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Abstract
This article proposes that of all the different ways that social connections are formed the most important factor is time. Given how central it is to the development of relationships, the article argues that projects aiming to improve community relations should extend their duration rather than truncate it for the sake of cost-efficiency or quick and apparent success. The project of specific focus is the making of community murals which is laden with potential but only when it is conceived in the entirety of the process rather than simply as an end product. This potential is based on the idea that more time, if used carefully and critically, can play a greater role in fostering positive relations in contexts where civic engagement is strained. Several case studies will be referenced from the United States of America and Northern Ireland, two societies that share both a tradition of mural making and social division, in terms of race relations and ethnonational/religious sectarianism respectively. Practical insights from these cases substantiate the central argument that the mural process affords moments for valuable cross-community contact, critical discussion, and meaningful reflection. When this approach is adopted, time can be best served in repairing social connections, creating new bonds and even mitigating further tension.

To get us beyond the truism that we are socially connected beings, it behoves us to consider what came before. In other words, how do we establish such connections? What allowed these relationships to emerge? Knowing the

answer to this would mean we could replicate those conditions in communities struggling with weak social bonds along political, racial, ethnic, and cultural divides. There are many possible factors at play (honest communication, empathy, respect, and mutual learning) but the common denominator is that most precious and universally finite resource: time. I argue for the simple yet, in some contexts, quite bold notion that it is occasionally preferable to take more time to complete a task, despite time-saving options being available. The task that is the subject of this article is the making of murals, as the arts can catalyse public consciousness and thoughtful dialogue on division among individuals and groups possessing diverse values and beliefs (Kirakosyan and Stephenson Jr., 2019). The basis for this argument is that the longer this task takes, the greater the opportunities for interaction between participants and the more likely it is that bonds are either strengthened or established.

Yet this idea might seem alien to any audience acclimatised to the maxim alluded to in the title: 'Time is money'. Often deployed as a corporate cliché, this phrase cannot serve all interests in a diversifying definition of 'labour'. Indeed, when it comes to certain qualitative sectors, I argue that the inverse is more fitting for emotional heavy lifting. When resisting the relentless commodification of human experiences, I replace this maxim with a different slogan: 'If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well'. In this resistance, I confront a paradox of 'time-saving', namely that to 'save' it, we must lose some of it. My call for more time is loaded with the caveat that it must be used wisely and critically. Almost like a fine meal or glass of wine, this extraction of full enjoyment tilts us away from the high-pressure, constantly streamlined 'time-saving' and toward 'time-savouring'.

The article begins by fundamentally reframing the notion of the mural, moving our thinking away from mural as a noun and toward mural as a verb. This semantic shift allows us to stop seeing a finished product and start appreciating the ongoing process. The latter dramatically lengthens the time

considered and it is through this window of opportunity, now wide open, that social connection can be made. Following this, I will turn my attention to the significance of time itself, both the benefits of extending a project's duration and the disadvantages of reducing it. I will then consider the intended audience: who ideally should be the members of society connected through projects? A discussion of outreach will delve into democratic engagement as well as direct and indirect forms of participation, whereby a pivotal early step in this process is exploring the environment within which murals are situated. This encourages participants to respond to the specific concerns and causes of celebration in their context. Part of casting a critical eye over one's environment is recognising its relationship to the wider world. As such, the use of several American and Northern Irish case studies connects the local and global in joined-up thinking. The article goes on to discuss several closely related issues around cost and worth, how this may initially be problematic when measuring impact but is ultimately redeemed through the qualitative virtues of social capital. My concluding point will be to suggest that the mission of maintaining our social connectivity is one of continued renewal and vigilance. This outlook disrupts a more basic structuring of time whereby a project has a definitive fixed end, but it more accurately reflects the nature of our vital and complex connections.

Mural as a Verb

There are several American cities renowned for their extensive mural production, one such place rooted in this creative tradition is Philadelphia. It is from the philosophy of the city's most prolific organisation, 'Mural Arts', that I gain a differentiation crucial to my thesis. The finished art is only the most visible part of a long and complicated process of collaboration (Mural Arts, 2020). It is during said process that moments for reflection and celebration are permitted as well as hope for a different future. When the medium is reframed like this, we see that beauty is not the main outcome but

a bonus. The real reward is the collective optimism of participants. For sure the presence of interesting designs adds a splash of vibrancy to the area, but the transformation runs deeper if social relations are improved. Any overemphasis on the visual outcome amounts to a limited conception of the medium and a mere snapshot of its true magnitude.

The difference becomes clearer when I contrast the actual techniques of old and new technologies. As Williams (1995) notes, people's ability to exercise their control depends heavily on whether they possess the means of cultural production. This is partially lost when certain new technologies are used to produce murals as happened to several 'Re-Imaged' pieces across Northern Ireland. Processes like heavy-duty printing and vinyl lamination for a smooth, slick photographic finish have more the feel of a factory than a community's family. Furthermore, should the facilities responsible be located elsewhere, physically distanced from the affected community, even more control is rescinded. I am not advocating a Luddite rejection of these technologies as they do have their advantages. However, an 'old school' fabrication of paint applied directly by hand to walls I believe outweighs new techniques in terms of potential connectivity. Artist and author Francisco 'Enuf' Garcia agrees, believing wall paintings to be an influential and primordial act (Public Allies, 2016). In essence, the old methods represent time-savouring; the work organically coming to life before the eyes of participants. Whereas time-saving new methods with their quick printing and quicker installation on the community's behalf by some third party severely impede on participants' ability to share, learn, and grow together.

Therefore, for the purpose of this article, I am redistributing emphasis from an isolated moment in time to a whole series of movements that led to its creation. In doing so we must try and semantically reorient ourselves, from thinking of mural as a noun toward mural as a *verb*. It can of course be challenging for some to see through this new analytical lens, especially as normative associations of 'mural' can entrench it in

corporeality. At first, the replacing verb can seem abstract with sceptics perhaps wondering where exactly is the art in the long-term process? In truth, the answer is that it lies in the people who take part, the actions they perform and the change they can come to embody (Bruguera, 2018).

To attain this embodiment, two indispensable communicative skills operate in tandem throughout the sequence of actions of a mural. The first is active listening, more than mere comprehension this is integral if one wishes to genuinely learn about others (Mural Arts, 2020). It is also a type of listening that ensures everyone is heard, in particular those muted voices which can be amplified during the project. The second is a reciprocal mode of speaking connecting those individuals or groups who normally have little to no interaction. Initial connections are not always comfortable or convenient, but the ultimate strategy is to build bridges of dialogue over chasms of misunderstanding, distrust, or ignorance. This is facilitated if such discussion is carried out in a safe space, an atmosphere of respect where everyone abides by agreed-upon rules of general conduct. By concentrating on the timeline as a whole and not simply what materialises at the end of it, I believe the power of murals can be unleashed. This power to foster new narratives of peace at a local level transfers some reliance away from more traditional, top-down approaches to peacebuilding (Arthur, 2020). As time is so central to my argument, I will now scrutinise some of the consequences of well-paced and rushed approaches.

The Importance of Time

Accepting that change cannot nor should be rushed and that communities should be encouraged to move at their own pace can be a double-edged sword. The 'Re-Imaging' programme in Northern Ireland (2012-2015) often involved lengthy discussions, negotiations, and protracted timescales. External events and the broader political climate could ratchet up tensions with a few projects stalling as a result. Yet despite difficulties, community

representatives claimed the process brought about a new sense of ownership and cohesion (Wallace, 2016, p. 6). Another feature of artistic intervention that can initially be challenging, and almost seems misguided, is refraining from resolving all issues. If a conversation is left open, contradictions and paradoxes will likely be swept up in its flow. By structuring dialogue in several meetings over weeks and even months, previously unconsidered themes can be formulated. Before anything can be built, a stable trust needs to be earned; every relationship needs a proper amount of time to lay this foundation. Should this crucial stage be hastened, the structural integrity of everything that follows may be in jeopardy.

The second conception of time that should be central to discussions (along with basic duration) is what I will call period placement. This happens when diverse groups gather to research their past, reflect upon their present, and imagine their future. This is what happened in an inclusion project in Berwyn, Illinois which aimed to celebrate Martin Luther King Day. Although work formally began in January 2020, students first met in early December 2019. Over the course of five workshops, they learnt about Dr King's life and legacy as well as the history of social justice murals (Berwyn Public Art Initiative, 2020). Here, the past and present merged and even tragically foreshadowed the future with the murder of George Floyd taking place mere months after its completion.

For a project's duration to have greater value, blank gaps in time should be filled with occasions for critical conversation, including period placement. A prime example is the actual painting of the mural, which is often the most time-consuming practical stage. Within this activity, there are several tasks, and the moments between them can be used for exchange of ideas and insights. From the morning colour mixing and rearranging assembled scaffolding, informal tea breaks and lunch, to the end of day cleaning of brushes, these tasks require concentration but not to the extent that they prevent simultaneous discussion (see Figure 1). Pounds (2020)

Figure 1: From the project *'Take the Red Road to Mars'*, a collaboration with NASA to combine art education and leadership skills for the underserved youth in East New York. Alabama Avenue, Brooklyn. Photo: CITYarts (2013)

makes the analogy of forging friendships; a connection cannot always be expected to happen in the first minutes or even first meetings, instead, it unfolds gradually over time. This logic tests out the 'contact hypothesis' where meaningful connections can reduce fear and hatred of 'the other' (Knox, 2010). The longer the project takes, the greater chance of engendering such connections, particularly since the nature of the task requires participants to work in close proximity to one another.

Aside from espousing a sensitively paced approach, it is worthwhile contemplating the consequences of the opposite as these can testify as warnings. When evaluating the 'Re-Imaging' programme, the pitfalls of short timeframes became apparent, not least because discussions had to be curtailed, limiting any deeper exploration of issues. Several artists stated that their work was strained due to expected high returns and fast turnarounds. Offers of work

needed to factor in time for ordering materials and commencing research – one artist signed a contract in mid-March 2015 and was expected to deliver the project and complete all engagement aspects by June 2015 (Wallace, 2016). A spectrum of logistics must be carefully calibrated to satisfy stakeholders' interests whilst not compromising on the progressive vision of both, the original remit and desire of the people. Learning from prior mistakes of oneself and others can of course mitigate unforeseen errors in judgement. These might range from unmanageably high numbers in group sessions to conversely poor attendance despite an awareness campaign. On top of that, little experience or understanding of public art can also mean a majority of consultation is providing information rather than stimulating profound engagement. As much of a cliché as it is, it should always be remembered that trust can be extremely difficult to gain and extremely easy to lose.

An instance from 'Re-Imaging' that brings into sharp focus the need to inform participants consistently at each stage is Aughnacloy in County Tyrone. A tight timeframe meant there was a lax opportunity for community influence at the production stage; unsurprisingly, many responded with disappointment at the finished artwork. Compounding the misfortune of the project was the decline in public support for future projects; prudence is therefore very much a virtue (Wallace, 2016). Ultimately, if community arts seek to help people look at their living environment anew, with all its assets, talents, and complex histories, then the process will be lengthy, but then again it should be. Time itself is not enough to affect meaningful progress, it also must be spent engaging the right audiences. This means both, prioritising certain sections of a population who tend to be at risk from escalating discord whilst adopting strategies that favour inclusive elasticity.

Democratising Engagement

Whilst not the only demographic encouraged to participate, there is notable interest in capturing the attention and imagination of young people. The

reasons for this preferential leaning stem from the desire to set in motion ambitious cogs that will turn for many generations, maintaining the machinery of a happier and healthier society. Priming any youth for adjustments and equipping them with valuable skills is a logical starting point. Similarly, there is great worry over a conflict's legacy on the hearts and minds of young people. A major evaluative report finding a preponderance of comments on racist/sectarian graffiti and other symbols on murals stated these had a negative impact upon affected communities in Northern Ireland (Wallace Consulting, 2016). This impact ranged from economically hurting the tourism sector, intimidation, segregating daily life e.g., social mixing areas and shopping, and reinforcing division through generations.

In optimal circumstances, young participants can make connections not only vertically – with elders from their community – but also with those across a horizontal axis, that is their peers from a different ethnic background. Since many crews in an American urban context are often multi-ethnic in make-up, the project's duration is a rare chance to learn about another's culture and history (Sieber et al., 2012). When musing on the ethics of tackling deeply sensitive topics with young people – some of whom may come from vulnerable situations – it is worthwhile listening to those well-versed in such practice. Muralist John Ewing remarked that young people are 'pretty realistic and honest, more than adults, about the obstacles they face, and want to bring [to the murals] the issues they are dealing with' (Sieber et al., 2012, p. 270).

An aspect of participation that furthers engagement is that it can be subdivided into direct and indirect forms. Direct participants are those who assist with the planning, organising, fundraising, design, and making of a project. They also frequently report a sense of accomplishment in recognising their substantive contribution to their environment (Pounds & Gude, 2020). Indirect participants are those who witness the success of the project and are caught up in a wider swell of pride that can overcome the

internalised stigma of a neighbourhood portrayed as dysfunctional. By giving democratic control to the people, they have agency (often bestowed to institutions or artists) to determine the project's direction and trajectory. Indirect participation increases the scope for community members to be imbued with a sense of ownership over the project.

It is entirely plausible that a consequence of collective participation is that heated disagreement may flare up, but this should not be regarded as a disadvantage. With a little guidance, a Tower of Babel-like confusion can be avoided and instead an orchestrated dialogue can crystallise, which can result in a heteroglossia where many voices can be heard. In this situation, the muralist acts as an orchestra conductor, unifying performances, setting the tempo, and clarifying the execution of a swelling symphony. The conductor's precise baton is matched by the muralist who tends to tackle the stage most exasperating to non-professionals (drawing a design on a wall with chalks, graphite, or china markers). As the instruments in an orchestra are balanced into a coherent sound, so too are the colours and line of an image. This relationship is mutually beneficial as additional input rescues the artist from the stifling alienation of the studio.

A procedural model for artist-to-community interaction is the 'tennis game', where leadership bounces back and forth throughout. An opening 'serve' might be for the artist to provide historical examples of murals, whether Renaissance frescoes or the modernist classics of 'Los Tres Grandes'. These trigger the imagination by showing off the media's versatility and offer inspirational references. For the uninitiated among the group, it educates the eye before the research and drawing stages. The ball is then firmly in the participants' court where their ideas materialise in sketching, clipping, collaging from magazines, and generally activating their creative resources. This adapts a world of imagery for assemblage and uses in their localised context. I will now enlarge this local context and expound on some preliminary and proactive uses of time.

Exploring the Environment: Who, Where and What

An early and valuable use of time which initiates many projects is a detailed exploration of the environment. If young people answer the *who* question, then specific external locations provide the *where*. Though it may seem mundane, this is a fundamental element in the equation, not least due to the medium's embedded position within the urban matrix. Just as active or 'deep' listening was employed in early participant semi-formal meetings, here the skill of looking comes into play. When seeking out the big picture by looking beneath surface appearance, young people can identify the issues that affect their home, the problems with which its residents grapple. Should an environment have a track record for amalgamating visual culture into the lived experience, then this imaged landscape can provide key reference cues, provoke critical thinking, and stir up inspiration. The orientation for summer youth jobs programmes at Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative in Boston begins with a half-day guided walking tour of neighbourhood murals (Sieber et al., 2012). Intimate familiarity with a place is functional when a community first gets an appetite for new artwork. The artist(s) might then be contacted to join a tour, scouting for potential sites. For all those on these visits, regardless of age, they see, with at least a partially fresh perspective, unexplored areas of their city as well as the opportunities it affords (Mosher, 2005).

One such opportunity was presented to the predominantly loyalist community of Sandy Row in Belfast when residents reviewed the politically charged and highly contested murals of their area. Once members were fully aware of how paramilitary images can harm perceptions of their area (Wallace, 2016), the group went on to debate how best to replace these painted relics. Of course, every removal from the public landscape leaves a temporary void, into which the arts can prove effective in creative place-making (see Figure 2). At this stage, the neighbourhood must collectively consider the *what* question: what should occupy this recently available

Figure 2: A notorious and huge 'Ulster Freedom Fighters' paramilitary mural is painted over as part of Northern Ireland's 'Re-Imaging' programme. Sandy Row, South Belfast. Photo from BBC News at bbc.co.uk/news

symbolic real estate? Mosher (2005) relates his experience to illustrate better enquiries; the question 'what do you want to see?' will usually bring out second-hand suggestions of the latest television craze, pop celebrity, or local sports hero. Whereas, when phrased 'what is important to you?', he found a neighbourhood is more likely to examine itself, its strengths, and motives. In doing so, the group embarks upon a "sociological excavation" (Greaney, 2002, p. 11), digging beneath rhetoric and nostalgia to articulate dreams, express frustrations, and visualise strategies for real progress.

It has been suggested that murals are an example of the controversial 'broken windows' theory in reverse (CRP Bay Area, 2020) – public safety enhanced by the feeling a location is cared for, with a drop in petty crimes like vandalism, illegal dumping, drug use, and robbery. The feeling of care need not be directed toward a location but rather address personal themes

of its inhabitants. In the opinion of the Community Rejuvenation Project Bay Area, work that depicts gun violence in a way that humanises rather than dehumanizes victims generates a resonance instead of numbing emotions (CRP Bay Area, 2020). Urban youth subculture, positive peace, and environment all coalesced in the Uphams Peace Mural. Painted in Boston in 2006, following a spate of gang-related murders, it expressed the young people's sincere hope for harmony. The opposite of peace is not always full-scale war, it can be some other discord that tears people apart, and it will register as a conflict to those touched by it. In the Uphams case, gangs were not ethnically organised but were territorially opposed (Sieber et al., 2012). The collaboration that resulted in the mural brought youths from either territory together. The specificity of location was psychologically tactical and poignant; the new image stood between Bird Street and Dudley Street, the gangs' turf – its message of unity, built on the border (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 : Youth playing hard on the '*Field of Life*', detail from side wall of Davey's Market, Dudley Street, Roxbury. Photo by Sieber, Cordeiro & Ferro (2012)

An additional rationale for embracing an expanded concept of 'environment' is that it makes another connection salient – that between the local and the global. This is not to suggest that a 'one size fits all' criteria can be transposed into any host society. Research into the display of cultural symbols stresses the varying context and the need to develop solutions tailored to a particular area (Brian and Gillespie, 2005). However, a transnational perspective seems justified in as much, as nascent artistic movements, frequently involving murals, are often born in similar periods of intense unrest. Indeed, murals as a political and popular expression in times of turbulence have been observed as a global trend. Whether during the Great Depression (Conrad, 1995), 'the Troubles' (Santino, 1999), post-colonial Ghanian Set/Setal youth movement (Diouf, 2005), or post-apartheid South Africa (Marschall, 2002), community murals seem to flourish amid transformative upheaval. A perennial problem of community engagement is 'parachute art' whereby external experts, disconnected from the local environment, suddenly appear, execute some rushed contribution, and disappear just as quickly as they arrived. To avoid this, the process of fabrication could develop appropriate imagery alongside related longer-term projects, such as architectural design, thereby fusing ideas in considerate planning (Mosher 2004, p. 536). It is now appropriate to reflect on how murals contribute to a construct that is much talked about, but little studied in a rigorous manner: social capital.

Social Capitalism: Cost vs. Worth

A common understanding of community art's value is by how much social capital it generates, which refers to that sense of connectedness. One way this can be achieved is if the bland spaces that are visually vitalised also become locations that encourage civic dialogue. The very walls which divided communities as sites of separation can induce connection (Anapur, 2017). According to the Chicago Public Art Group, thoughtfully shaped artistic

architecture can be the centres of community life – literally and spiritually (Pounds & Gude, 2020). Just as 'labour' is being interrogated, so too should the multiple forms of 'capital' be a target for our scrutiny. Perhaps once they are, we can rid ourselves of the illusion that material prosperity guarantees a sense of well-being.

A generally accepted definition of 'community arts' is art removed from the commercial world, not commodified objects within a market-driven system. Indeed, murals grant greater accessibility to art, hurdling over the cost and class-based barriers often associated with museums and galleries (CRP Bay Area, 2020). One of the core values of Urban Art Works in Seattle is belonging: a space for respect, diversity, and equity. This organisation fights against barriers to arts, education, and employment. Furthermore, they recognise that opportunity is denied not solely by class factors, but due to systematic racism (Hashagen, 2020). Serious social divides can persist throughout several media, such as print, electronic, and cyber. In contrast to these, the mural champions grassroots representation requires little investment of monetary capital and is subject to significant local control.

Yet even the best intentions can be assailed from many sides by an array of negative forces. In some cases, like Chicago's Pilsen neighbourhood (Wight, 2006), local mural movements can be redirected for marketing purposes. In more daunting circumstances, popular resistance can be co-opted for state propaganda as in the fascist, authoritarian government of Portugal under Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar (Sapega, 2002). Alternatively, images can mark out and defend the territory of sectarian groups (Santino, 1999) as they do in Northern Ireland. All these cases demonstrate the fragile dynamics of power and the vigilance required to secure the interests of the people. Should social capitalist intentions endure, then the community mural can act as one of the most democratic of media; solid enough to channel the best of human energy whilst flexible enough to adapt to inevitable growth and change. Gude (2020) believes murals are

symbols of connectedness made concrete. She invokes Martin Luther King's concept of a 'beloved community' – a society that offers pleasure and justice to all its citizens. The highest form that social capital is capable of taking is one that doubles the meaning of this essay's title: labour that produces love.

Despite the advantages of social capital, public art projects may still face an uphill struggle when convincing people of their worth which is inevitably weighed up against its costs. This expenditure will likely require more defending than other more practical physical improvements. Yet even the total figure for major programmes like Northern Ireland's 'Re-Imaging' can be relatively affordable, totalling £1,466,425, representing 73% of the overall 'Building Peace through the Arts' budget (Wallace, 2016). A more specific and tangible estimate of $10,000 per mural (approximately £7,500) comprehensively covers muralist fees, miscellaneous expenses for equipment and supplies, as well as youth stipends (Sieber et al., 2012). The latter raises the vital fact that many projects are part of summer job programmes, often with a joined-up thinking approach to violence prevention. The simple idea of young people being occupied during school holidays with something productive, benefiting the neighbourhood, resonates in Northern Ireland as the 'marching season' of summer invariably witnesses heightened civic tension and a peak in 'recreational rioting'.

For all the ways that impact could take shape, a recurrent stumbling block is how to measure it. Several acerbic questions can be frequently fired at public art: was it worth it? Should we do this again? When will we see the results? To address these concerns, we need to accept that our normative interpretation of 'worth' may be inadequate. Similarly, a purely quantitative comprehension of 'results' is not equipped with suitable metrics for a qualitative assessment. That the quality of impact evaluation is mixed is not an indictment on the evidence but rather a natural consequence of many projects' small scale. However, the University of West of Scotland's literature review

strongly suggests that research based on culture's contribution to conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery is small but growing (Baily, 2019).

That being said, even a modest organisation like Seattle's Urban Art Works can reap an impressively high yield. Last year alone sixty teenagers were mentored for 4,300 hours of arts training and employment. School-based workshops were delivered to 450 young people, and more than 60 artworks across the city were created working with 20 professional artists and engaging over 150 volunteers. Eventually, they hosted 10 community events with 1,500 people contributing to collaborative murals (Hashagen, 2020). Just as the funding available affects a project's lifespan, so too does the duration elevate the engagement figures. Consultation in 'Re-Imaging' ranged from two to twenty-eight weeks and a total of 1,674 facilitator hours were clocked. Overall, 932 sessions were held during tier one, involving 12,123 people; 7,156 of those were under 25 years old (Wallace, 2016). Statistically, drilling down into the views of participants reveals a range of positive opinions, from those who felt the artwork would make the area more welcoming (82%), improve the physical appearance (81%), or even lead to better relationships (73%) (Wallace, 2016). Figures also show that the majority (96%) was convinced of the importance for differing religions and nationalities to feel welcome and safe. Almost the same percentage (95%) believed the project had helped in this task. In terms of responsible citizen agency, 89% thought residents should have some role to play in challenging sectarianism. Since levels of satisfaction with the extent of community involvement were so high (96%), it is hardly surprising that support for further projects had a similar overwhelming majority (93%). I will conclude this article by pondering how such a holistic conception of time will likely end.

Is it Necessary to Finish?

The final principle in our consideration of time is, of course: when does it end? Once again, chronological metaphysics throws doubt on apparently

simple and rigid notions, such as ‘completion’. Much to the frustration of certain funding bodies, the truth may be more capricious even impalpable than expected or certainly desired. The first and most prosaic reason why imposing a definite end-date is a fallacy is maintenance. A faded, flaking or vandalised mural reflects poorly on a neighbourhood and raising conservation funds can be challenging. Therefore, a straightforward cost-effective method is setting up a schedule of regular maintenance. It is recommended that inspection takes place twice a year (after winter and after summer) due to weather extremes adversely affecting surface condition. I would argue that there is possible synchronicity in these moments but only if inspections are conducted accordingly. It should not be limited to a quick scanning glance but an occasion to remember the depth of the work. If the casual eye rests on the imagery for longer than a ‘once-over’, it can cherish the visual force – whether the complex dynamism of a collage or a strikingly stark, abstract minimalism. Along with appreciating the work’s formal elements, those charged with an inspection can reminiscence on its reasons for being: the person(s) commemorated, the local, historical event recorded and celebrated, or social issue that it calls to mind.

The second part of maintenance is restoring any damaged areas after they have been identified from inspection. Whether recruiting some of the young people from the original crew or bringing in new members, minor touch up painting every year ensures the social connections made through participation are not ephemeral. As previously mentioned, Northern Ireland faces a particular strain in community relations every summer due to a cycle of historical commemorations inflaming sensibilities. Mural maintenance that re-establishes a team spirit and reconnects the team with the reconciliatory themes of trust, honesty, forgiveness, and peace during this fraught period would make for perfect timing. Conversely, the materials of newer technologies do not require the same dutiful care as they can last longer without repairs.

This may seem like an advantage yet because of their robustness, we lose the regularity of contact that comes with physical maintenance.

Engagement need not be confined to inspection checks or a few summer days of repair; a whole host of activities can enliven a mural site into an ongoing and active curation. Examples such as the 'Wall of Respect' in Chicago and San Francisco's Clarion Alley, give us historical incentive, but the CRP continues to use their murals as backdrops for music videos, art walks, block parties, and community celebrations (CRP Bay Area, 2020). They have triggered panel discussions, symposia and documentaries. Though the practice of block parties is more common in the USA, a lack of precedent need not eliminate this fun and freeing option in Northern Ireland. All of these innovative strategies for maximising the creative and/or critical use of public space should hopefully persuade any sceptics of the social power of art once they can look beyond a rudimentary appreciation of the visual. From a research perspective, by not being just another one-off token gesture, this kind of repeated interactivity allows for longitudinal evidence to be gathered and, hopefully, justifying the optimism promoted in the contact hypothesis; that social contact can reduce prejudice and fear of 'the other' (Nagle, 2012, p. 83).

We must not be seduced into believing that just because a project appears to have reached an endpoint that that is indeed the case. Even with all the accoutrements falling into place (the group varnishing the mural, the neighbourhood dedication or unveiling ceremony, even the local politician getting their photo opportunity), something should linger at the back of the collective minds. If the process has been successful in raising political consciousness through group accomplishment, the burning question that lights the way forward is 'what else can we accomplish together?'. The initial rush of accomplishment should not hit a brick wall of complacency but encourage us to go further, for more profound contentment lies beyond. With a community

feeling empowered, their next project(s) can be to visualise and work for not only a more beautiful society but one that is more peaceful and just.

Conclusion

To summarise, the social connectivity of murals starts with a new reading of them that reveals their full potential; being an isolated and static 'thing', their noun status should be shed for the more dynamic and fluid action-based verb. Once this understanding has been seized, the rest can fall into place: from exercising forms of democratic engagement, critically excavating the environment, to maximising social capital, where a sense of worth adds up to more than utilitarian cost. As for the final question: 'when does it end?', the real response is not at a determined point in time nor in any ribbon-cutting ceremony exploited for its promotional credit. No, it is in the continuum, that spectrum of experience, reflection, and activity that conveys the truth that the job of socially (re)connecting ourselves is never done. Like the mural itself, our connections require careful inspection, regular maintenance with intricate details lovingly restored. This must not be a superficial engagement, operating only at the surface level but contact that delves deeper into a better understanding of ourselves and our neighbours. It is through such invigorating interactions that the purpose and presence of murals will be kept as fresh in our minds as the newly reapplied paint.

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