An Exploration into Public Art

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abstract

This project explores both the processes of designing and creating a mural and the community impact of public art. It aims to answer questions including: What goes into creating a mural? What is public art and why is it important? How does it socially and economically impact the community and its members? In doing this project, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how to create a mural and of the greater cultural context that public art projects exist in.

introduction

Simply put, public art is defined as “art that is in public,” residing outside of the gallery setting. Other times, its definition requires of it more conditions—that it is site-specific, meaning it has a purposeful connection to its location, and that it is created with the intention of being for the community, for anyone to experience. To me, the value in public art comes from its opportunity to be involved in and inspire a sense of ownership in the community. It’s ability to uplift and bring people together and to inspire change. Public art making creates an opportunity to add some joy to and change the energy of a space.

My first introduction to public art was while I was a senior in high school working on a ceramic tile mural that was made in a collaboration between my school and Art Bomb Brigade, a public art program run through the University of Akron. I found this experience to be so different and I loved getting to work as a group to create a giant piece of art. A few years later, as a student at the University of Akron, I took Art Bomb Brigade as a class. In this class we learned about the process of creating a mural, then as a class, worked as a team to design and paint a mural. This experience was so exciting and I had so much fun getting to work with my friends to transform an entire space using art. I really love the idea of getting to use art as a way to give something to the community.

When it came time to start thinking about my honors project, I knew I wanted to do something that allowed me to combine my interests and the things I have learned while in college. My experience with Art Bomb left me so excited about public art and being involved in the community and I needed to know more. I wanted to learn how to create a mural, the whole process from start to finish, as well as get a deeper understanding of how public art projects impact the communities they are in. Designing and creating a mural would allow me to combine my knowledge from my graphic design and illustration coursework towards further exploring my interest in public art. Ultimately, I wanted to explore this topic because it’s something I love to do and that brings me joy. I love getting to work with people, make art, and sprinkle some joy into my community.

In order to begin the process of wanting to paint a mural, my first step needed to be finding a wall. I took notice of places around Akron that I frequently pass by that could be good locations for a mural. I was looking for places, preferably belonging to local businesses, that had a blank exterior wall where a piece of art could liven the area. I identified five potential walls belonging to local businesses across various Akron neighborhoods including West Hill, Highland Square, Ellet, and Downtown. The locations ranged from restaurants and cafes, to stores, and a counseling office. After researching potential locations, I then identified a top choice wall to move forward with: a plant store. I identified this as the top choice due to its high-traffic location, the size of the wall, and the fun aesthetic of the store.

Before I could begin envisioning what a mural would look like for the plant store, I needed to do preliminary research on their business, brand, and aesthetic. To do this, I visited the store and looked through their website and social media pages. I concluded that their brand makes use of a clean and geometric aesthetic, leafy plant imagery, and dark colors. I then conducted visual research on mural designs, plant imagery, illustration styles, and color palettes to gauge a sense of what I liked and would be appropriate for this project. Keeping my observations and research in mind, I then moved on to sketching ideas for a mural design with the goal of creating a series of three fully illustrated designs, mocked up onto a picture of the wall, to pitch to the business when I reached out to them.

The three designs I came up with included one with large overlapping leafy plants, one of a flower garden, and the third being a black and white linework drawing of hands reaching out holding flowers. After creating the design options, I then did the part I was most nervous for—reaching out to the business. In order to reach out to the business, I sent an email explaining my idea for the project and asked if they were interested and would want to meet and further discuss. The plant store already had other plans for their wall.
Since this location did not work out, I then moved on to looking for other businesses that may be interested in floral themed murals. I researched and visited other plant stores, nurseries, florists, and hair salons around the Akron area that may be interested in a mural. With the help of my professor, we arrived at a new location for a mural: a retention wall that surrounds a parklet at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School. This ended up being the perfect place—not only is the wall in a great location and facing a main road in Akron, it also has personal significance to me as that is where I went to high school. In fact, the ceramic tile mural I worked on while a student there used to live on that same wall. We then reached out to the school with the designs and they were interested! They chose two out of the three submitted designs that could go on the wall. I decided to go with the green leafy design, as it would be fun, vibrant, and fitting for the space.

Now that the location had been chosen and approved, it was time to begin preparing to paint and planning out the logistics of the project. I then met with my professor and gathered painting materials, decided on a new background color for the design, ordered paint, and discussed getting the project started. In the original design I had illustrated, the background color of the wall was a dark teal almost black color, but I opted to swap this out for a grayish-blue color of paint. Very dark colors tend to create very thin paint and would require a second coat to be painted, meaning it would take twice as much paint and twice as long to do. By opting for the grayish-blue, a color with more white pigment in it, the paint would be much thicker and only require a single coat, while still matching well with the shades of green used in the design. For the paint that would be used for the design, I received donated paint from Art Bomb Brigade and chose several shades of green, blue, and yellow from their paint collection. I also borrowed the painting materials I would need to complete this project such as brushes, paint rollers, and tarps from Art Bomb Brigade.

I then decided on a plan for how to get the mural started—paint the background color, then draw the design on with chalk, paint over the chalk, then keep adding on to the ends of the design to make it bigger as I go, and so on. I had originally wanted to project the design onto the wall and trace it, but was encouraged to free hand draw it due to the illustration’s organic and loose nature, so I elected to use freehand as my method for applying the design. I then reached out to friends and formed a team of volunteers who wanted to help paint and participate in the mural. After the preparation and planning, it was finally time to paint!
Before I could actually start painting, the wall needed to be cleaned, so as to create the best conditions for the new paint to stick to. We dry washed the wall with rags to remove the dirt and peeled off all the loose paint from the previous paint job, then began painting the background color. After the background color was done and had dried, I then began to free hand translate the design onto the wall with chalk. As I had originally drawn the design in scale to another wall that was of completely different proportions, I needed to find a way to adapt the design to the shape of the new wall. I decided on aligning the center of the design with the corner where the two retention walls meet, and drawing the design outwards from there. This method would allow me to get the design onto both the walls in the parklet, as well as to more easily add on to the ends of the design and cater it to the shape of the wall as I worked.

After drawing the outlines, I began to trace over the chalk outlines with paint so they would not be washed off with the rain. Since I did not match and order paint to the colors I had in the original design, I decided to bring all the cans of paint I had to the work site and intuitively decide what colors to use as I worked. I had dark green and olive paints that I was able to easily match to colors in my illustration, so I outlined the leaves which used those colors first. From there, I started outlining the remaining chalk lines and matching the colors as I went. I aimed to pick colors that looked good next to each other, stood out against the background color, and matched the general value range of the colors I used in the illustration.

Using this process, I traced over most of the outlines and began to fill in some of the large elements with paint. At this point, I could get a sense of how the design and the colors were working and I decided that I was not completely satisfied with how some of the colors were interacting with each other. From here, I decided to take a step back and reevaluate.
In order to decide how to move forward, I made color swatches of every paint color I had, then photographed and color sampled the swatches so that I could digitally experiment with the colors in Procreate. After creating several color palette options and applying them to the design, I decided to use four of the paint colors I already had, as well as to purchase quarts of paint in two additional colors to achieve the correct range of values for the design.

I then began repainting the sections of the mural that needed to be changed to the new colors and continued blocking in the colors for the rest of the design. The addition of the new colors, a mint-white and a medium teal color, allowed for the design to pop and have more of a sense of foreground, middleground, and background, creating depth. Once I had a clear idea of which colors I wanted to use and had outlined all of the elements in the corresponding color of paint, I began inviting my friends who had offered to volunteer to come paint. Together we worked on blocking all the large elements in with paint.

After filling in most of the design, I then went back to digital and began to sketch out how I wanted to extend the design from each end. I decided to repeat the existing leaf elements but to rearrange and sometimes vertically reflect them in order to create a pattern that looks cohesive with the already planned part of the design, yet not identical with or mechanical feeling. After designing a new section to add on to each end, I then once again drew the design in chalk, outlined in paint, and then blocked in colors. As this wall was much shorter vertically, but much longer horizontally than for what I had originally planned, I repeated this process and extended the design four to five times its original length on each of the parklet walls.
process

Once I had extended the design to cover most of the wall and had blocked in the big shapes with paint, I began to clean up the design. I applied second coats of paint to the colors that needed it, cleaned up the edges, and adjusted the forms of some of the leaves to more naturally work with the composition. By cleaning up the shapes, it allowed me to see what I was working with, where there were tension points in the design, and what needed to be changed. From there, I began adding in details and filler elements to the design where needed. I painted on sprouts of grass on the foreground layer and larger, long leaves into the background to create more depth. This allowed me to adjust the design to fit the needs of the wall and cater the design to the location.

Now that the majority of the mural was painted, I needed to design one final section to add to each end, so as to not abruptly stop the design. For the end sections, I arranged the leaves to match the gradation of the wall in order to naturally taper the design off. After drawing and painting the end sections, the final step was to clean up the entire design. With each paint color, I defined the shapes, cleaned up the edges, and painted second and third coats where needed. Very lastly, I painted over any drips of paint and used the grayish-blue paint to clean up the edges of all the elements that touched the background.

Throughout the entire painting process, I photographed the materials and the wall at the beginning and end of each painting day, as well as documented several painting days with a time lapse video that shows the mural’s progression over time. The first day of painting was August 4, 2022 and it was completed on November 1, 2022, with an estimated total painting time of 75 hours.
challenges & discoveries

The process of creating this mural was so fun and exciting, but also challenged me and allowed me to grow. I think I walked into this project feeling fairly confident about the designing and painting process, but I did not anticipate the ways that this project would require me to think on my feet, challenge my nature, and teach me to adapt to new ways of doing things.

One of the biggest challenges and learning experiences that this project provided me with is that it forced me to work in processes completely outside of my comfort zone. As a graphic designer, I have a tendency to want to be meticulous and a perfectionist with my work, often to my own detriment. Falling into this tendency, the thought of free hand translating the design from my illustration to the wall and not planning out the whole design before I started scared me, but in a good way.

When I first started to draw the design with chalk I frequently got hung up on the details and the roughness of the chalk drawing, but it quickly led me to the realization that trying to be a perfectionist about this simply was not going to work—I needed to find a new way to go about this. From this point forward, I realized that all the chalk drawing needed to be is a guide to tell me the general size and shape of each of the leaves on the wall, and once it’s painted it does not need to look exactly like the illustration, and it won’t, but that’s a good thing.

A few of the other challenges this project presented me with were the limitations of working on an outdoor mural. In painting an outdoor mural, you are not free to work on it whenever you please—it’s up to the weather. You can only paint outside when it’s light out, not raining, and the temperature is above 50 degrees. When it is below 50 degrees outside the paint will have difficulty sticking to the wall, and if you paint too soon before it starts to rain, the rain will cause any paint that isn’t completely dry to run. Working with these conditions required me to plan ahead when I was going to paint, and to be able to adapt my schedule and change plans when necessary.

Another aspect of this project that surprised me was the leadership role it required me to take on. In creating this mural, all the decision making and planning was up to me. On days where I had friends helping me paint, it at first surprised me when I realized I was the one responsible for giving them directions. This experience showed me the importance of planning ahead, being prepared, and having a plan for what I wanted to get done each painting day.

lasting effects

The experience of creating this mural changed my whole way of thinking about my art practice, made me reflect on the reasons I love creating murals, and gave me lessons that I can apply to both my graphic design/illustration work and creating murals in the future. Working on this mural brought me so much joy and excitement and was such a rewarding experience. Painting a mural is a completely different experience in contrast to graphic design. It requires you to use your whole body, work with physical materials, and to be outside in the space. Getting to be outside creating artwork with my friends, listening to music, talking, laughing, and complaining together while we worked made the experience even more special. Not only were we having a good time, but getting to work with other artists allowed me to hear their advice and ideas for the mural in real time as we worked.

Working outside also provided us with the opportunity to people watch and to sometimes talk to those passing by. Some people just stopped by to look and moved on, others came and complimented the mural, and a few people, especially the high school students, stopped by and wanted to ask questions about the mural, the painting process, and what I was doing. Getting to be in the space and observe it at all hours of the day, and meet people was crucial to the process of creating the mural. Doing this project reinforced my love for people and for the Akron community.

In terms of my design and illustration practice, this project finally helped me to put a dent into my tendency of playing it safe and allowing perfectionism to run the show. While the grid structures and rules of graphic design are good and there for a reason, sometimes doing something unexpected is better, as long as there’s a reason for it. Stepping out of my comfort zone is a good thing, and using what I learned from this project, I can continue to use it to push myself as an artist.
As much as this experience impacted me, it also changed the space. The joy and creativity I experienced while creating the mural got put back into the space for anyone passing by to experience. So I guess that poses the question—How does the creation of public art impact the community it’s in? By adding a piece of art to a public space, it begins to humanize the environment and transform the space into a place. Public art changes the nature of a space and the way people experience it—it has the ability to impact a community and its members socially, culturally, and economically.

This idea of public art changing a space into a place is at the root of the concept of creative placemaking. Placemaking focuses on transforming public areas into places that serve the needs of the community by way of changing their aesthetic, physical appearance, and social identity. Creative placemaking, in particular, focuses on using art and culture as a vehicle for this transformation. It aims to rejuvenate spaces and encourage new social bonds to form between people and their community. Public art plays an important role in creative placemaking efforts—projects, like murals, can help to beautify and transform cities into places for community members to live, work, and play.

Adding public art projects to cities helps create more invigorating, lively environments and places an emphasis on the shared humanity of public places. When people experience art as part of their daily lives, it fuels their creativity and activates their imagination. Furthermore, experiencing public art encourages people to pay attention to their environment in new ways, as well as to the people around them. In doing this, we are reminded of the ways in which we are connected to our neighbors, ultimately reinforcing a sense of community. This sense of connectedness allows public art to act as a catalyst for people to engage in and care for their communities, as well as be a vehicle for learning and social change.

Artists can create public art to help create connections between people and build and uplift communities. Through applying their creativity to public places, artists become community leaders—advocating for and using art to show new perspectives and challenge beliefs and community values. In the case of Boston’s Artist-in-Residence program, artists and community members work on projects to reframe social narratives, improve city initiatives, and use art practice as a method for local government and community work.

Public art not only encourages people to engage in their community, it also allows cities to gain cultural and economic value. Cities with a strong public art presence appear more unique and tend to give the community a stronger sense of identity. As public art acts as a reflection of the local culture and history of a place, it, in turn, allows people to feel an attachment to and sense of ownership in their community. This feeling of identity and attachment to a location is a key factor in a city’s ability to keep its residents, as well as to encourage its growth.

This attention to creating a sense of community allows public art to act as a tool for both community restoration and generation, as well as economic generation. When public art is used to beautify and transform our everyday places—our parks, schools, and businesses—these places become more vibrant, exciting environments that encourage people to connect with one another. When cities have this type of dynamic cultural scene, they become more attractive to residents, as well as to businesses. Strengthening a community’s identity through public art attracts new residents and visitors and directly encourages cultural tourism. When these tourists visit and spend their money at local businesses, their spending helps to drive up the local economy.
concluding thoughts

When public art is created, it transforms and changes the nature of the space, altering the way that people experience and interact with it. Like I cannot know the full extent to how this project will impact me in the future, I also cannot predict what will happen to my mural or to the space. How will people use the parklet? Will they put benches up? Will people play soccer there? Will the wall get tagged? I don’t know. People will get to experience the space and do with it whatever they need. I can’t know the answer to any of those questions, but that’s part of the beauty of public art. And I’m excited to watch.

documentation

The mural lives at St. Vincent - St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio. An Exploration into Public Art was on display at Myers School of Art from November 4–10, 2022.

The timelapse process video is available on YouTube at: https://youtu.be/YXeXqqi9Eqc
bibliography


