Touching the Stone:
The Trials and Triumphs of a Community Mural

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Ancient History

In the late 1980's, at a public art conference at the University of Washington, a panel of developers, architects and artists debated whether artists should be included on design teams for building projects that incorporate public art. The debate was heated. At the time, this was regarded as a fairly radical idea. Artist, Judy Baca was the last of the panelists to speak. She challenged her colleagues with the following:

Here is a partial list of the design team for one of my recent public art projects. Artists, developers, architects, local high school students, representatives of neighborhood associations and community organizations, area gang leadership, city planners, neighborhood business owners, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the women's auxiliary from a nearby Baptist church. I could go on, but I think you get my point.

Fast Forward

When Judy Baca made her presentation in Washington, she was not speaking about some new, experimental wrinkle in the landscape of public art. She was representing a long legacy of public participation in artistic practice. These days the community engagement ideals Baca represented have insinuated themselves much more deeply into mainstream culture. More and more public art programs like the recently concluded Artists at the Millennium[1] emphasize community engagement as well as arts production.

At the same time the ongoing debate about how art should manifest in the public sphere is has increased in scope and intensity. Some feel that what was once a clearly defined universe of public art intent has evolved into a confusing babble of fuzzy grant guidelines, social engineering, and feel good jargon. Others see these changes as positive--- a deliverance from the imposition and tyranny of the "plop art" invaders. Separate from the politics, though, find themselves confronting new and daunting challenges---things they never covered in art school.

Interestingly, as the field of public art has evolved a continuum of approaches has emerged. On one end of the continuum, are public arts programs that allow artists to manifest their ideas fairly independently of public input or participation. On the other end, are artists who act as facilitators and/or guides for the creation of artworks by everyday citizens. In the middle somewhere, are artists who incorporate aspects of both. William Cochran is one such artist. His Community Mural Project, 1993-1998 provides

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[1] Sponsored, by the NEA and the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, Artists at the Millennium funded participatory public arts projects in communities in all 50 states.

an interesting case study to explore some of the challenges and issues faced by artists working in this hybrid realm.

I have always been interested in what lies behind appearances and the notion that what we see in the world is an illusion.

William Cochran

A Trick of the Eye

During the Jazz Age, Harry Houdini the world-famous illusionist made his reputation by escaping, at the last possible second, from what appeared to be certain death. The drama of his performances was heightened by the fact that there was real jeopardy involved. Trick or no, if he failed to extricate himself from whatever bondage or confinement, he had cooked up he would, in fact, suffer the consequences.

Although he is a muralist, William Cochran could also be described as an illusionist. And, though his methodical rendering appears quite safe, there is also an element of risk to his work. Cochran's "magic" is trompe l'oeil, the ancient art of visual deception. The risks he faces are less obvious, but in some ways more real. This is because Cochran sees his painted illusions as a catalyst for an enterprise more subtly perilous, yet far more complex —building community.

At the turn of the 19th Century, Houdini promised, and delivered momentary thrills. In 1993 in his hometown of Frederick, Maryland, William Cochran was interested in something more substantial. He had spent the previous four years completing a series of small murals called *Angels in the Architecture* in the city's historic downtown. In the process, he had both increased his mastery of the trompe l'oeil technique and begun learning the ropes at city hall. Although the experience had left him nearly broke, and physically exhausted, he wanted more.

The "more" in this case was precipitated by the city's interest in revitalizing a municipal park that had become an eyesore and suffered from disuse. At the time, Frederick was struggling with increasing levels of racial acrimony. The long finger of land that would make up the new park was regarded by many as the de facto border between the black and white communities. It was hoped that the new park would help the area's estranged neighbors find common ground, literally. The project was to begin with the renovation of an unattractive concrete bridge that spanned a stream, Carroll Creek that split the park down the middle.

Seeing an obvious opportunity, Cochran proposed using trompe l'oeil rather than a stone façade to enhance the bridge. It was a hard sell, but Cochran prevailed, not only because his proposal made economic sense but also because of the credibility he had accrued with city and community leaders during his work on the Angels project. And since Frederick

had no public art program there were no statues or bureaucracies to contend with. He reflects on how the project came together.

The Mayor was a critical partner. It took me a long time to learn how the system works because there are so many layers of political and social interest at play. You have to be careful who you work with so you don't alienate others. The goal is to work with everyone. Even so, you could end up aligning yourself with a temporary friend, because of shifting loyalties and elections every two years. So, it was important to build a broad base of support as early as possible.

After five months of full time work meeting with city officials and community groups to get final approval, Cochran started to conceive a much broader vision for the project. The idea that emerged was as much theatrical as it was visual. It was still a mural project, but the effort would not be Cochran's alone. It would be fueled by the stories, ideas, and, most importantly, the participation of the people of Frederick.

What was approved was a simple artwork. I still have the purchase order from the city that says "quantity: 1 trompe l'oeil bridge." Then I realized it was a bridge spanning a creek that ran down the middle of a divided community. I had learned something about community engagement from working on the Angels. During that time, it had become part of my artistic process. But, I didn't need community engagement to sell the Bridge project. The participatory part came after the approval, and it was driven by artistic considerations. I felt it could express something that could not be expressed any other way. And, I felt it could contribute to some healing in the community as well.

A Simple Question

Cochran realized that proceeding with his expanded idea would complicate an already difficult endeavor. He also knew that his good intentions would not protect him from the political and social minefields scattered throughout his racially divided community. To begin building trust, he needed a way to involve the public that was both accessible and safe. He and his wife Teresa, who had agreed to help manage the growing project, hit on the idea of using a question to engage people and solicit ideas for the bridge's design. As simple as this seemed, they understood that this was one of the most critical elements of their project. They wanted a question that invited people to express their ideas and feelings about community, creating, in Cochran's words, "a shared vision." For, if the bridge was to become more than a decorative footnote, people on both sides of Carroll Creek would need to feel that their involvement was not a gratuitous, token gesture.

Also, because this was a visual design process these ideas would need to be translated as symbols or images that could be used in the mural. Over the course of the next few weeks many questions were tried and tested with members of the community. One in particular seemed to fit the bill, but knowing the stakes, Cochran was still unsure. One evening, after a long day's work preparing the bridge surface, Cochran came across a trio of teens drinking beer under the span. Wary of the adult interloper, two of the three took off on their bikes, but one, the tallest of the group, stood his ground. Seeing an

opportunity to test his question, the muralist approached the young man. He describes what happened next.

I said, look I don't care about the beer, I just want to ask you a question. I'm painting this whole bridge to be an artwork and I am collecting ideas from the community. I was wondering if I ask you this question what your answer would be. So, I asked him: "What object represents the spirit of community to you?

He hardly hesitated and he said. "Two hands, one helping the other over the wall, one black, one white, it doesn't matter which is which." Bam! There it was. He was right there with it. He was 13, but I was talking to him as an equal and he responded as an equal. He nodded, one pro to another, and then walked off. With the power of that answer, I knew we had the right question.

Partnership and Repetition

With this question in hand, Teresa Cochran and a dozen community leaders who had joined the project as the "Guidance Team" took on the task of creating an outreach process to engage Frederick's diverse and separate communities. The effort was based on two key concepts—partnership and repetition. People in Frederick were not used to being asked for their input on anything, especially the design of a bridge. Opportunities to respond to the framing question would "need to be available all over town." This kind of saturation would require a systematic approach and many more hands.

The Guidance Team responded by creating a sophisticated communication plan and bringing in over 100 new volunteers. The yearlong outreach initiative incorporated direct mail, PSA's, public lectures, a web page, street interviews, creation of a special curriculum for schools and even an electronic billboard that flashed "the question" for six weeks. A key component was the placement of posters, response cards and collection boxes in businesses, libraries, schools and other public facilities all over town. As the buzz about the Community Bridge grew, the media also responded. Their ongoing interest and a documentary video that ran over 40 times on the local cable station, kept the project in the public eye for next 12 months and beyond.

After the first few months, it was clear that the plan was working. Reaction to the question started to trickle, then pour into the offices of Shared Vision, the new non-profit created to manage the project. The responses came in the form of stories, poems, drawings, even music. Many people felt compelled to describe both an image and the life experience that generated it. Often these stories were more compelling than the image itself.   Cochran recalls one that came all the way from Bosnia.

This soldier heard about the bridge from a tent mate who read about it in a Florida newspaper that had been sent from home. The newspaper mentioned our website so this woman in a mechanized division, who had been born in Frederick, got on the Internet and sent her idea. It was the symbol for the international peacekeeping force over there: a shield with the letters IFOR in Cyrillic and English side by side.

The Long Haul

The Community Mural ultimately took five years to complete. As long as this seems, Cochran feels the long-term nature of the project actually helped to mitigate notions in the community that it was a flash in the pan. "There were a lot of skeptics at first, but eventually, people concluded that it wasn't going away." Never the less, understanding the need to keep people involved and informed, small celebrations and speaking engagements became a regular feature of the project. The first images painted on the newly prepared surface also helped. Rather than begin with some of the smaller, more intricate designs, Cochran decided to use the bridge as a billboard of sorts. He placed the words Shared Vision across the middle of the one hundred-foot span. Getting this message up was particularly important because it was nearly eight months before additional images were added.

Although the outreach initiative had built community awareness and participation, initially it was not as successful attracting needed funding. As a result, the project "was starved for funds during its first half." This lack of funding slowed the process considerably and "placed great stress" on Cochran and Shared Vision's nucleus of workers and volunteers. In retrospect, Cochran regards these obstacles as having steeled his resolve. Rather than slowing down, he and Teresa responded to the slow-motion nature of the project by increasing the intensity of their engagement. Their investment of sweat equity eventually paid off. In early 1996, various funding initiatives started to bear fruit.

The eventual price tag for the mural, its administration and the production of related events came to just over $500,000 in cash and in-kind services. According to Cochran, this was approximately 40% more than if he had produced a straight mural. The diversity of funding sources reflects the breadth of community investment. In addition to the city's contribution of $122,000 funds were received from both the Maryland and Frederick arts councils, dozens of local businesses, corporations, individual donors and the general public, through the sale of $80,000 worth of "Bridge Bonds."

The transformation of the bridge from an unremarkable concrete conveyance into a work of art took thousands of hours of hand painting over a three-year period. While nearly all of the brushstrokes are Cochran's[2], he truly feels the work is a "co-creation," with his collaborators numbering in the hundreds, even thousands. The result is a very potent "trick of the eye" --- so well rendered that many of the sites 50,000 annual visitors never realize that they are not looking at an old stone bridge.

It should be noted that when he talks about the Community Bridge Cochran is not just referring the mural, but rather the "three artworks that make up the project." These are

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[2] A group of ten apprentices worked with Cochran for a few weeks each summer.

the bridge, the outreach initiative and, an exhibition of over 1000 design submissions that that was mounted at Frederick's Delaplaine Visual Arts Center in the Winter of 1995.

Cochran and many others in the Frederick community feel the Bridge's power extends far beyond its capacity to fool the eye. They see the mural's creation as having helped change city's view of itself and the dynamics of community interaction. Cochran reflects what he feels are the projects continuing legacies.

...Hundreds of businesses and thousands of individuals (contributed) time, labor materials, funds and ideas to make the Community Bridge a reality. ...The result is a catalyst for community building on cultural, social and economic levels. It, (also) tackles perhaps the most difficult and deeply rooted urban design issue---the entrenched divisions between people...and the damage those divisions cause... The project breaks this vicious cycle with a "virtuous circle" of strategic transformation that brings people of all ages into a new relationship with the community and its specific urban landscape.

Richard Griffin, the Executive Director of the Greater Frederick Development Corporation, sees the project in equally positive terms but with a very different perspective. For him success was, and still is, defined in terms of the City's development priorities. From this vantage point, he identifies the Community Bridge as "the single most influential urban infrastructure project…in recent years." He sees it as having provided the impetus for a "strengthened …community focus" on the "declining industrial area" that surrounds the park. To make his point, he lists a number multi-million-dollar capital investment projects that he says had their genesis in momentum and focus provided by the Bridge project. These include Frederick Public Library, the National Civil War Medicine Museum, a new light rail station and the continued redevelopment of the park.

Crescendo

As the mural neared completion, the Shared Vision team recognized that its unveiling would need to be as inclusive and involving as the process that created it. A year in planning, the celebration took place on September 12, 1998 at sunset. The event attracted over 5000 people, many of whom had contributed to the project. Cochran describes how the evening unfolded.

It wasn't just a big party; it was a crescendo. Like everything else we conceived of, it was a part of the work. The people who contributed their ideas and volunteered knew that they were a part of this—as co-creators. The whole celebration exemplified this. We broadcast it live on the Internet. It was multimedia, with music, dance and fireworks. We also had a video message from South Africa from a sister project. They were using art to transform this 10-mile stretch of roadway between Johannesburg and Soweto that was a symbol of apartheid. One of the originators had visited us and gave us a stone from that road. I decided to give it to the audience to pass around. I don't think anyone thought it would go all the way around. But it zig zagged through the crowd down one side of the creek, up the other and back to me. It showed how the bridge we had built

together had literally touched the other side of the world. When you touched stone you touched the soil of South Africa. After that event one of the things you were likely to hear from some people who were there was "I got to touch the stone."

Nuts, Bolts and Warning Labels

Community-based artmaking is not for the faint of heart. Having worked in the public and community arts field for three decades, I take the position that authentic public involvement is a risky undertaking, even under the best conditions. Given this, time I advise many clients to leave community engagement alone. For the rest, the ones I feel are both adequately prepared and seriously committed, I counsel a slow and deliberate course that acknowledges the most confounding axioms of community work: No matter how well prepared, you will inevitably find yourself learning on the job, or as William Cochran puts it, "building the rocket as it is taking off." Nonetheless, there are some things that artists, administrators and their community partners can consider as they circle the launching pad. Here are a few from my perspective.

There are no easy answers: The single most important key to successful community engagement in public art is understanding that there are no micro-waveable short-cuts to participatory art making. Every community's cultural, social and political ecology is unique. Assumptions and expectations accrued from other sites should be checked at the door---not because those experiences are not potentially valuable and informative, but because the scrupulous learning of a community's culture is an indispensable part of building community trust. And, in the end, you will find that trust is your most valuable resource.

Healthy partnerships are built on trust: Community engagement is collaboration intensive. Successful partners learn quickly that the driving force in fruitful relationships is trust. They know that real trust is built on deeds and practice, not words. They also know that trust-engendering practice is characterized by the continuity, predictability, regularity, and consistency of work together over time. By "over time," I mean a long time---years, even!

Power is as power does: People involved in productive community partnership have figured out how to deal effectively with power. They have learned that building trust between the more and less powerful is difficult, and that the greater the gap in power, the greater the challenge. They also know, that those who wield power are often unaware of the extent of their privilege and power and thus, have a difficult time understanding and responding to demands to share that power.

Collaborative art making is cumbersome and messy: Participants in successful creative collaborations know that a good partnership is like a good marriage. That means that even though it takes 10 times more energy to find consensus and get things done, the results make the journey worthwhile. Successful partners also know that at various times on that journey the partnership will be tested, and that those tests will not only be a

measure of the strength and resiliency of the partnership, they will also be the crucible upon which the strength and resiliency of the collaboration will be forged.

Insiders and outsiders both have advantages: Working in his home town allowed William Cochran to invest the time and energy he needed to cultivate community leaders and engage his diverse community. Visiting artists without this advantage must rely on community-based sponsors to generate the necessary resources and relationships. This is why artists competing for commissions that involve community engagement should pay as much attention to a sponsor's "street" credibility as they do the bottom line.

One advantage Cochran did not have was the leverage that often accrues to imported artists simply because they are imported. Although this out of town "star" status tends to diminish fairly quickly, it can be used to get the attention of local officials and attract much needed resources. The downside of being a foreign body is that local artists often feel snubbed. One antidote has been to partner with a compatible and respected local artist.

Time and money rule: By their very nature public art endeavors are both time intensive and costly. Adding community engagement into the mix dramatically increases the workload in both areas. As with the Community Bridge, large-scale community-oriented projects often find themselves running on empty. Yes it's true, it will cost more and take longer than you thought. In some cases, the artists involved end up on the short end of the stick. No matter who is deemed responsible, there is usually only one option---beating the bushes for money for a work that is unfinished and over budget. There is no harder fundraising challenge. Unfortunately, many artists and communities attracted to the idea of weaving public participation into the fabric of public art exacerbate the problem by trying to do it on the cheap. Don't!

Plan conservatively: Finishing a participatory arts project within the budget and on time is hard, but it can be done. The most successful projects are built on thorough planning and a conservative budgeting of time and money. "Conservative" in this context does not mean short or small, but what I call "over-realistic." For a public arts project that involves 100 or more community members, I generally inflate the schedule by fifty percent and increase the overall budget by one third.

Free labor is expensive: Volunteers are labor intensive. Coordinating the community-based unpaid labor force for the Community Bridge was a full-time job. Dropping the ball with those volunteers would have dissipated them as a resource and ruined Cochran's reputation in the community. Think twice about taking on free labor. When you do, make sure its care and feeding is in capable, compensated hands.

Post Script: A New Field is Emerging

Twenty-five years ago advocates for public art used words like *beautification*, *quality of life*, *design integrity* and *community animation* to make their case. Projects like the Community Bridge have upped the ante considerably. These days, it is not uncommon to

hear terms like *conflict resolution*, *public safety*, *economic development* and *community revitalization* employed to advance the cause. I don't think these are necessarily spurious assertions but they dramatically raise the stakes and broaden the playing field for public art.

But, using terms like these does more than broaden the dictionary of public art. I think it greatly alters the nature of the work. I would, in fact, contend that goals like improved economic or social health indicate the emergence of a new field, entirely, one I have come to call arts-based community development. This is a realm of cultural practice that regards public participation and artistic creation as mutually interdependent---joined at the hip. It also asserts that there are significant and tangible community benefits, beyond the aesthetic realm, that naturally accrue from certain kinds of community art endeavors.

So, if there is a new field calving off of the public art iceberg, how do these expanded aims effect how we define success or failure? First of all, we have to acknowledge that the "we" has expanded as well. In addition to citizen participants, every new sector that becomes involved, be it public safety, human services, or community development, now has say, as well. In fact, artists doing community work often find themselves contending with a greatly expanded range of scrutiny and judgment. And, given the difficulty of measuring outcomes in these instances, some fall prey to charges that they are dealing in false promises.

With this in mind, two obvious needs for this expanding universe are training and evaluation. But this is a subject for another article. Suffice it to say, though, community-based, participatory art making offers not only opportunity, but serious challenges for the growing number of artists and communities that are helping to define the field. In light of this, those contemplating joining the fray should proceed with caution.

The Shared Vision Model

When asked how he would characterize his approach to participatory public art making William Cochran responded with the following:

1. The works are monumental infrastructure projects in urban areas, providing a motivational focal point for a cooperative communal effort.

2. The artistic techniques employed are of very high quality. This builds trust, support, involvement and broad communications via the media.

3. The works are created in full public view, by hand, over an extended period of time, and create a gathering area at the meeting point between disparate neighborhoods or other strategic common areas.

4. The completed works are permanent and low maintenance, with a life span that is measured in decades or generations.

5. They engage the public directly in the creative process, involving thousands of people (and many artists) in their design and making.

6. Artistically, they weave together a critical mass of disparate voices to make a common statement. This can be deeply inspiring, and lies at the heart of this model's transformational power.

7. The works are very potent economic catalysts, capable of sparking or accelerating revitalization in the urban core. They demonstrate that public art can carry much more than its own weight.

8. They are a fusion of art, architecture, history and community. Their process is built on extended research and participation that involves area leaders, humanities scholars, artists, thinkers, and others, but they speak on universal themes. Deeply integrated into the fabric of their community, they also make national and international connections.

9. Because they hold the promise of revitalization on and social levels simultaneously, they draw support from many sectors of the community including: government, education, business, cultural, faith- and community-based non-profits.

10. The artwork and the transformational public process of its creation
results in a story that is also transformational when broadcast or

disseminated. The works employ powerful communication methods that reach millions of people to engage them and tell the story.