

The Mural Arts Program's Restored Spaces Initiative: Engaging Philadelphia Youth in Multi-Faceted Community Enrichment

Jane Golden 09 May 2010

Like residents of any urban environment, we in Philadelphia learn to expect and accept some grit and decay, and a lack of green, natural spaces as we traverse both the busy thoroughfares and most distant corners of the city. We encounter trash-strewn public spaces, bear witness to graffiti-covered walls, and feel boxed in by building after building. But in our most sacred spaces—our schools, recreation centers and other youth-oriented public spaces—these bleak and uninspiring conditions are the most difficult to accept, and the hardest to ignore.

As the Mural Arts Program has grown over the years, we have become increasingly aware of the needs within our most vulnerable neighborhoods and the need to reclaim and redefine public space. All too often, these neighborhoods and civic spaces preclude human encounters, and leave people feeling disconnected and powerless. At the Mural Arts Program, we have tried hard to be deliberate in our effort to identify and respond to the

needs that we see, the need to transform and build spaces where people create something together that captures the collective talents, aspirations and imagination of a community.

While the Mural Arts Program was initially born of a short-term solution to the graffiti crisis taking hold of Philadelphia in the early 1980s, we are now well into our third decade, and we have learned and continue to learn the depth of the links between our work to beautify the physical landscape of the city and our work with individuals. Our ability to provide access to the arts and other creative opportunities for underserved youth populations does more to shape what our city will look like for generations to come than paint alone ever could. Today, we strive to create projects that transcend the tightrope of artistic merit, projects that aren't band-aids but intentional instruments of long-term health, healing and growth. Quite simply, we want our work to provide traction for a multitude of voices, particularly among the youth who will exemplify the positive and incremental changes we hope to recognize in our city over the next generations.

In this spirit, in 2008 we launched our Restored Spaces Initiative, a multi-year, multi-site endeavor designed to engage students from our Mural Corps Art Education program, along with schools, civic institutions and a variety of community partners, in the creation of several large-scale, multi-dimensional public art projects that

incorporate elements of environmental education and urban revitalization and encourage youth ownership of the entire process. Firm in our belief that our schools and public spaces should look beautiful, unique and inviting, we envisioned Restored Spaces as a catalyst compelling all participants, community members and stakeholders to invest and reinvest in spaces that have the look of the forgotten and the uninspired. These Restored Spaces projects have the potential to breathe life back into the schools and neighborhoods in which we live and work, and where our children learn and play, by dramatically altering physical environments and sparking a shift in the attitudes of young people who encounter these environments and learn from them. It is our goal that through these projects our student participants begin to understand the potential regenerative impact of their artwork and the greater meaning that small, tangible visual improvements can cumulatively have on their neighborhoods and, by extension, the entire city.

In 2008, we kicked off the Restored Spaces Initiative with the transformation of John F. Hartranft Elementary School in North Philadelphia. Over the course of nine months, a drab industrial building was made over as an art gallery and outdoor classroom, replete with indoor and outdoor murals, a ceramic and stained-glass mosaic, an orchard and teaching garden, a bamboo garden and healthy new trees. Each element of our work at Hartranft was inspired by painting and sculpture that celebrated the natural

environment. Through conducting research projects, making site visits to parks, gardens and "eco-art" sites, and working directly from nature in an outdoor setting during the design phase, students gained an understanding of ecological issues and a finely tuned appreciation for the natural landscape.

In 2010, we will be transforming the Bodine High School for International Affairs in the Northern Liberties area of Philadelphia into a functional work of art that will include mural and mosaic elements, a rain garden and greenhouse, and a variety of green materials and educational tools. Once the project is complete, the school will be reborn as a green space and sanctuary offering inspiration, tranquility and transcendence to all passersby and allowing students to connect with nature on an individual level as well as through group activities and class lessons.

For this new project, Bodine was selected through a competitive application process based on its capacity to engage its students in sustaining the green improvements years into the future. The school features an environmental science curriculum in the freshman and junior years, an international baccalaureate Biology Program that contains units on ecology and environmental science, and an art program in which students are introduced to botanical art.

Our Mural Corps students will help lead this project,

working with the Philadelphia Water Department Office of Watersheds to ameliorate storm water management at Bodine through the creation of a rain garden, part of the Office's commitment to build green storm water infrastructures throughout the city. The Northern Liberties Neighborhood Association has committed to the sustainability of the site and will ensure that the property is maintained and cared for once the project is complete.

In addition to the murals, mosaics and enhancement of green spaces at the school, we will invite the surrounding community to help plant trees and assist with the greening of the block. This project serves as an opportunity for Mural Corps youth to engage the local community in constructive ways, and encourage stewardship of the natural world.

Our vision for Bodine, as for Hartranft and for all of our schools, one by one, is a vision of bright, engaging educational spaces that give students the rich resources they deserve and the connection with the natural world they very much need. These projects are special because they utilize the inclusive, community-wide process of mural-making to convey valuable lessons about the importance of respecting and appreciating the environment. They breathe life back into dull physical spaces that are intended to be the beacons of promise and progress within our communities, and they draw a variety of agencies and organizations into cooperative efforts to make aesthetic *and* functional improvements to

struggling, disconnected city neighborhoods.

The Restored Spaces Initiative is important because it directly connects kids to environmental issues, straddling several disciplines to create artworks that aren't static; they move and flow, and exist functionally in the service of the spaces that matter most to our collective future, spaces that house and nurture our brightest hopes in the form of our young people.

When it comes to carving out a space in which students can learn, play and delight in a natural world often overlooked in city life, we must creatively answer the call. We cannot afford to ignore the need to better equip tomorrow's leaders with the tools necessary for them to grow into those great roles. The way that we can inventively create opportunity where there is none visible, and the way we fight to improve and beautify our surroundings piece by piece, is what can separate Philadelphia from other cities that experience this same acute lack within their communities, and struggle to stretch their resources to answer it. The complex, multi-faceted, interdisciplinary projects of the Restored Spaces Initiative include all the components of what it means to be a community. They are not only the future of the Mural Arts Program, but are the required work of the moment.

For more information about Mural Arts and the variety of programs they offer, visit www.muralarts.org or contact Jane Golden at jane.golden@muralarts.org,

