

# Learning From the Process: Promising Practices From Mural Arts' Work in Communities

Mural Arts Institute

Promising Practices



Dancers from the King Solomon Baptist Church at the mural dedication.  
*Family Interrupted* © 2012 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Eric Okdeh, 709 West Dauphin Street. Photo by Steve Weinik.

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## Introduction

After decades of participatory artmaking in and with communities in Philadelphia, Mural Arts has fielded many requests to share its experience. Other communities and organizations wish to benefit from what Mural Arts has learned about how to create meaningful community-based work. In response, Mural Arts launched the Mural Arts Institute in 2018. The institute sought to develop learning opportunities and materials, for its own use, and to increase its capacity to formally respond to knowledge sharing requests. As part of the Institute's work, Mural Arts hired Metris Arts Consulting to create a "learning synthesis" that describes the promising practices embedded in a selection of Mural Arts' past projects. This learning effort focused on *how* Mural Arts has approached community arts work. Mural Arts hoped to mine its own practice of artmaking to learn and grow along with the diverse partners and collaborators who have helped build its practice.

Together, we explored which approaches lead to successful and impactful programs and projects. We formed an advisory group comprised of artists, partner organization representatives, volunteers, and staff members. This strategy addressed Mural Arts' desire to include those who have developed these practices alongside Mural Arts. It also aligned with Metris' commitment to equitable research and evaluation. We consulted with this advisory committee at several points. In the project design phase, we fleshed out the methods, goals, and audiences of the learning synthesis effort together. The advisory committee also helped define what



constitutes a successful project. They generated an initial list of practices that make a project work. They reviewed survey questions that we sent to a wider list of artists and staff members. Toward the end of the learning synthesis project, the advisory group reviewed and gave feedback on the almost-final list of practices.

To investigate the most promising approaches to creating artwork in collaboration with communities, Metris took a deep dive into nine projects. We used the lens of four focus neighborhoods where Mural Arts has completed a significant body of work—Center City East, Kensington, Mantua, and South Philadelphia—to narrow down the list of possible projects. Then, we narrowed the list even more by surveying artists and staff members for their perspectives on which projects went particularly well and why. Finally, Mural Arts and Metris selected the nine projects featured in this document. We considered:

- The quality of the engagement process
- The range of Mural Arts programs and approaches represented
- Artists and staff members’ availability to speak with us
- Whether projects already had any documentation and learning efforts (completed or in progress)

From these nine projects, we selected four to feature in three case studies. One case focuses on a project within the Community Murals program (“ASpire: No Limits”) and one focuses on a project within the Art Education program

(“Micro to Macro”). The third case study combines two projects (“Southeast by Southeast” and the “Kensington Storefront”) to describe the Porch Light program storefront model.

Metris conducted 14 interviews with artists and staff members involved in these nine projects. We also conducted one focus group and one site visit, as well as attending one muraLAB internal learning discussion. During the site visit, we conducted brief interviews with 11 program participants and volunteers. During these conversations, we discussed many other Mural Arts projects and programs; most of the interviewees had been involved with Mural Arts for many years and in different capacities. Finally, we also reviewed materials and interview notes related to “Philly Painting” and “Finding the Light Within,” along with a number of existing case studies and toolkits featuring Mural Arts’ work.

We developed this document of promising practices by exploring what made these projects work well *and* what could have gone better. Our assumption was that Mural Arts has room to grow. As a result, this is not a “best practices” document. There are many “best” practices in the field that are not exemplified in these projects. We were convinced that exploring these featured projects would yield lessons that support Mural Arts’ ongoing learning alongside communities and in conversation with other practitioners. In some cases, we ended up with more questions to pick up in future learning efforts. In this deep dive into nine projects in their particularities, we invite you to learn along with us.

# OUTLINE



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# FEATURED PROJECTS

## Healing Begins Through Connection p. 8

Department: Porch Light  
Artist: Caledonia Curry (a.k.a. SWOON)  
Program Director: Laure E. Biron, LSW, MSS, MLSP, MFA  
Project Manager: Jess Lewis-Turner, PhD

## Kensington Storefront p. 9

Department: Porch Light  
Workshop Artists: Ashley Flynn, Lisa Kelley, Cory Kram, Kathryn Pannepacker, Rosalind Pichardo, and John Zerbe  
Program Director: Laure E. Biron, LSW, MSS, MLSP, MFA and Nadia Malik, MSW  
Program Manager: Pamela Draper, MMT, MTBC  
Storefront Staff: Michael Worthy

## Family Interrupted p. 7

Department: Restorative Justice  
Artist: Eric Okdeh, with input from individuals incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford and in the Philadelphia Prison System, adjudicated youth, returning citizens, and community and family members.  
Project Manager: Robyn Buseman, MS

## Micro to Macro p. 10

Department: Art Education  
Artist: Benjamin Volta  
Program Director: Lisa Murch  
Project Manager: Philip Asbury

## Familias Separadas p. 6

Series: Open Source: A Citywide Public Art Exhibition  
Department: Community Murals  
Artist: Michelle Angela Ortiz  
Curator: Pedro Alonzo  
Open Source Project Manager: Monica Campana

## ASpire: No Limits p. 4

Department: Community Murals  
Artist: Ernel Martinez  
Program Director and Project Manager: Cathy Harris  
Program Coordinator: Kevin Brown

## Colorful Legacy p. 5

Department: Porch Light  
Artist: Willis "Nomo" Humphrey and Keir Johnston  
Program Director: Laure E. Biron, LSW, MSS, MLSP, MFA  
Project Manager: Dave Kyu

## Our Park/Southwark p. 12

Department: Environmental Justice. Restored Spaces Initiative  
Artists: Basurama, Danielle Denk (The Trust for Public Land), James Aaron Dunn, Mateo Fernández-Muro, Shari Hersh (Mural Arts), and Gamar Markarian  
Community Design Leaders and Organizers: Khin Aye, Yuli Binsi Bakri, Eryani Chandra, Chin Chin, Sung Chin, Elizabeth Cristobal, Mark Ellis, Bilkis Esar, Noelia Garcia, Yuri Garcia, Monica Granados, Gabriela Ramos Guzman, Gibran Medina, Lizeth Morales, Yaneth Melendez, Olga, Dalila Romera, Elena Rosas, Sulay Sosa, Rosa Salgado, Hlawn Kip Sung, Ngun Tha Sung, Si Si Than, Josefina Atonal Tecuapacho, Farida Yusuf, and Kwok Xi Yao  
Program Director: Shari Hersh  
Project Team: Julius Ferraro, Kyla Van Buren, Ciara Williams, Emma Wu

## Southeast by Southeast p. 11

Department: Porch Light  
Lead Artist and Co-Founder: Shira Walinsky  
Program Director: Sara Ansell, MSW, MSSP, and Laure E. Biron, LSW, MSS, MLSP, MFA, and Nadia Malik, MSW  
Program Manager and Co-Founder: Melissa Fogg, MSW  
Storefront Staff: Naw Doh



# ASpire: No Limits

Completed in 2014, Mural Arts implemented this mural project within its Community Murals program, part of its earliest practice of creating murals with communities. Artist **Ernel Martinez** designed this mural celebrating the life and work of Dr. Shawn L. White, aka Air Smooth. Dr. White was an MC, recording artist, and producer who grew up in Point Breeze, where the mural is located. His lifework, however, was centered on health promotion—most notably, HIV/AIDS prevention among young African American men. The mural design features a portrait of Dr. White in front of an array of inspiring blocks of words laid out in the shape of a street map of the Point Breeze neighborhood. In addition to community meetings, the project team created a youth engagement program that used Dr. White’s legacy to inspire self-respect and healthy decision-making among

African American males. The program included a day-long workshop at Audenreid High School and a series of workshops at Jazz U Up barbershop, mirroring some of Dr. White’s own engagement strategies. The workshops included a photo portrait project called “I AM...” and opportunities to paint panels of “ASpire.” Mural Arts invited members of the Restorative Justice Guild (Mural Arts’ re-entry workforce program) to participate in these programs and three personal storytelling workshops with First Person Arts. In addition to Martinez, key team members and collaborators for this project were Cathy Harris (project manager), Nicole Fisher (mother of Dr. White’s son and Refuge Workshop designer), Kevin Brown (Barbershop Talks organizer), Will Little (Barbershop Talks organizer), and Lamont Wilson (“I AM...” photographer).



*ASpire: No Limits* © 2016 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Ernel Martinez. 21st and Ellsworth Streets. Photo by Steve Weinik.



## Colorful Legacy

Completed in 2015, this mural was the first Porch Light project that combined mural production and engagement with a series of town hall events. The mural production and town hall events together were called “Building Brotherhood: Engaging Males of Color.” Every year since, Mural Arts and City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual DisAbility Services (DBHIDS) have engaged a targeted group of participants and a wider public to raise awareness around a particular behavioral health theme in similar projects. For “Colorful Legacy,” artists **Willis “Nomo” Humphrey** and **Keir Johnston** developed the mural through workshops with young males of color. Three multi-service provider organizations in North and South Philadelphia hosted workshops: Congreso E3

Center, PRO ACT Recovery Community Center, and Diversified Community Services Dixon House. The project team also held public town hall meetings at each service provider site. Through town halls, they sought to raise awareness of the issues men and boys of color face in gaining access to education and jobs. By reducing stigma, they sought to increase men and boys' access to behavioral health services. Overall, they strived to build momentum for wellness (both community and individual) for a diverse group of Philadelphia men and boys of color. Hoping to reflect the city-wide nature of this conversation, the mural is located at a major transportation hub in West Philadelphia. DBHIDS used this collaboration with Mural Arts to launch an ongoing Engaging Males of Color Initiative.



*Colorful Legacy* © 2015 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Willis "Nomo" Humphrey & Keir Johnston. 4008 Chestnut Street. Photo by Steve Weinik.

# Familias Separadas (Phase 1)

Artist **Michelle Angela Ortiz** began this project in 2013. She worked with undocumented youth and families from Juntos, a Latino immigrant community-led organization. Ortiz collected audio stories from undocumented families that reveal the moment their loved ones were deported and how their lives changed before and after deportation. In 2015, Ortiz realized the first in a series of temporary site-specific public artworks that mark the locations and documents stories of immigrant families affected by deportations in Pennsylvania. Mural Arts supported this first set of installations as part of the Open Source exhibition, guest-curated by Pedro Alonzo. The site-specific installations included four centrally located sites: the street in front of the Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency building, on top of

the Compass Rose in the City Hall Courtyard, in front of Robert Indiana's "Love" sculpture, and in the 9th Street Market. At the ICE building, Ortiz led over 30 volunteers, community members, and undocumented families from Juntos to install the words of Ana, an undocumented mother detained at Berks Detention Center. ICE agents looked on as they installed the 90 feet long stenciled words, "WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, RISKING OUR LIVES, FOR OUR FAMILIES AND OUR FUTURE." ([See the short time-lapse video of this installation here.](#)) Ortiz has continued the "Familias Separadas" project with subsequent phases. She has completed a series of installations as part of Mural Arts' Monument Lab exhibition and also in Harrisburg, PA. She created a documentary about families detained at the Berks Detention Center called "Las Madres de Berks."



*Familias Separadas / Te Amo (I love you)* © 2015 Michelle Angela Ortiz. Love Park, 1599 John F Kennedy Blvd, Philadelphia, PA. Photo by Steve Weinik.



# Family Interrupted

Completed in 2012, artist **Eric Okdeh** developed this mural as part of the Restorative Justice program with input from inmates, probationers, ex-inmates, adjudicated youth, and community and family members. The project sparked a dialogue around the impact of incarceration on families, and the community at large, through the mural-making process. Okdeh worked with his mural class at Graterford Prison to collaboratively design and paint the mural. He incorporated these men's experiences as well as the stories collected through a series of engagements throughout the city. In collaboration with the Philadelphia Prison Society, Okdeh held workshops with participants impacted by incarceration. Participants ranged

from men who had their life sentences commuted to adjudicated youth at St. Gabriel Hall, who can qualify for weekend furloughs to see their families. Okdeh and the Graterford class also designed and painted colorful mailboxes placed in locations in affected neighborhoods and visiting rooms of prisons and juvenile facilities. The mailboxes contained practical information about the impact of incarceration on families and communities. They also gave inmates and community members the opportunity to send messages to be used in the mural and on the project's [website](#). In the church building near the mural site, Mural Arts held paint days for community members who wanted to contribute to the project.



*Family Interrupted* © 2012 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Eric Okdeh, 709 West Dauphin Street. Photo by Michael Reali.



# Healing Begins Through Connection

Completed in 2018, this Porch Light mural is the product of a residency by international artist **Swoon** and her collaborators that took place at the Kensington Storefront. Called “The Road Home,” the residency featured programming in the storefront, including beauty shop, toy-making, writing, drawing, and movie hangout activities. The artist team also coordinated programming with Prevention Point, the Kensington Storefront recovery services partner. For the project’s public programming, the team curated a day-long conference that focused on trauma and recovery featuring Dr. Gabor Maté at International House Philadelphia. To celebrate her experiences at Kensington Storefront, Swoon designed the

mural to feature portraits of the individuals—staff, volunteers, and participants—who make the Kensington Storefront a place for healing that combats social isolation. Swoon painted the portraits in her studio and artist Doug Jones installed the mural near the storefront on Kensington Avenue. Storefront participants and community members helped to paint the background of the mural at paint days. Project manager Jess Lewis-Turner provided an extra layer of coordination for this project, given that Swoon lives outside of Philadelphia. Collaborator Jessica Radovich also produced a zine as a result of the residency called *Everyday Healing*, focusing on mindfulness.



*Healing Begins Through Connection* © 2018 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Swoon, 2913 Kensington Avenue. Photo by Steve Weinik.

# Kensington Storefront

In March 2017, Mural Arts opened a storefront under the umbrella of the Porch Light program. It used the successful, blended arts and social services model of Southeast by Southeast. This new storefront is a partnership with New Kensington CDC, Impact Services, and Prevention Point. Located on Kensington Avenue, the team's goal is to uplift the resilience of a community struggling with drug addiction, crime, and housing insecurity. In the summer of 2017, just after the storefront opened and early in the experimental programming phase, the city completed a cleanup of a large nearby encampment of people experiencing

homelessness and opioid use disorder. The Kensington Storefront saw an uptick in the number of people in this situation coming by the space. It shifted its programming and services accordingly. Since then, the Kensington Storefront has developed into a safe space for wellness-focused artmaking and reflection. It strives to welcome all who come through the door and recognize their dignity. The storefront connects individuals to organizations that provide services and referrals that they might not otherwise encounter. It also serves as a hub for area organizations to collaborate.



*Voices of Survivors* workshop at the Kensington storefront, February 22, 2019. Photo by Steve Weinik.



# Micro to Macro

Completed in October 2014, the mural serves as the final product of a yearlong partnership between Mural Arts and the Morton McMichael Elementary School in the Mantua section of Philadelphia.

Artist **Benjamin Volta** worked closely with the school's 7th-grade science and math teachers. They developed programming that integrated art into each class' existing math and science curriculum. Additional afterschool programming with interested middle school students allowed Volta to assemble a group of students to design, paint, and drive the final mural project. By working both in and out of school, Volta was able to reach an average of 50 student participants per week. The

mural features a map of the world that, on one side morphs into trees. The trees branch out to images of neurons. It then zooms in on DNA, atoms, and particles. On the opposite side, the map scales out and provides images of the earth and the larger universe. Each aspect of the mural incorporates drawings directly from, or inspired by, the student participants. Members of the Restorative Justice Guild helped to install the mural that wraps two full sides of the school building and continues into the interior entryway. Community members and PECO employees also helped to paint the mural during paint days.



*Micro to Macro* © 2014 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Benjamin Volta. Morton McMichael Elementary School, 3543 Fairmount Avenue. Photo by Steve Weinik.



# Southeast by Southeast

In its beginning in 2012, the **Southeast by Southeast** project (Southeast Philadelphia and Southeast Asia) was a partnership between Mural Arts and Lutheran Children and Family Services (LCFS). Artist **Shira Walinsky** and social worker **Melissa Fogg** developed the storefront as a multi-disciplinary service center combining artmaking and social service delivery. Early on, Walinsky and artist Miriam Singer conducted printmaking workshops and community events featuring Karen, Chin, and Nepali culture. They sought out artists from among the refugee community to showcase their work. They found Bhutanese/Nepali dancers and Karen weavers from Burma. Fogg and LCFS brought volunteers, case aids, and multi-service providers. The activities in the storefront space

developed organically. Eventually, English-language learning and literacy and citizenship classes emerged as the most pressing needs as well as an interest in community gathering space and ways to celebrate their home cultures. In 2016, after a number of extensions on the lease and with the closing of Lutheran Children and Family Services, the project turned into a direct partnership between Mural Arts and DBHIDS, who was already funding the initiative. Since 2012, Walinsky has developed a body of work alongside the immigrant communities near the storefront space, including more than six murals, three books, a multi-media bus installation, a Monument Lab exhibition installation, and a series of films.



Language Lab © 2015 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Shira Walinsky, 604 Moore Street and 2106 South 8th Street. Photo by Michael Reali.

# Our Park/Southwark

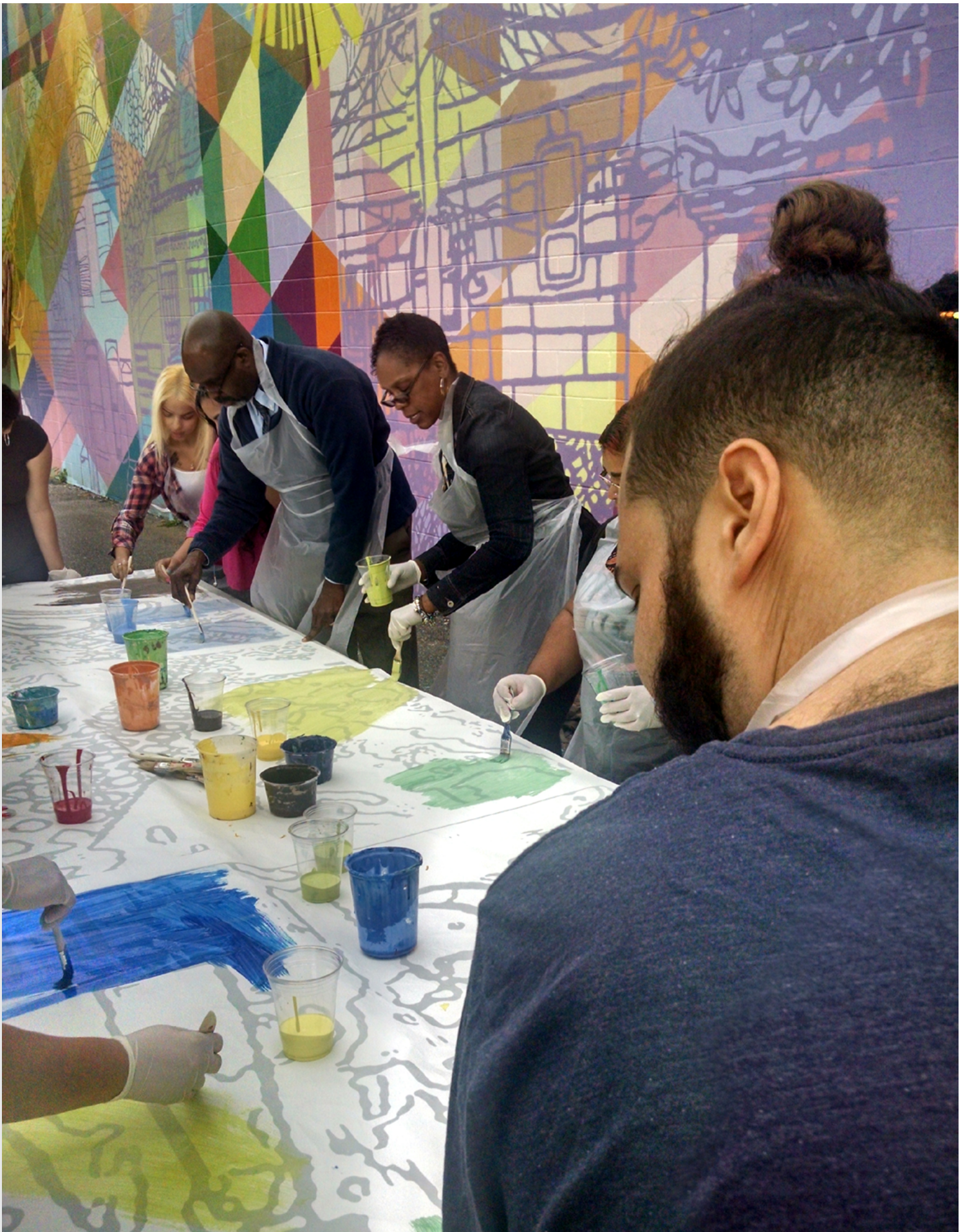
Beginning in 2016, the Mural Arts Restored Spaces Initiative and The Trust for Public Land engaged community members in a collaborative design process to transform and restore the schoolyard at Southwark School in South Philadelphia. Mural Arts staff member **Shari Hersh**, The Trust for Public Land program director **Danielle Denk**, and design strategists **Gamar Markarian** and **Mateo Fernández-Muro** invited community members into a variety of design activities. The Restored Spaces activities created a horizontal collaborative structure to work together and come to agreement across cultural and linguistic differences. These activities included playing a giant board game, designed from a map of the Southwark School city block, which allowed for lighthearted and uninhibited brainstorming of ideas. The resulting new schoolyard design includes rainwater gardens, new play equipment, a calming garden space, an outdoor classroom, an outdoor makerspace, and spaces for gathering and community events. While the community waited for the lengthy process of removing the asphalt in

the back schoolyard, Restored Spaces hired three Community Organizers and 26 Community Design Leaders (CDLs) to work alongside volunteers on designing and building elements for the front schoolyard. These community members worked with **Basurama**, a collective based in Madrid and Bilbao, to plan, design, and build seating and planters from repurposed school desks and tables. Eventually, the group designed and built additional elements to create a community gathering area in the front schoolyard and a makerspace in the back schoolyard. Communal meals at build days offered an opportunity to get to know and respect each other's food cultures. The camaraderie of the team grew as they learned fabrication skills and built together. Also, artist **James Aaron Dunn** worked with students from nearby Furness High School to create a mural titled "Weaving Culture" that faces the front schoolyard space. In the finished schoolyard—transformed into "**Our Park**"—community members will administer micro grants for community-led programs.



Southwark Schoolyard Gameplay, January 26, 2017. *Our Park/Southwark* © 2017 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Mateo Fernández-Muro and Gamar Markarian, Southwark School, 1835 South 9th Street. Photo by Steve Weinik.





*Colorful Legacy* © 2015 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Willis "Nomo" Humphrey & Keir Johnston. 4008 Chestnut Street. Photo by Steve Weinik.



# ROLES



## Collaboration Makes Mural Arts Projects and Programs Work

For these projects and programs to be successful, they involved participation from many different types of people. The balance of roles and responsibilities among these parties varies from project to project, but everyone works together to bring projects and programs to life. The artworks that are made are the products of this interactive process where everyone contributes. Yet, the artwork being produced is not always a physical work of art; the community and skills built in the process of working together can also be the artwork.

Time and again, interviewees mentioned good collaborative relationships and structures as the reasons their projects went well. The collaborative relationship between artists and project or program managers is key in all of Mural Arts' work. When these two team members have a good relationship, it goes a long way toward success. Artists and project or program managers "hold" the work together; they interact and coordinate with all the other team members. "The community" takes on different roles depending on the project, but it is the central component of every successful project or program. We describe community here as community collaborators, site stakeholders, and casual participants. Because the makeup of every team is different, the best project teams have clear communication and expectations about what each team member is responsible for doing, how much and what kinds of support will be available, and what kinds of input each member will give.

The following is a description of what the teams have looked like for the projects in this study, though many different configurations are possible:

## Mural Arts

Mural Arts, as an organization and the leadership within it, plays an important role in responding to community priorities and opportunities, finding funding, and setting goals for particular projects and programs in collaboration with partners and other leaders. Internal Mural Arts programs like Restored Spaces, Restorative Justice, and Porch Light focus on particular community issues and areas of impact. By focusing on one area of impact over time, they can build upon earlier relationships and successes. Often a project is set in motion when someone at Mural Arts has a conversation with a partner or an artist about a specific project idea because the work they are doing coincides with an area of focus. For instance, "Healing Begins Through Connection" came about because Jane Golden reached out to Swoon and invited her to come back to do a project in Kensington around trauma and addiction. Mural Arts' leadership also has a role in contracting with the artist and approving artwork designs. Mural Arts' organizational apparatus supports individual projects and programs through communications and managing finances.

## Funders

Many projects happen with significant support from one funder or a small group of funders. Mural Arts strategically aligns funding opportunities with ongoing priorities, programs, and relationships. Funders often dictate how the money should be used, so they sometimes have restrictions that shape how a project is realized. Mural Arts often looks for additional sources of funding to counterbalance restricted funds for a more comprehensive approach if necessary. Some funders are also partners in implementing the work. Notably, Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services (DBHIDS) is a funder who is also involved in many projects and programs as a partner. It devotes its own staff time and other resources to make a project happen. In this learning synthesis, DBHIDS funded and partnered on "Colorful Legacy," "Healing Begins Through Connection," and the two storefronts, Southeast by Southeast and Kensington Storefront.

## Partner Organizations

Partner organizations can help shape project implementation, providing support or directly carrying out essential tasks. For “Micro to Macro,” artist Ben Volta was embedded in Morton McMichael Public School. Naturally, the principal and selected teachers helped to implement this project. In another example, the artists for “Colorful Legacy” conducted workshops and collaborated with program participants at Congreso E3 Center, PRO-ACT Recovery Community Center, and Diversified Community Services Dixon House. These partner organizations provided their own program infrastructure to facilitate relationships with a diverse group of males of color.

## Project/Program Managers

Typically Mural Arts employees and sometimes consultants, these team members manage a project’s implementation and coordinate team members and partners. They are often the “face” of Mural Arts in the community. They sometimes meet with community members even before an artist is on board. As a result, project/program managers often lead the community engagement strategy, collaborate with artists, and bring Mural Arts’ network of existing relationships to bear. Project managers like Cathy Harris oversee all steps in the project process from the contract with an artist and shepherding the work through the design and review process to ordering the paint and supplies needed to realize the work. Program managers like Melissa Fogg oversee the schedule of programs and, particularly at the Porch Light storefronts, handle the logistics of managing a physical space. They may offer some of their own programs. Both project managers and program managers handle the budget and take the lead on necessary permissions and permits. This includes finding appropriate walls and getting a wall owner’s permission.

## Artists

Artists design mural projects and/or lead workshops and programs. They are contracted on a project-by-project basis or join a project as Mural Arts staff artists. Artists engage community members in the process of creating

an artwork, using an approach tailored for each project and their own process and discipline. Artists sometimes work as part of a team of multi-disciplinary collaborators, as Swoon did for “Healing Begins Through Connection,” or as part of a collective, as Keir Johnston and Willis “Nomo” Humphrey did for “Colorful Legacy.” Collaborators can include individuals from varying disciplines depending on the project context and vision, such as designers, crafts people, musicians, poets, writers, dancers, architects, social workers, or art therapists. Some artists bring a body of work to Mural Arts around a particular issue, like Eric Okdeh’s focus on restorative justice and Michelle Angela Ortiz’s series of works around immigration/deportation. Shira Walinsky has developed a body of work around the experiences of refugees at the Southeast by Southeast storefront. Some temporary projects and exhibitions, like Open Source or Monument Lab, also have a curator who organizes a series of artworks around a theme or vision.

## Crew/Assistant Artists

These are individuals who may be Mural Arts employees or hired specifically by the artists to work on project installation and implementation. They range from artists who are skilled at mural installation and painting to individuals who are participating as part of a training program, like the Apprenticeship program or the Restorative Justice Guild. Artists typically complete and oversee the installation of their own designs. Some artists, however, may complete a design that other artists are hired to implement and install. For instance, Swoon designed “Healing Begins Through Connection” and painted the portraits in her studio. But, since she was not in Philadelphia, artist Doug Woods realized the mural. Often the mural is too large for any one person to paint. An extreme example is “Philly Painting” by Haas & Hahn, which took a year for lead muralist Felix St. Fort and a team of experienced and recently trained assistants from the neighborhood to install.

## Community Collaborators

These individuals and groups play a special role in the design process and are often co-creators of the final designs. These collaborators are



not professional artists. Mural Arts, partner organizations, or the artists themselves invite them into the process. Artists might feature aspects of these individuals' own stories in the artwork and consult with them closely. Community collaborators include Nicole Fisher, the mother of Dr. Shawn White's son, who was part of the team for "ASpire: No Limits," or the families affected by deportation that Ortiz worked with for "Familias Separadas." Artists invite other collaborators into a participatory design process as a group because of their connection to a particular topic or place. For instance, Ben Volta led students and teachers through the design process for "Micro to Macro" within their math and science curricula. The Mural Arts class at SCI Graterford Prison had been working with Eric Okdeh before "Family Interrupted." This resulted in an amazing "shorthand" among the collaborators from which to build. For "Our Park/Southwark," Mural Arts hired community members to serve as Community Organizers and Community Design Leaders to work with Basurama. They co-created benches, planters, and an outdoor makerspace, further developing the community's ownership of the re-designed schoolyard.

## Site Neighbors and Stakeholders

These individuals and groups are tied to the specific site where an artwork is installed or a program is conducted. They include the wall owner and site's immediate neighbors, as well as neighborhood organizations. Many of these individuals provide feedback on artwork designs,

sometimes shifting the final design. Mural Arts will gather stakeholders together to discuss a mural project several times throughout the process and sometimes will attend community meetings that are already happening to be available for questions. Depending on the location of a mural, it is a long-standing practice of Mural Arts to knock on doors and solicit individual feedback from neighbors. This ensures that those who will most often experience the final mural have had an opportunity to participate in the process. Sometimes this even occurs even before the artist is selected, so that neighbors can give feedback on the style of work and receive information about upcoming meetings and activities.

## Casual Participants and Targeted Publics

These people participate in a program related to a project but may not have any other connection to the site or the goals of the project. While many projects hold paint days where collaborators and neighbors help paint the designed mural, some have paint days for the general public. The "Micro to Macro" project included paint days for the community and PECO employees, a major funder for the project. Every year, one Porch Light project holds town hall-style events or conferences around a health topic, like those that were associated with "Colorful Legacy" and "Healing Begins Through Connection." These have targeted audiences around the topic of the project, such as engaging men of color around wellness or resources for those who provide recovery services. Sometimes Mural Arts holds centrally located events that are open to the general public.



Process Portrait. *ASpire: No Limits* © 2016 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Ernel Martinez. 21st and Ellsworth Streets. Photo by Lamont Wilson.



# HOW IT'S DONE



## What Makes a Successful Project Soar

Besides having the right people in place working well together, Mural Arts and its collaborators have learned a lot about the “how” of especially impactful work. These projects and programs are multifaceted. Sometimes what makes them work is unique to that project, team, or situation. Yet, embedded promising practices can apply to multiple projects and programs. These promising practices are not unique to Mural Arts, or even to Philadelphia. Others seeking to implement impactful, community-engaged artworks and programs can learn from them.

### **Coordinate project activities around a clear and realistic goal for community impact**

Mural Arts has tackled a wide variety of social issues through artmaking; these nine projects are no exception. In all of the elements of “ASpire,” from the mural design to the programming activities, team members focused on telling Dr. White’s story. They sought to inspire African American boys and young men and advance health promotion. It’s important to have all team members help articulate and establish the goal from the start. All projects, however, face the challenge of balancing aspirational, big-impact goals with the practical constraints of what they can accomplish in a given timeframe or budget. Problems arise when team members “bite off more than they can chew,” especially if the goals for community impact are better suited to a sustained effort than a one-off engagement. Artmaking has the potential to allow people to dream big and to address deep and intractable social issues, but also to over-promise. Traumatized and marginalized communities have often endured long histories of broken promises. Over-promising and under-delivering can jeopardize the trust that communities have placed in the project and your relationship. It makes it more difficult to gain trust for future projects. At worst, it re-traumatizes communities and does more harm than good.

### **Carefully consider skills, style, and affinity with theme when selecting an artist**

Mural Arts weighs multiple concerns when selecting an artist, including the technical demand of a project, the opportunity to advance artists learning mural skills, the affinity with the topic or issue, the project’s goal, a particular artist’s voice, and community dynamics. Sometimes Mural Arts issues an open call for artists. Other times, it invites artists to work on a project because of specific skills and connections to the project theme. Artist Benjamin Volta had already completed a long-term residency at Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, where he produced work in collaboration with math and science students, when Mural Arts invited him to work on what became “Micro to Macro.” Almost all of the artists who led these featured projects had worked on projects with Mural Arts before; Mural Arts trusted their artmaking and community engagement skills. Others had key skills and experiences that aligned

with community goals. Often Mural Arts builds a team of artists, designers, and craftspeople to gather all the necessary skills to complete a project. For instance, Mural Arts has paired artists newer to mural-making and working with communities, or based outside of Philadelphia, with another artist to create a complementary team. Many of the assistants for these projects had also been program participants or assistants for Mural Arts before, and some went on from these featured projects to lead projects of their own with Mural Arts.

## **Select artists and team members who will work responsibly with the community**

In the process of creating art with community members, artists and staff need to have the right cultural competencies, skills, and experiences to interact with community members. Artists who share the experiences and cultural background of the community they work with can often develop work that is especially meaningful to that community. The goal of “Colorful Legacy” centered on engaging males of color. Mural Arts, therefore, selected artists who were men of color and whose work had represented issues around African American and Latinx experiences. Artists who have worked in particular communities or addressed particular issues for many years can bring essential competencies and relationships into the artmaking process. Ortiz had worked for two years with the families featured in “Familias Separadas.” She held several screening calls before one woman would agree to talk with her. Some vulnerable communities require particular preparations on the part of artists and team members with direct interactions with the community; this includes individuals affected by incarceration, addiction, trauma, and/or displacement. Mural Arts helped to prepare Swoon and her team for working with individuals with opioid use disorder at the Kensington Storefront. They discussed what to expect and what supports the artist team would need. Even though Swoon had family experiences related to addiction, she and her team still needed preparation. Direct experience with a specific community is a plus, but the key is that the artists have the skills and experience to engage in a participatory process that aligns with that community’s values and stated needs.

## **Offer multiple, diverse, and meaningful opportunities for community members to participate in the artistic process**

Some projects define a core community to interact with based on the project goals. Yet, often you can better reach your project goals when you provide opportunities for many different types of people to engage and have input. It’s important to create engagement opportunities that offer different modalities. These can appeal to different interests and require different amounts of time and levels of expertise. In exploring how families are impacted by incarceration, “Family Interrupted” is one example of a project that offered varied and rich avenues to connect. In partnership with the Pennsylvania Prison Society, Mural Arts conducted workshops with men at Graterford Prison and youth at St. Gabriel’s Hall. Okdeh worked with three men who had their life sentences commuted. He also engaged others who had served their time and had been released to share their stories, notably with the Mural Arts’ Youth Violence Reduction Program. The mural-making class at Graterford painted mailboxes that Mural Arts placed in visitation waiting rooms and general public places throughout the city. Individuals could respond to prompts about incarceration and place them in the mailboxes. In addition to paint days near the mural site and the dedication, the public can engage with the mural content through QR codes. They can also contribute their own stories to a website connected to the project. These multiple avenues allowed a range of individuals—those deeply connected to the issues addressed to those just learning about them—to engage with the experiences of families impacted by incarceration in a meaningful way.



## Take enough time to build trust and develop relationships

Collaborating with communities to create artwork and art programs takes time. Artists need to get to know a community and their hopes and desires. Artists must also form relationships built on trust and mutual respect. Only then can they create artwork with community members that responds to and reflects that community. At Mural Arts, project managers play a special role in connecting artists to organizations and individuals, so that they can build on Mural Arts' existing relationships. Trust is especially important for artists and community collaborators; the success of their collaborations often rests on their ability to open up with each other. "ASpire: No Limits" would not have worked without the strong relationship between Ernel Martinez and Nicole Fisher. In the Porch Light storefront spaces, Southeast by Southeast and the Kensington Storefront, program staff have invested in long-term relationships within the storefronts' respective communities. Both of these spaces required at least a year to develop responsive programming designed around the assets and needs particular to each community. After a period of trial and error, building and maintaining the community's trust involves being transparent about project goals, roles, and responsibilities. That allows individual community members to know what to expect and to commit their own time and energy to a project or program. It's vitally important to follow through on your promises and have a consistent presence in the community. Ultimately, relationships built over time on a foundation of trust can lead to collaborations that benefit everyone involved.

## Create a sense of ownership through community contributions

Collaborative and participatory artmaking is at the core of these successful projects and programs. The hallmark of a good engagement process is when community members feel that they have been involved in something and artists feel that the engagement feeds into the artwork. The final products reflect the input and contributions of community members as well as the artist's vision for the work. The team should solicit community input early in the process, before the design is already finished, so that community members' feedback does not feel like a rubber stamp. When artists invite individuals into a design process, there is an opportunity to build a reflective or imaginative practice together. Artists listen deeply to community members' thoughts, experiences, and design ideas, and sometimes incorporate their physical drawings. These contributions should be treated with respect and credited appropriately, even as they are often transformed into final products that community members could not have created on their own, as in "Micro to Macro." For some artists like Eric Okdeh, this means that it is important for their collaborators to be able to recognize their contributions in the final designs. For other artists, it means making sure that the contributors understand how their contributions will be used and potentially changed. When projects or programs solicit individual stories and narratives, like for "Familias Separadas," artists take particular care that individuals give their permission for their materials to be used in a larger project or program.

## Prioritize and celebrate community assets and cultural traditions

Artwork created with communities can heighten its impact by using an asset-based lens in designing artwork and developing programs. Artists and team members should adopt a posture of learning from a community; they should listen for and respect community members' depth of knowledge. Design solutions are better when you prioritize local expertise and build on community strengths. Team members should assume that there are assets to celebrate, before identifying needs and how a project might bring new assets to bear. Many successful projects, such as "ASpire" and "Colorful Legacy," visually represent and celebrate people in the community within artworks. Artists can also uncover and celebrate cultural assets and "naturally-occurring artists." These individuals may not have been previously visible to outsiders. On top of celebrating Karen, Chin, and Nepali culture in projects, Southeast by Southeast has engaged community artists to lead weaving demonstrations and poetry workshops. All of the programming in the Kensington Storefront celebrates the ability for creativity and self-expression in every person that walks through the door. This uplifting approach powerfully fosters a sense of individual and neighborhood pride.

## Choose a significant site and remain sensitive to community dynamics

Where a mural is installed, or a program takes place, is crucial to the success of a project. For murals, Mural Arts and project managers must take into account the size and suitability of a wall for the physical installation of a mural. When considering site selection in a particular neighborhood, Mural Arts also remains sensitive to larger community dynamics such as development and potential displacement. Some program areas, like Restored Spaces, embody their commitment to equity by entrusting site selection to those most impacted by the issue at hand. At the very least, a selected site should not be imminently in danger of being lost to development. Mural Arts must also select wall owners who are appropriate long-term partners.

Sometimes, the design of the mural will integrate location features, creating a site-specific design. The “Family Interrupted” mural is an excellent example of this; the wall makes a “w” shape, which Okdeh incorporated into the design. The first panel (on the left) represents the families on the outside. They maintain relationships at a distance and raise families on their own. The panel on the far right, initially invisible, depicts incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals’ stories. In the “v” in the middle, the mural shows visiting room life where the two sides try to connect. The design also incorporates the stained-glass windows of the adjacent Baptist church. Other times, a mural’s location is significant because of visual references to the surrounding community. Who will see it and how it responds to larger features of the neighborhood increase a work’s meaning. Ortiz selected the sites for “Familias Separadas” for the significant impact of their Center City locations and proximity to other symbols such Love Park and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement building.

Site selection is no less crucial for ongoing programming. The Kensington Storefront and Southeast by Southeast sites are close to where participants live or regularly frequent. This is especially important for developing long-term relationships. Program sites must also be welcoming to intended participants. Storefronts have the added advantage of making visible what is happening inside. This can help invite individuals to come in, if they see people like them involved. Physical spaces can also be designed and arranged for participants’ particular needs (children, persons with disabilities, individuals in behavioral health treatment, etc.).

## Commit adequate resources to support deep engagement and quality work

Designing artwork with a community or providing arts programming in community settings requires a lot of time from artists and community members alike. There should, therefore, be enough financial resources to adequately support the vision for a project. Artists should be paid at least a living wage. When appropriate, honor community collaborators’ time and efforts with wages or stipends. Paid assistants and apprentices can be essential to realizing a project’s full vision. As part of the Arts Education program, Volta had an assistant in the classroom and during the after-school programs for “Micro to Macro.” The assistant ended up being a collaborative partner in engaging the students. In the beginning of “Micro to Macro,” the budget was only sufficient to install on some of the walls of the school. However, Volta and the school developed a vision for a mural that would wrap two sides of the building and completely transform the school exterior. Mural Arts found the resources to complete the full vision of the mural, including a team of assistants from the Restorative Justice Guild to help install it.

Engagement is time- and resource-intensive. “Our Park/Southwark” required translation and interpretation for five languages as well as in-person design facilitators to make an international collaborative design process work. Residency-style projects or programs offer opportunities to support artists’ direct engagement with communities. They must, however, compensate artists for community engagement planning/execution and the realization of stand-alone work, if expected. Programs also require additional and sometimes unique resources. The storefronts require space, staff, and individualized resources such as interpreters and training on how to use Narcan. If the budget is smaller than the vision, teams can be strategic about putting resources toward the elements of engagement that will have the most impact. Projects with smaller budgets may present opportunities to produce something similar on a smaller scale or to complete the work in phases.



## Be willing to take risks and embrace critical reflection

Artists bring “outside the box” thinking; they powerfully combine art and social issues. Producing innovative and impactful artwork often means trying something new that hasn’t been tried before and accepting that it may not work. For instance, Mural Arts and the partner organizations at the Kensington Storefront experimentally developed programming to see what worked and what didn’t. Many artists cited the support they received for their vision, and the risks they were taking, as the reasons their particular projects went well. Sometimes the support for their vision came from Mural Arts leadership or a curatorial team. Project managers, however, are the frontline of support and need to have the artist’s back. One project that took a big risk that paid off was the “Somos Seres Humanos (We Are Human Beings)” installation in front of the ICE building as part of “Familias Separadas.” Open Source curator Pedro Alonzo supported Ortiz’s vision, and Ortiz was persistent in working out the logistics to make the project work. Ortiz made a strong case to the Streets Commissioner and made it easy for him to say “yes” to using the street. And Ortiz had to ensure that the volunteers, who included undocumented families, would be safe during installation. In the end, the project had a significant visual impact and garnered considerable media attention. It met the goal of creating a platform to tell the stories of families affected by deportation and immigration detention. Other considerations include the fact that, sometimes, a temporary installation can take a lot more risks than something that will become a neighborhood fixture. Also, Mural Arts’ decades of successful work in and with the City of Philadelphia and stability as an organization can enable it to be more risk tolerant. A fledgling organization trying to prove itself to community leaders may need to take less risk.

## Project timing is of the essence

For every project, team members need enough time to plan the project, work with the community, and install the work. Some projects have particular constraints/opportunities that make timing even more crucial. A school-based project, for instance, necessitates keeping most of the engagement and project work within the school year. For “Micro to Macro,” working with the 7th grade was strategic, so that the students would be able to enjoy the mural that they worked on for at least another year when they come back for 8th grade. Other projects coincide with larger conversations and events, so that their timing heightens the projects’ impact. As part of Southeast by Southeast, the “47 Stories” and “Free Speech” projects came around the time of the 2016 presidential election. Nationally and locally, there were intense conversations and rhetoric around immigration and refugees. These projects spoke to those conversations in a way that would have been less resonant had the timing been different.

## Remain flexible within the iterative process of developing artwork in community

All team members have to be flexible enough to adapt to community issues, project logistics, and unexpected artistic insights. The artistic process is naturally iterative. The process of designing an artwork with, and in response to, community is even more so. It is important to make funding requests that allow for flexibility and help funders understand what to expect. Proposals that emphasize process, values, and impacts will generate better flexibility than those that focus on defined activities and deliverables. Project managers, especially, balance guiding a project within constraints (project goals, logistics, and budget) with remaining flexible to adapt to community-based processes. Project managers can also be creative partners in problem-solving as logistical hurdles arise. A seemingly mundane detail like ordering paint can turn into an opportunity to rethink the design. For “Healing Begins Through Connection,” Swoon’s original design included a gold color, but the paint that was within the budget was too brown. Project manager Jess Lewis-Turner also pointed out that gold paint can be difficult to paint, so it is not very good for murals that will be painted by the community at a paint day. The conversation between Swoon, Doug Woods, and Jess Lewis-Turner provided a workaround to adapt the mural design without the gold paint. Good communication allows project teams to overcome unexpected hurdles.

## **Foster inclusive communication so that everyone can hear and be heard**

Mural Arts has decades of experience collaborating with site neighbors and stakeholders for a mural. The key is to communicate regularly among stakeholders and make sure everyone has a voice in the process every step of the way. Listening widely and carefully will help avoid conflicts and misunderstandings. Clear communication ensures that no one feels surprised by the final result when kept abreast of project developments or delays. This process should be as inclusive as possible and help community members listen to each other. Projects sometimes bring together diverse stakeholders who struggle to get along. During the “ASpire” project, neighbors to the mural site were a mix of long-time residents and newer transplants, including the wall owner. Despite these potential differences, all the community members embraced the mural design process and final artwork. The project team credited involving multiple partners in the community and regular communication through multiple channels. The strong design also helped, by merging a representation of an African American pillar of the community with a bold, almost modernistic color blocks of text in the shape of the neighborhood map. In more contentious projects, Mural Arts takes care to make sure all the voices are heard, even if one voice is louder than the others. Mural Arts has learned that people often use these processes as a way to vent their frustration. When it works well, the process is about coming together as a community. Mural Arts can help the community leverage the power and opportunities that arise in that process.

## **Invest in strong partnerships to enhance impact**

Collaborative public art projects can bring together community organizations and funding opportunities to address entrenched community issues. All of these projects succeeded because of strong partnerships around common goals. In particular, for “Colorful Legacy,” the partnership with DBHIDS and the programming sites brought significant resources and enhanced community engagement activities. Since this project was part of its larger Engaging Men of Color Initiative, DBHIDS devoted staff time to the project. They co-produced the series of town halls and leveraged their networks to drive event attendance. This was also the first yearly mural project where DBHIDS and Mural Arts worked together through Porch Light to create a mural addressing a behavioral health issue. Mural Arts project director Laure Biron invested significant time and energy into building the relationships with her DBHIDS colleagues. She coordinated project implementation across organizations. Three other partner organizations—Congreso, Diversified Community Services, and PRO-ACT—hosted town halls and served as workshop sites for artists and their program participants. Through these partnerships, the programming generated a conversation about the behavioral health challenges experienced by males of color across neighborhoods in the Philadelphia region. The larger Porch Light program is a partnership with DBHIDS, Mural Arts, and provider sites that seeks to combine arts and social service delivery to work towards universal health and wellness among Philadelphians, especially those dealing with mental health issues or trauma. Together, the partners design programs that offer transformational experiences that allow for different kinds of interactions with social services.

## **Strategically pool resources and seek cross-program synergies**

Mural Arts is a large organization with many program areas. It often has opportunities to internally coordinate efforts to have a greater impact than an individual project could on its own. By aligning individual projects with more than one program, Mural Arts also realizes many opportunities to focus resources on ongoing strategic initiatives. These synergies often present themselves in relation to Art Education—youth engagement is a feature of so many projects. For example, Mural Arts deepened the “ASpire: No Limits” engagement and impacts by developing workshops for youth around the mural’s theme. It enlisted the Art Education program to help. “ASpire” also engaged Restorative Justice youth and young adults in the Refuge Workshop and First Person Arts partnership. In another example, the Art Education team currently holds one of their programs at the Southeast by Southeast storefront twice a week. This is not just a strategic use of space. It also brings in fresh perspectives and new youth to the storefront. Another frequent strategic alignment is between the Restorative Justice program, specifically the Guild, and mural projects that offer training and work opportunities. For instance, through “Micro to Macro,” re-entering individuals who were ready to take on more responsibility took a leadership role on the mural installation crew.



## Plan for an afterlife for the project

Projects that make a big impact often have “stickiness.”<sup>1</sup> They resonate with participants and community members long after the project is complete. Team members should plan for the afterlife of a project to maximize everyone’s energy and resource investments. The first way to do this is to make sure to document all of the elements of a project, including the process and engagement activities that add meaning to the final product. This is especially important for temporary projects, like the “Familias Separadas” installations. Without the pictures and video documentation of the installation process, one would not know that these installations existed. Now the installations can continue having an impact with new audiences through the documentation. For “ASpire: No Limits,” the project team invested in multiple forms of documentation for this project: a video documenting the Refuge Workshop, a 12-page program booklet distributed at the dedication, and a website. These forms of documentation build on the “From Man to Man” documentary to create a group of tools for telling the story of the project and Dr. White’s life.

Another important way that Mural Arts often sustains an afterlife for a project is to create avenues to maintain the relationships and connections made during the project. The storefront spaces offer an effective platform to continue to nurture a sense of community built through a project. For example, Swoon lives outside of Philadelphia and is not a part of the regular programming at the Kensington Storefront. The relationships, however, built among community members and staff through her residency, live on in the storefront itself. The “Healing Begins Through Connection” mural celebrates the sense of community at the storefront and is a point of pride for those strongly connected to the space.

Finally, projects can have an afterlife by living on in associated projects and programs. “Family Interrupted,” for instance, featured a project website that includes documentation and opportunities for individuals to share their stories. Through an exhibition at the Philadelphia History Museum, it also continued to connect the public with how families are impacted by incarceration. The exhibit contained a 14-foot reproduction of the mural, including the 22 scannable QR codes that link to audio files from mural process participants. The exhibit also included two of the mailboxes used to collect stories from the public in waiting rooms. Mural Arts also continues to activate engagement with the mural itself by including the mural as a regular stop during its tour programs.

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1 For more information on “stickiness” and other features of arts for change, see John Borstel et al., “Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change” (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, May 2017), <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>.



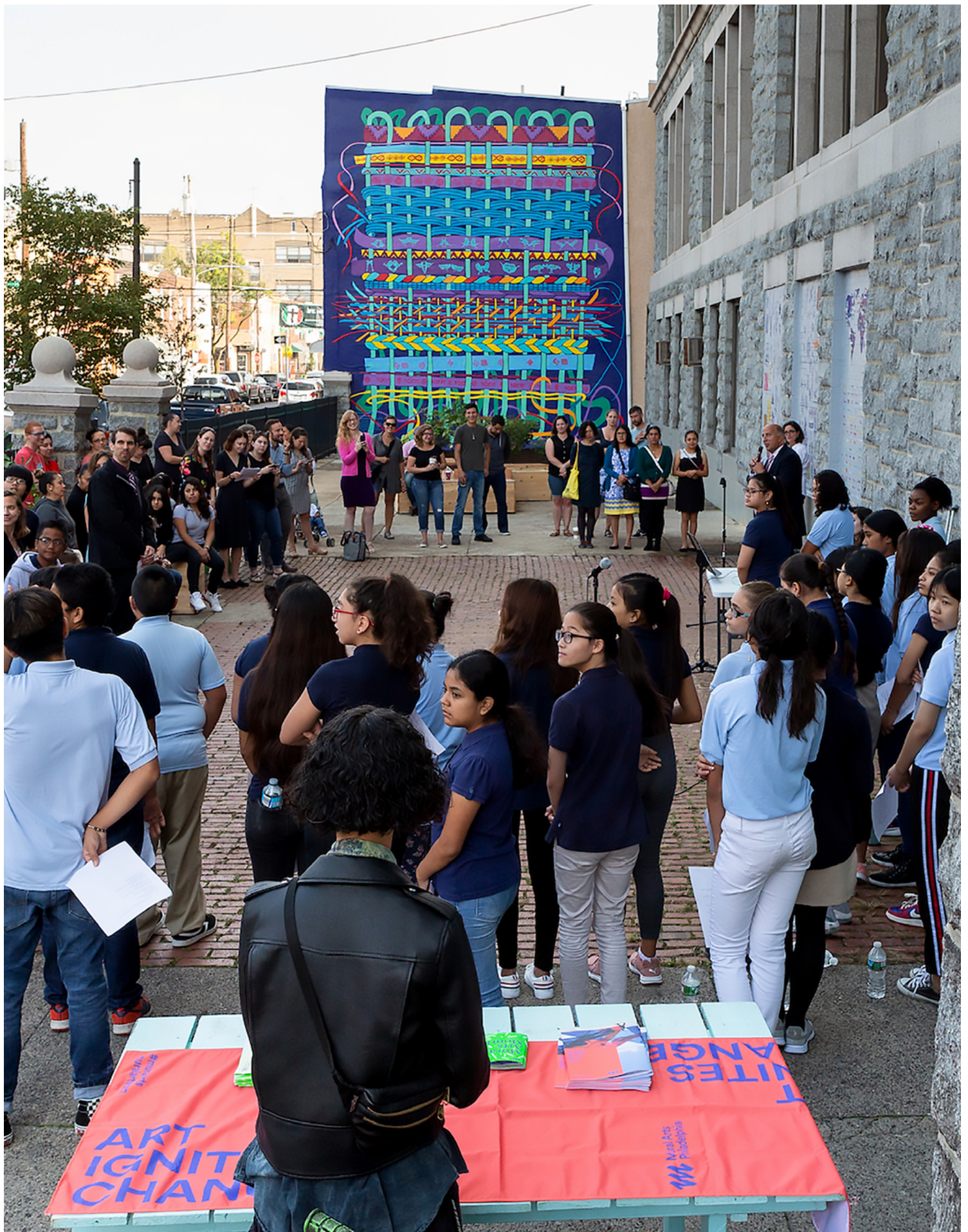


*Voices of Survivors* workshop at the Kensington storefront, February 22, 2019. Photo by Steve Weinik.



*Se Siente El Miedo (I Feel the Fear)* installed at the 9th Street Outdoor Market, Philadelphia / © 2015 Michelle Angela Ortiz. Photo by Steve Weinik.





Our Park/Southwark © 2017 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / James Dunn and Basurama Collective, Southwark School, 1835 South 9th Street. Photo by Steve Weinik.



# PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

## Our Park/ Southwark

The “Our Park/Southwark” project embodies many of the features of successful projects outlined in this document. It also exemplifies the recommendations to deepen participatory artmaking around building on and sustaining relationships from previous work, connecting to larger equity efforts, doing less for a greater impact, creating multiple and diverse ways to connect with the project, building community capacity, and investing in intangible outcomes.

The “Our Park/Southwark” project grew out of a previous collaboration between Restored Spaces and CohStra, called “[Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge](#).” The participants in that project identified both a need and an opportunity in the Southwark School yard to restore an asphalt-covered site to a green space. One of the goals of “Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge” was to build a local network of sustained relationships to create a foundation for future community-driven projects. For “Our Park/Southwark,” relationships with individuals and organizations generated in that previous project helped make outreach and engagement a success. For instance, Bethanna—the Community Umbrella Agency supporting families in the neighborhood—was involved in both projects and their continued engagement was very helpful.

Foremost, the “Our Park/Southwark” project used an environmental justice approach alongside ongoing community efforts in South Philadelphia. The project responded to the fact that the surrounding neighborhood faces environmental issues generated by inequitable conditions, such as a lack of greenspace, more litter, and

fewer resources to address climate change. The partnership between The Trust for Public Land, Restored Spaces, and community members was part of efforts to build stormwater catchment gardens throughout the city. An environmental justice approach mandates that those who are impacted be the ones to design solutions. To that end, the artistic team (Hersh, Denk, Markarian, Fernández-Muro, Basurama, and Dunn) facilitated a design process where community members themselves transformed the schoolyard from hardscape to a more climate-change resistant space for a variety of community uses. The group selected Basurama because of their methodology of co-designing and building with communities. In addition, the collective specializes in designing with waste materials (“basura” means “trash” in Spanish), aligning with the project goal of transforming the space through reuse to encourage rethinking what trash is.

The project unfolded over about 3.5 years. In Restored Spaces work, long timeframes are typical. Spending more time working with a community is part of an approach that places equity at the center. This removes some of the opportunistic dynamic of a nonprofit dropping in to do a project and leaving, while benefiting from the time and insights of community members to build the organization’s own reputation for innovative projects. This is also how “Our Park/Southwark” serves as an example of doing fewer projects in order to have greater strategic impact.

Not only did the team offer multiple, diverse, and meaningful ways for community members to connect. From the get-go, they also set up



the project to include community ownership and capacity-building. For instance, playing a game to create the schoolyard design positioned everyone as equals around the board. Community members and children played the game with interpreters, deciding what design solutions to use and placing them on the board. This gave everyone agency in the process and made sure the solutions were grounded in their knowledge and understanding of the site. Markarian and Fernández-Muro also conducted an in-depth design charette with a 3rd-grade class, which involved the board game and a site analysis. Flyers went home with children to invite parents to share their memories of school and schoolyards in their countries of origin. The team used a “Postcards From the Future” activity to invite participants to project themselves into the future space they were creating. All of these activities led community members to articulate a vision for the schoolyard as a “Weaving of Cultures.” Dunn worked with Furness High School students to explore this theme. They researched weaving traditions in each country represented in the community. The students each designed an individual strand of the woven mural design that corresponded to a tradition they researched.

The team’s community capacity-building commitment also carried over to the design process for the front schoolyard fixtures and backyard makerspace. Restored Spaces allocated resources to hire community members to work as Community Design Leaders/Organizers (CDLs). The CDLs committed to attending meetings and build days. Paying these individuals honored their time, especially important given challenges community members faced finding time amongst

their other commitments. Mural Arts and Basurama identified discarded desks from the School District of Philadelphia’s waste stream. Basurama began designing with the CDLs, starting by cataloging the possibilities with the materials. They took the CDLs through each decision to come up with designs for benches and planters that make up a gathering space and the makerspace. Basurama and the CDLs then built the fixtures together using readily accessible tools. Build days were as much about building community as building fixtures. Basurama created a relaxing atmosphere where everyone could have fun building together. To increase understanding for one another’s religions and backgrounds, Mural Arts paid community members to prepare meals that reflected their cultures.

All of the project activities created a strong sense of belonging and new networks across languages and cultures. The project participants now have connections with other immigrant families for friendship and support. Community members have a sense of ownership over the completed front yard. They are already putting it to use, even while the back yard is still under construction. Community members are maintaining the planters on their own, because they feel responsible for the fixtures they co-created and built together. The project momentum will continue when the makerspace in the back yard is complete. Mural Arts has set aside money for micro-grants for makerspace programming. Community members will decide what projects to green-light, and they will lead the programming in their redesigned schoolyard/community park. The community keeps wanting to do more together—a strong indication that the project built community, not just artworks.





Building the makerspace. *Our Park/Southwark* © 2019 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Basurama Collective, Southwark School, 1835 South 9th Street. Photo by Gamar Markarian.



# LEVEL UP



## How Can We Go Deeper?

We invited those interviewed for this learning synthesis to reflect on opportunities for Mural Arts to deepen and improve these promising practices. These recommendations highlight the fact that there are challenges in community-based artmaking that an organization with decades of experience still faces and grapples with. Mural Arts' learning in these areas can be instructive for others. It points to what to look out for when developing a community-based art practice.

### Do less, be strategic

Impactful work requires deep engagement and investment in the process of making artwork. It is frustrating to everyone involved when team members are stretched too thin to focus on the process of completing a project well. Consider reducing the number of projects completed each year and slowing down the process of deciding which opportunities to pursue. Take time to evaluate whether the timing is right for a particular opportunity and whether you can allocate appropriate resources and capacity. Then you can better assess where your efforts will be the most strategically deployed.

### Connect to equity efforts

Social issues are interconnected with each other and part of deeply entrenched systems of structural racism, poverty, trauma, addiction, and displacement. Large post-industrial cities are experiencing population shifts and real estate speculation and development. This means that the nature of participatory artmaking has changed from an earlier era, when beautification may not have directly supported gentrification. Connect with larger strategies that hold equity at the center of efforts toward systemic change. Choose partners who are working toward the same goals.

### Center community decision-making

Understand the difference between community-driven artwork and work that is participatory or collaborative. Ask yourself who decides what work gets done and where. Is it the people most impacted by a particular issue? Is it those who have traditionally been shut out of community decision-making? Ultimately, if the community holds decision-making power, the community can design solutions that most benefit them.

### Build community leadership

Participatory artmaking can build community leadership and power. Efforts to do so must be considered from the beginning and built into the structures of a project. Use the "buddy system." Create leadership teams or pairs so that community leaders can practice working together and sharing their knowledge. What skills and networks will be produced while working together? What activities will continue after your role in the project is over?

## Embrace the process as the product

Many projects and programs are successful because of artists' and team members' openness to new forms of work that come out of the process. However, it's hard to move away from the expectation that a project will result in a permanent mural or a temporary physical artwork. Consider how to stretch beyond the understanding of an artwork as the end goal. Understand that the relationships built are as important as producing the artwork. Invest resources in creating different outcomes, such as life and leadership skills, conflict resolution, and breaking down barriers. You could use a tool like the ["Aesthetic Perspectives"](#) framework to create a shared language about the artistic values of process-based work.

## Critically reflect together

A collaborative design process can provide a platform for learning and critical reflection in community. In the process, community members bring their local knowledge and expertise together with others in their community. The community can use the platform of the creative process to reflect on their shared challenges and then build imaginative critiques and innovative solutions. Facilitate processes for creating a shared knowledge base and opportunities to form common language and vision.

## Document and share the process

Documentation helps to explain how the process and the product make a meaningful whole work. The ability to apply learnings from one project to the next also requires documentation of what team members did for each project and program. For some projects, the process is the "product" and should be emphasized in documentation and storytelling efforts. For residencies and programs, artist journals or shared project diaries can be helpful ways to document key decisions along the way. For projects, artists and project managers can meet for a project debrief meeting to record and reflect on the details of what happened.

## Cultivate organizational learning

Artmaking with communities can open a process of critical reflection in doing the work. Provide opportunities for filtering that learning up through an organization. Organizational leadership can model openness to constructive criticism of the organization and its processes. This communicates critical learning as a value. Create space and designated times for reflecting on what worked, and what did not, for individual projects. Project debrief meetings that include artists, project managers, and key partners can serve this purpose.

## Increase coordination

If you conduct projects and ongoing programs simultaneously, it can be hard for everyone to know what everyone else is doing. Yet, cross-pollination between programs and strategies can lead to synergies and present opportunities to pool resources. Set organizational goals that transcend and incorporate everything you are doing. Then, find ways to increase internal communication to facilitate collaboration, connections, and deepen your progress toward your goals.



## **Embed equity in artist selection**

A “curatorial” approach can help ensure that you work with the right artists for each project. Over time, however, exclusively using this approach can make it more difficult for emerging or underrepresented artists to come into the fold. To avoid this, formalize your equity goals in your artist selection process, including targeted recruitment efforts. Investigate how best to ensure that you hire from a wider pool of artists and set up a process that matches your intentions. Also, if you reconsider “art” as “cultural practice,” it expands the field of practice and the practitioners, allowing you to actively engage across a broader spectrum of creativity and culture. You may include those who would not normally consider themselves artists or whose cultural forms have been excluded from the category of “art” by the dominant culture.

## **Formalize training pathways**

Formalize the pathways from training programs to job opportunities both within the organization and for external job placement. For example, look at the individual success stories of students who developed into teaching artists or from assistant to lead artists. Design pathways that make these successes the rule rather than the exception. Be clear about what the next steps are for individuals, how to pursue them, and what support you can offer.

## **From individuality to collectivity**

By definition, participatory, collaborative, or community-driven artwork is produced by many people. Sometimes an artistic team, as opposed to an individual, can best meet the needs of a project. Make a commitment to building and maintaining a working structure that supports the collaborative process. Throughout, rethink authorship and crediting. How you recognize the labor of all collaborators—whether they are community members or professionals—is essential to recognizing the relationships and trust that have been built during a process or project.

## **Pay everyone more**

Community engagement processes and the realization of innovative artworks require extensive time and effort from everyone. The reality is that many artists put in many more hours than are covered in their contracts. Skilled assistants, who understand the mural-making process and can execute more complicated design elements, should be paid commensurately with their skills. Carefully consider what a living wage would be for artists and artist assistants. One tool that could be useful is the W.A.G.E. fee calculator. Setting a “floor” wage can help ensure equity across projects and programs. In addition, community members should be paid for their time, if they are being asked for a commitment beyond a one-time activity. Paying everyone adequately shows that you value their time, input, and expertise.

## **Reduce workloads**

Project managers are key to the success of any model of intensive community engagement. They represent the project and coordinate between all of the team members. If project managers are significantly overburdened, they are unable to adequately support projects and programs. A commissioning agency should make sure that project managers have the time and resources to devote to exceptional projects by reducing the number of projects that they manage at any given time.

## **Maintain your momentum**

When a project ends, do your best to channel momentum and energy into future work or other efforts with the communities involved. Ideally, the work will be endless and projects that have end points will lead directly into new projects and opportunities to work together with or without your involvement. However, clarifying responsibilities for maintaining a connection with specific people involved makes sure that no one slips through the cracks. Just as physical artworks require instructions for care and a plan for maintenance, the relationships and engagement processes developed during a project should have a plan for their stewardship.



Mifflin Square meeting at Southeast by Southeast, 2017. Photo by Mural Arts Staff.



The Building Brotherhood program finale at Dixon House, August 25, 2015. *Colorful Legacy* © 2015 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Willis "Nomo" Humphrey & Keir Johnston. Photo by Albert Yee.



# Conclusion

Primarily, Mural Arts hoped to explore and deepen its understanding of its practice of artmaking through the processes that informed this report. Some of the practices highlighted are second nature to the organization. Others seemed to emerge in the magic of particular featured projects. For Mural Arts, the next step in its learning process is to more fully “bake” these practices into its internal organizational culture so that the organization can more consistently implement them across projects and programs. At the same time, Mural Arts can maintain flexibility for new magic to happen as different opportunities present new configurations and collaborations.

Mural Arts also sought to question and probe its practice of artmaking—within and alongside communities—through this learning effort. Unsurprisingly, many questions remain. Mural Arts can continue to probe and learn from them. One key remaining question is how Mural Arts can foster an ongoing culture of critical learning. The challenge is to create documentation and learning processes that do not overly burden staff, artists, and community members and that do not privilege written forms of communication. Another question is how Mural Arts can better manage the power imbalances between team members who

are on staff and those who are contracted on a project-by-project basis. Since many of those in the latter category are artists, one possible solution is to amplify and formalize artists’ voices in the organizational structure. This could also help Mural Arts advance anti-racism in its internal processes. One of the features of White supremacy culture in organizations is that “decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, those without power are still intimately familiar with the impacts of the decisions that are made without them. For contracted staff, external partners, and community members in general, how can Mural Arts make decision-making processes more transparent and inclusive? All those facilitating participatory artmaking processes, especially those operating within non-profit and philanthropic organizational structures, can afford to go deeper in answering these questions.

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2 Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture,” in *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, 2001, [http://www.cwsworkshop.org/PARC\\_site\\_B/dr-culture.html](http://www.cwsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html).

# Credits and Acknowledgements

**Suggested citation:** Laramée Kidd, Susannah. “Learning From the Process: Promising Practices From Mural Arts’ Work in Communities,” Philadelphia, PA: Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2020.

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A special thank you to the artists, project and program managers, community members, partner organization representatives, and the Kensington Storefront “Tuesday Tea and Textiles” program participants, staff, and volunteers who agreed to be interviewed or participated in a focus group discussion for this learning effort.

**Layout and Design:** Gamar Markarian

The Mural Arts Institute is supported by The JPB Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Southeast by Southeast mural in-process, July 15, 2013.  
Photo by Steve Weinik.





Mural dedication. *Family Interrupted* © 2012 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Eric Okdeh, 709 West Dauphin Street. Photo by Michael Reali.