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MURAL ARTS @ 30: A LANDSCAPE OF PRACTICE

David Updike and Thora Jacobson

Beginnings are not always predictive of outcomes. When the paint brushes wielded by an energetic, optimistic young mural artist and some one hundred youths recruited from the nearby Mantua neighborhood first touched down on the decidedly unpromising, sunbaked metal walls along the Spring Garden Street Bridge, passersby would certainly have known that something new was happening in Philadelphia, but no one could have anticipated the far-reaching effects this gesture would have.

The year was 1984, the artist was Jane Golden, and the project was part of a modest six-week summer program launched under the auspices of the newly created Anti-Graffiti Task Force, itself a component of recently elected Mayor W. Wilson Goode's broad efforts to address blight in the city. Looking back across the intervening decades of evolution and expansion, we can see that even early efforts such as this one already contained the seeds from which the Mural Arts Program's subsequent successes would be grown and nurtured. Most important among these—then and now—is the energy generated among the participants as they work together to do something positive for themselves, their neighborhood, and the city they call home. This energy, yoked to an enduring commitment to personal and community transformation, lies at the core of everything Mural Arts does and has propelled its practice forward through thirty years and

more than 3,800 murals and public art projects.

In two previous books we explored murals and “the stories they tell.”¹ Those stories have always spilled off the walls and into the lives of the communities in which the works reside, in ways both planned and unanticipated. As the ambition and scope of the projects have grown, and the actors involved have both diversified and multiplied exponentially, the stories these works embody have expanded along with them, overlapping and intertwining to form a larger, citywide narrative peopled by artists, residents, students, municipal government, business communities, and many others. Nor does the story end at the city limits—the innovative work being done in Philadelphia is paralleled by efforts taking place in communities around the country, many of which have looked to our city as a model and an inspiration, even as we constantly look outward to bring in new artists, ideas, and processes.

As we look back on thirty years of community-driven art, the intent of this book is both to celebrate an important milestone in our history and to share the valuable lessons—creative, organizational, social, and political—that we have learned along the way. Like any complex narrative, it can be approached from many perspectives. To give this story dimension, we have enlisted a diverse group of authors from disciplines that range





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from art education and activism to behavioral health, sociology, peacebuilding, and philanthropy, each of whom brings particular insights to the work we do in a series of essays that cuts across the scope of the enterprise that is Mural Arts. Their observations are mirrored in a kind of double helix by photographic essays that document a representative sampling of Mural Arts projects and offer the invaluable perspectives of the participants themselves, building on the individual essays to personalize the impact of our work and weave its programs into a cohesive, generative landscape of practice. As in our practice, it has been our goal here to honor the process as much as the product, for the value of our work is embedded in the relationships that it engenders and nourishes along the way. We have been remarkably fortunate to have been joined in this effort by partners—in the private and the public sectors, public education, academia, and neighborhoods—who understand what we do and the role it plays in improving our city's landscape and giving voice to the hopes, dreams, and struggles of many of its inhabitants.

The past thirty years have been a time of remarkable—if uneven—growth and change in Philadelphia, and the Mural Arts Program has grown and changed along with the city it serves. As Golden, who has been at the heart of this process since the very beginning, makes clear in her essay, “Growing Up, Growing Out, Putting Down Roots,” this expansion has occurred in all directions. Mural Arts has grown up—maturing in stages from its initial conception as a summer painting program for youth, to an innovative effort aimed at bringing art into the neighborhoods and offering graffiti writers an opportunity to reinvent themselves as mural artists, to its present form as a wide-ranging public art organization with a staff of more than fifty artists, educators, program managers, guides, and administrators; programs in communities, commercial corridors, public schools, prisons, and other places; and a dynamic board of Mural Arts Advocates whose energy and expertise continue to bring in the resources required to keep an operation of this scale on a course for con-

tinued growth and change. Mural Arts has grown out to attract prestigious artists from around the world to Philadelphia to create transformative projects of lasting value, and to extend its practice beyond painted surfaces to include collaborations with writers, musicians, designers, academics, and social service providers. And Mural Arts has put down roots through the lasting relationships we've formed with artists, advocates, students, and alumni, who are now embedded in nearly every one of Philadelphia's mosaic of communities.

One could add “grown inward” as well, since the ability to reflect, rethink, and reinvent—as Houston-based community artist Rick Lowe points out in his Foreword to this volume—is a key component of any artistic practice. Through three decades of social and cultural change, and four mayoral administrations with shifting priorities and organizational structures, Mural Arts has been called upon repeatedly to reshape, refocus, and reimagine its mission, without losing sight of the core principles that animate its practice. Only by rigorously evaluating our work in all its aspects—by challenging ourselves to discover new modes of production, and to find new ways of talking about what we do in order to engage different stakeholders—can we hope to build a healthy, responsive, and resilient organization.

In this regard, it is useful to be reminded that murals, as Jeremy Nowak points out in his essay, are the “product of informal social contracts or agreements that emerge through the art-making process.” Even when the work is executed primarily by one or more professional artists, it still involves negotiations with neighbors, property owners, and other stakeholders; community meetings in which ideas are discussed, developed, and sometimes discarded; and the whole network of reciprocal relationships necessary to the design, completion, and ongoing preservation of a public mural. In this type of process-oriented art-making, the most successful practitioners (both individuals and organizations) are those who learn to begin with questions rather than answers, to listen rather than instruct, and to remain open, knowing that in the end, the value of the work lies not



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only in the images it portrays but in the conversations it creates, which leave “a legacy of relationships whose meanings will have unpredictable effects.”

Elizabeth Thomas begins her essay with a provocative and open-ended question: “Who makes culture?” We are bombarded daily by seductive messages and images that aim to spur us to particular types of action, whether it is to buy a product, vote for a candidate, or watch a television show. But how often do we see our own issues, struggles, and achievements reflected in our environment, our own stories projected into the public discourse? Socially engaged art practice has begun to address this issue of who gets represented—and who does the representing—in public culture. Through the prominent examples of the New York-based artist collective Group Material, Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses in Houston, and Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera’s concept of Arte Útil (useful art), Thomas spotlights a few of the many creative ways in which this challenge is being taken up—for example, by coopting a favorite medium of advertisers and giving local residents, artists, and activists billboards on which to feature their own messages. Much of the work Mural Arts has done in recent years has been aimed at creating situations in which people from different constituencies can come together around pivotal—and sometimes divisive—community issues to tell their stories, listen to others, and participate in the creation of works of public art that reflect their particular perspectives and experiences. Taken as a whole, these projects, like the examples above, paint a larger picture of how public art can “function as a visualization of democracy” by giving voice to those who are too often silenced or marginalized.

Cynthia Weiss explores the ways in which these values have been operationalized in three Mural Arts projects, *Peace Is a Haiku Song*, *Aquí y Allá*, and *Design in Motion*, extending “the educational and aesthetic process beyond the mural and into the life of the community.” In each case, this process began with a question whose answer required “an intricate dialogue between artist and community, process and product, poetic and

historical imagery, and site and story.” *Peace Is a Haiku Song* grew out of Philadelphia poet Sonia Sanchez’s love of haiku, which prompted her to ask how this poetic form might be brought into “the contemporary world of social media.” Through an interactive website and a series of community writing sessions, people of all ages, from all over the city, contributed poems, many of which ended up on posters displayed on bus shelters and subway platforms. *Aquí y Allá* arose from artist Michelle Angela Ortiz’s questions about the impact of immigration and deportation on families across generations and national borders. To ensure a transnational perspective, Ortiz and her collaborators, four street artists from Juárez, enlisted youth from West Philadelphia and Chihuahua, Mexico, to design and produce a mural that celebrates their personal stories and bridges their different experiences around the idea of “home.” *Design in Motion* enacted a creative strategy that unites history and advocacy. As part of the city’s campaign to promote awareness of recycling by making its fleet of recycling trucks into mobile works of art, artist Desireé Bender and a team of kids from public schools “recycled” patterns from printed fabrics in celebration of the city’s past as a center for textile manufacturing. As Weiss points out, each of these projects is a “story of transformation,” not just of a physical space or object, but of the participants themselves, “who gain new skills, capacities, and a sense of agency” in the process. Especially for young people, this can be a formative experience as they learn “how to create work rooted in the real world with high stakes and very public results.”

Mural Arts’ growth and maturation has prompted us periodically to redefine the scope of our civic engagement. Through large, multiyear collaborations with other agencies, organizations, and social service providers, we have sought to address urgent community needs—often around difficult and painful issues such as addiction, suicide, and combat-induced post-traumatic stress disorder—in a sustained way. Dr. Samantha L. Matlin and Dr. Arthur C. Evans, Jr., of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services



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(DBHIDS) and Dr. Jacob Kraemer Tebes of Yale School of Medicine highlight the prolific partnership between Mural Arts and DBHIDS, which since 2007 has resulted in dozens of projects in the ongoing collaboration we call the Porch Light Program. A major objective of these efforts has been to remove the stigma and stereotypes surrounding behavioral health issues—which often prevent individuals and families from seeking treatment—by enlisting people with and without such conditions to work together toward a common goal.

Experience has taught us that activities such as community mural-making create safe spaces in which people often can overcome differences and feel free, perhaps for the first time, to open up about difficult subjects. As Paulette Moore and Howard Zehr note in their essay, the “‘bounded’ nature” of art—and the art-making process—makes such openness possible by providing a place where people feel empowered to “take risks, embrace vulnerability, [and] become creators.” The act of reclaiming a creative self can be a powerful force for personal and communal healing. This has been especially apparent in our growing body of work within the criminal justice system. Moore and Zehr point to the *Healing Walls* project, in which prisoners and victims of violent crime worked side by side to create a mural, as one such process “designed to encourage dialogue between two groups that are usually widely separated by experience, feelings, and stereotypes.”

The theme of healing is echoed by Arlene Goldbard, whose brilliant synthesis of the themes presented in this volume employs the metaphor of “stem cells of the body politic” to describe art’s role in engaging us to “open our own hearts and minds to others’ stories” and to “find commonality in difference.” The experience of art calls upon us to cultivate a “mindfulness” that propels us from the everyday and into a realm of possibility. In the end, it is precisely this desire to awaken a sense of possibility—in individuals, in communities, and in our own evolving practice—that lies at the heart of everything that the Mural Arts Program has done in its first three decades, and that will continue to sustain

us into a future ripe with challenges to be met, opportunities to be embraced, and relationships to be cultivated.

NOTE

1. See Jane Golden, Robin Rice, and Monica Yant Kinney, *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Jane Golden, Robin Rice, and Natalie Pompilio, *More Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). For other Mural Arts Program publications, as well as a compendium of useful sources on the themes presented in this volume, see the Resources section at the back of the book.



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MURAL ARTS: A HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS



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GROWING UP, GROWING OUT, PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

Jane Golden

Mural Arts: A History of Relationships

The Mural Arts Program grew from a small seed, a particular moment of civic optimism, and a mayoral resolve to contain an epidemic of graffiti. The moment was 1984, in the early days of the administration of W. Wilson Goode, Philadelphia's first African American mayor. The city was struggling with poverty, violence, the long-term effects of racism, a diminishing tax base—and graffiti. But Philadelphia had also begun to harness pent-up energy for change: the palpable optimism of a mayor who had galvanized the hopes of neighborhoods and businesses alike; the simultaneously creative and destructive impulses of youth to mark public space (and to organize to do so wherever and whenever possible); and the determination of a number of strong-minded block captains (mostly women) to better the experience of living in many of Philadelphia's devastated neighborhoods.

Goode came into office with a balanced budget left him by outgoing mayor Bill Green, Jr., and with the goodwill engendered by his effectiveness as the city's Managing Director. He had many problems to solve, but he saw the graffiti that increasingly masked transit corridors and public buildings in "wicked" and "wild styles" as a particularly visible impediment to progress. In response, he created the small seed that would become the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) and placed it under the leadership of community activist Tim Spencer,

who in turn hired me to teach art to former graffiti writers in a summer program.

When I joined PAGN in 1984 I had recently returned from Los Angeles, where I worked as a muralist with Judy Baca, the legendary creator of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), learning from Kent Twitchell, Terry Schoonhoven, the muralists of the Fine Arts Squad, and others. In Los Angeles, murals often spanned long industrial and commercial corridors, but in Philadelphia the geography, politics, and culture were very different: the city was made up of dozens of mosaicized, racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods; African Americans had begun to make clear inroads into the upper levels of city government and elective politics; and Philadelphia's graffiti tradition was older and more established even than New York's and was exploding in public spaces all over the city.

Philadelphia's early graffiti writers of the late 1960s and 1970s, including Cornbread, Cool Earl, Chewy, and T-Bone, had spawned graffiti clubs and crews like HCS (Hip City Swing-ers), KCD (Klub City Decorators), High Class Lunatics, Out to Bomb, and other new masters who waged "style wars" both locally and with the growing community of writers in New York. Mayor Goode's strategy for doing battle with the writers blended punishment and incentive: those who signed a pledge not to



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deface property would be given amnesty from prosecution for past infractions. Among the writers persuaded to sign the pledge were Theodore Harris (Knife), Rocco Albano (Pez), and Anthony Jones (Tran). They were assigned to assist me and proved critical to my understanding of the challenges and opportunities of my new job and city. They introduced me to Philly's writers—to their ambitions and motivations, their internal organization and competition, their intense study of typeface and graphic design, and their fluency with contemporary art and artists.

Growing Up

I didn't convince all the writers to sign the Mayor's pledge, but I gained respect for the ability and intelligence of those who did, and I was able to offer them something that was hard to come by in those days—real employment using color and design. Once these writers had painted out their share of graffiti, they joined me in a new venture: painting murals. I had seen what murals could do in Los Angeles, so why couldn't they change Philadelphia too?

Some of the groundwork for this venture had been laid by others. The Philadelphia Museum of Art had launched a community mural program in 1971 with the creation of what eventually grew into its Department of Community Programs. Don Kaiser, Clarence Wood, and the artists they mentored painted more than one hundred walls in a variety of neighborhoods over the course of a decade, and I made a point of studying their approach and the memorable work they created, which had primed the city for an appreciation of murals.

Our own minimally equipped venture took us into neighborhoods that would have seemed desolate to all but those who lived there—with almost every block missing at least one row home, and most of the empty lots buried in weeds and trash. The only city government presence in most of these communities was the police. It was on those streets that I met block captains like Rachel Bagby, Willie Mae Bullock, Iris Brown, and Tomasita

Romero, who responded with trust, and just a little incredulity, to the attention paid to their communities by PAGN artists. Accustomed to neglect by city agencies (some recalled feeling that they and their neighborhoods were *la cola de la vaca*, the tail of the cow), their initial doubt turned to enthusiasm at the prospect of a mural—and a hand in selecting what would be represented in it. We didn't know what to expect when we were invited into homes and church basements, but we were greeted with hospitality and candor and found ourselves absorbed in people's stories of their childhoods in the rural South, adult travels to Africa, and longing for access to nature. These early relationships, in which our intentions and commitment were tested daily, became lynchpins for our PAGN values: earning trust, listening intently, and making good on promises.

As a resourceful cohort of artists and former graffiti writers, we tested our creativity by finding ways to supplement our supplies to mix—and stretch—our color, while looking for new "canvases." In those days, we had little sense of permanence about the work we were doing. We saw our modest gestures at representing community histories and heroes and reintroducing urban dwellers to mountains, forests, and waterfalls primarily as catalysts for energy and optimism. And we wanted to evangelize about how art, created with neighbors' eyes and input, could nourish a sense of what is possible.

Our small program within PAGN was part of a team approach aimed at revitalizing city services to communities that ranged from Mantua and Strawberry Mansion to North Central, South, and Southwest Philadelphia. We had the staunch support of a mayor who recognized that murals were the visible expression of his desire to turn things around in Philadelphia, both changing neighborhoods and engaging at-risk youth. I was regularly surprised and honored to see Mayor Goode pull up in his car while driving through neighborhoods and get out and talk with us about our work.



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Growing Out

In 1989, during the Goode administration's second term, we had managed to raise our first funding independent of PAGN's city allocation, and we wanted to work with master artists who could serve as role models to our painting crew. Given my own history in Los Angeles and my respect for Kent Twitchell, I reached out to him first. We had a small grant of \$2,000, and he was accustomed to getting mural commissions of well over \$40,000, so we bargained. He said he would come to Philadelphia for our modest fee if he could paint a wall-sized mural of the 76ers' legendary Julius "Dr. J." Erving in a suit.

It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but after my relentless pursuit of his agent we were granted a half-hour window in the Doctor's busy schedule. The creation of that mural—a three-story figure of the elegant Erving on a black wall with an illusionistic cast shadow—was an artistic milestone. Completed in 1990 and sited on a major thoroughfare at the northern edge of Center City, *Dr. J* signaled an important transition for our work, which grew from a local to a citywide resource, and for our organization, which went from one that relied on local talent to one that could attract artists from across the country. Twitchell's mural also introduced new processes to our practice, especially the use of "parachute cloth," a non-woven pressed polyester fabric that, when operationalized through the tutelage of muralist Meg Saligman, would revolutionize our production.

As auspicious as projects like *Dr. J* were, the early 1990s were a tough time in Philadelphia. We continued to work in distressed neighborhoods, but some of the early momentum we experienced had plateaued. We couldn't generate the kind of community change we wanted with a single mural and a few determined block captains, so I focused inward to see how we could work smarter—and I looked outward for allies within city government, and for new strategies that would align with our ambitions.

Ed Rendell took office as mayor in 1992, having campaigned on the urgent need to revitalize the city's economic engine, which had faltered in the late 1980s. When founding director

Tim Spencer died in 1996, Mayor Rendell restructured PAGN's varied activities and moved elements of it to other city agencies to reflect new priorities. We were lucky to find a home within the Department of Recreation, then headed by Commissioner Michael DiBerardinis. A creative and entrepreneurial leader and a community organizer to his core, DiBerardinis saw our potential and began to open doors for us—to government, to new funding, and to external alliances. Through his advocacy with Mayor Rendell, I was re-inspired with a personal and professional sense of possibilities. We shifted from an "anti-graffiti" effort to the "pro-art" Mural Arts Program, a public/private partnership complete with a new nonprofit corporation that prepared us for growth and new ambitions. With support from the city and an organizational structure that allowed us to work toward broader change, we now had to sort out which communities we would serve and how we would organize our work.

I had been part of Leadership Philadelphia, a training program for emerging leaders, so I reached out to its executive director, Liz Dow, who quickly became an invaluable mentor as we built our new organization. As the first chairperson of the Mural Arts Advocates, she tapped into colleagues in the Leadership program to assemble a team of strategically placed board members who could connect us with expertise and resources throughout Philadelphia. Mural Arts suddenly had new leaves and branches—new resources and new visibility—with both the opportunities and the vulnerability that growth brings with it.

Putting Down Roots

In the end, the 1990s saw us expand our reach into new spheres of interest and influence. We launched sustained fundraising efforts through the Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates. We hired our first Mural Arts Advocate employee to serve our growing youth audiences. We accelerated the number of projects we produced annually, aligning our ambition for catalytic work with our desire to attract experienced muralists.



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A wide range of initiatives launched during the Nutter administration have challenged us to rethink our definitions of community, of murals, and of art-making in general. In 2009, with the support of the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, a program of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, we partnered with artist Steve Powers, a former West Philly graffiti writer, on his epic *A Love Letter for You*. Composed of fifty murals along a struggling commercial and residential corridor in West Philadelphia, this ambitious project involved far more than an increase in the number of walls we painted. We negotiated with numerous property owners for permission to use their walls and roofs for painting or access. We created signage for businesses with a pop-up sign shop, ICY Signs, which Powers has subsequently expanded into other sites and cities. We reached out to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), which had been reconstructing rails and renovating stations along the adjacent Market–Frankford elevated train line, from which the murals can be seen. *Love Letter* is a visible and valuable milestone in the complexity, scale, and sophistication of our artistic practice. The lessons we learned in the process were vital to our ability to envision and co-create, in 2012, the project *Philly Painting* with Dutch artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn along the Germantown Avenue commercial corridor in North Philadelphia.

Working with Deputy Mayor of Transportation and Utilities Rina Cutler, we created *How Philly Moves*, our largest mural ever, as a welcoming gesture to Philadelphia's visitors. The project, which grew out of photographer Jacques-Jean Tiziou's documentary work with the city's dance community, features monumental images of professional and amateur dancers from a variety of traditions stretched across 85,000 square feet of the garages that are the façade of Philadelphia International Airport. Completed in 2011, *How Philly Moves* took nearly two years from artist selection to dedication and involved almost every department and program at Mural Arts. It required a skilled project manager to negotiate the legalities, logistics, and

finances, and an experienced muralist to oversee the adaptation of photographic images to painted figures on the complex angles and planes of the parking garages, supervise a crew of assistants, and engage almost a thousand volunteers in a series of community paint days. And, just as with the early murals in Mantua and Strawberry Mansion, our primary job—beyond the completion of a project to be proud of—was to uphold our end of the human contract we made with our partners, funders, and project participants.

One of our more light-hearted efforts of the past few years, *How to Turn Anything into Something Else*, came out of a collaboration with Miss Rockaway Armada, a nationally recognized collective of artists who disperse and regroup for large-scale projects. Invited for a long-term residency at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, thirteen of the Armada artists took time to work with thirty-one Mural Arts youths, ten to fifteen years old, to create a mural like no other in our organizational history. Its imagery, which combines elements of reality and fantasy, speaks eloquently to transformation. As the artists explained: "Together we made a world that is at once a version of the one we inhabit, the one of which we are afraid, and the one for which we hope."

As we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary, we have the opportunity to reflect on what our work tells us about ourselves, the larger field of public art, our city, and our future. Philadelphia, despite its challenges, is a city with ambitions—to be the country's greenest city; to prepare its youth for a new kind of workforce; to transform how it delivers behavioral health services; to work with ex-offenders returning to the community; to eliminate stigma around addiction, homelessness, and suicide. We now acknowledge those challenges as our own, and we see that our capacity to meet them and others, to transform public spaces and community expectations through the creation of public art, grows with each project we co-create and each relationship we launch and nourish with imagination and collaboration.



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THE BALTIMURAL

Robin Rice

Sometime in the early to mid-1980s, I designed a pair of murals that were painted by Don Kaiser, Clarence Wood, and neighborhood residents as part of the Urban Outreach program sponsored by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The two walls bracket a parking lot on the south side of the 4700 block of Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia. Don and Clarence had a unique approach: the murals were to be what community members wanted, so much so that the artists made NO suggestions. Although they intended the murals to supersede and discourage graffiti, their populist commitment extended to avoiding walls that had recently been painted with large graffiti pieces or ambitious "throw-ups."

Don and Clarence were invited to the neighborhood by a Swiss intern at Calvary United Methodist Church who'd noticed interesting murals in the neighborhood. Even at this early date, Philadelphia was beginning to be recognized as a mural town. The intern organized a series of

community meetings at which the artists explained the process and asked for ideas. I remember Don saying that people often brought in print images, particularly refreshing-looking waterfalls advertising menthol cigarettes. Such cleansing, bucolic subjects remain popular to this day. Whoever showed up at the mural meetings had a say in the final product. The decision was by nonvoting consensus; Don and Clarence would not make a mural if they knew of objections. Meetings were announced through posted flyers or word-of-mouth—not as thorough a process as the door-to-door canvassing and polling often used by the Mural Arts Program today.

The artists promised that anyone who wanted to work on the walls could. Today questions about insurance and quality limit public participation, but back in the day this was possible. Mariposa Food Co-op (then at 4726 Baltimore Avenue, now relocated a block to the west), which owned one of the walls, had a vested interest in the project, so its members attended every meeting and were the primary voices in choosing a design. Their stated agenda could hardly be faulted: "people of all races, cultures, ages and genders working and living together."

I had long loved murals, from those produced during the Renaissance to the ones that adorn modern Mexican walls. No matter what subject the neighbors chose, I resolved that I would draw the designs. I created a series of images that responded to the community's comments. Luckily, no one else presented alternatives, and in the end everyone at the meeting was pleased with the designs.

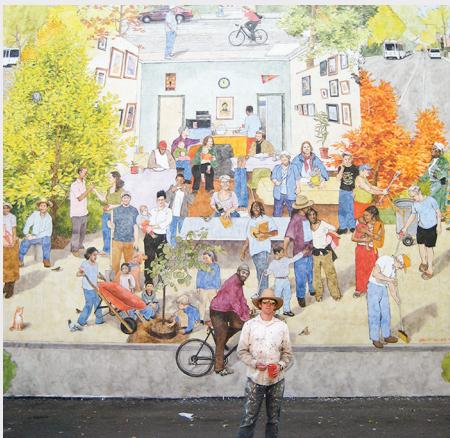
I fixed on a quintessentially West Philadelphian visual motif. Having recently moved to the city, I was enchanted by the view looking through the rows of columns enclosing the porches of the Victorian twins along the street, identical in construction but painted different colors and personalized with furniture and plantings, creating a visual "corridor" uniting homes and families. The designs I made mirrored one another across the parking lot, ensuring that one of them would always be seen by people traveling in either direction. They represented two seasons expressed on the same tunnel-like row of porches with the same residents—families and friends—sitting, working, chatting, playing, exiting or arriving. A fantasy element of people and vehicles flying above the streets allowed me to include more figures.



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Don and Clarence habitually left cans of paint from the murals they'd made with a volunteer who agreed to paint over tags that might show up on the mural. The Baltimore Avenue locals even painted a largish sign that read "The Baltimural" at the entrance to the parking lot. When residents noticed strollers admiring their mural, they came over and explained it. I believe that the freshness and friendliness of the mural contributed to an observable long-range uptick in new businesses and restaurants in the area.



The Baltimural (above, detail), c. 1983, was designed by Robin Rice and painted with Don Kaiser and Clarence Wood of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Department of Community Programs. The Heart of Baltimore Avenue (below, detail) by David Guinn (pictured) was painted on the same site, and with a similar spirit, by Mural Arts in 2008.

Fast forward some twenty-five years. I was still in West Philadelphia, but most of those who originally participated in the mural had moved away. Decades of sun had faded the paint, in spite of its being refreshed by the Mural Arts Program. The thick mustache of one main figure in the painting, fashionable in the 1980s, now looked dated, but the school uniforms worn by kids in the pictures had changed little. Because diversity was a theme, the mural still spoke to a population that remains one of the most diverse in the city.

It can be hard to admit that what was once a shining emblem has hopelessly deteriorated. The *Baltimural* diptych had served us well, but its shabbiness made it seem irrelevant and even

a bit sad in the twenty-first century. Mural Arts asked artist David Guinn to address the problem. A sensitive, highly skilled muralist who had once lived in the neighborhood, David knew I'd done the earlier designs and thoughtfully called me to ask how I'd feel about seeing them painted over with something new. I was undeniably nostalgic—though I ended up writing extensively about Philadelphia murals and muralists, *The Baltimural* is the only one I've ever designed—but I knew that David was the perfect choice for the new murals.

Completed in 2008 and titled *The Heart of Baltimore Avenue*, David's new paintings sparkle. They continue the theme—started with *The Baltimural*—of a portrait of the neighborhood, a composite of vignettes that even includes a memento of Don and Clarence's (and my) earlier walls. It's a delightful album of local highlights and characteristic scenes. Our part of the city—"West," as some now simply call it—continues to welcome immigrant communities, students, and artists, and to shelter generations of Philadelphians. I like the thought that new residents and visitors can see us on fresh new walls. Our story is worth retelling. We've changed but we're still the same.