

One Piece at a Time: Building Community and a Mosaic Mural

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of community members who worked with a social work community practice class to create a participatory mosaic mural in an ethnically diverse and rapidly gentrifying area of a small city in New England. Community members in this project included people working in the community at agencies and schools, artists with studios in the neighborhood, residents, and business owners. Seven community members participated in the study and completed hour-long semi-structured interviews. Analysis revealed three primary themes: (1) artist and community match, (2) what it takes to make it happen, and (3) mural legacy. This paper contributes to literature investigating the value of participatory art projects as a strategy to build collaboration and connectedness utilizing critical service learning and creative placemaking approaches.

The current study explores the experiences of community members who participated in the creation of a mosaic art mural in a small city in the northeastern United States. The mural project resulted from a collaboration between a public university (art and social work departments), residents, local businesses, neighborhood agencies, and grassroots organizations. The corresponding elective course, cotaught by a social work professor and university artist in residence, was grounded in critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008), creative placemaking (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], n.d.), and deep engagement (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004) to ensure a participatory project. This study thus investigates the lived experiences of a broad-based coalition of community partners who worked alongside a university-sponsored artist in residence, professor, and students through the lenses of creative placemaking and critical service-learning.

The strategies of service-learning and creative placemaking are intended to support resiliency, beauty, and collaboration with diverse sectors of a community (NEA, n.d.). Ensuring that community-based art projects are developed and created with broad community representation reflects “deep engagement” and an authentic participatory approach (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004).

Service-learning is one pedagogical approach to addressing community-identified concerns, often in the community where the university is located. The principles of service-learning—study, reciprocity, and reflection—are intended to bolster

student learning and civic responsibility, address community-identified needs, and support long-term, mutually beneficial community-university partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Butin, 2010; Eyler et al., 1999). As a strategy for building community-university partnerships, service-learning requires an investment in relationship building as part of collaborative problem-solving (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Most research on service-learning has focused on student outcomes, with less attention paid to the participating community partners (Beran & Lubin, 2012; Butin, 2010; Cress et al., 2010). Additionally, existing research on community partners does not include the perspectives of informal networks or individual residents who have worked with service-learning students (Cress et al., 2010; Driscoll et al., 1996; Gerstenblatt, 2014; Gray et al., 1999; Littlepage et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006). This project used a service-learning strategy to involve students in collaboration with the university artist in residence, who also cotaught the class. These two university contributors joined the community in creating a mural.

Creative placemaking brings together artists, residents, and other stakeholders to create art that transforms communities and supports resiliency, beauty, and collaboration from all sectors (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.). Critiques of creative placemaking have included a lack of racial and class diversity in leadership, contributions to gentrification that displaces residents, inconsistency in approaches and desired outcomes (economic or social), and a lack of

defined outcomes and expectations (Nicodemus, 2013; Markusen & Nicodemus, 2018; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020).

Literature Review

Community-University Partnerships

Boyer's (1996) model of engaged teaching and scholarship placed responsibility on the academy to be an active participant in addressing local, national, and international issues and problems, highlighting that universities and colleges "were one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country" (p. 11). Holland (2005) advocated for institutions of higher education to become active partners in a "highly complex learning society where discovery, learning, and engagement are integrated activities that involve many sources of knowledge generated in diverse settings by a variety of contributors" (p. 12). Community-university partnerships can involve service-learning pedagogy, community-based research, and collaboration between universities and a variety of stakeholders, including nonprofit agencies, government institutions, informal networks, and businesses. These partnerships

are most effective when they are driven by community-identified needs; include a variety of partners, formal and informal; and ensure parity and sustainability (Porter & Woo, 2015; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012).

Community partners can benefit from student and faculty support in programs and services, increased visibility, and use of research or evaluation. In a study of community partner experiences, Rinaldo et al. (2015) found positive aspects of partnering with university faculty and students in terms of "direct benefits to the organization, support of the agency mission, and satisfaction in serving students as mentors and co-teachers" (p. 121). Criticism of these partnerships includes power differentials between the university and community and community needs being secondary to those of the university; therefore, it is critical to establish relationships with authentic shared power and synchrony in determining a strategy and plan (Hall, 2010).

Strategies to support more mutually beneficial partnerships have also been identified in the literature. These include engaging in participatory action research (PAR), implementing a critical

Figure 1. Mosaic Mural



service-learning model, establishing a stronger focus on community-identified needs, and promoting the inclusion of informal and grassroots participation (Gerstenblatt, 2014; Rosenberger, 2000; Stuart, 2012).

Creative Placemaking

Creative placemaking supports local efforts to enhance quality of life and offers an opportunity for community members to utilize creative activity to build a sense of place (NEA, n.d.). The goal of creative placemaking is to engage residents and build community through art projects (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2009) using strategies such as low-barrier participation, collective creative expression, social connection, and value for all contributions. To be inclusive and reach residents authentically, artists and community practitioners utilize an approach of “deep engagement” (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004) to establish networks and relationships, which can support diverse representation and sustainability (Stokes et al., 2014). Relationships cultivated with a diverse group of stakeholders recognize a cocreation of knowledge, public art projects, and mutually beneficial outcomes based on community-expressed needs (Zitcer, 2020).

Project facilitators encourage community members to participate in art projects as much as they are comfortable, recognizing that any level of participation serves an important purpose in building a diverse network and strong relationships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Per the NEA’s definition of creative placemaking, creative placemaking expands the traditional role of the artist beyond the studio and other performance venues; they become a collaborator working in partnership toward a larger public good rather than singularly in pursuit of their artistic vision (Zitcer, 2020).

Research exploring the efficacy of creative placemaking is increasing (Redaelli, 2018; Stern, 2014; Vaughn et al., 2021; Zitcer, 2020). Much research on creative placemaking has come in the form of case studies, program evaluations, white papers, and collected stories, including from the NEA (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Embedded in these inquiries is a fundamental question about whether the goal of creative placemaking is economic development or social impact (Moss, 2012; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020).

It remains challenging to prove that creative placemaking activities and projects have facilitated desired outcomes, such as vibrancy, livability, a sense

of place, or positive economic or social changes (Moss, 2012; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020). Creative placemaking has been critiqued as unfocused and perhaps contributing to the very issues of disparity and inequity that creative placemaking projects hope to address (Nicodemus, 2013; Markusen & Nicodemus, 2018; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020). Differing views on the desired outcomes of creative placemaking, i.e., social impact (Stern, 2014) or economic impact (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010), surfaced in studies investigating the value of the arts as a driver of public good (Vaughn et al., 2021).

The study described here addresses a gap in the research focused on community member experiences working with a university as a community partner, working with students, and the use of art and creative placemaking as a tool to build community. Overall, this study and its findings lend insight into the fusion of creative placemaking and service-learning principles to address issues of gentrification, community engagement, and raising the voices of all residents and stakeholders.

Service-Learning

Over the past 3 decades, academic service-learning—an approach that integrates student learning with a commitment to solving problems in nearby or remotely connected communities—has become more popular in higher education. Rather than having one unified definition, academic service-learning is widely interpreted and defined. In fact, Kendall (1990) identified 147 definitions of academic service-learning. The duration of service-learning programs ranges from a one-time experience to several weeks, a semester course, or integrated programs consisting of a series of connected courses. Service-learning has been described as “essentially an umbrella term which many activities and programs can fall [under], rather than a narrowly defined practice with associated outcomes” (Finley, 2011, p. 2).

Studies on service-learning primarily focus on student outcomes (Cress et al., 2010; Eyler et al., 1999). A meta-analysis of 62 studies involving 11,837 students indicated gains in attitudes toward self, school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance (Celio et al., 2011). Years of refinement and evaluation have resulted in three best-practice approaches, summarized as (a) a strong link between learning outcomes and engagement, (b) thoughtful community-centered partnership, and (c) reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Butin, 2010; Celio et al., 2011; Eyler et al., 1999).

Rice and Pollack (2000), Rosenberger (2000), and Mitchell (2008) built on Rhoads's (1997) concept of critical community service to develop the framework of "critical service-learning" as social justice service-learning. Wang and Rodgers (2006) detected increased complex thinking and reasoning skills among students through the use of the social justice service-learning model as compared to traditional service-learning courses. Service-learning can then become "a problem-solving instrument of social and political reform" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 6), positioning students as activists to promote social justice as part of their academic learning experience (Mitchell, 2008).

One critique of service-learning is that the benefits to students outweigh the benefits to the community (Beran & Lubin, 2012; Butin, 2010). Research focused on the experiences of community partners working with service-learning students is scarce (Cress et al., 2010; Gerstenblatt, 2014). Additionally, the scant research on community partners does not consider informal networks or individuals involved with service-learning students (Cress et al., 2010; Driscoll et al., 1996; Gerstenblatt, 2014; Gray et al., 1999; Littlepage et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006). The current study addresses gaps in the literature related to community partner experiences with critical service-learning pedagogy and creative placemaking, offering insight into how these two approaches may be used effectively in higher education.

Background

The mural project was built through a collaboration that the first author initiated between the curator of the university art museum, the artist in residence, and community stakeholders, including the neighborhood association, business owners, and community activists. The site chosen for the mural was in the center of the community at an intersection of two main streets, on the wall of a building owned by a local coffee company. The corner itself is a hub. Located at a four-way stop, the corner is populated with a new apartment building, a popular upscale Mediterranean restaurant, a mosque, a basketball court and park, and the exterior wall of a furniture store. Not only is it a physical crossroads of the neighborhood, but it also represents the intersection of the old and the new in terms of buildings, businesses, and residents.

The neighborhood where the mural is located has been quickly gentrified. As is common in rapidly gentrifying areas, the neighborhood houses the highest concentration of poverty in

the city, coupled with a surge of restaurants, breweries, galleries, and newly built high-end housing for rent and sale. According to 2016–17 data, 39% of neighborhood residents had incomes below the poverty level compared to the city average of 19%. Residents born outside of the United States comprised 33.5% of the neighborhood population, in contrast to the city's total of 13% (City-data.com, 2020).

The mural project itself was created within a social work community practice course offered at a midsize public university. The university serves a mixture of first-generation students, returning students, commuter students, students housed in dorms, and an increasing number of recent asylum seekers and immigrants to Maine. The university is located in a small city—the largest metropolitan area in a mostly rural state—nationally known for its arts, culture and outdoor recreation and as a destination for food and craft beer. Partnerships between the university, community agencies, and businesses are emphasized and cultivated across academic disciplines for internships, service-learning projects, and other mutually beneficial collaborations.

A total of 21 undergraduate and graduate students from multiple disciplines enrolled in the Community Art Practice and Creative Placemaking course (SWO 399/599). In this course, students collaborated with the artist and community members to create a mosaic mural from start to finish. The mural is composed of tiles both bought and made, found objects, mirrors, and sayings from the community. The learning outcomes of the course focused on multiple aspects of the social worker's role as a facilitator in community work.

Both the class and research project were theoretically grounded in Freire's (1970) political, radical, nonneutral approach to service-learning, which challenges the academy to move away from agency and institutional partnerships into the arena of more grassroots community engagement and organizing. Freire's theories and approaches fall within the social justice service-learning model in which social change becomes part of the practice (Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker, 2003). Using Freire's dialogical, action-reflection praxis, and historical analysis, this model directs students to critically examine the structural causes of social problems and integrates community development principles (Freire, 1970). Much of the work supporting the project was completed by community partners who donated time, space, materials, and other resources.

Community members were recruited to participate in the mural using multiple forms

of engagement. These strategies included disseminating fliers, attending neighborhood meetings, spreading the opportunity through word of mouth, talking to people on the street, doing Senegalese glass paintings at the local elementary school, meeting with an artist collaborative, and working with local businesses for donations. In preparation for the mural, representatives from the university met with community organizations and businesses to secure the location and confirm the logistics of creating a large-scale mural. In that process, we reached out to a range of grassroots and formal entities including the mosque, the social worker at the public housing complex, developers, school social workers, and an artist collaborative. Because of the relational aspect of the project, building relationships with residents and organizational representatives were a priority, and given the high level of participation, proved to be a success. Overall, the community participants represented a diverse group ethnically, racially, economically, and by age, and this diversity of experiences is displayed in the mural. Once the mural was complete, a local business hosted a community celebration that was well attended by a broad range of participants.

The present study included a two-phase research project. This paper explores community partner experiences, while an earlier article focused on the student experience (Shanti et al., 2022). The research question guiding this phenomenological study was: What was the experience of community members helping to build a community mosaic mural in partnership with a service-learning class and an artist in residence from a local university?

Methods

Phenomenology as a method seeks to identify the essence of a shared lived experience (Grbich, 2013). The shared experience explored in the current study is that of the community members involved in the creation of the mosaic mural. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used in this study given its focus on understanding the experiences of participants based on their perspectives and in their words (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Considering the interpretive lens of the researcher is central to hermeneutic phenomenology; through the use of bracketing and audit trails, or documenting reactions throughout analysis, rigor is enhanced, and researcher and participant experiences are distinguished (Armour et al., 2009). In this case, the members of the research team each had experiences related to the project. The first author

was a co-instructor in the course who had worked with the primary artist on prior projects in the United States and West Africa. The second author is a faculty member at the university where the class took place, a mural artist, and a community practitioner. At the time of the project, the third author coordinated service-learning at the university and is familiar with the community where the mural was created. All three researchers bracketed their assumptions and experiences prior to beginning analysis, and all three were involved in conducting the interviews.

Participants

Given that the research project had a potential sample of all those involved in the mural project, a combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used. Members of the community who supported the project were invited to participate through email, and seven were able to complete interviews with two of the researchers. Of the seven participants, one is a community artist; one is a community member, artist, and local faculty member; three are local business owners; one is an administrator at the involved university; and one works at the neighborhood elementary school.

Procedures

The study and all of its forms and procedures were approved by the university institutional review board. The research team developed a semistructured interview guide of six questions that were designed to explore participants' experiences before, during, and after the construction of the mural. Two questions explored their connection to the community and to the mural, another two questions asked about their experiences and observations of the mural creation process, and the final questions focused on participants' perceptions of the mural's impact on the community. Interviews were conducted in private settings selected by participants, and they averaged 40 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outside source. Phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the transcribed data using seven steps outlined by Moustakas (1994): (a) bracketing the researchers' experiences working with the community; (b) conducting a naïve reading to absorb the entirety of the data; (c) eliminating data that did not

pertain to the community members' experience of the project; (d) creating meaning units from participants' significant statements; (e) eliminating repetitive and overlapping meaning units; (f) categorizing meaning units into themes; and (g) validating the themes according to the interview transcripts. Triangulation was performed by the three researchers as they went through each step of the analysis process together.

Findings

Three primary themes emerged from the data: (a) artist and community match, (b) what it takes to make it happen, and (c) mural legacy.

Artist and Community Match

Participants found the facilitating artist to be uniquely suited for this project, and responses suggested that the presence of artist in residence

was related to the level of engagement in the project overall. Working within a community that is complex and diverse in many ways, the artist was perceived as “a catalytic force in bringing some of these disparate parts of the neighborhood together.” One participant said, “What made that project was having her.” Several of the artist's characteristics were identified as specific draws for participants, including the artist's Senegalese ethnicity, her ability to speak French, and her ability to, as a woman of color, connect with participants in a particular way. One stated, “We're not bringing in this White artist who can't really identify with where you're coming from. We're bringing someone from a community and a life and a world experience that totally gets it.”

Participants saw the choice of artist as a particular benefit for “students, who are children of color ... to see people in the role of educator, artist,

Figure 2. Students Working on the Mural



professional.” One participant used the actions of a teacher at a local school to illustrate this, saying:

[The English Language Learner] ELL teacher was very excited about being a part of it and she opened up her classroom to host [the artist]. There were a couple of other teachers who came in and were present ... it was a really exciting event.

Another confirmed:

I feel like that’s a really important piece that’s missing, because our staff ... tends not to reflect our student body, so having her speak French to the students, having her come into the classroom, and having, I think, a personal connection with students ... was a really important experience.

One underscored the importance of this by describing a new school initiative:

[They] had language groups this year at school where [they] invited people from the parent community to come in and facilitate those and teach those classes ... we also want the children to see themselves in the grown-ups around and have those positive role models.

Making it Happen

The second thematic cluster from the interviews covers specifics involved in bringing the project to fruition. Participants’ comments focused on their own contributions, the contributions of businesses and institutions, encountered challenges and their perceptions of these, and the collectivism and collaboration cultivated by the process.

My Part. Across interviews, participants spoke of their contributions to the mural. They touched on their degree of involvement, their contributions, and how they became involved in the project. Offerings ranged from immaterial support, such as cheering on artists, to the donation of space and materials, to more sustained efforts like advocating for the project site. Some of the examples given in interviews were: “I donated what I could to the project,” “We did host an event in [the restaurant] as a celebration of the completion of the mural,” and one person who “put up [their] little piece of charred glass.” Another person took this beyond individual contributions and “thought it would

be great to get the school involved in some way, so [they] pursued that.” Ultimately, they “set up a table there where the kids put their footprints on the glass.”

Participation was often cultivated through personal connection or by a person walking past the mural. In each case, participants felt good for having done something. Many believed their respective parts substantively added to building a “community asset” that would endure. One said, “These neighbors ... have a piece of the community ... up on the wall. For the rest of their lives, as long as that mural holds, they’ll be able to drive down there and take their kids.”

Businesses and Institutions. Three participants representing business or academic institutions spoke of an alignment between the project and mission of their organization, including philanthropic goals, specifically “how [art] can inspire people, inform people, [and] educate people in a way that is not confrontational.” For all of them, the process was a concrete way to demonstrate their held values and beliefs of being part of the community. One indicated that contributing was valuable to them by saying, “one of the reasons I ... always wanted to have a restaurant [is] it’s a good way to contribute to a community.” From the vantage point of an academic institution, an interviewee shared that “this particular project is getting to that highest possible level of higher education, which is, learn skills, learn about people, learn to do things effectively.”

Challenges. Participants spoke of experienced and shared challenges involved in creating the mural. These were often stated in the form of questions more than formed answers, such as “How do you make it meaningful?”; “How do you support that financially?”; “How do you integrate this with academic objectives and goals?”; “I know the project went longer than it was supposed to, so how do you compensate for that?”; “How do we get permission from the city?”; “How do we block this area off?” Participants described investments made to surmount these challenges through time, prioritization, innovation, and risk-taking. Reflections on what might have reduced challenges included better communication around the artist’s agreement with the university as well as around preplanning in general.

The fact that meaning and learning could be derived from such mistakes and challenges emerged from each interview. In the words of one participant, “The truth is, most of my significant substantive learning in life has gone when things

don't go well, when I've failed." Participants also saw the challenges as part of the benefit to students and something "you absolutely can't capture in the classroom."

Collectivism and Collaboration. While some participants spoke of the significance or meaning of their individual contributions, all participants discussed the diverse collective effort required to create a mural of this scale. In addition to describing the labor of creating the mural, participants spoke of the community effort to support the artist and her family with housing, furnishings, and food. One participant summarized these sentiments, saying "everyone kind of pitched in."

Participants discussed what made this art project unique, with one summarizing the "fundamental difference between [this] project and other mural projects in the neighborhood. . . The community engagement in the making makes it an entirely different kind of process." The word used most often to describe the community's involvement was "together." The project brought people together, specifically people of diverse backgrounds, and the mural stood as an "artifact" of this. One person said, "It's more than the artwork. It's [that] we're proud that we all came together for this." Another noted, "It showed me that people can come together from diverse backgrounds and create something of beauty. It was really a full representation of who we are now [in this city]." Another participant described the collaboration cultivated as the "connective piece between people that comes when you collaborate and when you bring community into it."

The general sentiment was that the mural offered a unique opportunity for anybody to participate because "there is something about art that has no boundaries. Any age, any person can take it in." One example given was the inclusion of neighborhood children's footprints in the mural. A participant explored the impact of this by saying:

What I thought was unique was actually the intimacy of the footprint. I felt like ... watching kids take their shoes and socks off and ... their foot being touched by someone else, and the paint that went on it, it was just very, to me, really almost personal. ... It was really beautiful.

Another agreed that "art belongs to everybody. Everyone should be able to participate in it." Others noted that the mural was "bridging two worlds" between the community and school

or in this place where "the contrast of really poor and really rich exists." One person suggested that "the next project could be even more inclusive of the community."

Mural Legacy

Significance of Location. This final theme focuses on different aspects of the mural's legacy of the mural. Across interviews, respondents saw the location of the mural as having resounding significance. Many called it "important," noting that the mural sat at a "crossroads," at the "heart of the neighborhood," or "where worlds collide." Many participants named this as a "key corner," populated by heavily utilized basketball courts, a Muslim community center, a new apartment complex, and a furniture store. The mural is "seen by four streets and seen by the neighborhood."

This visible piece was "like light in the midst of the unknown," one participant said. The unknown surfaced in other interviews as well. While many alluded to gentrification and neighborhood changes, one person discussed specifics, saying "We saw the highest homeless population we've ever seen this year. . . Families [are] being pushed into [the neighboring town], with the rise in development." Participants recognized that the neighborhood was "largely lower income and heavily immigrant," and "where a lot of refugees have settled."

The mural was noted to hold the potential to "honor the people who live there, but also show people that there is value and beauty in the neighborhood." This was described as a "testament to our community" and "nice to have a place where we could leave a footprint."

Message of Mural. In addition to describing the process of assembling the mural and its aesthetic aspects, participants commented on a deeper meaning or what the mural represents. While the shimmering mirrors often captured attention, one said, "It literally and conceptually . . . brings light to that community." Some thought it symbolized "hope," "peace and community," and "the dynamic quality of the neighborhood."

One said, "If it had been one person's piece, it wouldn't have the impact that it has. . . It's [the] messages that everyone brought." Throughout the interviews, respondents discussed the importance of bringing people together and the mural as a symbol of that. This sentiment held particular importance for one person because of the context at the time. They explained, "I'm sure we're aware of a bit of a divided society right now. I saw people

of all different races and economic levels helping out, so that inspires you too, it gives you a good feeling in your heart.”

Respondents expressed the need for the type of symbol brought by the mural in other ways. One person suggested:

Evolution as a human being, your moral principles, your values, your way you treat other people really does also matter. ... What this is doing, I think, is saying there is a moral component to this. It’s ‘I’m expressing art in a way that brings people together.’ There is a moral implication for that.

Lastly, others pointed out the personal elements of the mural gave it meaning—“[People] love the fact that somebody may have put their baby’s foot in some paint and now that footprint is on the mural. There are people who gathered supplies and embedded them in this mural.” These pieces of individual contribution were “symbolic of voices. Sometimes voices that don’t often get heard . . . and symbolic of connections between business, housing—low-income housing, and non-low-income housing, and the university. There’s a partnership that existed that was very authentic and real.”

Lasting Presence. Participants noted the creation of the mural and its ongoing contribution to the community as powerful and lasting. Specifically, they spoke to the power of art to motivate thought or feeling, as “it exerts an influence.” Beyond the impact of art on the individual, respondents mentioned several times that art would bring people together. One said, referencing those in the community who would not otherwise cross paths, “It gives [a] unique opportunity for people to meet new people and to work with each other.” Another affirmed that “art itself is creating community.” Put simply by one participant, “art matters.”

In their interviews, participants communicated the enduring physical and metaphorical presence of the mural. First, they pointed out how the visual itself is striking. One said, “I just love going down the hill at a certain time of day when the sun just hits. . . It shimmers and shines.” Others echoed that “it glitters” and that “you come down that hill . . . and just think ‘Oh, this is really beautiful.’ . . . I just want to stop and know what’s going on.” Others agreed that aesthetically the mural was “enhancing the neighborhood” and that “many people noticed.” One participant said, “I drive by there every day. It makes me smile and it makes me feel good inside.”

Figure 3. Artist in Residence and Her Artist Husband Working on the Mural



Many participants thought it cultivated a sense of “ownership of the space,” that it was like “putting a stamp on the community.” Across several interviews, people saw the mural as a place that the kids who participated could revisit. One participant thought that it made a “lasting impression” because when walking past with students, “they love to see if they can find their name, or their footprint.” A final testament to this was that, to the surprise of one participant, the mural had not been vandalized. They said, “We had a lot of graffiti on the building before [the mural was installed], and no one’s touching it.” One participant’s remark encapsulates the lasting presence of this mural: “It’s interesting, it lives without us having to do anything. It does have a life of its own.”

Discussion

The results of this study support the value public art can add to neighborhoods (NEA, n.d.), particularly when residents are involved in the process from start to finish (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2009; Zitcer, 2020). From helping to choose the site to offering creative input, community members felt invested and attached to the mural, describing in words their own experiences of deep engagement (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004). The location of the mural at a four-way stop/intersection was a critical factor in encouraging participation in a diverse community with rapid changes underway. One participant described the site as a place “where worlds collide” in “the heart of the neighborhood.” The worlds “colliding” at the intersection are a Muslim community center, a thriving coffee business, breweries, cafés, public housing, a new apartment building, and a basketball court and soccer field used by residents.

Though creative placemaking concepts guided the project, the team was vigilant in anticipating concerns commonly raised about this approach, including a lack of racial and class diversity in leadership, gentrification, and differing interests in economic or social outcomes (Nicodemus, 2013; Markusen & Nicodemus, 2018; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020). The artist, location, and focus on deep relational engagement were strategic choices and approaches that resulted in broad-based representation of the neighborhood. The high level of participation in creating this mural is attributed to a focus on relationship building, which supports the importance of deep engagement (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004). Without it, creative placemaking or other

types of projects seeking to build or improve communities risk failure.

A unique finding of this study is the perceived impact of the visiting artist herself. Participants highlighted that working with a Black, Senegalese, French-speaking, female artist was meaningful on many levels; however, all saw her as a catalyst for community engagement. While much has been written about the importance of cultural matches in education, health care, social work, and other helping professions, the significance of cultural matching has been raised, though recently explored, in the area of creative placemaking (Redaelli, 2018). Further research in this area could increase our understanding of how to approach and achieve deep engagement with communities.

While public art created by a solo artist solo can enhance a neighborhood, the participatory approach of this project brought people together and catalyzed a collective effort to create the mural. As one participant noted, “If it had been one person’s piece, it wouldn’t have the impact that it has. ... It’s [the] messages that everyone brought.” This participatory approach resulted in new friendships between residents, university students and faculty, community agencies and schools, the artist and her family, and business owners—all working together and offering support in ways beyond the mural’s construction. The strategy of those who initiated and coordinated the project, particularly the artist in residence and the social work faculty member coteaching the course, was to embed in the community, setting up work tables on the street to encourage participation and dialogue. This study demonstrates that ensuring easy access and options for participation are necessary to form a collective effort that represents the community.

The mural and voices elucidated in the Senegalese glass paintings, tiles, and found objects both told individual stories and reflected a collective reverence for the neighborhood. Based on the responses of participants in this study, the location and message of the mural created a lasting impression and positive memory. Having stories to tell about a piece they painted, object they donated, or interaction with the artist and her family, university students, faculty, and fellow community members formed memories and meaning that they relive when they pass the mural. While there is admiration for the beauty of the final product as conceived and executed by the artist, this study found that personal involvement inspired meaning making and memory.

Though the artist determined the visual plan and theme of the mural, it resonated with community members and spoke to issues facing the community. This made space to weave a story and represent the diversity of the neighborhood beyond the artist's vision, which demonstrates the importance of the artist as facilitator and community practitioner (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Leavy, 2020). Some of the stories were personal, and others reflected collective and societal concerns, local and beyond. Additionally, participants were not passive observers; they were part of the creation, which lifted art from a spectator or viewing experience to one that included them. Facilitating residents' part in the process, offering a variety of ways to contribute, and spending time getting to know residents were catalyzing factors in showing how art, as one participant stated, "is creating community."

Participants identified collaboration and partnership as points of richness in their experiences. As Hall (2010) noted, authentic feelings of shared power are key in establishing functional relationships in university-community partnerships. In this project, communication did seem to be an issue for participants in terms of the logistics of all the players and moving parts, particularly with the business that owned the wall where the mural was located and whose facilities were used to store materials. Overall, however, participants discussed the great rewards they felt in contributing to and benefiting from such a collective journey.

The experience participants described illustrates what we strive for in successful projects. When done well, they are iterative. There may be feelings of "managed chaos" and glitches in communication in community projects; however, this study found that being flexible and able to regroup was key to maintaining the integrity of participatory engagement. As within the mural itself, each small piece contributed to the whole, which "literally and conceptually ... brings light to the community. ... It shimmers and shines."

Conclusion

The current study underscores the importance of participatory practice and deep engagement in neighborhood-based work involving public art and community-university partnerships. These endeavors require investing in relationships with community partners, including them in key decisions, offering a variety of ways to contribute, and ensuring the

artist is skilled in community engagement and a good fit in terms of neighborhood dynamics and demographics. Further research is needed to build a useful understanding of the lived experiences of community participants involved in public art, in particular those partnered with a university, and might include focus groups, arts-based methods, and longitudinal studies to explore the long-term value of art as a means to build community. Such understandings will assist in the development and support of best practices for engaging the community in meaningful ways with public art projects and partnering with local universities.

The results of this study suggest the community gained direct benefits from participating in the creation of the mural. Those benefits included forming new relationships with neighbors, students, faculty, and the artist and her family; a sense of ownership for their "part" in the creation; positive memories of creating the mural; and ongoing enjoyment of the mural's beauty. Recommendations for increasing the benefits of university-involved public art/creative placemaking are as follows:

- Promote a "low-barrier approach" that extends to residents a variety of ways to be involved from start to finish.
- Utilize relational participatory practice.
- Ensure the message of the art itself is one that the community/neighborhood is involved in and believes in.
- Discuss and normalize the potential messiness of iterative community work.
- Recognize that the value of the project is not limited to any product, but for any individual, the value for them may lay in "their part" in the process.
- Conduct more research on deep engagement and aligned outcomes. Is the primary objective to engage people and build relationships or to increase economic outcomes? These conversations should take place well before the project, with a focus on including and elevating the voices of community members who may not be typically included or revered.
- Support additional exploration of how universities can be effective and balanced partners in community-based work and public art projects.

Strategies such as these would address critiques of creative placemaking and university efforts to engage in communities in reciprocal and authentic ways, while building on the attributes of existing models.

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