

GOING PUBLIC: THE GUIDE TO CREATING ART IN PUBLIC SPACES

CHAPTER TWO



COLLECTION
OF KNOWLEDGE

**“I HAVE SIMPLY WISHED TO
ASSERT THE REASONED AND
INDEPENDENT FEELING OF
MY OWN INDIVIDUALITY
WITHIN A TOTAL KNOWLEDGE
OF TRADITION.”**

HENRI MATISSE

IN THIS CHAPTER

In the previous chapter, you learned that the first step in public art creation is to figure out, based on your imaginations and the uniqueness of a particular neighborhood, why you want to create the work. This chapter will help you to expand on your inspiration, and to guide your exploration of a particular neighborhood or community. This can be done in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: photography, surveys, interviews, community meetings, mapping, and/or data collection. Our primary goal in this process is to extract knowledge in order to produce the best work of art possible. Our public artwork is an expression of our vision as community artists, and also reflective of the voices of the community in which we are installing a work of public art. In order to do this, we must first do some collection of knowledge. This process should be both intentional and as thorough as possible.

Significance and distinctiveness of murals and other works of public art lie in their connection and relevance to the area of installation. Artists and their teams often spend more time researching than painting. Learn how to collect information about the physical, historical, cultural and social layers of the neighborhood. Every piece of data is valuable to the overall work as it inspires ideas and imagery that we later implement in our sketch.



Mural created by Chor Boogie, DECOY, Leon Rainbow, Asad ULTRA Walker, and Peter Krsko is titled "Seasons in the City." it is located on intersection of Barry Place and Sherman Ave NW in Washington DC and it features an outdoor community space open for artists to paint additional works of art. This art space has been active since 2009 as a part of MuralsDC program.

Photo by Mika Altskan

DO YOU KNOW?

- the history of the place where your piece will be installed?
- the people who live in the neighborhood?
- any interesting facts about events going on or places nearby?
- how do people get around? Do they walk, drive, bike or use public transportation and what are their traffic patterns?
- where people sit or hang out in groups?
- the locations of all public spaces in the neighborhood?
- everybody who is working with you on your art project?
- who else could help you and contribute to your project?
- which newspapers, blogs, radio or television stations are active in the area?

KNOWLEDGE IS WEALTH

A public art project can become a significant addition to the community and embraced as a landmark if it is well executed, and more importantly, if it contains the essence of time and space of its creation. All public art is environmentally relevant, meaning it responds to the surrounding space and it is inspired by events that happen prior or during its creation. This doesn't mean, however, that it must have literal images of people living next door



“Call Your Mom” mural during production. The young people worked with leading artists DECOY and JAZIROCK.

or buildings that everyone already sees on a daily basis.

The depth of knowledge and the content radiate from the artwork when the artists take their research seriously and learn everything they can. Start this process by meeting with members of your team. You already invited them to be on the team, now put together a meeting where everybody can meet in person, introduce themselves, and say a few words about why they would like to work with you on this project. The meeting can be held in your living room or even on a sidewalk in front of the potential art installation site.

Public art projects are complex and rarely can be done by one person. Each team should be made up of people who have expertise in various fields such as the arts, book-keeping and budgeting, painting and scaffolding, media relations, or event planning. In addition to the experts, recruit students and volunteers who may have less prior experience. They will be your big-

gest asset during the project and will quickly become the experts for the next project you work on.

Work with as many local people as possible. The purpose of public art is to enrich the community. Not only will the artwork beautify the street, but it will also further stimulate the local economy by using supplies, refreshments and services that are all purchased locally. The most important advantage comes with the skills that are learned during the process of creating this work. If you teach the local students certain skills, you are directly investing in local residents who will in turn become productive members of their community.

SURVEY AND INTERVIEW



Mike Ciccotello and a curious spectator discuss a historical photograph that was a source of inspiration for a mural that portrays the history of New Brunswick, NJ.

Interesting facts and historical references can be found in the local library, but the stories and current “flavor” of the neighborhood and the people who live there can be obtained only through personal

interviews. You can find the local residents on the street, in the local grocery store, or at community meetings. They should include a wide spectrum of residents: younger as well as older residents, long time residents, and new residents. They all have their own connection to the place, and all these stories have the potential to influence your idea for the artwork and to shape the final sketch.



Mike Ciccotello at work.

When you approach the person you would like to interview, be polite and briefly describe your project and why you want to talk to them. If they are interested in helping you out, have a couple of questions ready. The exercise at the end of this chapter will help you think of the questions. After each question, you can ask clarifying questions to make sure you receive as much detail as possible. Each interview can last a few minutes to an hour. When you are finished, make sure you thank the interviewee and save their contact information. It is important to keep them updated on the progress of the project. Invite them to the site while you create and install the artwork, as well as the unveiling ceremony.



The completed mural covered the storefronts of a soon-to-be-demolished buildings in downtown New Brunswick, NJ



The success of a work of public art often depends on the active involvement of the broader community. Under sensitive guidance and access to art supplies, everyone greatly contributes to the final artwork.

ORGANIZE AND FACILITATE A MEETING

Community meetings are a valuable tool for a public artist. It is often the place where the majority of the community learns about your project. Before the meeting, write down all important stakeholders who you are planning on inviting. Prepare

a personal invitation, and if possible, confirm with them that they are interested and available for the scheduled meeting.

The location can be a church, a recreation or community center, or a local restaurant. Any place that is embraced by the community will be a great location. The room should have enough space and chairs for everyone to be comfortable and able to pay attention to the agenda. Coordinate with the manager of the space and find out a few available times and dates that you can invite all guests.

Speak with the stakeholders that you want to have at the meeting, find out their availability, and choose a date and time that works for the majority. Make sure you keep in touch with those who cannot attend.

Prepare an invitation stating the purpose of the meeting, location, date, and time. Use this invitation in emails, letters, as well as flyers. Specify that refreshments will be served. Distribute the flyers to spaces that most residents see; such as bus stops, churches, community notice boards, community centers, light poles, and outdoor spaces that are designated for posting bills. Include your contact information for people to RSVP so you have a better idea who is attending.

Prepare visual aids for the meeting, such as large posters, examples of your previous work, and a photo of the space where your project

will be created. Make sure everybody clearly understands what the meeting is about. Keep smiling and create an atmosphere of excitement and collaboration. Set the tone for a brainstorming session and minimize conflicts at all times.

The agenda is the most important guide to the meeting. Determine what questions and points will be discussed and follow the agenda without interrupting the brainstorming sessions. If the people are productive, keep them going. If they get into arguments or disagreements, politely interrupt and move on to the next agenda. Keep notes during the meeting. Afterwards, compile the notes and send them to everyone who attended the meeting, along with a thank you note. Keep in touch with the attendees and keep inviting them to the public art site during installation, and finally, make sure they are invited to the unveiling ceremony.



All cities are multidimensional and it takes a lot of research to get to know it and understand it. Graffiti and street artists explore urban structures from the most unusual points of view. *Photo by Mika Altskan*

FINDING A WALL FOR A MURAL

By Leon Rainbow

In urban areas there are several things to take into consideration before getting permission for a wall. How rough is the area? How secluded is the wall? Are there any gangs in the area? Answer these questions and take necessary precautions. A little bit of common sense can go a long way. In some areas you may not want to paint after dark or carry around a lot of money. Painting in crews, or having someone watch your back might be a good idea.



Identifying the right location is one of the most important aspects of Leon Rainbow's art. Here, the artist is working on a large installation in Trenton Museum in New Jersey. This museum exhibit was a culmination of hundreds of murals the artist has created throughout Trenton neighborhoods. *Photo by Ricardo Barros*

Once you have taken these things into consideration, it is time to secure a wall. Drive around your city and go in and talk to the owner of the first ugly but highly visible wall you spot. When you approach the owner, be sure to be polite, and be prepared to wait and return a few times, show your pictures and explain who you are and what you do.

The first thing you need is a portfolio, or a picture album of past work. Try to keep it diverse with business commissions, personal work, T-shirt designs and canvases. In the beginning you just want to show them what you do.

An important thing is a basic contract granting you permission from the building owner to paint their property. Having something in writing will save you from future issues. Once you get permission, it is your responsibility to maintain and regulate the wall. If someone tags your wall, paint over it within 24 hrs and repaint the whole wall as soon as possible. Keep your area free of trash and do not disturb the business while you are there. Also, do not block the entrance or exit to the business. Paint it as much as you want, experiment, try different techniques, but always keep a good rapport with the building owner.

PHOTOGRAPHY TERMS TO KNOW

AMBIENT

ambient light is the available or surrounding light.

APERTURE

The size of the lens opening through which light passes.

CAMERA

A picture taking device usually consisting of a light-tight box, a film holder, a shutter to admit a measured quantity of light and a lens to focus the image.

CONTRAST

The difference in darkness or density between one tone and another.

CROP

To trim the edges of an image, often to improve the composition.

DEPTH-OF-FIELD

The small range of allowable focusing error which will still produce an acceptable sharp image.

EXPOSURE

The intensity of light multiplied by the length of time it falls on a light-sensitive material; specifically, the combination of shutter speed and aperture.

F-STOP

The common term for the aperture setting of a lens.

SINGLE-LENS REFLEX

A camera in which the image formed by the taking lens is reflected by a mirror onto a ground-glass screen for viewing. The mirror swings out of the way just before exposure; to let the image (or light) reach the film. Abbreviated SLR.

SHUTTER

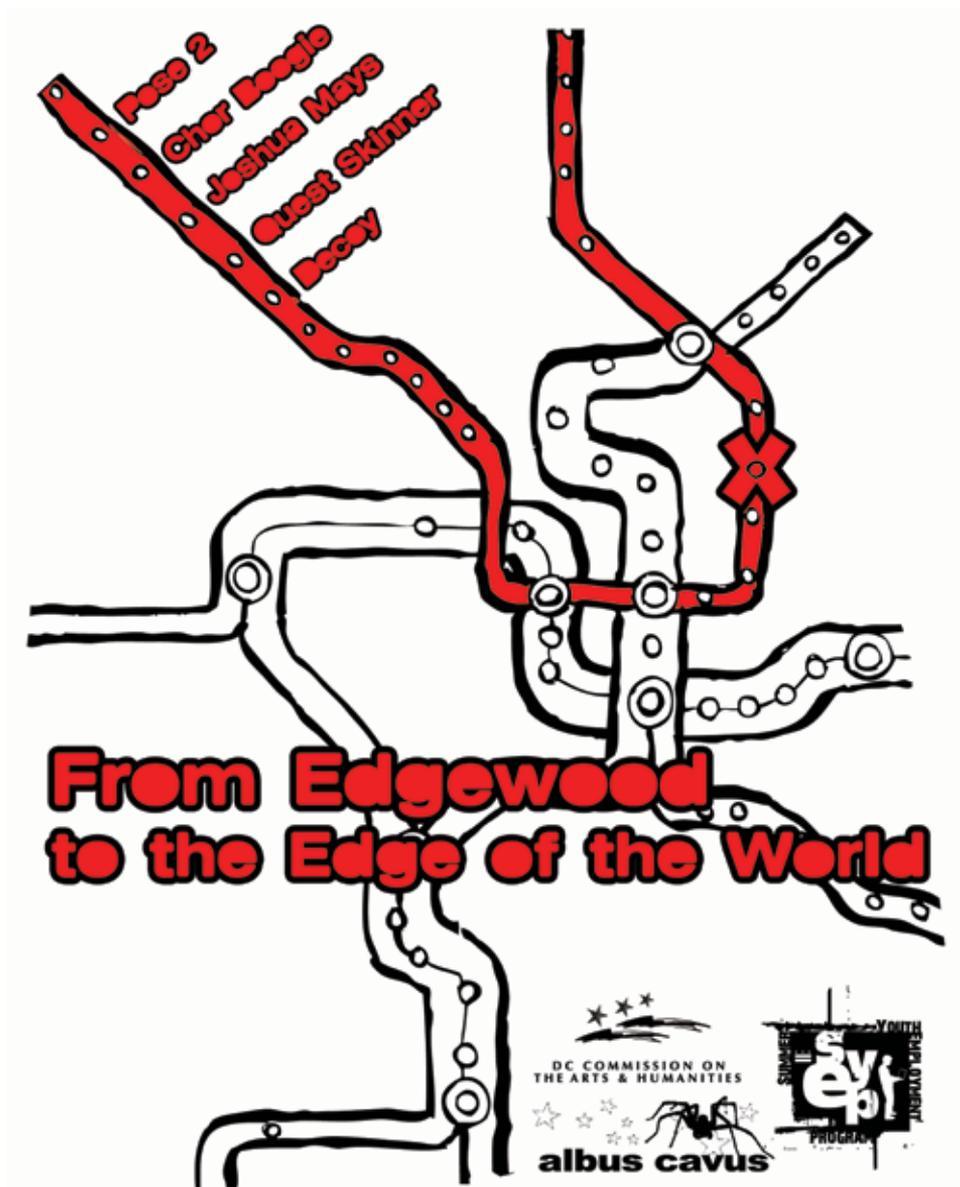
A mechanism that opens and closes to admit light into a camera for a measured length of time.

EASEL

Darkroom accessory used to hold printing paper flat and in place under the enlarger.

EQUIVALENT EXPOSURE

Alternative exposures settings (f-stops and shutter speeds) that will produce proper exposure. The concept of equivalent exposure will be discussed at length during class.



DECOY drew this rendering of DC Metro Map for Edgewood mural project. Draw a map of your neighborhood from memory and compare it to the actual map.

NOTES

USE THESE PAGES FOR RESEARCH/SKETCHING

QUESTIONS:

These questions will help to guide your own approach to knowledge collection. Choose some or all, then figure out an approach that works for you to answer these questions before creating your own public artwork(s).

1. What is the history of the neighborhood? Are there any historical, cultural or environmental landmarks or particularities?
2. Who lives in the neighborhood? What makes the people of this neighborhood or community different than any others nearby?
3. Are there any interesting facts about events or physical places in the community that should be reflected in, or can inspire, the work?
4. How do people move around the space? Are there a lot of cars whizzing by? Are there any pedestrian zones? Is there a central meeting place where people sit or congregate to play games, talk, share information, read, socialize, etc.?
5. What are the public spaces, like parks, in the neighborhood that people share?
6. Who could help you make the public artwork and/or contribute to the project somehow? For example, is there a youth center in the neighborhood that might want to engage its own participants in the project, too?
7. Which media outlets--newspapers, blogs, radio or TV stations--are active here? How could you get the attention of local media (see Chapter 9 for more information on Communications) by making your project stand out as a real innovation?
8. Survey all public art in your neighborhood. Who are the artists? What year were they created? Is there an interesting story associated with any of them?

ACTIVITIES:

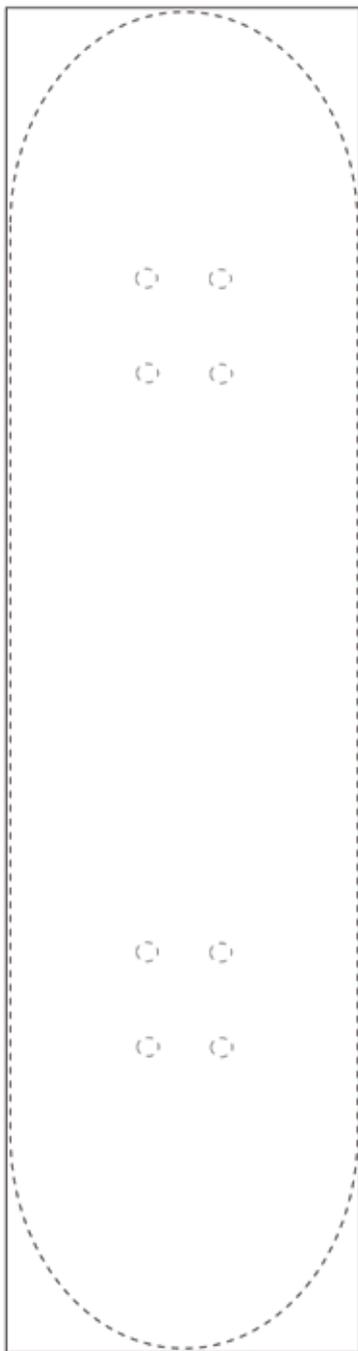
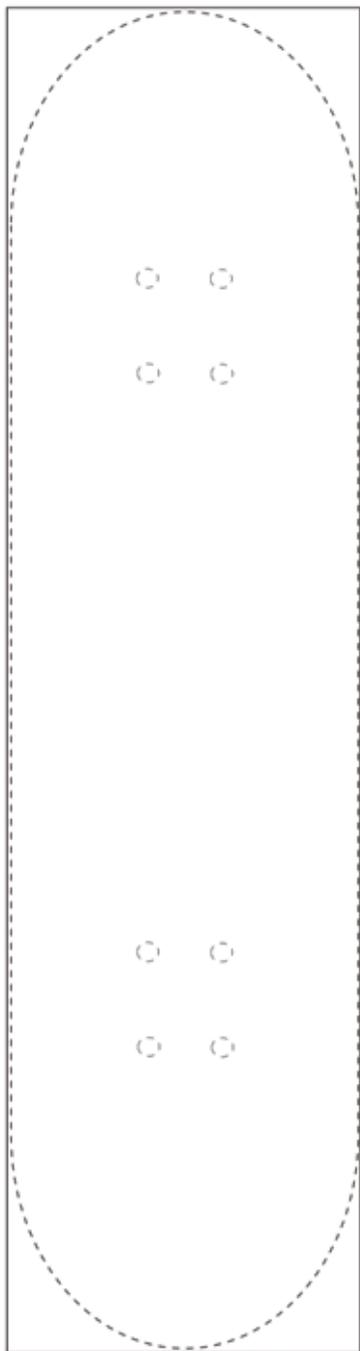
1. Name five of your favorite artists. How many of them are visual artists? How many of them are artists that create in public space?
2. Write a three-paragraph essay titled "This is why graffiti should be illegal" and an essay titled "This is why graffiti should be legal."
3. Organize a portfolio of your artwork and write your own artist statement.

NOTES

USE THESE PAGES FOR RESEARCH/SKETCHING

SKETCH FOR FUN

DESIGN YOUR OWN SKATEBOARD



NOTES

USE THESE PAGES FOR RESEARCH/SKETCHING

SUMMARY:

Although there are many different approaches to knowledge collection, the logical next step after we answer the question, “Why do I want to create a work of public art here?”, it is a fundamental part of the process and will help to build trust in the community where you’re working. Additionally, engaging in knowledge collection can help you gain an understanding of the particularities in the area, such as the number of trees on a particular street, pedestrian zones, historical landmarks and the ‘personality’ of a place, to name a few. Knowledge collection is the starting point for an exciting adventure in making community art. In this chapter, we learned some techniques for “investigating” a community or neighborhood; these can also be applied to crowdsourcing processes as outlined in Chapter 3.

