CREATING A COMMUNITY MURAL

A powerful toolkit about mural making that can be used to transform public spaces, communities, and youth.
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Create what you can imagine.
INTRODUCTION

Murals are powerful. They can positively transform public spaces, act as catalysts for new ideas, and even play a role in shifting individual and community perceptions. Murals can turn a new page in history for a community—marking a change from a troubled past or renewing a past that has been forgotten but has the capacity to strengthen and empower the community.

This toolkit presents a step-by-step guide to engage youth and their community through the collaborative process of creating community murals. The toolkit is based on the experiences of Colors of Connection (CC)—a nonprofit organization that works with marginalized, vulnerable, and/or conflict-affected populations, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa.

When working with youth and their communities, CC has found that a collaborative and community-formulated approach to the arts is an effective means of communication and community capacity building. CC has developed a community mural making model. This model aims to address developmental and psychosocial issues (at the individual and community level) and provide a platform for visibility and voice for marginalized groups. In this CC project, youth paint murals while being guided by input from a community council of local leaders. For communities dealing with trauma, isolation, depression, and hopelessness, as well as social issues associated with poverty and conflict, these murals create a vehicle through which they can be seen and heard.

During the mural making process, community leaders and youth address issues affecting the well-being of their community and identify solutions that are then depicted in the murals thereby projecting a positive path forward for the community. At the core of CC’s approach is to create and display imagery that represents what the community desires to promote in society as opposed to what they desire to prevent from occurring. Thus, this model values the creation of positive, assets-focused, and solution-driven imagery.

In CC’s experience, the mural projects create opportunities for youth to develop expressive capabilities and build social capital while acquiring new skills. CC has found that these projects can promote wellbeing, foster a sense of place, build local strength, nurture connections, and strengthen community leadership and resilience.

CC has worked primarily with populations in Sub-Saharan Africa that are impoverished, underdeveloped, hierarchical, and conflict-affected. Because this model was developed specifically for these types of communities, adaptations may be needed when applying this model to other types of communities.

This toolkit outlines steps for selecting participants, identifying public spaces, collaborating with community members and leaders, training participants, designing the community mural painting, and executing the final product. It is designed to support any person who has the desire to engage in mural making as a method of community-generated expression. The toolkit can be used by people who have basic drawing skills or by those who have no art background at all; however, we recommend that an artist be available to support the process. The steps in the toolkit can be useful for those who want to explore a particular issue in their community, or for those who have created murals in the past but are looking for a collaborative community-led process.

Our hope is that this toolkit will help you to create murals that express the voices of the youth and their community, bonded relationships, and a positive vision for the future.
STEP 1: DISCOVER «WHY?»:
Why Do You Want to Make a Community Mural?
The first question you have to ask yourself is: “Why do I want to make a community mural?” After asking yourself this question, brainstorming, and writing down some responses you will be able to dig a little deeper and discover what kind of impact a mural could have on your community.

People are drawn to create community murals because they may want to:

- **CREATE** a new form of public knowledge about where a community wants to head into the future concerning ................................................................. (issue)

- Show everyone that **YOUTH** can have a positive impact in their community because the public (and the youth themselves) may think that the youth in their community are ................................................................. (negative adjectives)

- **TRANSFORM** the .................................................................................. because it is (name of a public space or building) .................................................. (negative adjective) and it could be .................................................................................. (positive adjective)

- Draw attention to the **ISSUE** of ................................................................. that is affecting the community. (drought, health, sexual violence)

- **CONNECT** the .................................................................................. and the .................................................................................. (names of ethnicities, religious groups, etc.) (names of ethnicities, religious groups, etc.) who live in the same community but are isolated from each other and do not get along.

- Publicize youth’s talents and abilities in the **ARTS** because .................................................................................. (names of youth artists) are talented, but they do not have a place to exhibit and share their creative abilities.
Any and all of the above could be answers to the question: “Why do I want to make a community mural?” The wonderful thing about a community mural is that it can accomplish a multitude of positive things at once. If you need to discover some of the potential ways that a mural can positively impact a community and are not sure where to begin, take a moment to consider the community’s history, current events, and any of the important (but perhaps overlooked) issues that exist in the community.

For example, at CC we began our first project by asking: “What difference would a community mural make for people in the small post-war town of Harper, Liberia?” We knew that in Harper, burnt out-shells of buildings could serve as physical reminders of a painful past. With this in mind, we wondered: “How can these buildings be transformed into something beautiful and hopeful? How can they be used to represent possibilities for a more positive future?”
The project will involve three to four different kinds of members: you, a community arts council, the youth, and project assistants (optional). Each member will have a role to play.

**STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE «WHO»:**

Who will be Involved?

**Community Arts Council**

A diverse group of community leaders who are brought together to advise on the community arts council. The community leader is an elected or non-elected member of the community. The community leaders will then further develop and interpret these themes artistically.

**Youth**

Youth are old enough to focus on one task for several hours. They can be as young as 10 years old, but we have found that youth who are 12 years old have the most to offer. They could benefit from being in a social environment.

**Artists**

Artists are just one age bracket older than your youth participants. They have been trained in the arts. Some artists may choose to be the primary creators of, and decision makers for the mural. Project assistants can also give them a real world experience in relation to these career. They can help to make the content of your projects more relevant and exciting for the youth.

**Project Assistants**

In our projects, we typically need a youth group assistant for every 10 to 15 youth. Project assistants can assist in a number of ways. They can help to make the content of your projects more relevant and exciting for the youth. They can help with background research. They can also give them a real world experience in relation to these career. They can help to make the content of your projects more relevant and exciting for the youth.

**Tips for Identifying Community Arts Council Members**

- Represent all segments of the community, including those who have been historically marginalized.
- Represent diverse groups. For example, the community leader of a marginalized neighborhood, a member of a group that offers support and protection to vulnerable groups such as children, the homeless, or young mothers.
- Are respected by the community, as in a priest or a star football player.
- Are involved in the community in some way, as in a group leader or an influential leader in the neighborhood.
- You know and trust them to have a positive influence on people around them and who would look out for the good of others in their community, such as a middle or a neighborhood leader.
- Represent the interests of the youth, as in a youth group leader.

**Tips for Identifying Youth**

Keep in mind that the focus of your project may help you to decide which youth to engage for the project. In some projects, we use some of the following inclusion or exclusion criteria in order to identify youth participants who will get the most out of our program. We seek out those who:

- Are vulnerable — who are experiencing, or have experienced, hardships in their lives.
- Are enrolled in school.
- Have a particular interest in art.
- Have some free time to learn new skills.
- Can benefit from being in a social environment.
- Are involved in the community in some way, as in a group leader or an influential leader in the neighborhood.
- Are interested in the arts.
- Are interested in community service.
- Are able to engage with the project.
- Are motivated to learn new skills.

**TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING PROJECT ASSISTANTS**

- Are interested in the arts.
- Are interested in community service.
- Are able to engage with the project.
- Are interested in learning new skills.

**STEP 3: ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY ARTS COUNCIL**

You will facilitate the process of making the mural by forming a group of youth, community arts council, and project assistant, and helping these three groups to communicate with each other. As a facilitator, it is crucial for you to observe and to communicate in a way that allows you to look at the different perspectives and to be able to facilitate the communication of the project.