Commissioning Organization

A commissioning organization, like Mural Arts, plays an important role in responding to community priorities or opportunities and matching resources or funding to collectively defined goals for particular projects and programs.

For some organizations, leadership provides artistic direction by selecting artists and approving their designs. A commissioning organization can also support projects and programs by providing communications outlets like a website and newsletters and serving as a fiscal sponsor for expenses.
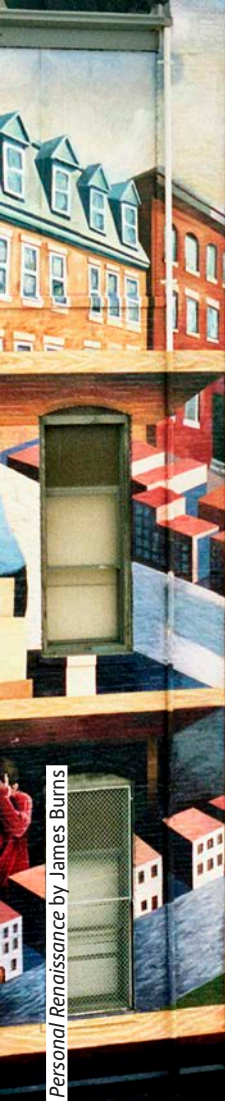
Funders

Many projects happen with support from one funder or a small group of funders. Some funding relationships support an organization's operating costs or ongoing programming. Some funders restrict how their money should be used. In either case, make sure that community priorities come first. Then match funding opportunities to previously established community goals.

Funders can also take on the role of partner organization, devoting their own staff time and other non-financial resources to make a project or program happen.

Partner Organizations

Partner organizations can help shape project and program implementation, providing support or directly carrying out essential tasks.

For instance, for an arts-integrated education project at an elementary school, the principal and selected teachers help to shape how an artist works in the classroom and have input in the final artwork.

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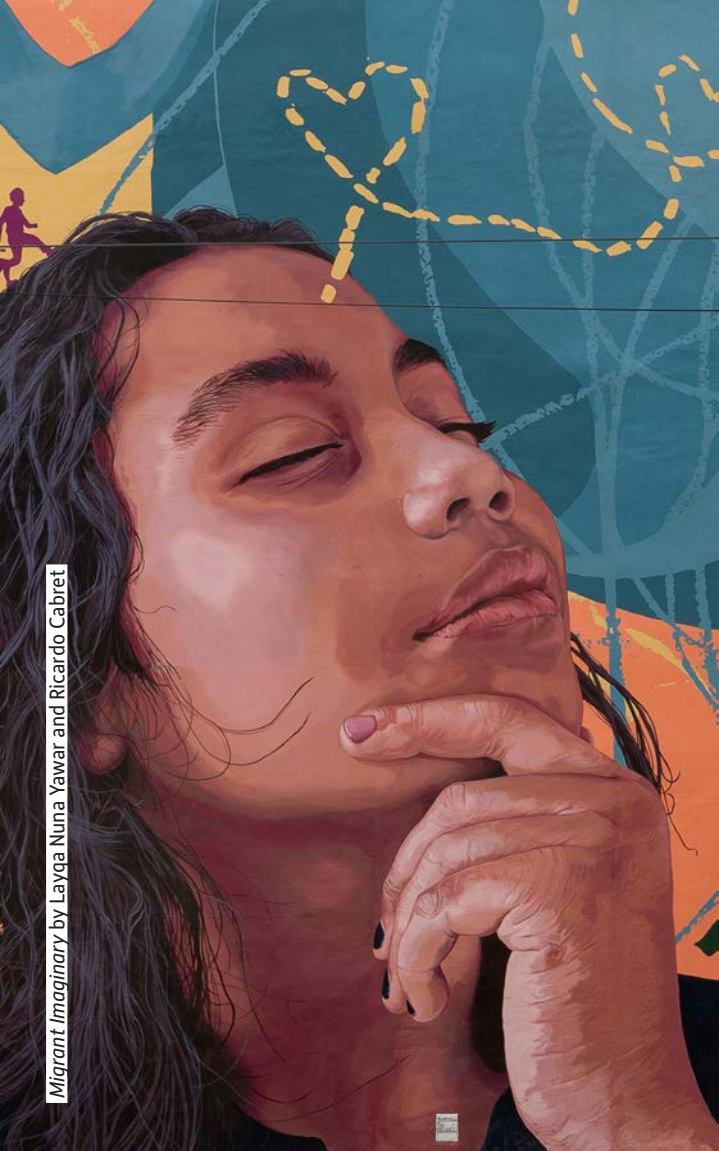
Peace Wall by Jane Golden

Project Managers

Project managers 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. Like program managers, they are often the "face" of the project in the community.

Project managers often lead the community engagement strategy, collaborate with artists, and bring the commissioning organization's network of existing relationships to bear.

Project managers handle the budget and take the lead on necessary permissions and permits.

Migrant Imaginary by Layqa Nuna Yawar and Ricardo Cabret

Program Managers

Program managers develop ongoing initiatives in response to partner and community goals and in service of their program participants. Like project managers, program managers lead implementation and coordinate among team members.

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Program managers oversee the schedule of programs and the budget, and they may also handle the logistics of managing a physical space.

Artists

Artists design projects and/or lead workshops and programs. They can be contracted on a project-by-project basis or employed by the commissioning organization.

Artists engage community members in the process of creating an artwork. They use an approach tailored for each project and their own practice. Some artists work as part of a collective or a team that could involve multi-disciplinary collaborators.

Some temporary projects and exhibitions may also have a curator who organizes a series of artworks around a theme or vision.

Resilience by Parris Stancell
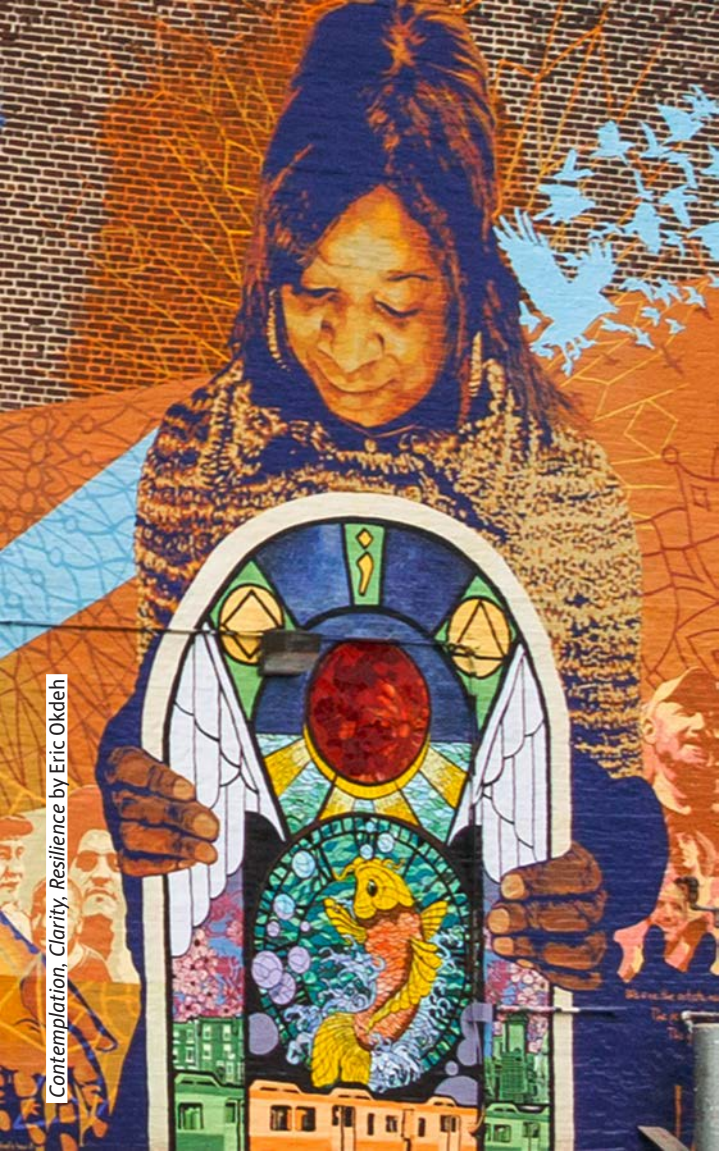
Crew or Assistant Artists

These individuals may be employees of the commissioning organization or be hired specifically by the artists to work on project production, installation, and implementation.

They range from artists who have particular skills to individuals who are participating as part of a training program.

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.

Community Collaborators

These individuals and groups are often co-creators of the project vision and goals, artistic concept, and design.

The artistic team sometimes invites collaborators into a participatory design process because of their connection to a particular issue, opportunity, or space/location.

Artists might feature aspects of individuals collaborators' own stories or artworks in the final artwork and consult with them closely.

Common Threads by Meg Saligman

Site Neighbors and Stakeholders

These individuals and groups include the site owner and site's immediate neighbors as well as neighborhood organizations. Many of these individuals provide feedback on artwork theme and designs, and their input sometimes shifts the final design.

A commissioning organization may gather stakeholders together to discuss a project several times, starting during the project planning and through the design process. Team members may also tap into existing community meetings or knock on surrounding neighbors' doors. All of these methods invite even more people to inform the project.

Families Belong Together by Ian Pierce (Artes Ekeko)
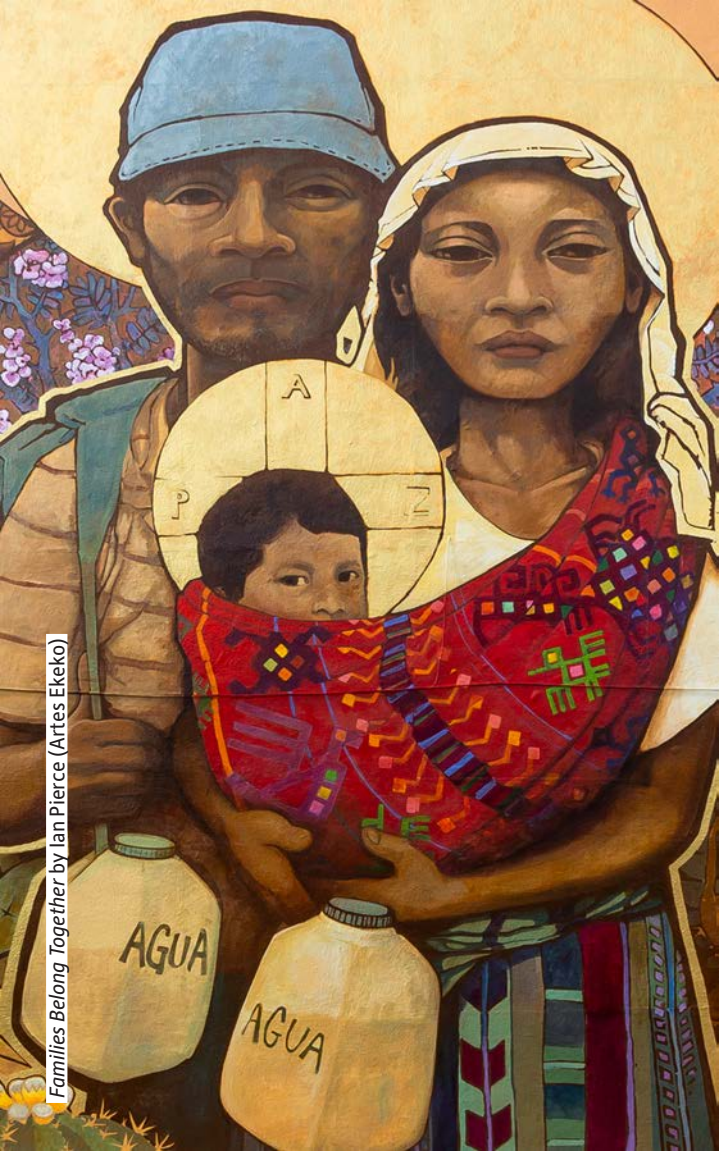
Casual Participants and Targeted Publics

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.

For example, while many mural projects hold "paint days" where collaborators and neighbors help paint the designed mural, some have paint days for the general public. Some projects may hold lectures, town halls, or conferences. These may have targeted audiences around a topic of the project, and even connect participants to resources and service providers.

Herman Wrice by David McShane

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The Heart of Baltimore Avenue by David Guinn

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The Legacy of Bishop Richard Allen and the A.M.E. Church by Willis "Nomo" Humphrey
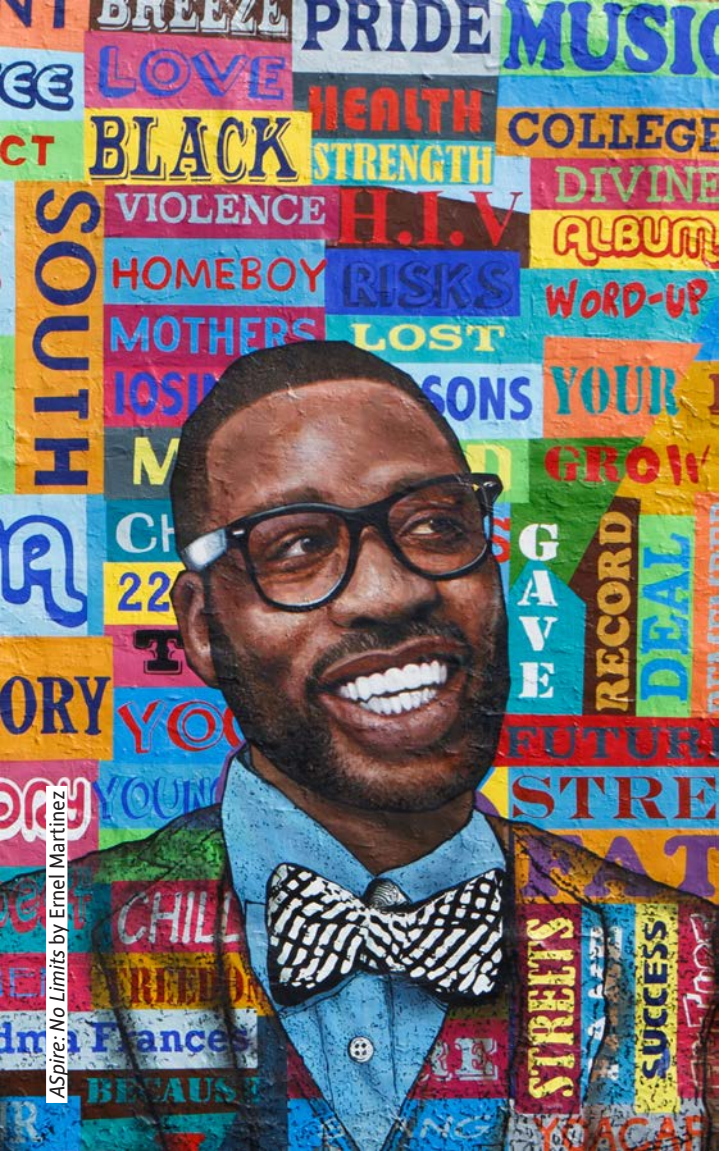
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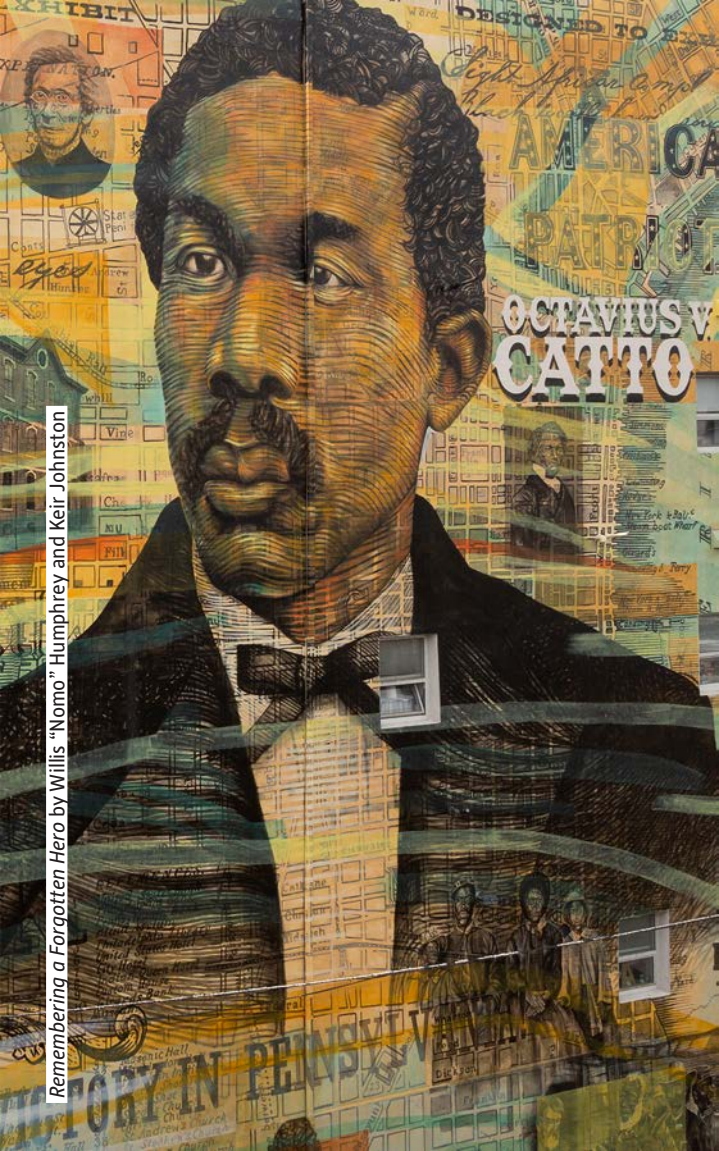
ASpire: No Limits by Ernel Martinez

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Remembering a Forgotten Hero by Willis "Nomo" Humphrey and Keir Johnston

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You Go Girl by Chip Thomas (aka "Jetsonorama") and Ursula Rucker

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Jackie Robinson by David McShane

Create Clear Collaboration Structures

Good collaborative relationships are the reasons most projects go well.

Artists and project or program managers often hold the work together; they interact and coordinate with all the other team members.

Although the makeup of every team is different, the best project teams consistently haveclear communication and expectations about what each team member is responsible for doing, how much and what kinds of support will be available, how decisions will be made, and what kinds of input each member will give.

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Finding the Light Within by James Burns

Name a Realistic Goal

All projects face the challenge of balancing aspirational, big impact goals with the practical constraints of what you can accomplish.

Have all team members help articulate and establish the goal from the start. Then think about what capacity and resources you need to carry it out. Make sure your goals match your investment; some are better suited to a sustained effort than a one-off engagement.

Watch out for making promises that you might not be able to keep, especially working with traumatized and marginalized communities that have endured long histories of broken promises.

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Carefully Select an Artist

Consider skills, style, and affinity when selecting an artist and involve multiple stakeholders in the selection process.

One approach is to issue an open call for artists to apply for your specific project. Another approach is to invite artists to work on a project because of specific skills and connections to the project theme.

You can also pair artists to create a complementary team—experienced artists with those newer to a particular creative practice and working with communities, or artists based outside your community with local artists.

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Engage Responsibly

What is this community's history and how might it be excluded or vulnerable? Make sure you have team members with the right skills and experience to responsibly interact with community members.

Artists from the community or who have worked with a community and its particular issues for years can often develop work that is especially meaningful. Some excluded or vulnerable communities require competencies within team members who have direct interactions with the community; this includes individuals affected by incarceration, addiction, trauma, and/or displacement.

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Create Multiple Participation Pathways

Even though projects can define a core community to interact with, many successful projects allow different types of people to engage and have input.

It's important to create engagement opportunities that offer varying modalities. These can appeal to different interests and require different amounts of time and levels of expertise.

These multiple avenues allow a range of individuals—from those deeply connected to the issues to those just learning about them— to contribute to stronger artworks that address community issues.

RECYCLING

LITTER CRITTERS: Dragon by Ben Woodward and Thom Lessner, Space 1026

Take Time, Build Trust

Collaborating with communities to create artwork and programs takes time. Artists need to get to know a community, their hopes and desires, and develop relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Only then can they create artwork with community members that responds to and reflects the community.

Trust is especially important for artists and community collaborators; the success of their collaborations often rests on their ability to develop these relationships. For programs, maintaining trust with a community requires transparency about goals and expectations, following through on promises, and having a consistent presence in the community.

Our Park/Southwark | *Weaving Culture* by James Dunn
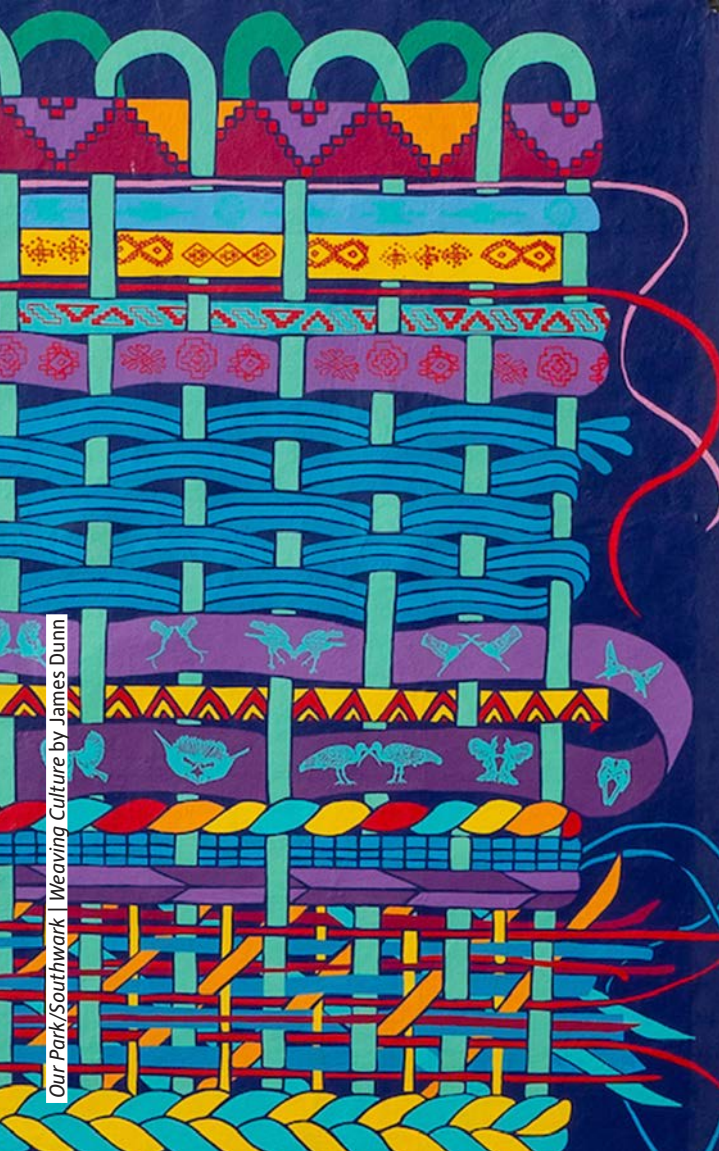
Pilot with Long-Term Commitment

Ongoing projects require at least a year to develop responsive programming designed around a community's particular assets and needs.

After a period of trial and error, building and maintaining the community's trust involves being transparent about long-term project goals, roles, and responsibilities. That allows people to open up and commit their own time and energy to a project or program.

Follow through on your promises and maintain a consistent presence in the community to build collaborations that benefit everyone involved.

Healing Walls by Parris Stancell and Cesar Viveros

Create Together

When artists invite individuals into a design process, there is an opportunity to create a shared imaginative or reflective practice.

Artists listen deeply to community members' thoughts, experiences, design ideas, and sometimes incorporate their physical drawings. 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 developed or finished, so that community feedback does not feel like a rubber stamp.

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Uprooted/reRooted by Marion Wilson and Eurhi Jones

Honor Community Contributions

Treat community contributions with respect and share authorship credit whenever possible.

For some artists, 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 feature individual stories and likenesses, take particular care that individuals give their permission.

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journey2home: Home Safe by Ernel Martinez and Shira Walinsky
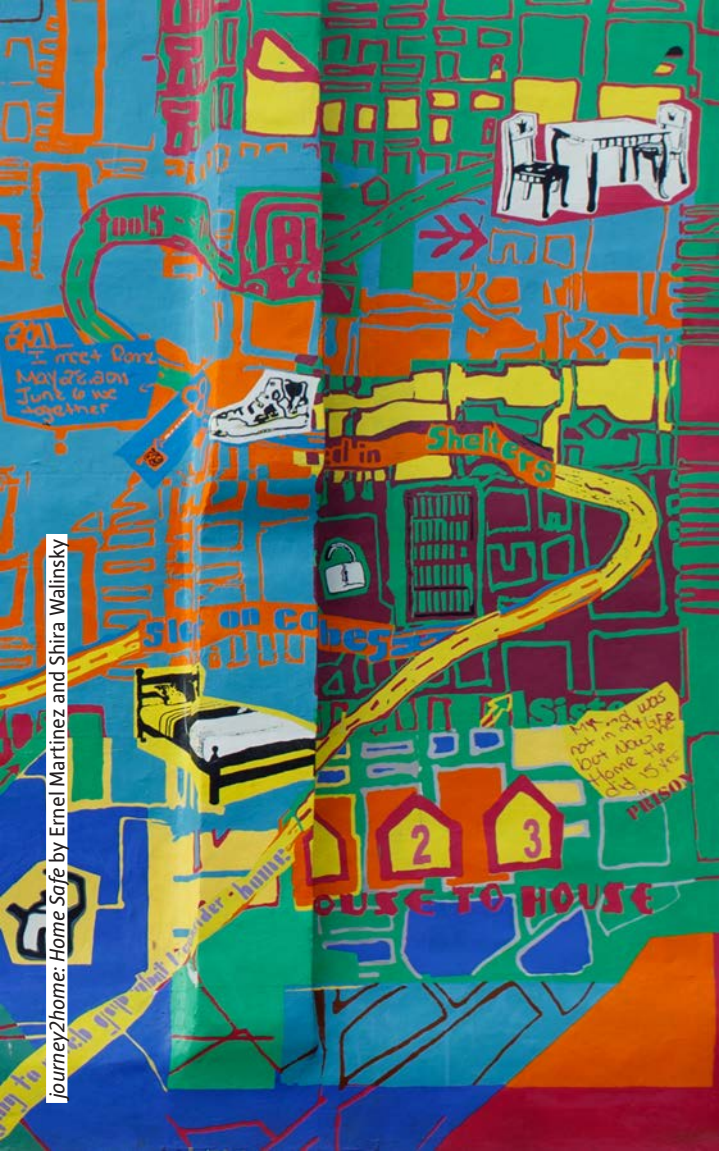
Celebrate Community Assets

Adopt a posture of learning from a community; listen for and respect community members' depth of knowledge.

Assume that there are assets to celebrate and build upon, before identifying needs and how a project might bring new assets to bear. Many successful projects visually represent and celebrate people in the community within artworks.

Projects can also celebrate cultural assets and "naturally-occurring artists" not previously visible to outsiders. Programming can also celebrate the ability for creativity and self-expression in every person.

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Amplify by Ben Volta
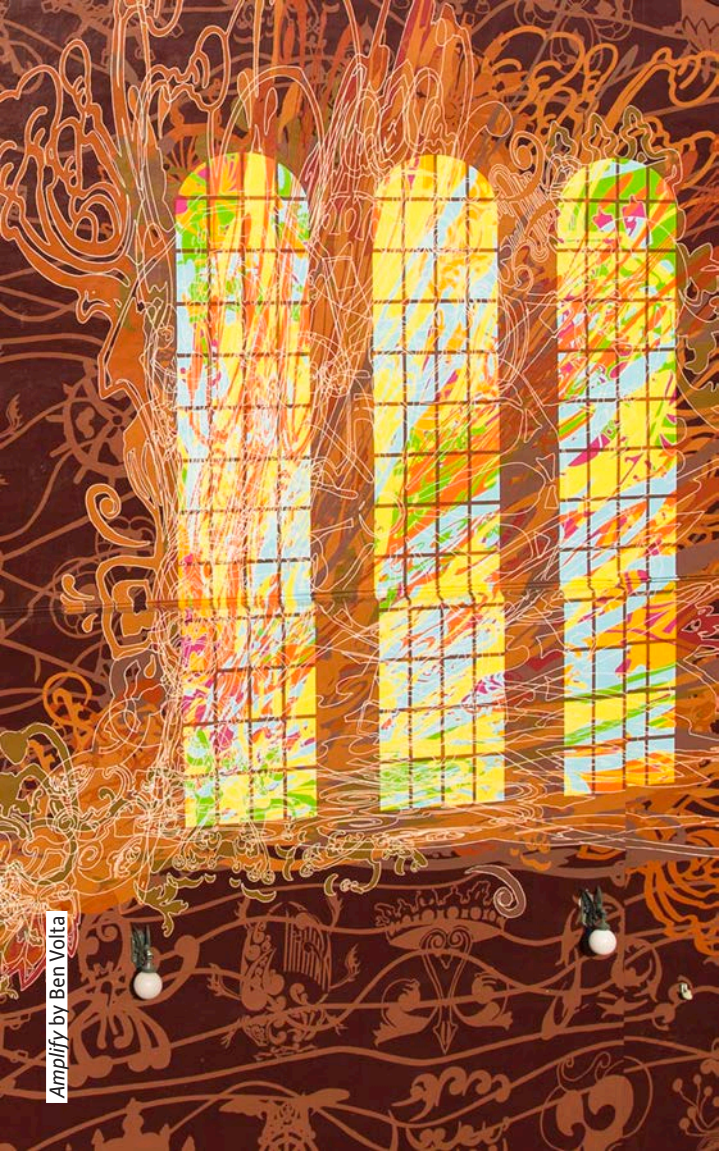
Watch Community Dynamics

When considering site selection in a particular neighborhood, remain sensitive to larger community dynamics such as development pressures and potential displacement. Prioritize the voices of those most impacted and historically shut out of development decisions in your site selection. Try to anticipate community changes that will affect your work and watch for negative unintended outcomes. At the very least, a selected site should not be imminently in danger of being lost to new development.

Make sure that the site owner is an appropriate long-term partner for stewardship of a permanent installation.

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Dreams, Diaspora, and Destiny by Josh Mays and King Britt

Select a Meaningful Site

Who will see public artwork and how it responds to larger features of the neighborhood increase a work's meaning. Consult community members about the meaning and accessibility of possible sites.

For example, project managers and artists must take into account the size and suitability of a wall for the physical installation of a mural. Sometimes, the artist's design for the artwork will integrate location features, creating a site-specific design. Other times, an artwork's location is significant because of visual references to the surrounding community.

Find an Appropriate Space

A program site should be 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.).

Reading the Flow by Eurhi Jones

Pay Everyone for Their Time

Designing artwork with a community or providing arts programming in community settings requires a lot of time from artists and community members alike.

Artists should be paid a living wage. Paid assistants and apprentices can be essential to realizing a project's full vision. Whenever appropriate, honor community members' time and efforts with wages or stipends.

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.

Room for Growth: Seeds of Change by Kaitlin Pomerantz
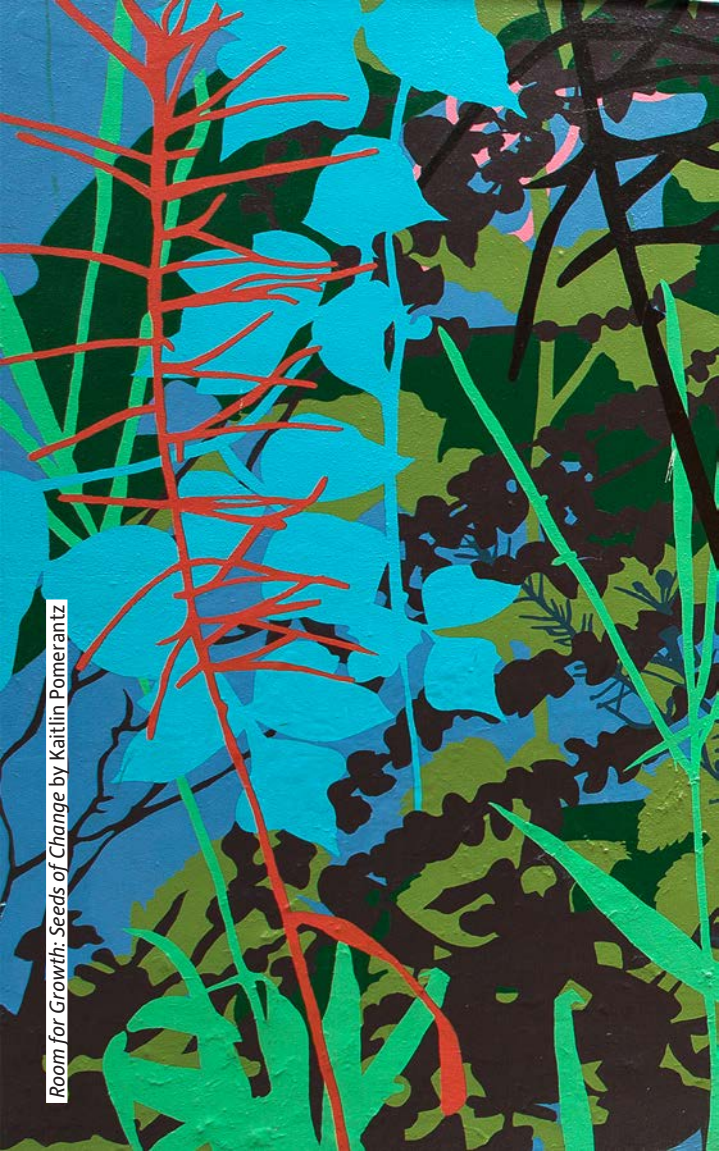
Take Risks

Artistic practice invites imagination and brings "outside the box" thinking; it can powerfully respond to social issues.

Producing innovative and impactful artwork often means trying something new that hasn't been tried before and accepting it may not work.

Support artists' and community members' vision and the risks they are taking. Sometimes, a temporary installation can take a lot more risks than something that will become a neighborhood fixture.

The Color of Your Voice by Keir Johnston and Ernel Martinez
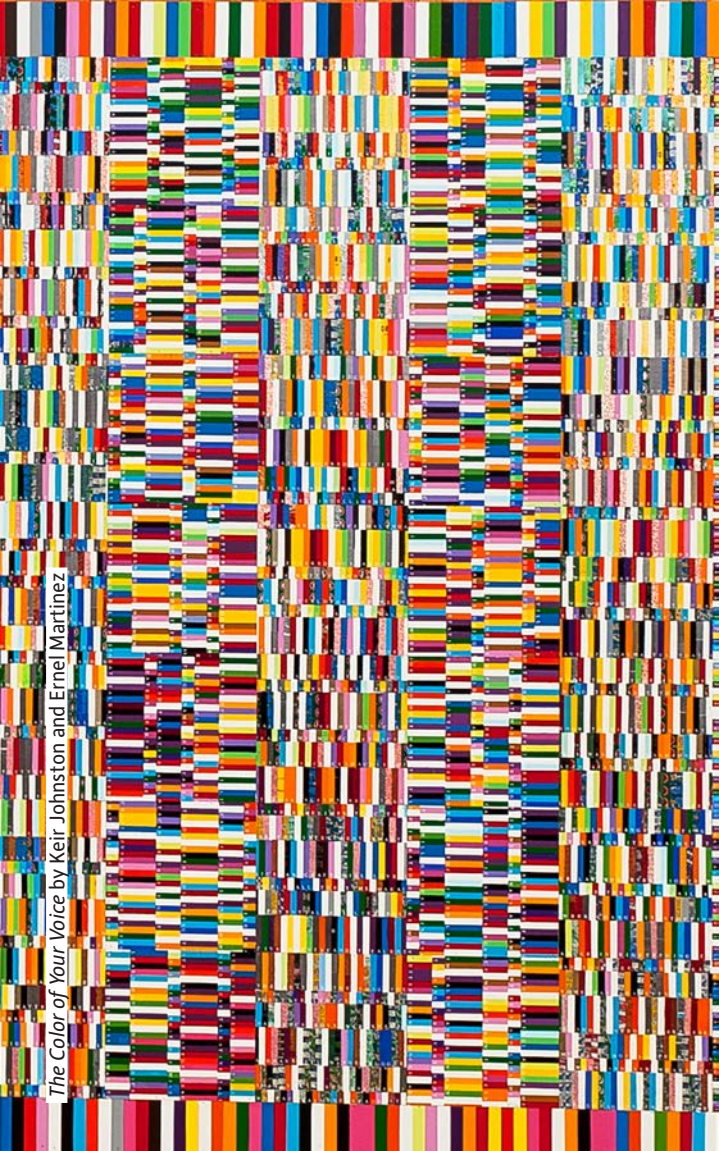
Timing is of the Essence

Ask yourself, is this the right timing for this project? 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. Other projects coincide with larger conversations and events, so that their timing heightens impact.

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The Oval: Summer Kaleidoscope by Jessie Unterhalter and Katey Truhn

Be Flexible

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.

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 activities and deliverables.

The Oval: Rhythm & Hues by Brad Carney

Foster Inclusive Communication

The key is to communicate regularly among stakeholders and build structures for listening to each other. Make sure everyone has a voice in the process every step of the way.

Participatory artmaking sometimes brings together diverse stakeholders who struggle to get along.

In more contentious processes, take care to make sure all the voices are heard, even if one voice is louder than the others. If everyone feels included, the process can be about coming together as a community.

The Circle by Henry Bermudez

Build Strong Partnerships

Collaborative public art projects can bring together community organizations and funding opportunities to address entrenched community issues.

Partnerships can help you reach more people by pooling networks and resources, and drive innovation by bringing in new ideas and working across disciplines.

You may have to invest significant time and energy into building relationships with your partners. Many projects succeed and have enhanced impact because of strong partnerships with shared values and common goals.

Imagining Frankford: Family & Community by Cesar Viveros

Strategically Pool Resources Internally

Within a large organization with many program areas, there are 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, you can find opportunities to pool resources for ongoing strategic initiatives. These synergies often present themselves in relation to arts education—youth engagement is a feature of many projects.

Another frequent strategic alignment is between re-entry workforce development and projects that offer training and work opportunities.

Parts Per Million by Ben Volta

Document your Project

Projects that make a big impact often have "stickiness." They resonate with participants and community members long after the project is complete.

Plan for "stickiness" by making sure to document all 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 so that installations can continue having an impact with new audiences through the documentation.

Industrious Light: Baldwin Locomotive Works by Phillip Adams

Continue Connecting

Team members should plan for the afterlife of a project to maximize everyone's energy and resource investments.

Do this by creating avenues to continue the relationships and connections made during the project.

Be clear on who the "steward" of these relationships is and make sure partners and community members know how to stay in touch. The steward could be the commissioning organization or an ongoing program partner, especially if artists live outside the community and need to move on when the project is done.

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Strength in Our Bonds by Ernel Martinez

Create Spin-Offs

Projects can have an afterlife by living on in associated projects and programs.

This could be an exhibition in a centrally-located venue away from the project site so that more people can learn about the project.

If you have created video documentation, you can mount the video on a website or host screenings. You can bring people to the site by connecting with tour programs that your organization or another organization offers.

Do Less,
Be Strategic

Impactful work requires deep engagement and investment in the process of making art.

It is frustrating to everyone involved when team members are stretched too thin to focus on the process of completing a project well.

Focus less on the number of projects completed each year and making quick decisions about pursuing opportunities, and more on better assessing where your efforts will be most strategically deployed. Then you can better assess where your efforts will be the most strategically deployed.

Connect to Equity Efforts

Social issues are interconnected. They are 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.

I vote to protect the people that can't vote

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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.

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Familias Separadas by Michelle Angela Ortiz

WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, RISKING OUR LIVES, FOR OUR FAMILIES & OUR FUTURE

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?

A Tribute to Gloria Casarez by Michelle Angela Ortiz

Cultivate Organizational Learning

Artmaking with communities can open a process of critical reflection through practice.

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.

Spotlight the Process

The ability to apply learnings from one project to the next requires documentation of how team members did what they 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.

Sanctuary by James Burns

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 towards 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.

Legacy by Walé Oyéjidé
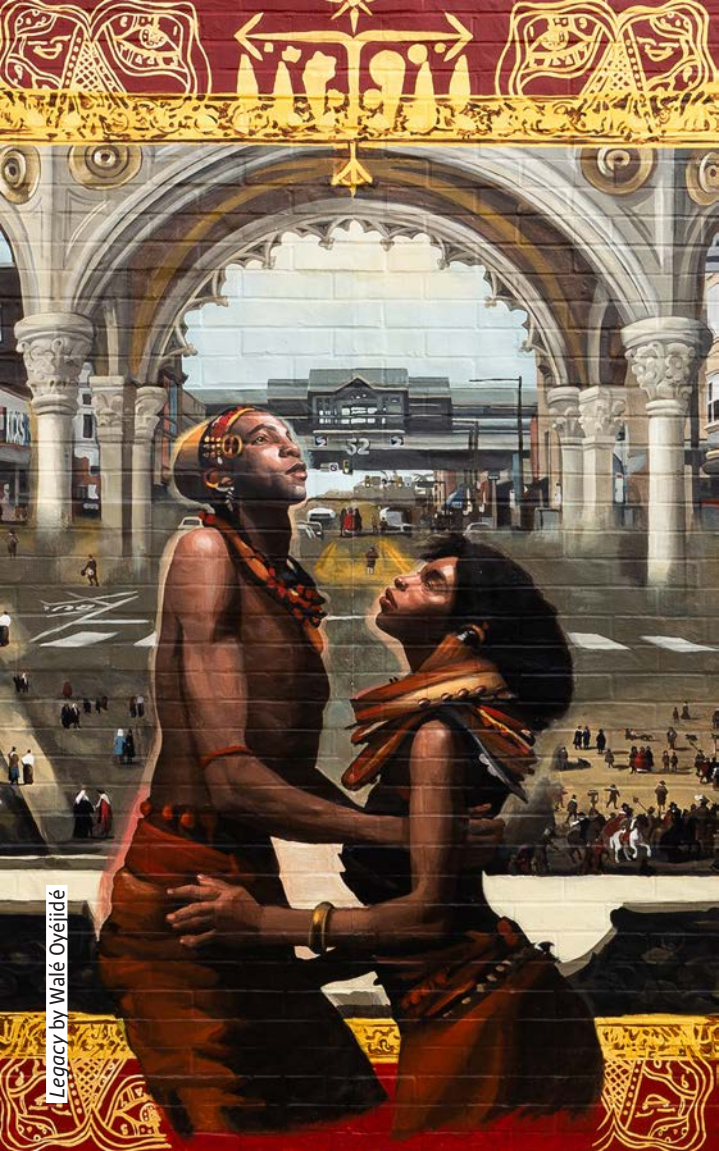
Focus on Culture

Reconsider "art" as "cultural practice." Doing so 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.

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Pedal Powering by Candy Coated

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.

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 contract. Skilled assistants, who understand the production process and can execute more complicated design elements, should be paid appropriately.

In addition, community members should be paid for their time commitment and local knowledge. 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.

Our Tacony: Yesterday and Tomorrow by Mariel Capanna

Embrace
Process as 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 or temporary physical public 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.

Your Hands Shimmering on Legs of Rain by Eurhi Jones

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 critique and innovative solutions.

Facilitate processes for creating a shared knowledge base and opportunities to form common language and vision.

Spring (resoration) by David Guinn

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.

Untitled (Waterloo playground) by Calo Rosa

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.

Help ensure that no one slips through the cracks by clarifying who is responsible for maintaining specific connections.

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.

Celebrating the Northeast by Emilie Ledieu

Imagine

(Groups of 2 to 6 people)

1- Each person picks one *Role* card.
There must be at least one artist and one
community member.

2- Ask yourself and each other:
   - What are your responsibilities?
   - How will you collaborate?
   - What will you need (from yourself, from
     each other) to collaborate?

3- Imagine a project, or goal: something that
you will realize together. Set the context.

4- Pick two *How It's Done* cards, and think
about, then discuss, how they apply to your
context.

5- Experienced teams still need to learn and
grow. Choose one *Level Up* card and explore
how your team could improve.

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Curing Community by Cesar Viveros

Reflect

(Individuals, in pairs, or groups)

1- Remove the *Role* cards from the deck.

2- Pick a *How It's Done* card and reflect using some of these prompts (or other questions you come up with):
- Why is this important or necessary?
- How does this apply to my work?
- How have I practiced this in the past, and what were the benefits?
- How has this been missing in the past, and what did that reveal?
- How could I practice this in my current or future work?
- How could this improve my work?
- How could this advance my equity goals?

3- If with others: share your cards and interview each other.

4- What did you learn from this thought experience?

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Still Life by Phillip Adams

Collaborate

(Individuals, in pairs, or groups)

1- Separate the *Role* cards from the deck and pick one of those cards.

2- Reflect using some of these prompts (or other questions you come up with):
- What are some examples of what this role does or represents?
- What are the strengths of this role?
- When does this role have power? When does it not?
- What does this role need from others to be a good collaborator?
- What does this role need to share in order to be a good collaborator?

3- If with others: share what you reflected on and see if there are similarities or disparities. What would be the challenges or opportunities if your roles were collaborating on a project together?

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CREDITS

The content on these cards was derived from the "Learning from the Process" research report produced by Metris Arts Consulting, commissioned by the Mural Arts Institute. This work was a collaborative process that included many advisors and participants and we are thankful for those colleagues, artists, community partners, and others who contributed to the rich reflection of the complexities of our work.

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Level Up!
Imagine, Reflect, and Collaborate

Use these cards to take a deep dive into the practice of socially engaged, participatory artmaking with and alongside communities. Explore these promising practices and images derived from Mural Arts' experience.

Included are different approaches to using this deck for facilitating individual or group learning experiences, reflecting on your own practices, and imagining new and mmomre equitable forms of participatory, socially engaged public artmaking.

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Folding the Prism by Jessie Unterhalter and Katey Truhn (Jessie & Katey)