The catalytic potential of murals

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Abstract: The painting of murals is a popular tool for community and economic development across North America. Municipalities and community organizations pursue mural development projects for various reasons. This affects the model adopted: either a community development oriented mural (CDOM) model or an economic development oriented mural (EDOM) model. Choice of model depends on the agencies and individuals involved in the development process. This also affects mural placement, mural content, and determines the criteria for the measurement of success. An analysis of the mural program of Winnipeg's West End BIZ reveals a synthesis of both the CDOM and EDOM models. This hybrid approach and the reasons for its implementation are explained and its successes and shortcomings identified.

Introduction

The most recent trend of mural painting in North America began thirty years ago. Mural making was undertaken as a public response to cultural and political stresses such as racism during the American civil rights movement (Cockfort and Webber 1997). Over time, the process evolved into two distinct responses to urban neighbourhood and rural decline. Urban neighbourhood decline has been addressed with community development oriented murals, while rural decline and depopulation have been addressed with economic development oriented murals. The characteristics and objectives of each strategy differ but, in both models, they govern the approach that municipalities and groups will use and the time frame required to complete the project. Additionally, indicators used to measure project success may vary. Despite the clear differences between the two models, a trend towards a hybrid approach in mural development has recently emerged. In keeping with their mandate to promote community economic development, the West End BIZ, a business improvement

association in Winnipeg has attempted to reap the benefits of each strategy by fusing both approaches into one.

Community Development-Oriented Murals (CDOM)

Community murals are created with the goals of building community capacity, supporting community development and improving the physical environment (Table 1). These elements are significant in both the creation process and the resulting mural. Community murals have been painted on the walls of buildings in urban neighborhoods for over thirty years, whereas economic murals have a brief history dating back to Chemainus, British Columbia in the 1980s (Schutz 1986). CDOMs are a vehicle for communities to express their identity and values, and are created through a collaborative process that benefits community members.

A community mural can only achieve its intended goals through an emphasis on the art of *mural creation*. Everything from the design of the images to be placed on the wall to the activity of painting the mural is done with heavy community involvement, consultation, and participation. By engaging area residents in the process of mural development, it is believed that they will be able to gain social and artistic skills that can transcend the act of mural painting (Rice 1999). In a collaborative community effort, participants work with amateur and/or professional artists to develop themes, acquire supplies, negotiate wall space, and paint a mural.

While local community members now initiate many community murals, early in the history of community mural development experienced artists served as catalysts to spur interest in mural development (Gude 1989). In 1970, the Chicago Mural Group was formed by a group of artists who were interested in painting murals with members of underprivileged neighbourhoods (Cockfort and Webber 1977). The Chicago Mural Group aided in building community capacity by having the community raise the necessary funds, having local participants decide on a theme, and involving them in the painting of the mural. One of the most successful aspects of this approach was the engagement of local youths as apprentice artists to help with the planning and painting of murals. These youth learned the necessary skills to be competent and professional artists – skills they could transfer to other workplaces. Several cities have used similar strategies and have met with some success.

Philadelphia's Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) has painted over 1000 murals using various mural development strategies (Rice 1999). Although Philadelphia's more recent approaches have been geared towards tourism,

they continue to support the offshoots of their founding program. In the early 1980s Philadelphia was notorious for the amount of graffiti that covered the walls of its city. The Philadelphia Anti-Grafitti Network (PAGN) was established in 1984 in order to address this problem. Graffiti artists that had been, or otherwise would be, charged with vandalism were hired to assist with the creation of murals. The project was a success. Not only did other graffiti artists soon trade in their spray cans for paint brushes but the neighborhoods that had once been overrun with graffiti were now being beautified. Instead of graffiti on the walls, murals began to enliven areas with images of a more positive nature. These early murals were often symbols of hope and contained images of waterfalls and other sights foreign to the urban poor. Most notably, these murals served as deterrents to potential graffiti, and in some cases were a factor in the revitalization of communities and improvement of community relations. PAGN's model, based on enhancement of neighbourhood aesthetics, deterrence of vandalism, and increase of incentives for additional improvements, has been replicated successfully in several cities.

Table 1: *Community Development Model criteria.*

Common Criteria: Goals	PA	IL	WI	**WE**
Build Community Capacity				
Develop community participation skills		√	√	√
Build social capital		√	√	
Build human capital	√	√		
Increase potential employability of participants	√	√		
Support Community Development				
Create constructive outlets for youth	√	√		√
Display local pride	√	√	√	√
Promote cultural awareness	√	√	√	
Display community identity	√	√	√	√
Improve physical environment				
Deter crime and vandalism	√	√		√
Beautify an area	√		√	√
Increase incentives for additional improvement	√			√
Reclaim space	√	√	√	√
Process equally or more important than quality of product		√	√	

IL= Chicago, Illinois
PA= Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
WE= West End BIZ, Winnipeg, Manitoba
WI= Mifflin Community Co-op, Madsion, Wisconsin

Supporting community development through the supply of constructive activities for youth, promotion of cultural awareness, and the public display of community identity and pride is another advantage of community murals. Community murals are often identifiable through their content and multiple image layouts. Although sometimes of an apparently unrelated nature, the images represent values, culture, ethnicity, activities, moral issues, religious beliefs, hopes, dreams and many more of the social, political, economic, and spiritual elements that are unique to each community. They require months of work to complete and result in more eclectic pieces of art than economic development-oriented mural projects.

Economic Development-Oriented Murals (EDOM)

A relatively recent North American phenomenon, economically motivated murals are intended to achieve different objectives from community murals and differ greatly from community murals in many ways. Economic mural projects are often undertaken in attempt to restructure or revitalize communities with stagnant economies – whether that of rural communities suffering from depopulation or inner city districts lacking a viable economic base (Schutz 1989; Widdis 2000) (see Table 2). By developing and marketing themselves as specialized tourism destinations based mainly upon the appeal of heritage and public art, such places hope to increase outsider spending within the locality, encourage residents to spend locally, increase the appeal for existing businesses to remain in place, attract new commercial interests, and to diversify and strengthen their traditional economic base (Lehr and Kentner Hidalgo 1998). Quite simply, these towns need attractions for visitors, which encourage spending, thereby increasing the community's longevity..

These objectives have an enormous impact on the structure of the mural development process. Most importantly, the outcome of the project is the focus of the mural development strategy. The murals are created for non-locals to admire and, through a cascade effect, for the broader community to benefit economically. Community involvement is limited to approving the proposal for mural placement. Mural content and themes are decided upon by a committee composed of funding agencies and businesses. There is no attempt to achieve community consensus (Boissevain and Morton Arts Council). By adopting a consistent thematic approach to mural content within the area communities hope to create and market a local identity (Town of Stony Plain 2003). These districts are often selected for their heavy traffic flows and proximity to retail activity. The selection of specific mural sites is based on the wall's condition, surface

Table 2: Economic Development Model criteria.

Common Criteria: Goals	BC	MB	SK	**WE**
Main attraction tourism	√	√	√	√
Slow down tourism		√	√	√
Beautification	√	√		√
Create identity	√	√	√	√
Use heritage mural themes	√	√	√	
Attract new commercial interests	√	√	√	√
Create new employment opportunities	√			
Diversify economy	√	√	√	
Increase outsider spending within locality	√	√	√	√
Encourage residents to spend locally	√	√		√
Encourage residents to remain in locality	√	√	√	√
Attract new residents		√		
Encourage businesses to remain in locality	√	√	√	√
Quality of product more important than process	√	√	√	√

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and visibility as well as willingness of businesses to participate in mural development (Turner 2003). The paintings are designed and produced quickly by commissioned artists whose purpose is to meet the requirements of those funding the mural. Overall, the process of economic mural development is faster than the community approach; it takes place over a matter of weeks rather than months and the quality of the art is judged upon artistic skill rather than on the degree of community collaboration.

The process, however, only lays the groundwork for the ultimate objectives. The completion of the first few murals, the marketing of the project, accessibility of the location, appeal of the art, location of local retail activity, and so on, all influence the number of tourists who will be drawn to the murals and it is hoped, local businesses. These variables change in an inner city setting. The true measure of success for the economic mural project is whether it contributes to the long term economic stability of the locality. Those municipalities that have been most successful are those that have gained new residents and truly increased the flexibility of their economy by entering the tertiary sector markets (Barnes and Hayter 1992).

Examining Winnipeg's West End BIZ Mural Program

The West End BIZ encompasses five census tracts/neighbourhoods that cover a significant part of city's centre. Whereas Winnipeg's total population grew by over 15% between 1971 and 1996, the West End's population declined by 20%. This meant the loss of about 8000 local residents, consumers, and taxpayers. Many of the more than 30,000 people who now live there have either moved in recently, or stayed behind due to the availability of cheap accommodation. Areas of the BIZ closer to downtown have older buildings, a higher rate of depopulation and population turnover, a higher incidence of low income, higher poverty rates, and lower rates of home ownership.

The West End BIZ is a non-profit association whose motto is to "make the West End a better place to live, work, and play" by promoting and practicing community economic development within its boundaries (Turner 2003). In operation for over a decade, the BIZ has focused its efforts on improving the built environment so that it is more attractive to potential and existing business. The BIZ's initiatives have included street enhancement activities through the addition of trees, planters, brighter lighting, graffiti removal, and litter pick-up, the addition of bright signage distinguishing the area's boundaries, and the organization of a bicycle patrol. More recently, the BIZ has realized that the success of local businesses is closely tied to the well-being of the community and condition of the built environment. However, the BIZ's attempts at increasing community capacity have been limited; they have generally left the social work up to non-profit associations in the area.

Although mainly a residential area, the West End experiences high traffic volumes. The main avenues are lined by retail, commercial and industrial uses ranging from restaurants to electronics repair stores. As a result, the BIZ hopes to create additional opportunities for existing local businesses by expanding the current consumer base. They know that it is important to attract non-resident visitors, and are anxious to provide passers-by with a reason to stop into the West End neighbourhoods. Having heard that other places were successfully using mural development schemes to attract tourists, the BIZ trusted the experience of places such as Philadelphia and decided to see if a similar formula would work for the West End. The BIZ's approach is similar to EDOM strategies, but incorporates parts of CDOM models as well. The themes that have been decided upon for mural development are multiculturalism, famous people, and local heroes. To date, its hybrid strategy has resulted in the clustering of approximately fifty murals within its boundaries.

Table 3: *Involvement in the mural creation process.*

Involvement	BC	MB	SK	PA	WI	IL	**WE**
Artist(s)							
Consulted for approval							
Contributed ideas	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Assisted in design	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Helped to paint	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Funding Agency(ies)							
Consulted for approval	√	√	√	√	√		√
Contributed ideas	√	√	√		√		√
Assisted in design					√		
Helped to paint					√		
Business(es)							
Consulted for approval	√	√	√	√		√	√
Contributed ideas							√
Assisted in design							
Helped to paint							
Community Organization(s)							
Consulted for approval			√	√	√	√	√
Contributed ideas			√	√	√	√	√
Assisted in design				√	√	√	
Helped to paint				√	√	√	
Community Residents							
Consulted for approval	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Contributed ideas				√	√	√	√
Assisted in design					√	√	√
Helped to paint				√	√	√	√

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The first six murals went up in 1999 and met community opposition. They were criticized for their appearance, the process by which they were created, their cost and, eventually, their durability. These original murals were based on internet-retrieved images that were assembled into multicultural themes and painted indoors on *alumiply* boards which were later attached to outdoor walls. There was no community input. Following this initial effort, the BIZ acknowledged that it was important for residents to be able to watch the paintings being created and have since made sure that all paintings are original designs painted by Winnipeg artists in full view of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The majority of murals have been created in this way. However, the extent of direct community input has mainly been limited to the consultation with local business owners and community groups over mural themes.

In the summer of 2002, the BIZ also launched a Mural Mentorship Program which follows the community mural prescription more closely than the rest of their murals. While only three murals have been painted in this way due to the amount of time required to complete each painting, it has quickly become an annual tradition. University students are hired to work with local youths who volunteer to paint a community mural. Thus far, all three murals have been painted along Ellice Avenue. This street has a constant flow of traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, so the painting of the murals is witnessed at all times, both by community members and visitors. Whereas the rest of the BIZs murals involve only a handful of people, it is estimated that over 250 people helped with the summer 2004 community mural, through discussion of the project, the design, and the painting of the mural itself. In a number of ways, the West End BIZ's community murals exemplify the criteria set out by other community mural projects in Chicago, Madison, and Philadelphia: developing community participation skills, creating a constructive outlet for youth, promoting cultural awareness, displaying community identity, and beautifying the area. However, both the BIZ's resources and the amount of time that residents have available to contribute to mural development are limited.

Conclusion

The origins of mural painting and the reasons for its continued undertaking are rooted in social, cultural, political and economic challenges. People have become increasingly familiar with murals and have come to recognize them as interesting or pretty pictures on walls without understanding why murals are painted as public art. It is important to identify the motivation behind mural painting and to distinguish how

these factors ultimately influence variations in their geographical distribution, content, and development processes.

Although there are two established mural development models, increasingly mural development projects use various hybrid approaches to set goals and to execute their murals. The West End BIZ will not achieve its desired objectives of community revitalization and increased business opportunities without continued outreach and community involvement. The biggest challenge for the BIZ is that its goals are far broader than those of conventional models of mural development. Moroeever, their hybrid approach makes it more difficult to achieve and measure success. The sometimes conflicting agendas of community groups and businesses make reaching consensus on goals, procedures, and practices difficult. This can be ameliorated by direct consultation between business groups and communities. When the process is inclusive and participatory, mural development benefits all.

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