

Place in Progress: Students Making Public Art at Sudbury Secondary School

Abstract:

During the late winter and early spring months of 2011, I was working with the grade 11 and 12 visual arts students at Sudbury Secondary School. My role was to present the social and historical significance and methodology of mural production to help prepare the students for their task of creating a mural for their school's new cafeteria. The historical lectures gave the students an overview of the social significance of a mural as a public art form which has several empowering functions for a community. Murals can tell cultural stories, transmit tradition and form group identity. Murals allow community members to actively address social struggles in a collaborative democratic way and present a vision of a what they want in community living.

A second task was to co-facilitate, with their teacher, the actual making of the cafeteria mural. As the students engaged in the process of mural design it became evident that the production of the mural was becoming a way for the students to engage also in the space around them: to claim space and to connect to place. Formation of "place" is a continual cultural process. Public artwork and murals in particular, play important roles in transforming "space" into "place" (Lohman vi).

During the process of creating the mural, questions arose with regard to this particular mural. These are the particular questions this essay set out to address: How does this mural contribute to the formation of place? Was there a need for this community to connect to place? If so, what was this need? Since formation of place is a cultural process, what is the cultural significance of this mural's process? How does the mural's process reflect the context in which it is being made? Does the mural's imagery in any way reflect the students' process of making the mural or reflect student's attempt to process their feelings about place? The answers to these questions can only be found by exploring the contextual background of this mural (Lippard xiii).

This essay first explores the historical context of the school, a) to determine the narrative behind the school's current landscape and b) to determine the social need which impelled the commission of the mural.

Secondly, the essay considers the high school students' process of thinking, designing and planning the mural in collaboration. The social negotiating which occurs during a collaborative public art project becomes clear through attention to its process. Spatial, social and personal creative boundaries are seen to be tested. The artists' place within the community is consciously examined. The students' ideas of place and their awareness to it is revealed.

Thirdly, the imagery of the mural can be shown as emerging from its formative processes. This essay shows connections between the subject matter of the mural's imagery and the historical, social and spatial contexts in which the mural is being made.

The essay concludes with an overview of the possible role that this mural could play as a model for further collaborative public art projects in Sudbury Secondary School.