

Wall Murals of Philadelphia: Windows Into Urban Communities

Elliott Westerman
Pennsylvania State University

This is a short and personal essay about the wall murals of Philadelphia. To study these wall murals, I had to immerse myself in the art and community in a way that is not necessary in the study of more conventional topics such as economic development or transport. As a young White man whose life experience comes primarily from growing up in the affluent suburbs of State College, Pennsylvania, the urban life of the poor was completely new to me. To do this research, I lived in a West Philadelphia row house for 6 weeks as a member of the Philadelphia Field Project. Typically, suburbanites are socialized to view places like West Philadelphia or Harlem, New York, as problem areas fraught with danger and little hope. I applied to the Field Project because I wanted to learn about such problem places directly. I reasoned that anyone could read about economically distressed areas, but it would be better to live there for a length of time. The stereotypes, fears, and misconceptions that I carried with me made me anxious about living in West Philadelphia, but I was also anticipating the experience with excitement. The social theory of the Philadelphia Field Project allowed me and other group members to approach West Philadelphia with a different and more positive perspective (Yapa, 2000 [this issue]).

“Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.” So reads a mural in North Philadelphia that is known as *Safe Streets* (see Figure 1). The center panel of the mural shows a group of African Americans painting a wall previously defaced by graffiti. It portrays a message of cooperation, working together, and a bright future. This is a typical theme found in more than 1,600 murals that have been appearing in Philadelphia through the efforts of groups such as the Philadelphia Department of Recreation’s Mural Arts Program. This program began in 1984 as a way of combating the serious street graffiti problem in Philadelphia. The murals tell of racial strife and heal-

ing, the celebration of war heroes, and famous events in sport history. With more than 1,620 murals, Philadelphia has more murals than any other city in the United States; currently, less than 10 have been vandalized by graffiti artists. The murals of Philadelphia and the murals of Northern Ireland exist under a very similar premise: “[murals] removed from their context would fail to have any real artistic merit . . . it is undoubtedly true that their strength lies primarily in their location and their relationship to it” (Rolston, 1999). Murals can be used to learn about places in a nonintrusive way because they are quite connected to their neighborhoods and communities.

Origin of the Graffiti Fighting Mural Arts Program

For many years, street graffiti in Philadelphia had been a major problem, particularly because graffiti was also a way in which street gangs marked their territory. The Mural Arts Program began as a fight against street graffiti. In the early 80s, a grass roots effort to paint wall murals had started in the Mantua section of West Philadelphia, a program initiated by 25-year-old Tim Spencer, the executive director of the Mantua community Planners and the Chairman of West Philadelphia’s Anti-Graffiti Task Force. In 1983, Mayor-elect Wilson Goode decided to expand this program and announced the formation of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN). The next year, the Goode administration began the Mural Arts Program funded by the city’s Department of Recreation, a program responsible for the majority of Philadelphia’s murals. Mural art is a public affair that can be viewed, enjoyed, and understood from the sidewalk, street, highway, or front porch. It is an art form that does more than cover blank walls, it takes on important issues such as ethnic history, pride, drugs, religious issues,



Figure 1. The Safe Streets Mural

and women's rights. For Mayor Goode, murals were not just an aesthetic solution to the problem of a graffiti-covered city that he termed *ugly*. He viewed graffiti as "destroying the neighborhood," and he believed that "[graffiti] . . . keeps businesses away" (Cooke, 1983).

The Spatial Distribution of Murals

Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods (Cybriwsky, 1995); however, the names of the larger regional divisions of the city follow directional quadrants. West Philadelphia is composed of areas to the west of the Schuylkill River up to the county boundary on City Avenue. East of the Schuylkill river, Market Street divides the city into North and South Philadelphia. Northwest Philadelphia centers on Wissahickon Creek and contains the neighborhoods of Germantown, Chestnut Hill, and Mt. Airy. An imaginary dividing line separates North Philadelphia from the Northeast, the area of the city straddling Roosevelt Boulevard and protruding toward Bucks County. A drive from the North to the Northeast reveals a change in the urban landscape from a rectangular street pattern to one more reminiscent of a suburban area. Economically, the highest household incomes occur in the Northwest and Northeast, where the city is closest to the more affluent suburban counties of Montgomery and Bucks. High household incomes are characteristic of neighborhoods of Center City, such as Society Hill, Queen Village, and Rittenhouse. The spatial distribution of murals appears to follow the economic geography of household income (see Figures 2 and 3). As Figure 2 shows, the largest clustering of murals are in North Philadelphia, followed by other large clusters in West and South Philadelphia. Northeast and Northwest Phila-

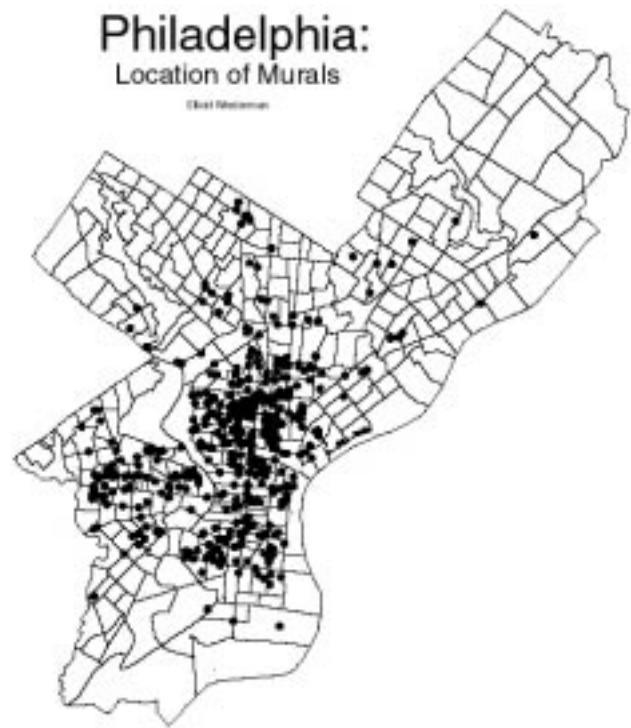


Figure 2. Murals of Philadelphia

delphia are almost entirely devoid of murals. North Philadelphia provides a classic example of a post-industrial landscape of crumbling, old, factory sites as well as large empty lots where buildings once stood. North and West Philadelphia have become notorious for high crime rates and drug-related problems. These areas are also economically distressed, and much money and planning have gone into remedying the situation. In fact, Jane Golden Heriza, director of the Mural Arts Program, commissioned more murals in North and West Philadelphia than elsewhere in the city. It is her belief that murals are more than public art. For her, they have a two-fold purpose: murals are "half aesthetics and half social activism" (Radio Times, 1998). This open air urban "art gallery" has definitely achieved and continues to achieve Jane Golden Heriza's vision. This can be seen through the images found on the murals. The murals that dot the city's landscape vividly display the people and events of Philadelphia, and the ideas that its inhabitants celebrate as well as the vices they warn against

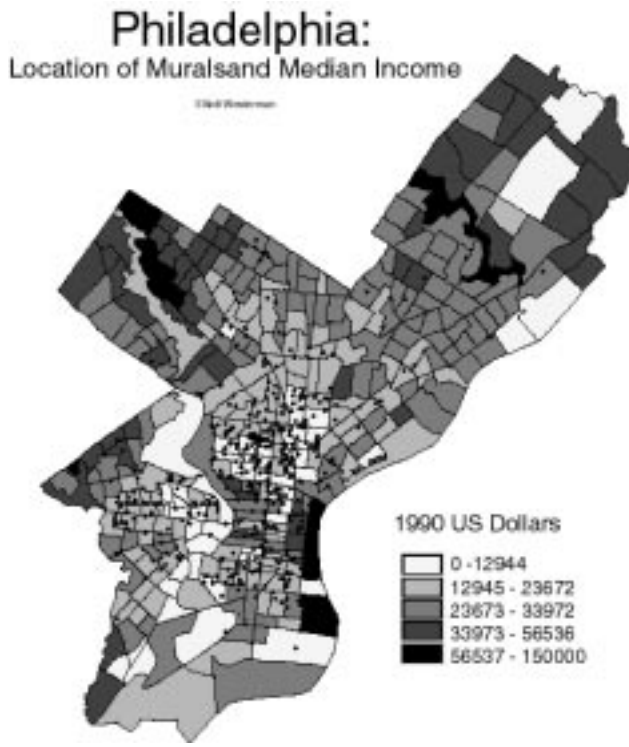


Figure 3. Median Income of Households

The Place Specificity of Murals

The themes in several murals are locationally very specific in that they work well at those particular locations but not elsewhere. Some examples of these locationally specific murals are the *Peace Wall*, *Frank Rizzo*, *Mario Lanza*, and *Puerto Rican Liberty* (Figures 4 and 5).

The Peace Wall. The *Peace Wall* is located in the Grays Ferry neighborhood across the Schuylkill River from the University of Pennsylvania, a community that has been scarred by racial tension and violence in the past (see Figure 4). There was a long-standing racial divide in this part of the city that caused children of different races to play on the neighborhood basketball courts at different times of the day. The *Peace Wall* mural is very simple and may not mean much to a person unfamiliar with the neighborhood. The mural depicts a star-like form of outstretched arms, black, brown, and white, that gather together in the middle and touch each other. The mural was painted by Jane Golden Heriza after meeting with a local community planning agency that wanted to see a mural that reflected unity, with “. . . hands joined together, hands united in



Figure 4. The *Peace Wall*



Figure 5. The Former Mayor Frank Rizzo

peace” (Naedele, 1998). The 11 multicolored hands in the mural represent neighborhood residents of all ages. This mural celebrates peace, and included in the lower right corner are words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9, King James version). This is significant because the neighborhood is very religious. At the mural’s dedication, a White minister and a Black minister were photographed embracing each other as the ceremony began.

Rizzo and Lanza. Location is crucial for another set of South Philadelphia murals that depict former Mayor Frank Rizzo and actor/singer Mario Lanza, two men from the community well-known in the city for its large Italian community. The Mario Lanza mural is appropriate for its location because it is not far from his boyhood home. The Frank Rizzo mural, which stands near South Philadelphia’s famous Italian market, would not be found in any of the other areas of the city



Figure 6. Common Threads

for historical reasons (see Figure 5). For example, if it were placed in West Philadelphia or the Germantown area, both well-known African American communities, the mural would probably run the risk of constant defacement because Rizzo's policies were not always well liked by the people in that area. This sort of mural with a geographically appropriate location can also be seen in murals such as *Puerto Rican Liberty* and the one in North Philadelphia created for the President's Summit on Germantown Avenue, a neighborhood that celebrates the nearby community of Jamaican Americans.

Urban Youth as Part of History

The largest and probably most spectacular mural in the city, named *Common Threads*, is located at the corner of Broad and Spring Garden Streets (see Figure 6). Unlike the others, this mural does not strictly reflect a neighborhood, it has a theme much wider in scope. It shows pictures of 15 city high school students dressed in period clothes and striking classical poses that mimic classical figurines that appear around them. Those students dressed in their modern attire mirror



Figure 7. The Ogontz Avenue Art Company Mural

the poses of the other figures, which include an Assyrian fertility goddess, a dancing Chinese doll, and a Dresden lady. This mural was an attempt by artist Meg Saligman to "bring out the classical beauty of these city kids. And I was hoping that people would make the connection. The worlds of the figurines and these young people seem so dissimilar, but there are common threads that tie them" (Radio Times, 1998).

Grass Roots Mural Programs

Besides the murals funded by the city, there are those created through individual efforts. People such as Kathryn Pannepacker and Peter Doyle have used mural art to build cooperation between community residents (primarily children) and trained artists. Kathryn has worked mostly by herself and with friends, whereas Peter Doyle has set up his own art program known as the Ogontz Avenue Art Company (OAAC). Both have a vision of getting young people to experience art from a very young age. Peter Doyle sees his art company as an environment where "kids are safe and are given an opportunity to have a shot at the American Dream" (Doyle, 1998). Their philosophies are quite in line with that of Jane Golden Heriza, who views mural art as a catalyst for social change (see Figure 7).

The OAAC was started in 1994 by Peter Doyle, who wanted people to use art to overcome racial and socio-economic divides and create something together as friends. The company's goals are ambitious, but they stretch beyond art. The main focus of the group is to educate kids in an area where the school staff is burnt out and overburdened. The company has had a big impact on Peter Doyle as well, who claims that working in Philadelphia with the kids on wall murals has "changed his art and life dramatically." His experience has allowed the kids in the neighborhood to take pride in their artistic creations, and they always call Peter when they have been "tagged" (Doyle, 1998). Tagging refers to the vandalizing of a mural with graffiti.



Figure 8. The *Graffiti Mural*

***Graffiti Mural:* Commemorating Slain Friends**

The *Graffiti Mural* is located in the Mantua neighborhood of West Philadelphia (see Figure 8). The mural was painted as a memorial to four of the artist's friends who were slain while playing Nintendo. It was not clear whether the killings were related to gang activity, but such was the suspicion.

The artist gave his name to us as simply *Jim*. In the middle of the mural is a large bleeding heart with the word *peace* written across it, and below that a peace symbol. To the left and right of the heart are drawings of unrolled scrolls. The one on the left shows an unfinished poem that Jim says is stored in his mind. It reads, "I see the sun, but there is no sun in the ghetto. All we got in the ghetto is a dream . . ." The scroll on the right reads, "Wall of fame . . . in memory of . . ." and below that a list of the names of those killed. At the very bottom of the right-hand scroll is written, "= suicide." And to the right of that scroll is a cross inscribed with the acronym *S.O.S.* that in this case stands for "Sisters Of Strength," the name of a group of concerned women who meet regularly to discuss the neighborhood's problems and what they can do to change things. Next to the acronym appear the words, *Mantua Against Drugs*. At the top left of the mural are the letters *I.C.H.* framed by clouds and a tombstone with *R.I.P.* written on it. The letters *I.C.H.* stand for "Inner-City Hustlers," the name of a rap group that Jim and some of his slain friends belonged to. Running throughout the entire length of the mural is an arrow that starts halfway up on the left, then dips below the bleeding heart, and rises again with the end pointing to the Wall of Fame scroll. Written above the arrow on the



Figure 9. The *Sarah Allen Lucretia Mott Mural*

right side are the words, "And We Still Rise." This symbolizes the deflating effect the killings had on the neighborhood but suggest that in the end, they would rise again as stronger people. Despite the "graffiti-like" nature of the artistry, the face of the mural is tag free (Jim, personal interviews, May 23, 1998).

The Sarah Allen Lucretia Mott Mural

Another mural with an interesting historical and contemporary association is found on the corner of Parrish and Preston Streets in West Philadelphia (see Figure 9).

The *Woman's Hospital Mural* stands across from a historic building that was the site of a progressive and groundbreaking institution, the Woman's Hospital. This mural is significant because it is a beautiful depiction of the people and institution that were associated with the former hospital and the current use of the building. Today, the building and a block of renovated townhomes have been reborn as the Sarah Allen

Lucretia Mott Community. The resulting community rose out of the rubble of many abandoned and collapsing homes, as well as from the abandoned seven-story Woman's Hospital left vacant for more than 20 years. With the help of the Friends Rehabilitation Program (FRP), the Belmont Improvement Association (BIA), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), they set out to improve this community that was struggling to manage with problems of drug addiction, unemployment, and homelessness. The FRP and BIA began by opening a renovated building in 1988 that housed 23 formerly homeless women, gave them a home base, and improved their chances for employment. The next project opened in 1994 with the development of 36 units of family housing on 41st and Ogden Streets. In February 1998, 40 more apartments for families were opened as a combination of rehabilitation and new construction. Finally, the largest project was rehabilitating and converting the former hospital into 87 housing units for senior citizens and the disabled. It is considered to be one of the finest projects financed by the HUD Section 202 program (Friends Rehabilitation Program, 1998).

Thus, the neighborhood was reborn as many of the long-term residents had hoped, and the mural that stands across the street reflects this renaissance. Pictured in the mural's upper middle is the outline of a huge butterfly with rainbows radiating outward from its wings symbolizing racial unity. Within the outline of the wings are images from the old Woman's Hospital and from the cleanup efforts on the site. At the bottom of the mural are two large images of Lucretia Mott and Sarah Allen. Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) organized the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, which consisted of an integrated group of women who recognized the need to further the fight for women's rights. She organized the Seneca Falls Anti-Slavery Convention, raised money to fund a female medical college, supported efforts to establish the Woman's Hospital, and organized a series of lectures to demonstrate the skills of the new "lady doctors." Sarah Allen (1764-1849) was a missionary and wife of Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). She supported his work toward religious freedom for all. She is the consecrated Mother of African Methodism, and her open home was a refuge to those who labored in the ministry. She hosted the Philadelphia Annual Conference in her home, and in 1827 she organized the Daughters of the Conference to introduce home missions in the A.M.E. Church (Friends Rehabilitation Program, 1998).

At the top of the mural is a picture of Anne Preston. She was responsible for obtaining the charter for the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia, one of the first hospitals in America to serve the needs of women and children. The hospital later served as a clinical training facility for the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania where Preston was the dean. On either side of her in the mural are pictures of the current administrators of the Sarah Allen Lucretia Mott Community, Mike Devose and Rasheedah Hyman. Rasheedah is the former director of the Sarah Allen Home, herself a former battered and homeless woman, who draws inspiration for her work from the likes of Sarah Allen, Lucretia Mott, and Anne Preston. Since 1988, the Sarah Allen home has graduated more than 160 homeless women from the program (Friends Rehabilitation Program, 1998).

"Alternative" Murals

Not all the murals are simply paintings. In recent years and especially after the formation of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation Mural Arts Program, the types of murals that are being produced include mosaics. A good example created by artist Paul Santoleri can be seen at 31st Street and Baring Avenue in West Philadelphia. This is the city's first mosaic mural. It contains tiles, glass, clayware, and pottery that children made while enrolled in a Philadelphia Museum of Art workshop. This type of mural lends itself more to the interaction between the artist and children, much like the OAAC does. Clay discs with children's handprints and names can be found throughout the mosaic. Children from the neighborhood brought all sorts of things to be included in the mural ranging from a television remote control to spoons. Paul Santoleri's recently finished mural, *Flower in the City*, combines painting and mosaic, along with the artistic talents of children. There are tall leaves of grass growing up from the bottom, which are made up of the tiles the children created, and appearing above the tall grasses is a bird's eye view of West Philadelphia. Depicted in the mural are rowhouses (with a giant passion flower growing among them), Fairmount Park, and the Schuylkill River in the distance. Santoleri is an interesting artist because he is a West Philadelphia resident who walks down to work on this mural each day. He is a teacher by nature and enjoys teaching children to create art and express themselves creatively. He enjoys the work with the Mural Arts Program because it allows him to practice his craft,

work outside, and interact with people he would not otherwise meet.

The *Flower in the City* mural stands next to a basketball court, and when the artist is asked what murals mean to the people in the neighborhoods, he mentions the players: "The mural gives them a backdrop, it isn't just a vacant wall, but something to look at and think about" (P. Santoleri, personal communication, June 6, 1998). To him, the mural is like a monument presented to the neighborhood, which people can be identified by and have a sense of ownership over. I found that community people respected it because they considered it a gift from the city. According to Santoleri, the greatest achievement for a mural artist working with the Mural Arts Program is to "do a good quality piece of work and still have the community involved." The theme in the mural *Flower in the City* is really a metaphor. Within cities like Philadelphia in a state of urban decay and within the mass of concrete, flowers can still grow and bring beauty. The beauty that the mural represents is the city's people.

Integrating Research, Learning, and Service

Because the Philadelphia Field Project is an initiative in service learning, it is worthwhile asking about the "service" component of my project and the manner in which I integrated the research, learning, and service. To answer that question, I need to return to Yapa's social theory referred to in the introduction of this issue (Yapa, 2000). The notion of a poverty sector is an example of Cartesian dualism in social science. The idea of a poverty sector groups a set of households according to income criteria and divides the nonpoor from the poor, self from the other, and the problem from the nonproblem. According to this view, places such as North and West Philadelphia are considered poverty areas, regions in which the poverty problem resides. People similar to myself are accorded a subject status wherein we are asked to research and provide solutions to social problems. Such research assumes that poverty results from a lack of income, and that subjects such as myself are not implicated in the problem in any way. The social theory of the Philadelphia Field Project questions this conventional view of poverty and the inner city. First, by focusing on discourse it claims that the particular way in which the subject and the object of poverty are presented is actually a discursive construction. In other words, the assumption that a young White person from an afflu-

ent suburb can intervene in a place like West Philadelphia by researching it and offering solutions, without understanding his own responsibility for the material conditions there, is actually a product of a particular way of understanding poverty in cities. The Philadelphia Field Project allowed me the opportunity to rethink my own role and consider my agency in West Philadelphia. The changes that took place within myself will be discussed further shortly. Yet the question remains, How can changes that I experienced internally make any difference to the community from which I took so much? Replying to this rhetorical question, it is important to realize that subject, object, and discourse are mutually constituted. The conventional discourse defines my subjectivity and my relation to the inner city in a specific way. Yet through a different understanding of the inner city, I can change the nature of my subject status, thus enabling a further change in the discourse. The Philadelphia Field Project provided me with the means to begin this change. It altered my relation to the community in such a way that I can participate in the production of a new discourse that in turn will redefine the object, namely the inner-city communities of Philadelphia. The new discourse claims to offer more hope and optimism by multiplying the sites at which agents can act, a point illustrated by the other articles in this issue.

Now I wish to return to the theme of how the Field Project changed my own relationship to the city. My undergraduate education has been dominated by studying economics, geography, and cartography. Within the framework of that training, I assumed that the inner-city problems were issues of economics, crime, and violence. Going to Philadelphia and studying murals gave me a chance to look at the inner city from a different frame of mind. I learned much about art, especially public art, and the culture of the city. I was able to learn about neighborhoods and the problems they face by studying the symbolism depicted in the murals. I learned about locality and ethnicity within the city and how the murals represented such neighborhoods. I volunteered in programs to feed local children and chaperoned at a local school. Yet, through it all, what I discovered to be most important were shifts in attitude and lessons learned from being in that environment. All the members of our group left Philadelphia as changed individuals.

Experiences such as the Philadelphia Project have taught me more about life and people than nearly anything else. I now know that walls built in our lives and society can be brought down. Our superficial disagree-

ments can be put aside to find out the true meaning of what is important. By spending time with the warm-hearted and loving people of the Belmont/Mantua neighborhood, I became educated in things that no school or university can teach. By playing with the children in the neighborhood and getting to know their families, I learned about their hopes, aspirations, dreams, and goals. Although none of the people I met had much money, it was wonderful to see their sense of hope and generosity. By being with these people and, in a sense, becoming part of their family, my own research became more meaningful as I began to better understand the issues and themes depicted in the murals. I made a conscious effort to get to know one particular family quite well. I have been able to keep in touch with this family, and I have come to learn a great deal about the African American culture.

From this experience, I learned to go beyond economics and came to appreciate the role of culture in the building of a strong community. I was able to overcome the burden of cultural stereotypes and see the destructiveness of viewing inner-city African Americans as the "problem other." Through my close contact with the community, I sensed the power of hope, faith, and immense love that does exist. It is true that drugs were sold in the neighborhood that I lived in, and there

were shootings, crime, and violence. However, this was also a community of families, loving parents and trusting children, and kind people with hope and faith. Understanding this was the most important aspect of my summer with the Philadelphia Field Project.

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Elliott Westerman is a senior undergraduate in the Department of Geography at Pennsylvania State University.