the Mural**

Ironically, the portion of the process with the greatest depth of participation for the gardeners took place next – brainstorming and coming up with the design for the mural (Fig 10). My students and I arrived to the meeting armed with sketches of possible ideas, which we used to start discussion, but the gardeners made all final decisions. This sort of dominant decision-making authority over a piece of the process is what Arnstein calls “Delegated Power”, and it is just one step from the top of the ladder (1969, 370). Participants not only suggest solutions, but they control the means to ensure that those solutions are carried out.

The students tried numerous times to change parts of the mural’s design. They didn’t want the image of the old mural to carry on to the new, they rejected all of the “hand-holding”, and they were not always in favor of including so many fruits and vegetables, not to mention a few
butterflies. I purposely denied them a say in the content of the mural, explaining as often as needed that, “this mural is for the people who will see it everyday. It’s our job to take the gardeners’ ideas and turn them into an artistic composition.” I see this lack of participation as necessary to ensuring control by the gardeners over the design of their mural. In a way, the students were, like myself, outsiders and we let go of our power over this activity in order to redistribute it into the hands of the gardeners, providing them with meaningful participation (Arnstein, 1969).

The grandkids were absent from this phase of the process. Although they did attend the brainstorming meetings, they were not consulted much beyond simple yes/no questions such as,
“Do you like the idea of lots of people holding hands?”. Again, they were placed by elders onto the “Informing” step of the ladder, where information was passed along, but nothing much was asked of them.

*Prepping for and Painting the Mural*

Physical disabilities combined with old age prevented most of the gardeners from even attempting to help prep and paint, forcing me to merely speculate on what this relationship might have looked like. If gardeners had been able to help, the activity would most likely have fallen under step #6 of the participation ladder – “Partnership” – whereby citizens and powerholders share the decision-making and responsibilities (Arnstein, 1969). We would’ve worked side-by-side, penciling in vegetables and choosing colors much like the students and I did.

It was in this phase of the project that the students and I worked as team in every sense of the word. This kind of “Partnership”, according to Arnstein, is characterized by negotiations and an even distribution of duties (1969). I did not draw the original design sketch, nor draw out the mural onto the primed wall. As the students said in their interviews, they were heavily involved in every activity from scraping to gridding to painting. The original design sketch was split into sections, which were cut out and combined into one large sketch. After powerwashing and priming the wall (Fig 11a-b), I handed each of the students a laminated copy of the gridded sketch and a permanent black marker. “Go find a square and start drawing,” I said (Fig 11c). Painting took place in a similar divide-and-conquer fashion until the mural was completed (Fig 12a-d). Negotiations were a constant part of the process. I will admit that the criticism was not always constructive, but at least everyone felt comfortable openly sharing his or her opinions.
By the time the grandkids stepped in, the mural had already been drawn out and for the most part, colors chosen. The students and I advised the grandkids, handing them certain brushes and telling them which color to use. The experience was comparable to a paint-by-number for them. Because they were involved in little to none of the decision-making, their participation most clearly resembles the “Informing” rung (Arnstein, 1969).

**Planning the BBQ Reception**

The gardeners had been tossing around ideas about a BBQ fundraiser all summer. I suggested turning the fundraising BBQ into an opening reception for the mural, a suggestion they considered for a while and eventually embraced. In this case the gardeners exercised complete “Citizen Control” over the activity, marked by “a degree of power which guarantees that participants or residents can govern a program, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which ‘outsiders’ may change them” (Arnstein 1969, 371). The grandkids were swept along in this activity with a great amount of enthusiasm.

The students and I, on the other hand, found ourselves somewhere between the “Informing” and “Consultation” rungs on the participation ladder for this activity. We were welcome to throw in our two cents, but there was no guarantee that our suggestions would be taken into account (Arnstein, 1969). As the gardeners and grandkids hammered out details, the relationship began to resemble more of a “Partnership”. I painted two big banners to hang on the garden gate, and the students designed and passed out a publicity flier. Student #1 donated two packages of bratwurst and I brought a big cooler of lemonade. But overall, this was most certainly one part of the project where the gardeners called the shots. The BBQ reception was their creation.
Fig 11 Prep work: a) powerwashing the wall; b) priming it; and c) drawing on the design
Fig 12 Painting process: a) the original wall; b) after priming; c) halfway finished with the mural; and d) the author at work organizing paint.
Overall

It is difficult to combine the above observations and make an overarching statement as to depth of participation for the entire project. However, I am able to draw several conclusions. First of all, the grandkids, whether or not they were aware of it, suffered the lowest depth of participation according to Arnstein's ladder and accompanying definitions. They participated in many activities, but were almost always working under the instruction and authority of their grandmother, a student, or I. The gardeners, except for the initial proposal of the project, were always involved at a level of rung #3 (Informing) or above. The strongest activities were brainstorming and planning the BBQ. And the students, operating under special employment circumstances, often experienced reduced participation so that the gardeners could assume more decision-making powers.

Evaluation of Perceived Impact of Participation on Finished Mural

Out of the responses to questions #4-6 come many shared perceptions of what the mural means, who it is for, and the purpose in making it. Some answers were given unilaterally across subject groups, but others differ according to what activities the participants were involved in, as well as their history and sense of attachment to the garden.

One answer that popped up in all three groups was that the mural was made for everybody (see Table 3). Only the gardeners added in that the mural was made for them. Perhaps while everyone else saw the project as belonging to the neighborhood around it, the gardeners, whose thoughts and ideas were tied into the design, felt a greater sense of ownership over the project. To
see oneself in the mural and to feel that it speaks to who you are and where you came from is a form of meaningful individual impact (Treguer 1999; Golden et al. 2002).

Looking at the responses in relation to participation, it seems that more than being involved in designing the mural, just having a lot of experience in the garden influenced perceptions of the mural's meaning. For instance, the grandkids were hardly involved in brainstorming and designing, yet they saw the mural as improving the appearance of and renewing interest in the garden (Table 3). Four out of five of them, when asked what the purpose of the mural is, responded that it will invite outsiders to the garden by telling them what the garden is about. The gardeners were also quick to mention the garden when talking about the purpose of the mural. To them, it represented the story of the garden and was a sign of beauty and hope. They were more likely to go beyond the borders of the garden in describing the scope of the mural's impact, meaning that for some reason, perhaps their age or experience, they were able to see the mural as hopefully changing the surrounding community for the better. Because they felt so much personal pride for the mural, they may have speculated that the local neighborhood would take pride in it too.

Both the gardeners and the students mentioned the power of the mural to bring people together (see Table 3). I hypothesize that the gardeners' high depth of participation, and the students' high breadth of participation, is the cause of this. The students were involved in so many aspects of making the mural that they saw firsthand how the different groups came together to complete the project. I recall one day when we needed a hammer and everyone I asked out on the sidewalk denied owning one. One of the gardeners, whom I was not able to interview, arrived at the gate twenty minutes later with a hammer. “Here, I asked around to my neighbors,” he said.
Another time, we needed a power source to drill some anchors into the wall. A man living two apartment buildings down heard me asking people and offered to throw an extension cord out of his window. Small events like these, witnessed often by my students and I, were signs of different people coming together on one project. My students also listened and took notes on the gardeners' ideas for the mural, and subjected their work to critique from the gardeners throughout the process. This gave them a good idea of the intended message of the mural, which is, as Gardener #1 said, "coming together in a garden". As this quote illustrates, the gardeners had "coming and working together" as the mural's theme from the start. This theme is projected again and again – in the images of different races holding hands in the mural, in the way in which we organized and ran a fundraising BBQ, and in the physical act of getting up on the scaffolding together and painting.

It is especially important to note that the students never mentioned the garden in their answers to questions #3-6. While they may have noted that the project brought people together, they did not specifically connect the meaning of the mural to its location. Instead, the project meant to them "a job well done" or "how I changed over a summer". This kind of deep personal meaning, as opposed to the kind of collective meaning that the grandkids and gardeners took away from the project, is connected to the ways in which the students did and did not participate. Because they were not able to make the mural reflect their own ideas, it is obviously going to be hard to connect to the message of the mural. But, because they were involved in so many steps of making it, they took pride in the physical work and in completing the job (see Table 3). This proves an extremely important point - that if people are to feel a sense of ownership and connection to the meaning of the mural, they should be actively included in the design process.
Art in the Market is typical of other public art programs across the country. Since the 1980s, more and more organizations are using this model of employment for “at-risk” youth, whereby the mural is designed with community input and constructed by youth employees (Cockcroft et al. 1977). By many measures, the model is working. But, based on my research, I believe that there is great potential for improvement, especially in relation to the structure of participation. The final chapter of this paper looks at several similar programs around the country – how they operate, if and how they facilitate community participation, and what relative successes and failures they have experienced. The hope is that, together with the conclusions that I may draw about the mural project in Over the Rhine, these case studies may offer suggestions for improvement for public art organizations.
Chapter 4
Case Analysis and Application

In retrospect, it is obvious to me that the garden mural project operated under two separate goals – to teach youth employment skills, and to involve community members in an art project. In the process, both groups were able to share and learn from each other, but in the end, the differences in their participatory involvement resulted in very different perceptions of the project. The students learned how to work as a team, and felt a sense of accomplishment in a job well done. If the point of the program was to enrich the lives of “at-risk” youth by encouraging personal growth and development, then AITM is succeeding. But, after eight weeks, the students still felt little to no connection to either the garden or the surrounding community, except for the personal relationships they developed with the gardeners and grandkids.

When included, especially in the design phase of the project, it is evident that community members developed a strong attachment and sense of ownership over the mural. Most of the gardeners and grandkids were able to visualize ways in which the mural could benefit the neighborhood and/or garden before the project was even entirely underway. Now that it is finished, the gardeners and grandkids see the mural as representing “their story”, and can freely discuss the potential it has to bring people together, give hope to the community, and draw more residents into the garden. If the point of the program is to use public art to unite neighborhood residents, encourage discussion, and foster a sense of hope for the future, then AITM is succeeding. But, physical disabilities and resource restraints prevented the gardeners and grandkids from
participating on a daily basis. While they appreciated the ideas that went into designing the mural, as well as the message of the finished piece, they developed only a minimal understanding of the amount of daily work that went into completing the project.

AITM could be restructured so that participants foster a personal connection to the mural's message, while still cultivating an appreciation for the weeks of physical labor and teamwork that creating a mural requires. What would such a program look like? I decided to turn to other mural organizations across the country to consider how they structure their programs, particularly project participation. For this case study I relied primarily on books and websites. The goal is to draw from the experiences of these organizations, and to apply that knowledge towards my own search for how to best organize a participatory arts program.

**Philadelphia: The Mural Arts Program**

Philadelphia's MAP (Mural Arts Program) is the largest and most prolific public arts organization in the country (Golden et al. 2002). It began in the 1980s, when Mayor Wilson Goode started a citywide program called the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, a combination youth-employment and graffiti-removal program that targeted young graffiti artists. Not long after, the city hired Jane Golden, a young muralist from Los Angeles, to head up a summer art program for the Anti-Graffiti Network. Golden believed that murals gave young wall writers a positive outlet for their creative talents and city officials supported that vision. She was made director and the program expanded rapidly. To date, MAP is responsible for the painting of over 2000 murals in Philadelphia (Golden et al. 2002).
Part of the reason MAP has been able to operate at such a high level, and for so long, is because they are affiliated with and funded by the city of Philadelphia. In the 1990s, MAP’s annual operation budget routinely exceeded $2 million; an incredible amount compared to most non-profit arts organizations (Golden et al. 2002). However, as beneficial as this relationship may seem, there are drawbacks. A city government is essentially just another donor, and as the literature about participatory organizations shows, donor money comes with its own agenda.

This has played out in troubling ways, at least from a pro-participation perspective. Within a decade, the city dropped the youth employment aspect of the program and encouraged Golden to “make the quality of the murals a priority”, something that wasn’t being pushed before, when “inexperienced teenagers with inferior materials were usually behind the paintbrush” (Golden et al. 2002, 80). MAP continued to provide youth with an array of art education programming, but began contracting more professional artists to plan and paint murals throughout the city. The program gained recognition and soon more foundations were donating money, but a lot of that money came with specific requests. Thus, MAP was being forced to not only curb the participation of “untrained” community members, but to also sell donors’ ideas to communities (as opposed to letting community members come up with their own themes and images).

A poignant example of how this plays out is in 1998, when the program was given a $32,000 grant from the William Penn foundation to do three murals celebrating Quaker history and philosophy. MAP decided to center one of the murals on peace, and thought that a good location for such a mural would be Grays Ferry, a neighborhood in Philadelphia troubled by crime and racial conflict. Golden admits that, “from the beginning, there were skeptics…some in the neighborhood thought the mural was ridiculous, even hypocritical” (53). But the MAP pressed on, creating a huge
mural of hands of all ages and races (Fig. 13). It’s a gorgeous image that graces the front cover of the book, but Kevin Spicer, a lifelong resident of Grays Ferry, said he felt the community was “spoon-fed” a design about unity whether or not residents really wanted it. Spicer has since said he learned to like the mural, but his words should be very troubling for an organization that claims to be making community art. They also speak to one of the critiques of alleged participatory processes, assumptions about “community” (Cleaver 2001). MAP presumed that Grays Ferry residents would overwhelmingly support a mural with a positive message like “peace”, but in reality, people were very divided on the issue (Golden et al. 2002). Their experiences living in the neighborhood were varied, just as their opinions about what should be in a mural were varied. To not even be given the chance to voice those opinions in a meaningful manner was obviously frustrating, and this affected what kind of meaning residents took from the project.

Figure 13 The “Peace Wall”, in Grays Ferry, Philadelphia (MAP 2004, “Mural Gallery”).
Based on what I have read about MAP, it seems that over the last twenty years pressure from the city of Philadelphia and numerous private donors has forced MAP to sacrifice process for product. By many measures, they seem to be a model of success – thousands of murals, thousands of youth enrolled in a variety of educational programs, and incredible moral and financial support from the greater community. But I think that if one digs a little deeper there are reminders of what MAP has had to give up in order to continue with the work that they do.

**Los Angeles: Judith Baca and SPARC**

MAP may be the most prolific mural arts organization in the country, but there are many others that are tirelessly working to promote the creation of public art in urban space. SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center) is one of the oldest. Founded in 1976 by muralist Judith Baca, SPARC is an independent non-profit agency dedicated to the creation, preservation, and documentation of public art. SPARC’s mission is to create art that “fosters understanding, encourages civic dialogue and addresses social issues” (SPARC 2004, “history”). SPARC has experienced their share of difficulties, yet when compared to MAP, it seems that they have had more success with engaging the community. In other words, Judith Baca’s organization takes a serious approach to putting their mission statement into action.

An excellent example of this is the Guadalupe Mural project, where Judith Baca spent months talking with literally hundreds of residents to gather input for a portable six-paneled mural about the history of their town (Doss 1995; Fig. 14). The result is a mural that chronicles the town's long history of ethnic diversity and highlights the importance of these different groups in shaping Guadalupe's history. How does this project compare to the “peace wall” in Grays Ferry,
Philadelphia? Both were painted by professional artists, without any physical help from community residents, but in Guadalupe, Baca made the effort to listen to not just a few, but hundreds of residents. Baca clearly opposed the “artist-knows-best” mentality of public art in favor of a participatory model that involves people in civic dialogue. The trade-off was time. Gathering all that community input took months, but by not rushing through that part of the process, Baca was able to create something that the residents felt so much ownership over that they argued about where to place the finished piece (Doss 1995).

What sets SPARC apart from other arts organizations is its strong emphasis on documentation and preservation (SPARC 2004). In doing so, SPARC has produced a more circumspect approach to promoting public art. For them, the process is not over when the last coat of paint has been applied. I believe that this says a lot about the principles behind SPARC’s work.
If murals are truly about giving a voice to our "disenfranchised communities who need to be heard" (SPARC 2004, “history”), then it is important to keep careful records of the meaning behind the work, and to keep the murals in good condition, for they are visual representations of people’s thoughts and opinions. What SPARC is documenting is not just the finished products then, but also the process, for these community murals are filled with the messages of those who were involved in the creation.

**The Tucson Arts Brigade**

TAB (Tucson Arts Brigade) is the smallest and youngest of the three organizations I cover in this chapter. Founded in 1996, TAB has two main focuses – mural production, and arts education for youth and adults (TAB 2004). This is not very different from either MAP or SPARC, but the process that TAB uses is. Six out of seven of the murals featured on their official website were designed around an event rather than a space. In other words, rather than finding a donor with an idea and then peddling that idea to the people (as MAP did in the case of Grays Ferry), TAB begins with a group of people, then creates a portable mural which can be moved from place to place. For example, there’s the mural created by over 75 participants during the course of one day as part of a conference titled, “Coming Together Across Borders and Issues for Economic, Environmental and Social Justice” (TAB 2004, “Mural Tour”). The mural was shipped to Canada, for what purpose the website does not specify.

This project challenges some of the ideas I have presented in this paper about participatory processes. First of all, the process was rushed (if it was all painted in one day) and yet 75 people actively participated in the mural’s design and creation. Perhaps it does not require
months of work to collect community input for a mural as Judith Baca did in Guadalupe. What if participants are given a relatively open forum to share and communicate ideas without threat of censorship? If a mural is finished in one day, then there was obviously not time enough for “editing”. It is here that issues of donors and funding come into play. Organizations like MAP, and even SPARC, are forced to operate within certain confines. Donors, the city government, even residents, expect a certain level of aesthetic “professionalism” and do not often support controversial statements in public artwork. If murals are painted in a day, then

At the beginning of the AITM program my supervisor quietly informed me to avoid any kind of “overtly political message…anything that will, you know, offend someone”. He said that this was because some of AITM’s funding came from a federal grant, and if we wanted to continue getting money we had to be uncontroversial. I doubt that my experience was unique. The pressure to censor the content of public art is an issue that demands attention, because censorship directly counteracts the original purpose of participatory public art, which is to give voice to the people. By creating public artwork that is more public in process than in place, and by doing it in such a short time frame so as to eliminate planning and/or editing, TAB may have found a way to create uncensored visual dialogues between participants.

The preceding case studies were merely a glimpse into how several arts organizations operate, but the points that I chose to pull out are important because I feel that they illustrate issues I experienced with my own work. In some cases I think that they offer suggestions for how to improve upon a program like Art in the Market. The final section is an attempt to synthesize the many elements of participatory art presented in this paper, and to offer a possible plan for the future
Conclusions

It is clear from the preceding case studies that just as the term “participatory” means different things to different organizations (Chambers 1995; Mayo and Craig 1995), so does the phrase “participatory public art”. For an organization like MAP the phrase has come to mean creating professional works of art in public space with some citizen input and approval, but the main focus being the visual improvement of the space. However, for a program like TAB, “participatory public art” means creating murals without any creative limitations. Public art organizations may be built on similar convictions, but they differ in goals, methods, resources, and nature of participation. The first task for any arts organization looking to restructure is to determine what principles will guide operation. Will the organization focus on youth employment? Arts education? Political activism and community organizing?

Sometimes these kinds of decisions are influenced by restrictions on funding resources. AITM was able to find funding by employing “at-risk” youth, as are a lot of public arts organizations. CCY did not have the administrative capabilities to channel only youth from Over the Rhine to AITM, which forced project leaders like myself to search elsewhere for community participants. If funding is only available for employing “at-risk” youth then until an organization can find alternative sources of funding for hiring other ages it can focus on teen employees. Ideally though, teens would be from the surrounding neighborhood. Or, an organization could enter into a partnership with another community-based organization that employs neighborhood youth and become part of their programming. AITM is presently attempting such a merge with IMPACT Over the Rhine, a neighborhood beautification group based in Findlay Market that hires youth from around the community.
Public art organizations may also want to consider adding strong documentation and preservation components to their programs as SPARC has done. If mural arts truly give a voice to the disenfranchised then it is important to keep a record of those visual messages, and to keep them in good repair. In the very beginning of the Over the Rhine mural project when I spoke with the gardeners about what they envisioned for the wall, I remember being surprised by how adamant they were about keeping the image of the “old mural” in the new mural. The old mural was faded almost beyond recognition. Most of the paint had flaked off. Yet one gardener told me, “That mural has a very important meaning for us and we don’t want it to be lost”. This was my first glimpse of the very personal associations people can make with public art. I think it is evidence of how important it is to craft programs that allow people to create art that is meaningful to them and will be with them for many years. Public art organizations should take it upon themselves to preserve those meanings.

The point behind these suggestions is that when creating public art as a community building activity, participation matters. How participation is structured within the organization directly affects what people take away from the experience. For instance, this study has shown that the design phase of the project is especially crucial to fostering a sense of ownership over the finished mural. Public art organizations need to reflect on their goals and reevaluate participatory processes to ensure the promotion of these goals. Additional research into how participation affects the impacts of public art programming would be beneficial to AITM and any other organization like it. Their ultimate goal is to create community change through participatory art; something that I believe this study shows is possible, with the right planning.
Literature Cited


