

Chapter 27

From Conflict to Constructive Engagement: Mediating Public Art

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ABSTRACT

After many years of divisive controversy over a mural on the local branch library's walls, a San Francisco neighborhood elected to mediate the dispute. Participants faced the task of getting beyond wounds of battle in order to work collaboratively to create a solution acceptable to the community. Through that process, community was redefined as a protected and welcoming space for both long-time neighbors and newcomers. The mediator, a local resident, presents a case history of the process, the impact on the community, and the significance for dynamics of engagement in other places around issues of public art.

INTRODUCTION

Engagement in community affairs sounds like a good thing to do. Democracy depends on participation at all levels of communal life by as many people as possible. An empowered population is both cause and effect of active engagement. Nowhere are the opportunities to engage greater than in projects involving public art.

On the other hand, nowhere is the likelihood of painful conflict greater than when public art is the issue. Art calls forth questions of identity, aesthetics, cultural values, and, on a material level, competition for resources. Because so much is at stake, opinions become quickly polarized. While opportunities for engagement are great, therefore, so are opportunities for disaffection. As conflicts turn nasty, people who began with optimism and good faith accrue emotional injuries and decide that community engagement is not such a good idea after all.

In a small neighborhood in San Francisco, shortly after the millennium, these themes played out on a loud and vivid stage. A branch library was being renovated; what would become of a down-home mural produced by local youths thirty years before? For some neighbors, the mural represented the spirit of

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the community, a charming amalgam of cultural styles and political ideals. For other, though, mostly homeowners newer to the neighborhood, the mural blighted the architectural excellence of an otherwise lovely public building. Over many years, controversy raged, growing steadily more acrimonious and polarized. But after several years of intensifying warfare, as time for the renovated library to reopen drew near, something unusual happened. A political leader called for a conflict resolution process to take place. With all actors located within the community, mediation succeeded in settling the question at hand but, more importantly, gave the community lessons in ways to handle future strife with respect and effectiveness. (Roy 2014)

This chapter is a first-hand case history of the events, written by the mediator with a focus on the multiple types of leadership involved. Throughout the essay, I use the first person pronoun, to avoid the grammatical awkwardness of the more common third person research paper. Even more than word-smithing, however, I advocate for the premise that lived experience can be good research. (Trujillo 2008) To participate in events while recording and analyzing them lends rich nuance to understanding social dynamics and process. Whatever is lost in objective distance is gained in details that can only be known through engagement and that uniquely allow for descriptions of a more complex sort. In the library artwork mediation, I played different roles at different times, sometimes teacher, sometimes advocate, at other times opinion setter as a member of the community. By examining in detail the ways in which leadership was consciously constructed among the participants, and how I as the mediator moved among varied leadership roles, the chapter offers both a research report and a brief training manual for constructive intervention in community-based conflict, especially as it plays out around public art.

San Francisco is known for many qualities: hills and sea, bridges and pyramids, culture and counter-culture, political activism and high-tech development, fine art and *muralissimo*. San Franciscans feel passionate about their public art. Murals adorn wall after wall in the Mission District, defining outdoor space in cultural terms. Indoors as well, San Francisco ranks high among American cities for the quantity and quality of its fine art museums.

There is one more thing for which San Francisco is well known: protest.

In 2002 many of these qualities coalesced in a neighborhood called Bernal Heights. A city-wide bond measure was passed to fund the renovation of all nine branches of the San Francisco Public Library. Local libraries are well-used institutions in the city, centers of community life for children and seniors, meeting spaces for neighborhood groups, institutions sponsoring an array of events at all times of the year.

In Bernal the library sits at the very center of the central commercial district on Cortland Avenue. A small architectural jewel, it was built in the 1940s as a result of community engagement. The neighborhood, having outgrown a storefront site, lobbied hard for a building to house its well-loved branch. The Depression-era Work Project Administration funded the project.

But by the 1980s the neighborhood had fallen on hard times. Long an amalgam of Latino, Filipino, and white working class residents, Bernal Heights' plight reflected the decline of blue-collar jobs in the city over-all. Youth gangs troubled civil life; shops along Cortland closed and home property values declined. All these problems were manifested on the library walls in a particular form of public art: graffiti. People walked past the library with eyes averted from the blight growing daily on its façade.

Bernal Heights was familiarly known as Red Hill, a nod to the progressive politics engaged by many of its residents. The neighborhood center, an active agent of community engagement, took the problem of the library's defacement in hand. They created a summer youth employment program, won funding from the city, and hired a muralist to organize a band of young people and replace graffiti with man-

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