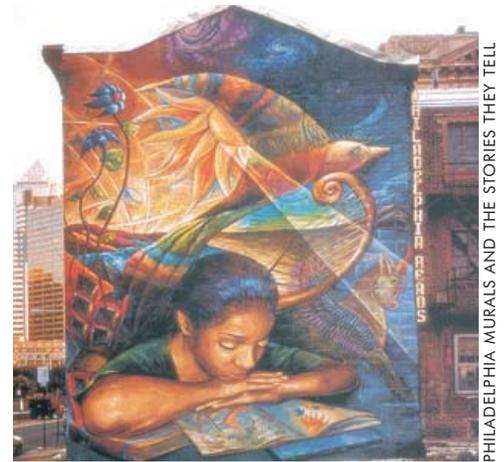


PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Mural Arts Program engages community members in murals that improve aesthetics and transform neighborhoods

“Murals work on a symbolic level, providing opportunities for communities to express concerns, values, and aspirations: their yearning to be free of violence and fear; their hope to create a better world for themselves and their children; their desire to remember those who were overcome or who overcame...They are our dreams manifest.”

—JANE GOLDEN, DIRECTOR MURAL ARTS PROJECT, FOREWORD PHILADELPHIA MURALS AND THE STORIES THEY TELL



IN SECRET BOOK, 1999.

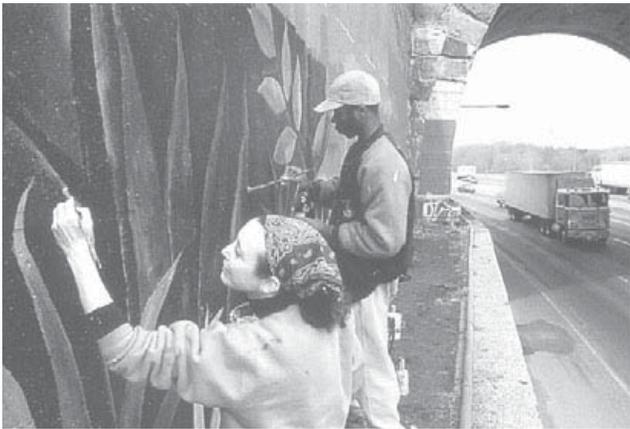
Fervent in the belief that public art has the power to eradicate urban blight and create community change, Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program (MAP) follows a community participatory model to transform graffiti-scarred walls into scenic views in diverse neighborhoods citywide. In the process of creating murals that feature portraits of community heroes, tell neighborhood stories or display abstract designs, MAP fosters connections among neighbors and forges new bonds between residents (including at-risk youth), professional artists, and mural funders. In addition to helping artists and residents collaborate to turn their artistic visions into reality, MAP offers art education programs citywide. MAP works alongside Philadelphia’s diverse communities to use public art to revitalize communities, promote education, and

support civic pride. MAP is responsible for the creation of over 2000 murals since the mid 1980’s.¹

THE PLACE

MAP operates primarily in low-income neighborhoods across Philadelphia, reaching residents of all races and ethnicities. As the popularity of murals increases and word spreads, murals are now being created in wealthier neighborhoods, as well. During the first five years of the program, murals were painted in largely African American communities. MAP later expanded to Latino communities and then to Asian and White communities, eventually encompassing the full diversity of Philadelphia’s population (1,479,339 as of the 2003 US Census): 42.6%

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PHILADELPHIA MURALS AND THE STORIES THEY TELL

GOLDEN AND FELLOW ARTIST WORKING ON THE LEDGE WALL MURAL.

African American, 42.5% White, 8.5% Hispanic/Latino, 4.4% Asian, and 2% American Indian/Alaska Native.

THE PROJECT

MAP grew out of the city's Anti-Graffiti Network, which was launched by former Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode in 1984. Mural arts have historical roots in depicting significant social, political and cultural imagery and MAP continues this legacy. Today, MAP brings together community residents and grassroots organizations to arrive at consensus about what images should be painted in their own communities. MAP facilitates community listening sessions to identify common themes and unify community members around a subject for the mural that will be painted in their neighborhood. MAP became institutionalized within the city's Department of Recreation in 1996 and in this role, creates new partnerships between government agencies, educational institutions, corporations, and philanthropic foundations to bring murals to fruition.

Engaging the talent of approximately 170 artists, MAP completes an average of 100 projects a year, including mosaic (small pieces of colored glass or stone fit-

ted together), ceramic (hand painted and kiln fired ceramic tiles), and fresco (watercolors painted on wet plaster) murals. The program strives to serve as many neighborhoods as possible, without bias, and maintains a waiting list for art education and mural creation. As MAP Director Jane Golden observes, "People have an intuitive desire to have art around, and murals make art accessible. The program's grassroots, bottom-up approach also works to empower residents for whom, oftentimes, art in their neighborhoods equates to an occasional billboard with alcohol and tobacco images."

MAP has five main objectives:

1. To create murals that reflect and depict the culture, history, and vision of the communities in which they are created,
2. To develop long-term, sustainable collaborations with communities that engage partners in the mural design process,
3. To educate youth about visual art and foster youth development through offering high-risk students mentorship opportunities with professional artists,
4. To use murals and the mural design process as a tool for community engagement, blight remediation, neighborhood beautification, and demonstration of civic pride, and
5. To generate professional development opportunities for artists who are committed to working collaboratively in communities to create murals and visual art education projects.

Each new MAP undertaking begins with a call (or more recently a written application) from an interested community member. MAP then conducts a site visit to find a wall suitable for a mural: Is the wall relatively smooth? Does the wall have major defects that would disrupt the painting process? Is the wall free of water damage? And importantly, will people be able to view the entire image? MAP coordinates community meetings to discuss what themes and images the community would like to see captured in the mural's design.

MAP offers classes at recreation centers, homeless shelters, detention centers, and senior centers citywide, reaching out to all members of Philadelphia's communities. In an effort to engage the city's youth, MAP offers art instruction to more than 1,000 students, ages 8 to 18, at 36 sites throughout Philadelphia.

MAP engages community members in an inclusive process of brainstorming and may also show slides of other murals to help get the ball rolling.

“The program attempts to use art as a tool to examine neighborhood systems more globally,” says Golden, adding that she wants the art MAP creates to tell a story about the neighborhood. To the extent possible, MAP tries to connect its work with existing community efforts and murals are tailored to depict important messages. For example, anti-drug and anti-smoking murals sponsored by Philadelphia’s Department of Public Health were erected as part of larger anti-drug and anti-smoking campaigns.

MAP is a holistic program that works to engage the community in creating murals, not just at specific sites, but through mentorship and education aimed at nurturing new artists. MAP offers classes at recreation centers, homeless shelters, detention centers, and senior centers citywide, reaching out to all members of Philadelphia’s communities. In an effort to engage the city’s youth, MAP offers art instruction to more than 1,000 students, ages 8 to 18, at 36 sites throughout Philadelphia through *The Big Picture*, a year-round program that introduces students to the history and process

“Once the mural was complete...neighborhood youth began helping their elders keep the area in front of the mural clean...[s]ometimes designing and producing a local mural begins a process of social connection and political activism that previously did not exist.”

of mural painting. Lessons help students foster creative thinking skills and prepare them for applying these skills to the workforce by teaching them problem solving, critical thinking, and teamwork. The final element of the program is for students to design and paint a small mural.

Like other national arts projects, MAP must strive to convince government funders of the value of public art. “The program isn’t the police or the fire department and is seen as expendable,” explained Golden. Most murals are sponsored and funded by private foundations or corporations, and matching city funds with private dollars has been one key to MAP’s continued success.

Keeping up with success is another challenge. As more communities experience the benefits of murals, demand increases. With only a small staff and minimal resources, MAP struggles to meet expectations. “Success is a mixed blessing, a double-edged sword,” said Golden. “We want to ensure fairness by bringing art to different neighborhoods and utilizing the talents of a diverse group of artists.” MAP constantly strives to reach the neighborhoods and youth that need it most and to create art that will make a difference in their communities.



PHILADELPHIA MURALS AND THE STORIES THEY TELL

AN OCTAGONAL MURAL AT A COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER.

THE PEOPLE

Diverse Partners Collaborate to Build Healthy Environments

With Golden at the helm, MAP is a truly collaborative program that brings together community residents and professional artists to produce public art. The program relies on collaborations with, and funding from, a variety of public and private sources, including the City of Philadelphia, corporations, foundations, and individuals. Community-based arts organizations, schools, and senior centers offer support by recruiting community members and providing sites for education programs. Sponsors of the education programs include

the City of Philadelphia, American Jewish Committee, The William Penn Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Nathan Cummings Foundation. MAP also fosters artistic skills among people in prisons and detention centers, community youth and former graffiti artists who are committed to applying their skills to legal activity.

Matching city funds with private dollars has been one key to MAP's continued success.

THE RESULTS

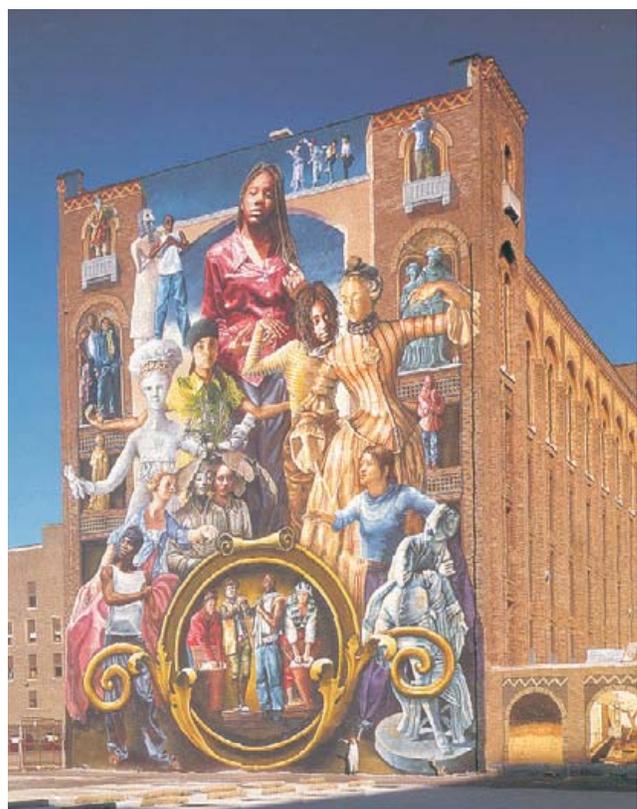
Healthy Change in Local Environments

Since its inception, MAP has completed nearly 2,500 indoor and outdoor murals throughout the city, more than any other public art program in the nation. Murals not only transform neighborhoods, they often become the “heart of community revitalization,” revealing to residents the potential their neighborhoods have to be safe and beautiful. The pride murals generate frequently prompts further community development efforts, including economic and social welfare enhancements like cleaner streets, fewer billboards promoting unhealthy behaviors, and more city-sponsored youth programs. In Golden’s book, *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*, mural documentarian Timothy Drescher describes his experience of meeting a woman in North Philadelphia, who said of one of MAP’s creations, “Without that mural, we wouldn’t *be* a community.” Drescher goes on to explain that “once the mural was complete...neighborhood youth began helping their elders keep the area in front of the mural clean... [s]ometimes designing and producing a local mural begins a process of social connection and political activism that previously did not exist.”

Mural creation also helps transform the lives of youth who participate in the program each year. In the process of mural building, youth often discover latent artistic talents as well as find new outlets for positive mental, physical, and social activity. Some may also be diverted from drugs and crime, and many young MAP employees have earned their General Education Diploma with program support.

Although published research on the impact of public art on health is limited, the installation of public art in one community was associated with improved sense of well-being and increased social connectedness.² A small body of literature suggests that art in healthcare settings can improve patient recovery times and provide therapeutic benefits.³ In the late 1990’s several reviews of arts programs sought to better understand the relationship between art and health and found some support for the notion that participating in art programs can improve health, perceived well-being, and resilience.⁴

The value of art for preventing violence, vandalism and graffiti has been hypothesized but not yet formally evaluated.⁵ There are numerous examples of public arts and public works programs that require inclusion of art on the basis that public art enhances quality of life, promotes community well-being, increases civic pride, and celebrates regional history.⁶ Art has been



COMMON THREADS: PHILADELPHIA'S TALLEST MURAL OCCUPIES AN 8-STORY WALL.

used as a tool for social change and community development in programs that seek to increase social connections, reduce social isolation, reduce delinquency and truancy among at-risk youth, and promote healing among institutionalized adults. Still, more research is needed to draw empirical conclusions about the influence of community art on positive health outcomes.^{7,8}

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

Golden attributes MAP's success to its commitment to involving community partners, to promoting sustainability and consistently enhancing program effectiveness. "By creating projects in collaboration with others, creativity flourishes," she explained. "By using creativity and by doing a variety of projects in diverse neighborhoods MAP can reach people and contribute to neighborhood aesthetics and community transformation."

LOOKING AHEAD

MAP continues to contribute to aesthetic and social transformations in neighborhoods throughout Philadelphia. Given high demand, budgetary constraints and limited staffing, MAP currently uses a competitive process to determine where murals will be painted. MAP staff has produced books, calendars and other products to spread the stories and images of Philadelphia's murals and to help supplement private funding to support program operations. Community art is essential to creating public spaces that residents and passersby can enjoy and has the potential to stimulate activism and engagement. When the value of public art becomes more widely understood, programs like MAP will finally receive their long overdue recognition and public support.

PROGRAM CONTACT

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ENDNOTES

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This is one in a series of 11 profiles that reveal how improvements to the built environment can positively influence the health of community residents. The examples illustrate how changes to the built environment can be particularly meaningful in communities that have historically lacked important features such as pedestrian infrastructure, services and institutions, or public art. Taken more broadly, the profiles demonstrate how improvements to the built environment have the potential to reduce health disparities.

The profiles were written and produced by Prevention Institute. Funding and guidance were provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health. It is our hope that these profiles will stimulate and inspire partnerships between community residents and practitioners from multiple fields and sectors to design solutions and take action to improve the built environment for the health and well-being of all.