



ART AS

INFRASTRUCTURE

An Evaluation of Civic Art
and Public Engagement
in Four Communities in
South Los Angeles County

MAY 2018



Los Angeles
County
Arts
Commission



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The field of public art has broadened its range of practice from monuments depicting historical figures that dominated the landscape of 19th century and early 20th century cities and the placement of fine art sculptures and murals in public venues. Today's public art includes artistic practices that emphasize community involvement and may not result in permanently sited artworks. Among commissioning agencies, there has been a shift to include members of the community in the early phases of artist selection and artwork development, often with the intention to avoid "failed" artworks that are vandalized or must be removed because of controversy. In addition, public art projects, like other creative placemaking efforts, are increasingly wedded to larger community development goals, intensifying the interest in measuring outcomes. Public art is not typically formally evaluated because of a number of challenges that it poses, but the benefit of developing artworks as part of beautification and anti-blight projects is widely assumed. Using murals and artworks as a graffiti vandalism deterrence mechanism is often mentioned in graffiti abatement programs in particular. Nonetheless, little has been done to measure the effectiveness of artworks as graffiti vandalism deterrence or the outcomes related to temporary participatory artworks.

This report is an evaluation of a range of outcomes at the four sites in the Creative Graffiti Abatement Project in Los Angeles County. The Creative Graffiti Abatement project artworks are examples of artistic contributions to the physical and social aspects of civic infrastructure. In this project, the LA County Arts Commission drew on its experience realizing arts-based solutions that enhance the value of civic spaces, securing grant funding to continue and expand its practice in this area, with the support of the Office of the Second Supervisorial District of the County. The LA County Regional Parks and Open Space District, which funds the development and improvement of parks, recreational, cultural and community facilities and open spaces, approved the project in 2013. The Arts Commission proposed that public art and engagement financed by the grant would increase community pride and a sense of ownership of public assets, which would ultimately lead to the reduction of graffiti vandalism at county properties. The project team designed the project to

- ▶ Ensure that public engagement was integral and ongoing
- ▶ Create new cultural assets that would meet the needs of each site
- ▶ Test a peer-to-peer model to ensure that artists were fully supported to meet the demands of the project
- ▶ Incorporate evaluation as a component of the project design

The Project Coordination Committee selected the project sites from parks and libraries in the Second Supervisorial District based on the high frequency of graffiti vandalism at the sites and opportunities to leverage other county investments for success, such as percent for art funds from renovation or construction projects.

THE SELECTED ARTISTS AND SITES WERE

- ▶ **Cocina Abierta Collective** for Victoria Community Regional Park
- ▶ **Fausto Fernandez** for East Rancho Dominguez Park and Community Center
- ▶ **Greenmeme** for A.C. Bilbrew Library
- ▶ **Swift Lee Office** for Woodcrest Library
- ▶ **Louise Griffin** for assistance with fabrication and installation elements where needed

Because public engagement was crucial to success, an additional artist was hired early in the process to conduct initial site research, help select appropriate artists, collaborate with the four selected artists in creating public engagement plans and create demonstration programs to model future engagement opportunities at each site. **Sara Daleiden of s(o)ul** was hired in this capacity and as part of her production of engagement programs she worked with director Mark Escribano to create a documentary video that follows the process of artwork development at each site. The final video, titled “Civic Art: Four Stories from South Los Angeles,” is to be used as an engagement tool with community members, government employees and public art administrators.

The artists developed site-responsive artworks to lessen graffiti vandalism using strategies that grew out of their engagement in and with the community. Some of the strategies that they used included

- ▶ Improving the aesthetic appearance of the sites
- ▶ Activating underutilized spaces to increase activity at the site
- ▶ Creating surfaces that deter graffiti vandalism
- ▶ Building social cohesion
- ▶ Highlighting facility assets and community history

This report evaluates the success of these strategies in shifting perceptions, increasing positive activity, reducing graffiti vandalism, building a sense of community ownership and building capacity for future arts and culture activities at the sites. While this report takes a summative approach to evaluating outcomes, the evaluator was embedded in planning and public engagement activities throughout the project, combining elements of a developmental evaluation approach with strategies from ethnographic inquiry. In developmental evaluation, the evaluator provides real-time feedback to program staff members so that they can adapt programs to complex and evolving situations. Ethnographic research emphasizes data collection through fieldwork methods like participant observation in order to represent and analyze cultural patterns and perspectives. This embedded approach to documenting the process, products and outcomes of this project enabled an evaluation of the factors that contributed to and mitigated success in the development of these complex art projects in public facilities.

FINDINGS

ATTRIBUTES OF AESTHETIC EXCELLENCE

To evaluate the aesthetic dimension of the works, the evaluator used the “Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change” framework to analyze aspects of the artworks and the artistic processes that were particular contributors to the success of these projects.² Of the 11 attributes in the framework, five emerged as prominent elements in the artworks and artistic processes developed as part of this project:

- ▶ Openness
- ▶ Sensory Experience
- ▶ Communal Meaning
- ▶ Risk-taking
- ▶ Cultural Integrity

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF PLACE AND ABATING GRAFFITI VANDALISM THROUGH BEAUTIFICATION

Community members interpreted the installation of artwork at these public facilities as positive investment in their neighborhoods and as signs that the government cares about their community. General perceptions of the parks improved dramatically, particularly in the areas of cleanliness and safety. The artworks encouraged new uses of the public facilities as well as supporting the positive activities already happening there. As expected, the role of the artworks in promoting stewardship and reducing the amount of vandalism at these parks and libraries is entangled with several other factors. Insufficient data were available to evaluate graffiti vandalism at the two library sites. Also, the administrative data used to measure graffiti vandalism may indicate changes in staff behavior rather than graffiti vandalism itself. While the community's perception of cleanliness and safety improved dramatically at both parks where graffiti vandalism removal was monitored, only East Rancho Dominguez Park and Community Center experienced a reduction in requests for graffiti vandalism removals. It is impossible to be certain why there was a difference in outcomes at these two communities, but by looking at outcomes at all four sites, the evaluator was able to identify some factors that contribute to successful beautification outcomes:

- ▶ Highly visible artworks may be more effective for graffiti vandalism abatement.
- ▶ Pairing art projects and new infrastructure can increase the impact of both kinds of investment.
- ▶ A well-maintained appearance, through artworks and a lack of graffiti vandalism, and the presence of family-oriented activity can foster the perception that a place is safe and welcoming.

ENHANCING ATTACHMENT AND A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

It is almost a truism that if people are involved in making an artwork, then they will feel a sense of ownership for the artwork and they will respect it and care for it. Sometimes this involvement is seen to be in tension with the development of professional artwork, but this project demonstrated how different engagement strategies can foster attachment and a sense of ownership through the interaction between communities and professional artists. The following lessons learned about successful engagement strategies across the four sites in this project could be instructive for other public art engagement projects:

- ▶ Involving community members in design or fabrication of artworks builds a sense of ownership.
- ▶ Communication and interaction with artists during the development of an artwork also builds a sense of ownership.
- ▶ Artistic engagement that provides space for social interaction among participants can foster bonds important for social cohesion and civic engagement.
- ▶ Investigating and working with the attachments to place that already exist in a community is fruitful for engagement efforts.
- ▶ The lengthy timeline of physical construction, whether for artworks or other infrastructure investments, is a challenge for meaningful engagement activities.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR FUTURE ARTS AND CULTURE PROGRAMMING

The goal that these programs would live on in the form of continuing arts and culture programs at these parks and libraries was perhaps the most ambitious and complex part of this project. The artists worked hard to create programs related to the artworks that could be replicated by staff or

community leaders. Some staff members have expressed their willingness to do so, but by the end of the data collection period, no concrete plans had been made for the programs to be repeated. It is too early to see long-term outcomes in terms of programming at these facilities, but capacity was built for future arts and culture programming by expanding the concept of what art is and what kinds of programming are possible at these facilities. These programs were most effective as “demonstration projects” that were mostly implemented by artists, and the evidence suggests that staff members will need training and other resources if they want to continue any of the programs. This project was a learning process about the possibilities and challenges for further partnerships between the Arts Commission and the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Public Library:

- ▶ As demonstration projects, the engagement programs generated new ideas for programs and strategies to engage the public among the partner department staff members.
- ▶ Staff turnover was a clear challenge in the implementation of these projects for capacity building.
- ▶ There are differences between the two partner departments in terms of capacity for future programming given the different resources and existing structures of these departments.

TAKE AWAYS

These projects were successful in shifting perceptions of place, supporting existing positive use and encouraging new activity at the project sites. While the data are ambiguous about whether or not the projects were successful at reducing graffiti vandalism, the projects contributed to the overarching goals of improving stewardship and a sense of community ownership of public facilities. The projects also show the promising possibilities for further arts and culture programs at these neighborhood parks and libraries. The report offers detailed recommendations for public art commissioning agencies, arts organizations, artists and evaluators implementing similar projects.

These findings also highlight embedding meaningful engagement activities in public art as an important aspect of government investment in communities. Like libraries, parks and recreation centers themselves, artwork is part of civic infrastructure, understood as physical structures and spaces, as well as social processes of management and use that animate them. Programs offered in these spaces are part of the infrastructure that builds and supports relationships between community members and also between community members and government. **This evaluation demonstrates how physical and social artworks in those kinds of everyday civic spaces can contribute to community development and help to ensure that everyone has access to the benefits of arts and culture.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMISSIONING AGENCIES

- ▶ Approach the development of physical artwork as an opportunity for artistic engagement with the public and staff throughout the process, including installation and post-launch, instead of simply during the design phase as a prophylactic against community blowback.
- ▶ Create a “maintenance plan” for temporary participatory artworks that could involve maintaining contact with the community members involved, specific plans for additional programming or the distribution of documentation materials.
- ▶ Support artist engagement work with a comprehensive communication plan for each project that defines responsibilities for artists and project staff.
- ▶ Clarify documentation and data collection roles and responsibilities within artistic engagement programs.
- ▶ Facilitate the communication of expectations and goals between government agencies and artists at the beginning of a project.
- ▶ Create flexibility within contracting structures for artists who create work based on engagement to design deliverables based on their site research.

OPPORTUNITIES IN PARKS AND LIBRARIES

- ▶ Create multi-year artist-in-residence opportunities in neighborhood parks and libraries focused on public engagement.
- ▶ Partner directly with a neighborhood association, Parks After Dark advisory council or Friends of the Library group to increase civic engagement.
- ▶ Build staff capacity for arts and culture programming at neighborhood parks and libraries by providing docent training for on-site staff, pairing staff members and artists to co-produce programs or creating cohort programs of staff members to foster a learning community.
- ▶ Increase direct engagement with teenagers and young adults to foster civic engagement and develop young community leaders during fabrication or by partnering with organizations working with young adults.

EVALUATING PUBLIC ART AND ENGAGEMENT

- ▶ Carefully assess administrative or program data to balance the efficiencies that might be gained by using data that are already being collected with inconsistencies in data collected by non-research staff.
- ▶ Administer surveys orally or conduct on-the-spot interviews in the midst of artistic engagement programs or other events in order to get richer qualitative responses to artwork.
- ▶ Consult an evaluator or researcher to guide the ethical use of data and identifying information about participants.
- ▶ Invite artists to collaborate with research staff on evaluation and data collection efforts, such as embedding data collection in engagement activities or designing collection instruments or protocols. Assess artists’ capacity to conduct data collection tasks and support artists in developing consistent documentation practices.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Sheila Kuehl, Chair
Hilda L. Solis
Mark Ridley-Thomas
Janice Hahn
Kathryn Barger

COMMISSIONERS

Eric R. Eisenberg
President

Helen Hernandez
Vice President

Constance Jolcuvar
Secretary

Liane Weintraub
Executive Committee

Pamela Bright-Moon
Immediate Past President

Darnella Davidson
Eric Hanks
Bettina Korek
Alis Clausen Odenthal
Claire Peeps
Norma Provencio Pichardo
David Valdez
Hope Warschaw
Rosalind Wyman

Kristin Sakoda
Executive Director

Researched and prepared by Susannah Laramée Kidd
Research Analyst, LA County Arts Commission

Designed by Creative Core

Our thanks to Mark Stern of the Social Impact of the Arts Project at University of Pennsylvania and Pam Korza, Co-director of Animating Democracy at Americans for the Arts for their very helpful comments on a previous draft of this report.

Research for this report was completed with generous support from the Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program of the American Council of Learned Societies.