

Heading up a Public Mural Project: A Love Letter to Art Advocates

My favorite part of artmaking is the dramatic transformation of a space that mural art brings. The ugly eyesore becomes a beautiful focal point. Unnoticed becomes noteworthy. This birth of beauty, engagement, and delight in a neglected space, particularly in public spaces, is why I paint murals. I have seen enough happy endings to know that the effort is worth it, but sometimes I forget that the turnarounds I experience, and have come to expect, on every project are still a surprise to others. Here is my love letter to every art advocate with a dream of transforming a space they care about but is not sure about where to start, or how to go about it. The advice I offer is my observations from watching project coordinators that were successful. I hope this document will provide you with insights to help your project come to fruition, so we can bring more beautiful works of art into our public spaces.

Public murals cover a broad spectrum of truly publicly funded murals, private property owners, and commercially sponsored murals from retail tenants that are public facing. The majority of public art projects are initiated by art advocates from within the community with support built from community art organizations.

Every mural project begins with a single individual with a vision. This person is someone who understands that art changes how a space feels, how individuals experience the space in their community. If you are considering heading up a mural project, it is critical to understand up front that *most* people won't get it until they see it. Once the mural is up, 95% of the community will love it. As in, "This is the best thing since sliced bread and now I take a new route to work every day." Five percent of people will always prefer things how they used to be. This group is a very small fraction of the population, and they are not your target audience.

This person with the vision is typically not the artist. The optics are not ideal if an artist puts together their own project, navigating the bureaucratic process to create work for themselves when ideally, they should focus on the craft. There is no magic formula to success with public mural projects, it is typically a slow, relentless effort. The good news is that I have seen lots of successful projects, community transformations, for those who persist. Every project I have been on has happened because one individual saw an opportunity to put something beautiful together, and then just figured out how to make it happen the best they could.

Mindset

Your job, as vision keeper of the project, is not to get defeated when, initially, people respond to your enthusiasm with resistance or apathy. Art on canvas can be incubated gently, protected from the outside world and its harsh criticism. This is not so with mural art. When working in the public space you have to go out and hustle your idea. You become an art evangelist. Your idea will require cooperation from individuals in a variety of roles. Your idea, however awesome, will be met with skepticism. The trick is communicating your vision and winning onto your team a handful of people that can help make your vision a reality. Warning: The majority of people you share your idea with will probably think you are crazy. You are not crazy. You are pursuing the easiest and most brilliant way to bring vibrancy and pride into your neighborhood, business, or city. The appreciation does not come until much later.

Get Specific

Decide on what part of your town could use to be “activated” or benefit most from a beautification project. Look for walls with few windows and high visibility; they have the most to gain from a makeover. Create a shortlist of four or five walls that are the best candidates. If, despite your best efforts, your first choice wall does not pan out, you can move on to plan B, C or D. There is usually no shortage of walls that would make great canvases for a mural. Sometimes, after one or two murals go up on other walls, and the success is experienced firsthand, then your first choice wall will become available.

Public or privately funded?

In an ideal world, your community has a “percent for art” program. If that is the case, congratulations: your city already understands the value of public art and the chances of getting sponsorship or city support in your beautification project are good. Start by forming a neighborhood interest group. The mural projects that I have been involved with that are city funded started with a park or neighborhood organization that lobbied their city council or county representative. If you are looking for public funds, you will be more successful if there is an effort made at gaining as much broad community support for the idea as possible through the form of an interest group focused on community art.

If your city does not have a percent for art program, then your city officials likely do not have the support from city council to fund your public mural project. The best approach in this situation is to target building owners, businesses, or private homes with public facing walls or fences.

Public art projects run by private individuals: How to approach businesses, building owners, and residential owners that have well positioned public facing walls.

Truly, this process is like trying to win over a shy wild animal. While knocking on doors is always a good place to start, I have found it is not the most effective because you don't want the building owner to feel ambushed by the idea. Casual conversations, referrals, networking through the chamber of commerce and local business events, promoting the idea among friends and social media and serendipitous encounters are typically more effective than targeting a single individual or business. If it is a great idea, doors will open. If you are able to open up a conversation about your amazing vision to transform the community through mural art with someone, anyone, I suggest you lead with images, not words. Also, do as much homework as you can ahead of time. This includes finding out who owns the spaces you are considering, how the space is used and by whom, and what the vision is for the art, and how it would serve the space.

When approaching private parties, don't promote the mural project as a charity case, make sure you communicate to the decision makers the economic value that is created by public art. It might be true that valuing art is a moral issue and that supporting the arts and artists is a noble cause. But the best way to find funding and get approvals is to appeal to practical realities:

- "Fine art" murals deter graffiti. The building owner saves money from graffiti remediation.
- Communities with beautiful mural art are more desirable to live and work in and as a result real estate prices going up. Depriving a community of beautification projects is not the best way to solve the challenge of affordable housing.
- Mural art makes a space more inviting, so visitors are more likely to walk rather than drive through a space, more likely to shop, or stop for coffee. The local economy receives an economic bump from the attention the art generates.
- Mural art is possibly the least expensive capital improvement project, compared to landscaping (and required maintenance that entails), hardscaping, or structural renovations and the impact and upgrade can be substantial.
- Mural projects typically receive positive press in the local newspaper, increasing visibility for the business in the community.
- The buildings and businesses become visual icons in the community.
- Murals require little maintenance and last 20-30 years.

Lead with images

Take a photo of the walls in consideration. Find images online of other murals you admire, or if you have identified a particular artist you want to work with, get images of their murals. Photoshop the photos of sample murals onto the photos you took of your local public walls. Print out this stack of images and show them to whomever you cross paths with. Talk up the local barista, librarian and city administrator. One in ten conversations might lead to another door opening that makes the project possible.

In my experience, the word "mural" is too ambiguous, and many people have a negative reaction to it. Many people have seen lots of ugly murals in their life and fewer beautiful, transformative murals. So, if you can help it, don't use words, show them a picture. If you show someone a mural of something that you think is incredible, and they think it is terribly ugly, that is good to know. It saves you both a lot of words and time. However, if you show them something that piques their curiosity, you have just cleared one of the biggest hurdles in bringing your idea to fruition.

The Design

Just as you would not ask to see the architectural designs of the building you want before you decide to hire the architect, you should not expect an artist to create a unique rendering for the project without a design fee. However, by all means the artist should provide potential clients with examples of his or her work, and possibly site mockups using past designs. If you would like an original design created for that site, the artist should be paid for the work.

Every situation presents its own opportunity. If there are not any experienced mural artists in your community, consider running the mural project as a mural workshop for local artists who want to learn how to paint murals. Find an experienced artist willing to travel to your community and take on apprentices while they oversee and ultimately guarantee the quality of the outcome. The local apprentices would be then more qualified to take on their own local mural projects in the future.

Developing a concept with a building owner

The building owner is not inclined to take risks with their investment. Ideally, you will be able to show them pictures to entice them to the possibilities. Take the time to explain how murals positively impact foot traffic, property values, and business. Also, listen. Find out what they love most about their life and their community, what imagery they might want to see, so that you can suggest artwork that respects them and takes

their preferences into consideration. Their reservations are the final hurdles in the race, and if you can understand their reservations, you can resolve hurdles where you are able and the project can move forward. This does not mean you are going to paint a twenty-foot tall portrait of the building owner on water skis. It is up to the artist to intuitively piece together a work of art that is compelling to the community that is also appropriate for the client. You can reassure them that they can approve the final design before it is painted. If they feel like they will have a voice in the creation of the mural, they are more likely to cooperate with and contribute financially to the project. At the very least, it is best to begin these initial conversations with a collaborative approach, to see if there might be an alignment of goals, a win-win-win for the community, the artist and client.

It is great if you can meet with the primary stakeholders onsite, to walk the area and look at the site together. The artist, public committee, and building owner can piece together the challenges and opportunities with their shared experience. City approval should be relatively easy since building owners have lots of legal domain over their walls, but you still will need to coordinate with the city for approval and also permits if you will be blocking sidewalks, etc.

Funding the project

The best place to find funding for a mural project is from the parties that directly benefit from the project. The best time to identify funding is when you have already warmed up the soup. You have identified the buildings, received conditional approval from client's and understand their budget. It is easier to bring the mural project as sharply into focus first, to make it as real as possible, so you can communicate the value to the community and client's, than trying to peddle an abstract idea that sounds far off and looks undefined. Clearly articulating the positive financial impact that a mural brings, and why murals are a wise investment is important. Yes, there is inherent value in art, and it imparts intangible benefits on the community, but there are also positive financial repercussions. I suggest communicating in the language that matters most to the person with whom you are communicating.

The murals in public spaces that I have worked have all been funded by one of the categories I have mentioned already: cities (usually urged by organized community groups), building owners, business owners, and private residents, who receive direct benefits from a wall they own that is also public facing. I do not have experience with kickstarter campaigns, private funding of projects in public spaces, or soliciting funds from the community directly in the public space, although these all seem like reasonable fundraising avenues. No matter which avenue you pursue, clarifying the specifics of the project to the greatest degree possible would be a sensible first step to finding funding.

The Design Process

First of all, don't invite everyone to the party.

The design should be developed primarily by the artist, with up front design directions as well as general feedback from the building owner and project coordinator/ art advocate. That's it. Great art is not made by a committee.

Make sure that the purpose of the mural is clear and defined for all parties. Who is this mural for? What speed and angle will the viewer see it from? What is the energy or style we want to convey? What new future will be made possible by the completion of this mural? Once you know the purpose, you can make decisions about the design that keep the priorities in mind and be flexible to the preferences of the collaborating individuals.

For example, a pediatric dental office with a bright white wall that faces the street might want the art to appeal to kids *and* look professional. This does not mean the artist needs to feel pigeonholed into painting a big smiling tooth holding a toothbrush. If that is what your artist comes up with, find another artist. If the business is obstinate on that imagery, consider finding another wall or client. There are an infinite number of styles and imagery that would create a work of art that delights kids, looks professional, and would be enjoyed by both patients and the general public equally, that is not overtly commercial. It is the artist's job to figure out how to adjust color, composition, style and subject to meet design objectives. You can do so many things with paint. Make things blend or disappear, make them pop, wrap images around the corner, onto the pavement, bring the eye where you want, surprise, calm, delight, whatever. You can do a few different things with each work of art, but you can't do everything with every piece. A "kitchen sink" style mural that aims to please everyone and tell multiple stories that pleases and represents every single person in the community is not the way to solve an interesting design challenge. Instead of "design by committee" make sure that the key parties are listened to, and that their opinion is taken into account at the beginning, but leave the artist to create a design that synthesizes the key priorities into a compelling visual.

Success

Once the mural painting is underway, invite the community into the process wherever possible. Invite the local paper out to cover the project. Arrange "office hours" with the artist so people can ask questions about the project and engage. Collect first hand testimonials from the community about the impact the art has on them. In as many ways as you can, celebrate the project and any successes that the project creates.

But the greatest success is the beautiful glow a mural creates in a community years after it was painted. It takes a while for a new piece to work it's way into the psyche of a

community and the fabric of daily life. The mural might become a favorite backdrop for quinceñera photo shoots. People start to use it as a reference point in local geography, for example the restaurant next to the _____ mural or give directions to their house by telling people to “turn right at the big _____”. Someday, when the farmers market needs a second location, they choose the parking lot next to the mural because it offers the vibrant community feel they were looking for. Children that used to point out details with their tiny fingers now whiz past the landmark on their way to middle school. Visitors from out of town tend to stop and park once they see the mural, to take a photo and explore the area to see what other unique thing they might discover. The other businesses in the area want a mural of their own, and suddenly it is an artsy part of town. Individuals who want to live in a vibrant community are attracted to move there and businesses thrive. It is not an overnight phenomenon, but it starts with a single successful mural project. The one you have been thinking about but just don’t know where to start...

Best of luck to you!

Case Study: “Beautility” Project in San Jose, CA



I was one of six artists selected to paint 12 utility boxes at Fontana Park. The park is a greenbelt owned by the water district and runs through several neighborhoods in San Jose, CA. Their idea was to have the dozen concrete utility boxes in a long corridor owned by the water district that runs through several neighborhoods painted by mural artists. Michael Ogilvie, the Director of Public Art for the City of San Jose, tracked the effort it took for approvals and coordination of the project. Here is the data:

693 emails

77 phone conversations

42 in person and group meetings

3 community events

A cumulative of 600 hours of artist time for their labor in creating their designs and painting the murals.

250 hours of staff time for project management and coordinating all the logistics.

This does not include the help and time from the Anti-Graffiti team for applying the protective clear coat (at a cost of about \$11,000), or all of the volunteer hours that stakeholders have put into this.

That is a crazy amount of effort for a wee bit of art. It's worth noting here that Michael is an efficient person. We have worked on two projects together and he gets to the point quickly and keeps all the cats (artists, government agencies) herded in the same direction without fuss. In Michael's words: "By comparison, this project was a pretty small project as it did not require engineering (soils, structural, electric), off-site fabrication, transportation of large scale objects, road closures, complex installation processes, or excessive inter-departmental or inter-agency coordination (though water district approvals had to go through an extensive evaluation process)."

Part of the reason it took so much coordination is the utility boxes were property of the Water District. Public entities like Caltrans, PG&E, the water district are generally "art ambivalent", but the fact is they own A LOT of the ugly canvases that are ripe for bringing transformations through art into our communities. Key decision makers may not be familiar with the upside of public art if they haven't experienced a community art success story firsthand, but they can imagine many potential risks: fear of inappropriate art, tagging, copyright lawsuits, not being able to paint over the artwork at the end of its life cycle, etc. One of the primary obstacles might be overcome by educating decision makers the benefit art brings to a community and also to share best practices that ensure positive

outcomes so that key decision makers can make an easy and informed choice where everyone wins.



The artwork includes a poem by Rumi, a stanza on each of the four sides:

*I'll be waiting here...
For your soul to shake
For your silence to break
For your love to wake!*

Grassroots art advocacy is at the root of every public art project that happens. The impetus for the water vault project came from the Fontana Parks Neighborhood Association who lobbied their local representatives for three years to bring this art beautification project to their beloved greenbelt. The organization was created twenty years prior in an effort to have trees planted in the park, and the group has been active on various projects ever since.