

PHILLY PAINTING

A Case Study

Judie Gilmore
June 2013



PHILLY PAINTING

Forging a new practice of community muralism

Introduction

WHAT IS PHILLY PAINTING?

In 2010 the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program set into motion a mural project of unprecedented scale in one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city, where historic Germantown Avenue (“the Avenue”) meets Lehigh Avenue in North Philadelphia.

Eighteen months later, the facades of 51 storefronts along three blocks of the Avenue were painted in a dramatic design of woven color and pattern, visually unifying the blighted corridors and symbolically “weaving” together a diverse array of storefronts into a unified experience. Beyond the visual transformation, *Philly Painting* employed local residents on the painting crew that executed the ambitious design. The project consisted of a 16 month artist residency with internationally renowned artists Haas&Hahn (Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn), extraordinary collaboration among the public and private sectors, a storefront studio, online video documentation, and a dynamic community process.

While it sounds like a simple agenda: hire local residents to transform a neighborhood’s main business corridor through painting storefronts in a unified design, *Philly Painting* is the most ambitious and complex project the Mural Arts Program has undertaken in its 30-year history. It was a tremendously challenging project for everyone involved, both because of the sheer logistics of the undertaking and because of the experimental nature of the project.

For Mural Arts, it was neither a traditional mural project—the collaborative process of which the organization has honed over its 30 year history—nor a program-driven project, where its program participants are led through a public art-making experience that connects them to their communities, as in the organization’s art education, restorative justice, or behavioral health work.

Instead, the project’s goals seem to exist more within the creative-placemaking paradigm, a field of practice that has exploded since the publication of Richard Florida’s seminal book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, now a decade old. In what has become a much cited resource on this emerging field, in their *Creative Placemaking* white paper, scholars Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa state, “Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”¹

Creative placemaking is a field created and inhabited by organizations and institutions—it is how grantmakers, funders, and municipalities talk about certain type of investments in place, investments that have very specific goals around economic development, as did *Philly Painting*. In many ways this description sums up the project’s goals beautifully, but there are some key differences. The creative placemaking paradigm by necessity diminishes the role of the artist in favor of the massive efforts of the cross-sector partners that are needed for projects of this nature to succeed. It is a field that often uses visual art as a tool, but is more interested in creating artistic spaces that are animated by artists working, selling, performing, or simply living and shopping. While visual art often signifies “creative place!” it is usually not the sole outcome of a creative-placemaking strategy.

Traditionally, this has been more the realm of public art, but again, *Philly Painting* does not fit its mold either—in which an institution commissions an artist to come to a place and create an “intervention” within that space. For this model undervalues the social aspects of a project like *Philly Painting*, its reparation, redemption even, of an entire public sphere—not just visually, but socially. In the example of *Philly Painting*, from an extreme state of blight and neglect to a public sphere that not only looks differently, but *functions* differently.

Social outcomes are at the center of Mural Arts' practice, and over the years it has honed a collaborative creative process, led by highly qualified artists, that strives to achieve tangible social outcomes for individuals and communities. Because the mural is the most visible output of this practice, it is often viewed as the artwork created, but more accurately, the artwork begins when Mural Arts first connects a community and an artist around an issue or aspiration, and continues to take shape through meetings, workshops, dialogues, and mini-projects co-created with participants. It culminates in an art object, often a mural that acts as a visible artifact of the entire creative process. Mural Arts argues that this method for creating public art generates alternative platforms for social change that often lack the stigma, politics, and complicated histories of more conventional platforms.

In this work Mural Arts is part of a growing movement within the art world that has gone by different names over the years, but is most recently identified as social practice. Social practice is less about object making than it is about a deeply participatory process, so much so that it often does not result in a tangible art object. Though like *Philly Painting*, most of Mural Arts' projects do in fact produce objects, and unfortunately the existence of a tangible object often eclipses the process of its creation, especially as one attempts to assign agency in order to measure outcomes or success.

So you see, the inability to answer the seemingly simple question—*What is Philly Painting?*—suggests the most intriguing things about it. It is in fact an example of the evolving practice of the Mural Arts Program that currently sits at the ambiguous intersection of creative placemaking, social practice, and community public art—but not fully in any one. Exploring this peculiar nexus through its manifestation in *Philly Painting*—its origins, execution, impact, and lessons learned—this case study will attempt to answer some important questions that Mural Arts finds itself asking at this moment in time. What conclusions can be drawn about this kind of work? What impact does it have and how can it be measured? And ultimately, is it a worthy investment?

PROJECT AT-A-GLANCE

- *Philly Painting* was a \$550,000 neighborhood commercial corridor beautification project comprised of an abstract mural across 51 storefronts along a three block section of Germantown Avenue in North Philadelphia.
- The project was created and executed during a 16 month artist residency with internationally renowned Dutch artists Haas&Hahn (Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn).
- The project was a local job source, paying community residents over \$130,000 for 9,200 hours of work repairing and painting building facades.
- *Philly Painting* was the culmination of a three year partnership between the Mural Arts Program and the Philadelphia Department of Commerce as they explored how socially engaged art could help revitalize commercial corridors.
- The project included a temporary storefront studio occupying a vacant building on the corridor for six months during production.

PROJECT GOALS

- To bring visual coherence and beauty to a much blighted, historic section of Germantown Avenue
- To create an exceptional work of contemporary art
- To build connections and increase social capital within the project community
- To create jobs for local residents
- To bring more customers to local businesses
- To spur other investments in the corridor
- To give the neighborhood a unified identity
- To inspire hope and optimism throughout the community
- To improve the public image of Germantown Avenue by generating positive attention for a neighborhood often highlighted for negative reasons
- To repair the relationship between the City and merchants along the Avenue
- To reconnect the neighborhood to City services
- To establish positive relationships among business owners and merchants

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

- Improved quality of life
- Improved local business viability
- Increased property values
- Increased retail sales
- Long-term investments and additional resources generated for the corridor

Project Description

HISTORY

In 2009 an economic study of Philadelphia's commercial corridors concluded that murals on or near business corridors were one of the top five interventions that demonstrated a positive correlation to corridor success.² In fact, murals specifically proved to have a statistically positive effect on both real estate value and retail sales. The study went on to include in its main recommendations that there should be more efforts like the Mural Arts Program because they are effective and cost efficient ways of alleviating blight on corridors.³ Historically, the Mural Arts Program had difficulty quantifying the impact of its work converting vacant and abandoned lots and blank walls into community public art projects. Now here was strong evidence that not only were murals beautifying neighborhoods, building social capital, and inspiring community pride, they were in fact one of the smartest investments that could be made along a revitalizing corridor.

While there are many best practices in the field of neighborhood economic development, there is no silver bullet and the problem of deteriorating commercial corridors plagues urban areas worldwide. Most urban centers have commercial areas that have seen significant disinvestment for a variety of reasons, and declining commercial areas can drain the life out of a community, often becoming hot beds of crime, vandalism, loitering, and other delinquency. They often lack design standards, zoning, or code enforcement. Capital improvements that can make them safer and less blighted (like lighting, storefront design, improved sidewalks and curbs), are expensive and take organizational capacity that is often not present. Often, it makes no economic sense for the private market to invest in these areas, so it is left to government, nonprofits, and communities to make improvements with limited resources and competing

priorities. New, cost effective solutions for declining urban commercial corridors are in high demand.

After the study was released highlighting community murals as a powerful tool in corridor revitalization, Mural Arts began to approach projects along business corridors more strategically, partnering with neighborhood groups and community development corporations to situate public art projects in coordination with other development and capital investments. After the successful execution of a series of projects along several prominent commercial corridors—Lancaster, Girard, and Frankford Avenues to name a few—Mural Arts began a conversations with the Philadelphia Department of Commerce on how a proactive public art strategy for corridors could be used to jump start the city's most struggling corridors.

Staff members from both organizations were intrigued by the report and eager to find an opportunity to test its findings further. Within this context and with support from Philadelphia Council President Darrell Clarke, the Commerce Department decided to fund two projects that would unfold in coordination along a North Philadelphia corridor (Germantown Avenue, where it meets Lehigh Avenue) that they had found particularly challenging in terms of engaging and connecting existing merchants to each other and to local community groups. In addition to its challenging nature, the corridor had a strong arts partner on the ground. Just a few blocks from the corridor was the headquarters of The Village of Arts and Humanities, a community-based nonprofit whose mission is to support the voices and aspirations of the community through providing opportunities for self-expression rooted in art and culture. The Village became a critical partner in the project, serving on the steering committee, hosting the artists' residency, and connecting the project team to key individuals in the community.

The first project the Commerce Department funded was an economic development revitalization plan that would recommend strategies to re-energize the corridor and put adjacent and underutilized land into productive use and guide capital investments. For the second project, they contracted the Mural Arts Program to lead a major public art initiative along the corridor to unfold in coordination with the planning process. Together, the two projects would represent a targeted, highly visible investment in the neighborhood to spur market interest and activity

and to renew the image of this once thriving business district.

The community art project was intended as an “early implementation action plan,” demonstrating to neighborhood stakeholders, many of whom suffered from planning fatigue after years of neighborhood planning by various agencies produced limited improvements, that this planning process would lead to real investments. Mural Arts was willing to match the Commerce Department’s investment with support from private institutions and individuals. In addition, after failed attempts to get merchants along the corridor engaged in any coordinated effort, the Commerce Department hoped that the art project would create and repair relationships among merchants around a project that was seen as more “neutral”—no one argued with the fact that the corridor was plagued with severe blight and in desperate need of beautification. It was within this context that the two institutions—the Mural Arts Program and the Commerce Department—embarked on an ambitious, unprecedented partnership, an experiment really, to see if a socially engaged art project could in fact move the needle along Germantown Avenue in a way that other interventions had failed to do.

Essential to the project’s success was the collaboration of the many partners involved, including the teams at the Commerce Department, the Planning Commission, and Council President Darrell Clarke’s office. Community partners, most notably The Village of Arts and Humanities that hosted the artists’ residency and Diane Bridges of NET CDC, helped the team build trust within the community. The team of partners and individuals crucial to the project’s success also included Interface Studio, who completed the economic development plan and were instrumental in the planning and start up phase of the project, and dozens of local business and community representatives. It is impossible to talk about the project without discussing the incredibly complex web of partners involved, each with a slightly different agenda and with slightly different goals.

URBAN CONTEXT

Like most other urban centers across the country, in the decades between 1950 and 2000, Philadelphia suffered significant population loss following the departure of residents from the city after World War II. In the 1950 Census, Philadelphia had a population of 2.3 million and a thriving manufacturing-based

economy. In 2000, Philadelphia’s population was reported as 1.5 million, a decline of 34 percent in half a decade.⁴ In the 2010 Census, Philadelphia actually grew for the first time since 1950, but at a miniscule rate of 0.6 percent,⁵ not nearly enough to counter the decades of population loss at much higher rates. And nowhere is the impact of that population loss more evident than in North Philadelphia.

In 2012, the area around Germantown and Lehigh’s immediate population included approximately 5,500 residents, with 60 percent of households living in poverty. The median household income for the area was \$14,201, and 65 percent of households earned less than \$25,000 per year. In 2010, 67 percent of the population identified as African American, 33 percent Hispanic or Latino, 22 percent identified as other or more than one race, and 11 percent as Caucasian.⁶

In terms of the physical landscape, vacancy accounts for the second most common land use, with a shocking one-third of the neighborhood’s land use vacant land or buildings. Remarkably, there was at least one vacant lot or building on 91 percent of blocks. Combined vacancy accounts for 36.25 acres of land use in the immediate neighborhood.⁷

On the actual corridor, the vacancy is palpable. The dominant features of shuttered security grates on first floors and boarded up windows on second and third floors line the Avenue. At the corridor’s core—the 2500 to 2700 blocks where the project was concentrated—65 percent of upper floors and 24 percent of bottom floors were vacant. As the plan asserts, “This vacancy disrupts the momentum and energy of the corridor, detracts from its appearance, and greatly influences its public image.”⁸ In addition, the buildings that are standing are not in good condition. A survey of the structural conditions revealed that 70 percent of the buildings were in sub par condition, needing at the very least serious improvements, to major renovation or structural damage to the point of needing to be salvaged.⁹

On top of these poor building conditions are competing signs of every shape, style, surface and scale imaginable, creating a visual chaos on top of a deteriorating canvas. The merchants have a predictably wide range of color and design preferences that are rooted in the diverse things they sell, and the diversity of their origins. Adding to the chaos, the Avenue has a variety of visible utility lines, SEPTA’s venerable “route 23” and the relics related to

the trolley tracks, and parking on both sides of the street. Over 50 percent of businesses surveyed indicated that crime or perceptions of crime were major factors deterring shoppers on the corridor.¹⁰ Concerns about the litter and the lack of cleanliness were the second most common issue raised by business owners.¹¹ The economic development plan only underscores what is so visually obvious along the corridor—this is a place in a serious state of disrepair with many competing needs.

ARTISTS

Once Mural Arts was given a go ahead by the Commerce Department and a corridor had been selected, staff members began exploring the site for opportunities it presented for public art. Mural Arts realized that to visually counter the persistent levels of blight and vacancy, the scale of the artwork needed to be encompassing, the community fully engaged, and the complex stakeholders—merchants, politicians, city agencies, community leaders, residents—brought along as partners in shaping the project’s vision. Furthermore, the scale and context of the site, that is, painting the facades of entire city blocks—would require a unified design over multiple storefronts and buildings. The site and goals of the project were better suited to abstraction, which Mural Arts had only minimally explored in other mural projects. More traditional community murals in Philadelphia have used narrative expression in a variety of styles, literally communicating collective history and vision through representational and figurative form. These factors made the project ambitious for Mural Arts in both scale and style.

In addition to wanting the work to be abstract, Mural Arts believed strongly that the project would be most successful if it could find an artist that could truly work side-by-side with community members to create a vision, but that also had the talent to create a cohesive design that would reflect the individuality of each business and read as a cohesive design across the entire corridor. Due to the unique challenges and opportunities of the site and project, there was not an obvious artist in Mural Arts’ cadre of muralists whose practice explored abstraction, design, and color in the way the full façade of a city block begged to be treated.

Like the rest of the world, Mural Arts had been watching as the Favela Painting projects in Brazil, created by Dutch duo Haas&Hahn went viral. Many people, including the City of Philadelphia’s Chief

Cultural Officer, Gary Steuer, had sent Mural Arts’ Director links to their ambitious work as it unfolded across a global stage. The scale and intention of their ambitious projects in the hard-bitten slums of Brazil—murals that boldly splashed across entire plazas, radiating energy and life—seemed aligned with the emerging goals of the project along Germantown. Haas&Hahn were the first artists Mural Arts thought of, and the organization immediately reached out to the artists to gauge their interest in a conversation about the North Philadelphia project. Having just run out of money to continue their work in Brazil, the timing was just right; the artists were interested in talking to Mural Arts about a possible partnership and intrigued by the notion of replicating their unique model of modular design intervention in another urban setting.

In December 2010, Mural Arts brought Haas&Hahn to Philadelphia for a two day visit. As Mural Arts Director Jane Golden described it,

“We drove around and looked at Philadelphia through the lens of things that they are driven by. They’re not just looking at surface; they’re looking at substance—they’re looking at issues that drive and make a city, and they’re looking at the issues and problems that cities grapple with—not just here in the United States, but around the world.”¹²

After the visit, Mural Arts was convinced that the artists’ commitment to authentic community process and collaboration was as serious as Mural Arts,’ and their practice was well suited to the site.

Through increasingly complex projects in Rio de Janeiro, Haas&Hahn had been exploring the idea of abstraction as a collective vision, rendering painted experiences composed of simple geometry—visually representing an underlying social value in their practice, that often the whole is in fact greater than the sum of its parts. As if resulting visual monuments were not testament enough, their practice included the hiring and training of local residents to assist them in the production of the work. Five years of working on and off in Rio, their work had culminated in the masterpiece at Santa Marta—the painting of 34 houses, approximately 23,000 square feet, on the hillside slum, converting it into what they call “a new monument for the community.”¹³ Thoroughly impressed by their credentials and thoughtful approach to design and urbanism, as well as to their interest—in fact, their insistence—on living in the

neighborhood where they would be asked to work, Mural Arts was thrilled to offer them the commission.

This budding partnership with Haas&Hahn and the possibility of their stunning work landing in Philadelphia led to Mural Arts' successful application to the Knight Arts Challenge Philadelphia in 2011 for project support to match the Commerce Department's investment. As Knight Foundation Arts Associate Tatiana Hernandez reflects,

"This project was sort of out of left field for Mural Arts, being large scale and abstract. Figurative murals often reflect what a community has been. This project was interested in reflecting what a community could be."¹⁴

DESIGN

Haas&Hahn chose to live just a block off the project's corridor in an available building owned by The Village of Arts and Humanities. They began their 16 month residency in September 2011, moving in and getting to know their neighbors by hosting barbecues, hanging out on the stoop, and visiting local businesses. As Urhahn put it,

"We didn't just show up and start painting. We showed up and started making friends, talked to people, tried to get to know the neighborhood. Basically the first half-year we talked to everybody from the police officers to the guys on the corner and everyone in between--especially the store owners."¹⁵

As they were embedding themselves within the neighborhood and establishing their street "cred," the artists were also busy capturing important images of the neighborhood, both figurative and literal. Using these as inspiration, they began to develop a color palette for the design based on patterns of recurring primary and secondary hues that reflected the neighborhood and Philadelphia's quintessentially rich and complex character. Ultimately, they settled on a palette of 35 "native" color combinations, consisting of a lot of reds, bricks, and burgundies, with contrasting highlight colors they found often repeated on cornices, mailboxes, and signage—attempting to arrive at the "feel" of North Philly through color.

In developing the designs, the artists used complex digital and analogue models to reshape and scale the

swatches of "native" color to transcend the architecture of the individual buildings, and lend uniformity to the corridor. Mural Arts then took their color palettes from store to store, soliciting feedback, using the preset color swatches to start conversations. The project team would then return with the design superimposed onto photographs of the facades, and in this way, obtained approvals from merchants and building owners to paint 51 buildings along the corridor.

While the outcome appears simple and eloquent, the design process was anything but. Because each store façade had a unique design that had to also read as part of the larger whole, combined with the complexities of obtaining approvals for over 50 façades, Koolhaas was not able to create one master design for the entire corridor. Instead, the design was piecemeal, created according to the most recently obtained approval. As Koolhaas put it, "It ended up being a complex, design-as-you-go concept."¹⁶

The artists' solution to these multiple challenges was to create a design that could accommodate change and varying input from store owners, but that still represented something unified. They created a concept of weaving, where different merchants could choose different patterns of color (the colors that "felt right" to them), but could in turn be "woven" into the adjacent building's design. The result was individual designs for each building, but a unified look of woven pattern along the corridor. Creating an iterative design that functions at both the individual and collective levels—in necessary fits and starts—was challenging for everyone involved. Koolhaas explained his struggle with this process,

"In terms of scale, it is biggest thing we have ever done before. There was a constant struggle to balance the simplicity and complexity. I was driven to do both, as well as to connect it all. There was a competing drive to differentiate the stores, because each shop owner wanted something different from their neighbor, but at the same time to make sure the final design was a cohesive and unified the space. It was a battle within myself and with them to achieve both."¹⁷

As planned, the participatory design process led to a strong sense of ownership along the Avenue, and gave the store owners a commonality that had been missing. When one building would be painted, merchants would often see it and suggest changes to

their design. While it was an exhausting design challenge, it ultimately led to a cohesive vision that everyone shared.

The final product received multiple accolades. In June 2013, the project was chosen as one of the Americans for the Arts' Public Art Network's 2012 Year in Review, a competitive, juried selection of the nation's top 50 public art projects. And even one of Mural Arts' toughest critics, the Architecture Critic, Ingra Saffron, at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, lauded the design in a review of the work. Saffron states,

*"Purely as a composition, there is much to admire about Haas&Hahn's luminously colored mural. It recalls the famous grid paintings by their 20th century compatriot, the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, whose jazz-inspired work also celebrates the city. Their grid moves to a hip-hop beat, and that injects the appearance of energy into this anemic commercial corridor."*¹⁸

And perhaps most importantly, the final murals are admired by the residents of the community. As the project began, a corner building here, a storefront there, several residents expressed concern, even disliked the design. But as the full vision was realized, and the storefronts began to create a unified experience, many residents changed their minds. In a typical reaction, community leader Diane Bridges recalls,

"I started out not being a lover of art like that. But then each day we went on Germantown Avenue, I started really looking at it, and it started to look better and better, and I'm like, 'Okay. Okay. I like this.'" ¹⁹

Even the neighborhood's Councilman, Council President Darrell Clarke, had his reservations, but eventually came around, saying,

"They did a sampling of it, and I said, 'Well, I'm not quite there yet.' But as it moved down the block you began to see the uniformity and the lack of uniformity in terms of the way it was done. It really caught my eye and it's something people talk about every time they drop down the Avenue."²⁰

And as local tour guide and resident Keenan "Poppy" Jones explains it,

"The most successful aspect of Philly Painting is the beautification of the neighborhood. That has to be up there at the top. I am a neighborhood resident, and the color and pattern – for me and everyone else here – are uplifting. It's the beginning of a new phase."²¹

PRODUCTION

Beyond the ambitious design goals of *Philly Painting* were Mural Arts' and Haas&Hahn's commitment to hiring local residents to help execute the murals. In many ways jobs were the most important aspect of the project, as all parties realized that no amount of paint, goodwill, or unified corridor identity could compete with the simple economics of the neighborhood—so many without jobs, so few hiring. So they set out to change that in a small way, eventually hiring 21 individuals to join the *Philly Painting* Crew. In the beginning, staff at The Village connected the project team to individuals in the community looking for jobs. In subsequent rounds, Mural Arts posted job opportunities and conducted formal interviews. Job opportunities also spread by word of mouth. The demand for these jobs was overwhelming. At one point, the artists had to post a sign saying that there were no more jobs available to avoid being continuously interrupted by individuals who heard they were hiring. Crew members were paid \$12 to \$25 per hour based on experience and worked a combined 9,200 hours, receiving over \$130,000 (almost one fourth of the total project budget) over the course of the project.

Per Haas&Hahn's vision, the Crew became a living "brand" of the project as they went up and down the corridor for nine months, repairing, prepping, priming, gridding, painting, and repainting the corridor. Having residents on the Crew meant that community members saw their friends, their neighbors, and their children making the improvements. Instead of hanging out on corners, these men and women were active participants in the transformation. Because of this, everyone felt some connection to the project; one resident said it felt like an "organic transformation."

In order to underscore the complexities involved in production, it helps to put the massive scale of the project in context. Just looking at Mural Arts' project output (not taking into account its programming activities which serve more than 3,000 individuals), in its most recent fiscal year Mural Arts completed 46 projects, ranging from temporary projects, to small

community murals, to complex city-wide initiatives. While Mural Arts considers *Philly Painting* one project, in many ways it makes more sense to think about the resources needed to complete it as dozens of small projects—as each building had to be repaired, prepped, primed, and painted in the same way as an average mural. The project, managed by Senior Project Manager Shari Hersh, one part-time support staff, two artists in-residence (Haas&Hahn), and the Crew of 21 (including the lead muralist and Crew leader, Felix St. Fort), produced a project output almost equal to the output of the entire organization in one year. With *Philly Painting*, Mural Arts basically doubled the amount of work it produced in one year, a staggering figure. It is no wonder that everyone involved felt that the amount of work was overwhelming.

Once the first building was completed in April 2012, painting continued for the next eight months. St. Fort was hired in April to lead the Crew and execute Haas&Hahn's ambitious design. This left Koolhaas and Urhahn available to design, create models, redesign, engage with community residents and Crew members, and work with partners and stakeholders, as well as the time needed to manage the documentation and marketing of the project through video, photography, and social media.

Another important aspect of production was the Crew's storefront studio on the Avenue opened in June. For six months the project team rented a vacant storefront on a prominent Germantown Avenue corner as the Crew's studio and production base, leaving the doors open as they worked and inviting people to come and go, to voice their opinions about the project, to paint sample palettes, and to informally be part of the project. Crew members took photographs of visitors and started a photo collage that became a destination itself. The lively storefront came to represent the openness and energy that the entire project continually tried to foster. In fact, it was Haas&Hahn's intention that the storefront and the large and visible Crew driving lifts, repairing façades, and painting and transforming buildings along the corridor, represented the exciting investment and transformation taking place on a human scale as well. The Crew's omnipresence along the corridor during production kept the work alive and fresh, bringing renewed energy to the corridor along with the artwork being produced.

Other community members were recruited by Haas&Hahn to participate in project documentation and marketing. Local merchants and community group staff members served as spokespersons for the project anytime funders, media, or other interested parties wanted information. Mural Arts' Tour Department hired local resident Keenan Jones to lead group tours through the corridor which ran weekly from April through October. Avenue merchants were hired to print the Crew's uniform and project merchandizing products. Haas&Hahn also recruited neighborhood residents to appear in and help create a series of professional video "webisodes" by Jon Kauffman and Seven Halsema that appear on the project website, PhillyPainting.org.

Another strength Haas&Hahn brought to the project was their strong relationships with other marketing venues. During the project, they secured sponsorship by the Dutch-based urban lifestyle brand, HUB Footwear, for an online documentary series entitled "Challenge the Obvious." HUB also produced a limited-edition *Philly Painting* shoe, a hip-hop trainer in dark maroon designed by the artists.

On December 1st, 2012, at the beginning of the holiday shopping season, the team celebrated the project's completion with a dedication and celebration of all who had brought it to life. More than 1,000 residents, merchants, artists, crew members, project staff, public officials, and other stakeholders came together to recognize the enormous accomplishment. Crew members, along with hundreds of community members, paraded a giant lift up the Avenue that had been transformed into a painted experience in color. Local children and musicians added to the festivities with a drum corps and step performance. The artists walked up the Avenue, side-by-side, in matching *Philly Painting* sweatshirts. As Koolhaas reflected,

*"Walking down the Avenue on the parade—that was the most amazing part... Because I see people coming out of the shops and we had the drums... You saw people smiling. You don't see that a lot over here on the Avenue."*²²

FINANCES

The financing of the project reflects one of its core values as a genuine public/private partnership. Mural Arts matched funding from the City with foundation and private support. More than \$550,000 was invested in the project, with key support from the Philadelphia Department of Commerce; PTS Foundation; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; and the Bank of America Foundation. Additional funding was provided by the Consulate General of the Netherlands, PA DCED (Department of Community and Economic Development), and an individual donor, with the City's Department of Human Services providing support for a related youth employment initiative. Labor was the largest expense, with approximately 45 percent of the total budget (\$250,000) allocated for artist and assistant fees, which included over 9,200 hours of crew labor. The second largest expense was paint, scaffolding, lifts and supplies, which represented 20 percent of the total budget (\$110,000).

Challenges

As the introduction to the *Philly Painting* book that documents the project in colorful photographs boldly states, "Basically everyone involved said *Philly Painting* was the hardest project they'd ever done." It was a project that from the beginning was going to be challenging and complex, and it is a testament to the courage of every partner involved that each signed on despite a long list of unknowns. Philadelphia's Chief Cultural Officer, Gary Steuer, describes some of the project's complexity,

*"I don't think anybody anticipated the deteriorated state of so many of the buildings. They had to repair so many façades, and they faced all sorts of unanticipated challenges related to the incredible array of stakeholders whose approval was needed to make the project happen."*²³

The project team indeed encountered several setbacks that required creative solutions and compromise. One of the biggest challenges was simply obtaining approval to work on as many buildings as were necessary to have the desired visual impact. Most often the merchants were not the building owners, so Mural Arts had to not only get the merchants' approval, but the owners' as well. As in many inner-city environments, the owners of the buildings along

the corridor were often absent, uninterested, or simply unresponsive. It took countless hours finding, calling, and writing shop and building owners to obtain the necessary approvals.

In addition, the state of decline in the building's themselves also presented unanticipated challenges. Most buildings required some level of repair before the team could begin prepping and painting. In addition, there were some building façades in the core area that could simply not be painted because they were unsafe, or the project team was not able to obtain the necessary permissions. Even with the extraordinary efforts, there are some unfortunate "gaps" in the final design that do compromise the end product.

A revision of the project's scope that was decided upon early on in the project helped to overcome another challenge that was not anticipated. The original plan was to only paint the second and third floors of each building, which on most buildings were vacant with boarded up windows. The first floor commercial spaces were a mix of windows, security grates, store entrances, signage and advertisements. Early on Haas&Hahn suggested that project partners let them also include the first floors in their design, believing that the visual disorder on the first floors, if not addressed, would detract from any design, no matter how strong, on the upper floors. Once agreed, this meant revising the scope of the work greatly, and tackling the challenging task of priming and treating difficult-to-paint metal security grates and addressing signage that was falling down, fading, poorly designed, or visually disagreeable in other ways. When possible, the project team redesigned and repainted the business' signs to coordinate with the murals. All project partners agree this was the right decision, and in hindsight, wish they could have addressed more of the elements of visual chaos on the first floors that compete so heavily with the design.

Because of the logistical challenges and navigation of the complicated bureaucracies of completing development projects in Philadelphia, the project required much more resources and staffing than had been originally planned. Due to the many complexities of the project and the simple fact that Mural Arts has become efficient at certain tasks like lift rentals, ordering and delivering paint, and managing large crews, it made sense for the organization to become a partner in production. It was also necessary because of the complicated

partnerships with local government, nonprofits and other Philadelphia institutions. Mural Arts' longstanding relationships and experience with these institutions was needed as navigating complex bureaucracy and red tape required a huge amount of resources.

As a result, Mural Arts dedicated one full-time project manager to the project team to coordinate approvals, permits, hiring the Crew, and managing the production of the building repair, preparation and painting. Senior project manager, Shari Hersh, also managed the relationships with stakeholders, kept the work on schedule, and kept up with the demanding financial and reporting requirements required with the use of public funds and combining multiple restricted funding sources. This left the artists more time for connecting with the community members, advancing the iterative design process, and marketing the project. Throughout the project Mural Arts learned that an undertaking of this magnitude requires a huge amount of staff resources.

Another lesson learned early on in the production was that hiring local residents to join the Crew was not as simple as project partners thought. Because of the technical skills needed to execute such a large and graphic design, the team needed some experienced members on the Crew to serve as mentors to the less experienced. Likewise, managing a crew of individuals, many of whom had never held a job, was more difficult than anyone had anticipated. Project leaders had not planned on needing to mentor individuals in basic job skills such as showing up on time and working directly with a supervisor and as part of a team. It took a few months for the project team to find the right skill mix, making jobs available to local residents while being able to produce at the high level that was needed to keep the project on schedule.

In hindsight, Mural Arts also felt that they underutilized the potential of the design process to build relationships between adjacent corridor merchants. While Haas&Hahn's practice is centered around the notion of abstraction being inherently inclusive—allowing for individual views to coexist within it—in the end, Koolhaas still had to do the incredibly difficult work of wedding individual neighbor's preferences into one coherent design. Hersh wonders if they could have improved on the collaborative process even more, using the design approval process to have neighboring merchants

work together to offer creative solutions—perhaps choosing more complementary color preferences if they knew how it would relate to their neighbor's—instead of leaving it solely up to Koolhaas to integrate. Perhaps this would have led to stronger, more meaningful relationships between neighboring merchants.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for many involved was the fact that no one had anticipated how hard it was going to be to have the project complete, that is to halt the momentum that had been created over a year of hard work and collaboration. As Urhahn reflected,

"It's very different than a traditional mural on one wall, where you know once you've painted that wall, you're done. With this work, every day you work you are further away from closure because there is no end to how much you could do if only you could keep going. We started this massive momentum, and the stopping of it somehow seemed wrong, almost like a loss. It's not just stopping the painting, it's stopping peoples' jobs, peoples' hope in the project, in their renewed hope in their community and their neighbors. You can't just walk away. The dedication was great, but at the same time bittersweet. We celebrated the fact that we created this great machine, and then turned it off."²⁴

And lastly, another challenge is what will become of the enormous work produced as it will no doubt require ongoing maintenance and care. Remember, the art object created consists of 51 painted building façades. Maintaining the quality of this large work is a challenge Mural Arts takes very seriously, and in many ways is part of a larger challenge the organization is beginning to tackle as its collection of over 1,500 extant murals are aging throughout the city. Not surprisingly, finding new resources to support ongoing maintenance of a project already created is incredibly difficult. Reserving maintenance funds within a project budget that was already stretched incredibly thin was also difficult. In the case of *Philly Painting*, Mural Arts has committed the modest revenues it will share with Haas&Hahn from the project's book sales to be placed into a maintenance fund. And *Philly Painting*, as it represents such a large and complicated project in Mural Arts' portfolio, will no doubt be part of a discussion Mural Arts is having as it is creating its first-ever large-scale restoration strategy this year, a

plan that will both inform how the organization cares for its extant collection, but also how it commits to future projects and their maintenance needs.

Impact

While it is still too soon to fully evaluate the impact of the project, many of its short term goals were either met or are well on their way to being met. Visually, the murals brought coherence and colorful design to the much blighted section of Germantown Avenue and together created an exceptional work of contemporary art that has become a destination in and of itself. In fact, the Mural Arts added *Philly Painting* to its tour program early on in the project. From June through October 2012, tours ran every Wednesday, bringing over 300 people to the area to view the artwork. Local residents led the tours through the corridor and introduced their neighborhood and its businesses to visitors.

This type of activity, as well as the media attention the project generated, did much towards the goal of improving the public image of Germantown Avenue by generating positive attention for a neighborhood often highlighted for negative reasons. Over 15 articles have been written about the project, including pieces in the *New York Times Style Magazine*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Atlantic Cities*. Eight “webisodes” about the project and the community produced by Haas&Hahn, along with a two-episode documentary about the artists and their work on *Philly Painting*, created by HUB Footwear, has generated over 160,000 views (and counting) online. Outside response to the project gauged in articles and online comments ranges from curiosity to skepticism, but are predominantly positive.

In addition, *Philly Painting* achieved much towards the stated goals of building connections among merchants, increasing social capital, repairing the relationship between the City and the community, and reconnecting it to City services. It is important to remember that the project unfolded in coordination with a massive planning effort and the creation of the neighborhood’s economic development plan by Interface Studio. It would be impossible to assign these short-term impacts to just the project or just the plan, but together, the early impact has been significant.

The project coordinated over 180 hours of partner meetings and hosted eight special events, including a project launch, a dedication ceremony attended by more than 1,000 stakeholders, a project tour as part of the Design Philadelphia festival, neighborhood open houses, and public design reviews. Many merchants talked to each other for the first time at meetings organized to discuss both the project and the plan. In these meetings, merchants, government partners, and planners identified pressing needs along the corridor and started working together towards immediate solutions.

The government partners were especially excited about the project’s early impacts. Project leader and champion, Dr. H. Ahada Stanford, the Neighborhood Economic Development Senior Manager at the Commerce Department, reflects,

“This project has created a new dynamic between local businesses along the corridor and city government. A great example is the reactions of the businesses along the corridor. They felt isolated, and they felt that the City was not their friend. But after we approached this project with Mural Arts, they were open to us. At the dedication, it was interesting to see how everyone was just hugging each other—someone from the Commerce Department hugging a neighborhood business owner. This is incredible.”²⁵

City officials also noted an increase in demand from the neighborhood for city services and believe the project connected the community to city government in a new way. David Fecteau, the lead City Planner on the project, states,

“One huge impact is that the City is now getting more phone calls and emails from the civic groups in the neighborhood about what’s going on. They are sending us information about events. Now that people in the community know people in the City, we get more phone calls. They now feel like someone from City Hall cares about them up there.”²⁶

Another exciting project achievement was the establishment of a functioning Business Association along the corridor. Using the momentum of the project and its new relationships, the Commerce Department was able to organize a group of core merchants to serve in this essential function,

representing the needs of all businesses along the corridor.

Toward the important goal of creating jobs for local residents, the project stated goals were clearly met. The project team hired local residents as Crew members, paying them over \$130,000 for approximately 9,200 hours of work repairing and painting the storefronts. The project team made a special effort to hire both men and women, with women making up 40 percent of the Crew, as well as to ensure the Crew accurately represented the racial makeup of the surrounding community. Crew members were trained and certified in erecting scaffolding, operating the lift machines, and in basic wall repair, preparation and painting.

Towards the goal of spurring other investments in the corridor, by businesses and other institutions, the project had some early successes. The Commerce Department reported that several businesses in the community are now considering expansion, and that the project has prompted real estate developers to consider new housing projects in the area. In addition to the outside investments the project help to spark, partners in government believe that it also greatly improved the outcomes of the planning process, leading to early action on items that probably wouldn't have happened without it, namely in areas around crime and cleaning. As Fecteau recalls,

“We thought up front about what interventions were needed, how to tie them to public funding, and we ended up creating a little action plan that lived within the larger land use plan. The planners and consultants ended up being the ones organizing community groups to get these early things happening. Because of the murals, I also think the merchants were more engaged in the process than they normally would have been.”

Project partners believe that *Philly Painting* is a model that is adaptable in other urban settings. Actually, improvements seen may be easier to realize in other places because this project was executed in one of Philadelphia's most disinvested and disadvantaged neighborhoods. If similar efforts were made in a community that had just slightly more capacity, the results may be even greater. The project model proved to be a relatively inexpensive and efficient way to catalyze change, build social capital, and create hope within an underserved community. If this project is successful in the long term on the scale that

project partners intend it to be, it could become a fascinating model and a useful new tool for other neighborhoods in other cities across the country and around the world.

Conclusion

In many ways, the Mural Arts Program and the project team are uncertain of what long-term effect *Philly Painting* will have on the community. One of the most frustrating aspects of this type of work is how difficult it is to measure its long-term impact. The project's simplest short-term goal, which they believed was accomplished, was to use large-scale murals to transform a place that had been overtaken by blight and disinvestment.

But the long-term question that this begs—was the visual transformation and the process used to create it enough to combat the underlying problems that *caused* the blight in the first place?—remains. In fact, it is a question frequently asked by Mural Arts' toughest critics who claim that murals, especially in low-income neighborhoods, are merely “lipstick on a pig,” arguing that paint is not a strong enough economic development tool to battle the outside factors at work on a corridor like Germantown Avenue—factors such as population loss, unemployment, lack of quality education and healthcare, a sluggish economy, and a pervasive culture of drugs and related crime to name a few.

Dynamic projects like *Philly Painting* prove that the underlying question about the impact that visual transformation can have, minimizes the full scope of work that is actually accomplished. It is a question rooted in a traditional understanding of public art that places primary importance on artistic quality and is not fully representative of the complex work that many in the emerging fields of creative placemaking and social practice now find themselves doing. While artistic excellence is incredibly important to Mural Arts, as an organization it is learning that its practice cannot be defined as simply muralism, where the mural is the end in and of itself. Instead, it is an evolving social practice, a project-based community practice working to create an artistic product that strives to make a difference in the world that is more than aesthetic.

It is an emerging practice that also transcends traditional creative placemaking, as it posits that

economic development goals are also not the end in and of themselves. In terms of how a project like *Philly Painting* fits into a creative placemaking mold, it is perhaps more helpful to think of the entire collection of Mural Arts' work—especially the dozens of crosscutting projects that refuse to fit into any one paradigm like *Philly Painting*—as a creative placemaking strategy across the city as a whole. *Philly Painting* would then be one shining example of the way in which this city-wide strategy has very democratic values—uplifting different types of communities with projects custom designed to address the unique local needs in each community, with the common thread of providing exceptional artwork and artists engaged in deeply rooted community practices as the infrastructure for change.

In a much cited essay on the emergence of a new practice of art that extends beyond the traditional art world to include “real world” change, curator and scholar Aimee Chang outlines the dilemma that artists and institutions working within this paradigm face, that is “the difficulty of having their creativity understood beyond the ability to produce ‘physically beautiful’ objects.” She goes on to recognize that,

“For those artists interested in being taken seriously outside the decorative arena, there is a need to advocate on behalf of the relevance of artists in a much-expanded field and to challenge the traditional models of how art work—the work of artists—is carried out and understood.”²⁷

Social practice presents a perhaps more inclusive paradigm for Mural Arts and Haas&Hahn to view the long-term effect of the culmination of their efforts—not just in the visual transformation produced, but in the momentum of activism that they set into motion. This paradigm accepts the social capital and jobs created, the artists' intimate relationships within the community, relationships renewed and created, the unprecedented collaboration between the public and private sectors, and the optimism and energy

generated, as tantamount to the visual experience created. Indeed it is these products of *Philly Painting*, along with the beautiful colors that skip along the corridor, echoing the rhythms of the street, which fundamentally transformed the fiber of this community—the very way it functions—from the inside out.

Within this paradigm, it is more appropriate to ask not how the mural affected this community, but more accurately, how will the entire endeavor affect the community in the long run? Project partners believe that in ten years the answer will be, “a lot;” that in a decade, residents will look back at this project and say, “That was when things turned around.” Or at the very least, “That was when things quit going downhill.” They believe strongly that the connections and relationships that were created or repaired will lead to more investments in this neighborhood—public officials that see potential, not problems; residents that don't wait around for improvements, but lead them; merchants that choose to invest in their businesses; other partners in the city wanting to work here; and other artists that use their talents to battle the rampant blight and its underlying causes.

If considered within an integrated paradigm of social practice, creative placemaking and community-based public art, *Philly Painting* can be seen as just the beginning of what will be a long-term push for renewal along the corridor. It is an example of how within this newly forged practice, the artwork in its entirety creates a catalyst for social change that in turn will combat the seemingly overwhelming “other” factors. Only time will tell, but all partners hope the effect will be as ambitious, bright, and colorful as the murals themselves.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following colleagues who were interviewed or gave substantial help for this case study between December 2012 and June 2013.

CAITLIN BUTLER, *Senior Manager of Institutional Relations and Grant Oversight, Philadelphia Mural Arts Program,*

BRIAN CAMPBELL, *Executive Assistant, Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*

TAQUIDDIN 'MUHAMMED' CUSTIS, *Maintenance Supervisor and Crew Manager, Philly Painting*

DAVID FECTEAU, *City Planner Philadelphia City Planning Commission*

DONNA FRISBY-GREENWOOD, *Program Director, Philadelphia, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*

JANE GOLDEN, *Executive Director, Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*

TATIANA HERNANDEZ, *Associate/Arts John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*

SHARI HERSH, *Senior Project Manager, Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*

THORA JACOBSON, *Director, Design Review, Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*

KEENAN JONES, *Neighborhood Tour Guide Philadelphia Mural Arts Tour Program*

JEROEN KOOLHAAS, *Artist, Haas&Hahn/Philly Painting*

SCOTT PAGE, *Principal Interface Studio*

EL SAWYER, *Operations Director The Village of Arts and Humanities*

H. AHADA STANFORD, PH.D., *Neighborhood Economic Development Senior Manager, Philadelphia Department of Commerce*

GARY STEUER, *Chief Cultural Officer City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy*

DRE URHAHN, *Artist, Haas&Hahn/Philly Painting*

Cover Photo Credits
(Top Right and Bottom) **JEROEN KOOLHAAS**
(Top Left) **JON KAUFFMAN**

References/Resources

- "2001 Rudy Bruner Award Gold Medal Winner: The Village of Arts and Humanities Project Case Study." *BrunerFoundation.org*. 2001. Web. 22 May 2013.
- Barley, Luke. "Reimagining an Entire Neighborhood Through Murals." *The Atlantic Cities*. *The Atlantic*, 2 Aug. 2012. Web. 23 May 2013.
- "Challenge the Obvious - Episode One: A day in the life of Haas&Hahn." Hub Footwear. *YouTube*. 2012. 23 May 2013.
- "Challenge the Obvious – Haas&Hahn: This is not the end." Hub Footwear. *YouTube*. 2013. 23 May 2013.
- Chang, Aimee. "The Artist and the City: New Models for Creative Public Practice." *Transforma*. Canada: Printcrafters, 2010.
- David Moss, Ian, "Creative Placemaking Has an Outcomes Problem," *Createquity.com*. 9 May 2012. Web. 12 June 2013.
- Econsult Corporation, "Commercial Corridors: A Strategic Investment Framework for Philadelphia," Philadelphia, PA: Econsult Corporation, 2009.
- Interface Studio, "Along the Avenue: The Economic Development Strategic Plan for Germantown and Lehigh," Philadelphia, PA: Interface Studio, 2012.
- Kennedy, Randy. "Outside the Citadel, Art that Nurtures." *New York Times* 24 March 2013. Print.
- Koolhaas, Jeroen, and Dre Urhahan. *Philly Painting*. Philadelphia: Haas&Hahn, 2013. Print.
- Markusen, Ann and Anne Gadwa. *Creative Placemaking*. Minneapolis, MN: Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting, 2012.
- Saffron, Inga. "Changing Skyline: Mural Arts." *Philly.com*. *Philadelphia Inquirer* 8 Dec. 2012. Web. 23 May 2013.

Notes

- ¹ Markusen, Ann and Anne Godwa. *Creative Placemaking*. (Minneapolis: Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting, 2010), 3.
- ² Econsult Corporation. "Executive Summary." *Commercial Corridors: A Strategic Investment Framework for Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: Econsult Corporation, 2009), ES.7.
- ³ Econsult, ES.9.
- ⁴ Bruner Foundation. "2001 Rudy Bruner Award Gold Medal Winner: The Village of Arts and Humanities Project Case Study." n.d. Web. Viewed May, 22 2013 at <http://www.brunerfoundation.org/rba/pdfs/2001/01_Village.pdf>, 6.
- ⁵ Interface Studio, "Along the Avenue: The Economic Development Strategic Plan for Germantown and Lehigh," (Philadelphia: Interface Studio, 2012), 11.
- ⁶ Interface Studio, 11.
- ⁷ Interface Studio, 13.
- ⁸ Interface Studio, 16.
- ⁹ Interface Studio, 14.
- ¹⁰ Interface Studio, 25.
- ¹¹ Interface Studio, 24.
- ¹² McGetric, Brendan. Introduction. *Philly Painting*. (Philadelphia: Haas&Hahn, 2013), 4.
- ¹³ "Santa Marta." *FavelaPainting.com*. Firmeza Foundation, n.d. Web. 20 May, 2013.
- ¹⁴ Tatiana Hernandez Interview, March 19, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Barley, Luke. "Reimagining an Entire Neighborhood Through Murals." (Washington, DC: *The Atlantic Cities*, 2 Aug. 2012). Viewed 23 May 2013.
- ¹⁶ Jeroen Koolhaas Interview, Dec. 4, 2012.
- ¹⁷ Koolhaas Interview.
- ¹⁸ Saffron, Inga. "Changing Skyline: Mural Arts." (Philadelphia: *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 Dec. 2012). Viewed 23 May 2013.
- ¹⁹ *Challenge the obvious – Episode One* video.
- ²⁰ *Challenge the obvious – Episode One* video.
- ²¹ Keenan Jones Interview, December 4, 2012.
- ²² McGetric, 7.
- ²³ Gary Steuer Interview, April 12, 2013.
- ²⁴ Dre Urhan Interview, Dec. 3, 2012.
- ²⁵ H. Ahada Stanford Interview, Dec. 1, 2012.
- ²⁶ David Fecteau Interview, Dec. 3, 2012.
- ²⁷ Chang, Aimee. "The Artist and the City: New Models for Creative Public Practice. *Transforma*. (Canada: Printcrafters, 2010), 11.