



WALL TO



Awash with vibrant colors and larger-than-life figures, this mural not only stretches the length of the Whitney Avenue pedestrian tunnel in Wilkinsburg, Pa., but also serves as a revealing object lesson on developing community-based public art.

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PUBLIC ART PROJECT MEANT TO ENRICH COMMUNITY LIFE ENDS UP AS A CULTURAL LIGHTNING ROD? A STORY ON THE COMPLEX ARTISTRY OF GRANT MAKING IN NEIGHBORHOODS. BY REID FRAZIER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE O'NEILL

ILKINSBURG BOROUGH BUILDING, THIRD FLOOR AUDITORIUM. THIS IS A TOUGH, TOUGH ROOM: ABOUT 25 PEOPLE, YOUNG AND OLD, BLACK AND WHITE, BLUE COLLAR AND PROFESSIONAL, HAVE TRICKLED IN ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT AND ARE SEATED IN A SEMI-CIRCLE. THERE IS DISCUSSION; THEN HEATED DISCUSSION, THEN FINGER POINTING AND, FINALLY, A VOLLEY OF PERSONAL INSULTS BETWEEN TWO IN THE GROUP.

Denys Candy, a veteran community consultant who is facilitating the meeting, asks both the insulters to leave. When the door is closed behind them, he tells the survivors to take a time out—literally. He directs them to sit in silence and take three deep breaths.

“Typically with an altercation like that, a meeting would have ended in disarray. My job at that point is to save the meeting,” Candy says of the late January session more than a year ago.

All the verbal drama and emergency-meeting-saving procedures beg the big question: What principle of freedom and democracy is so in peril in work-a-day Wilkinsburg that neighbors nearly come to blows? Taxation without representation? Pursuit of happiness? Religious liberty?

No—none of these. It’s about art: Capital “A” art, meaning Public Art. And in this case, it’s about a bold, color-soaked mural lining the 100-foot Whitney Avenue pedestrian tunnel underneath the East Busway, a public transit corridor that connects downtown Pittsburgh to eastern city and suburban neighborhoods. Wilkinsburg was a small piece of a much larger project involving 100 youth painting murals at some 50 neighborhood locations under the supervision of accomplished artists.

To the group of foundations—Grable, Pittsburgh, Poise and The Heinz Endowments—government agencies, the Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative and National City Bank, which awarded a total of nearly \$500,000 for the three-year project, there was never a discussion of the possibility of neighborhood-level friction. Neither was there any

worry that the public process devised to pave the way for the Whitney Avenue mural might not be broad enough to deal with differences that are present in every community—generational, class, racial and political, among them.

“There was a lot we didn’t anticipate and adjust for as grant makers because, as we all realize now, there was very little of the community anchored in the management of this grant,” says Justin Laing, a program officer in the Endowments’ Arts & Culture section. “What was needed was a sponsoring organization based in the borough that had credibility broadly across neighborhoods and was clearly defined as the manager of the project.”

By all accounts, that was the most important of several lessons that program officers have taken from the Wilkinsburg piece of the mural project. But this is not the regrettable foundation practice where, in the aftermath of bumpy grant making, lessons are duly noted, funders quickly move on to smoother roads and the community is left to find its own way.

For two years, long after the vivid murals were painted on tunnel walls, long after some residents were so put off by the murals and the process that they wrote complaint letters, the funders continued their support. The mural project moved through its remaining locations and was completed last summer. But during that same period, Laing stayed with Wilkinsburg and, with local stakeholders, began an intensive analysis of the project from management style to resident opinion to community expectations.



That led to another Endowments grant in December—\$35,000 awarded directly to Wilkinsburg Borough officials—to fund the development of a stronger, more comprehensive process for community decision making on public art. Now, after a series of public working sessions (born from the bracing shock of that resident-ejection session in January), guidance from Pittsburgh public art experts and strong support from the borough council, the new process will soon be in place.

“Instead of taking the lessons we learned from Whitney Avenue and applying them in the future for other projects, we asked ourselves if there weren’t an obligation to stay with Wilkinsburg and apply them there.” In doing that, says Laing, “we realized we were developing a reliable public art process that we hope will benefit many other municipalities that have little experience in public art selection.”

That exercise in responsive philanthropy will likely pay important dividends for Wilkinsburg, which has for several decades suffered a steady erosion of property values and population, in stark contrast to thriving neighboring municipalities. “Every dollar spent on public art has to go a long way,” says Wilkinsburg Councilwoman Tracy Evans, who as a newly elected member in 2006

cast the lone “no” vote in the council’s 8-to-1 approval of its portion of the mural project. Now, her worries about lack of an ability to review a proposed piece of art have been turned around and she is one of the borough officials on the art advisory committee helping set new guidelines.

The way most funders and participants remember it, the Wilkinsburg portion of the “Moving the Lives of Kids: Community Mural Project” (named deliberately with Martin Luther King’s initials in mind), didn’t officially get the “controversial” label until the letters started arriving. It was only a handful of complaints about the jarring nature of the artwork and the lack of notice that a mural was being planned, but several funders confirm that the letters raised alarms, since foundations are not used to receiving negative mail. They needed to respond to the neighborhood concerns, they say, but they also needed to continue supporting the other communities to make sure the grant met its goals.

The two key determiners of the mural project’s success were its creator and implementer, 30-year-old Kyle Holbrook, an impassioned local artist who also has been prolific nationally for his mural work; and Hill House Association, an experienced social service agency awarded the grant. While that arrangement worked well for coordinating the

Kyle Holbrook, owner of Pittsburgh-based KH Design, hires local artists and high school students to create public murals for the Moving the Lives of Kids: Community Mural Project. Though some scenes, like this one in the Whitney Avenue tunnel, are not his personal handiwork, Holbrook is still the man in charge.



Pittsburgh Office of Public Art Director Renee Piechocki, above, and her staff helped Wilkinsburg residents form a public art steering committee to create guidelines for bringing future projects into the borough. At this June 3 meeting, Cordell Harris, below, and other committee members reviewed a presentation about the group's work that would be shown later to Wilkinsburg council members.

business side of the project, funders say they didn't pay as much attention as they might have to the geography gap. Hill House, based in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is in the thick of the city, about eight miles west of Wilkinsburg.

"In hindsight, it wasn't fair of us to expect people in an organization based across town to know the community well enough to anticipate problems, or deal with issues quickly," says Laing. It's important, he says, since many problems can be dealt with more effectively by those more distanced from the actual doing.

For Holbrook, his reputation in Pittsburgh has always been that he is his own agent, fiercely protective of his artwork and the young people

That makes the foundation's investment in the youth-development aspects—"paying kids for the summer to create art and thinking about art as a serious career"—a better risk. "Also, we wanted to support Kyle as an instigator for public art, to get people to look at murals," says Williams. "It's a valuable thing for the city."

In Allegheny County alone, Holbrook's company has enlisted youth to produce some 150 murals. Beyond Pennsylvania, he has led public projects in Charlotte, Houston, even cities in Brazil and Haiti. But Holbrook-orchestrated murals also are commissioned by clients for their private property. One of his pieces splashes across walls of Strength Inc., a social services nonprofit

"WE DON'T HAVE THE RESOURCES TO DO PUBLIC ART VERY OFTEN, SO WHEN WE DO, WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THERE'S A PROCESS IN PLACE THAT HAS THE CONFIDENCE OF THE COMMUNITY." **Tracy Evans** Wilkinsburg borough council

he hires as apprentices. Working through the firm he started, KH Design Co., he approaches both missions with full-bore intensity. The firm is dedicated to working with young people from neighborhoods in which the projects are based. "At 10 o'clock at night, I've got teenagers out there painting—that's inspiring," says Holbrook, who was raised in a middle-class neighborhood in Wilkinsburg by parents who worked as educators in city and suburban school districts.

Despite that environment, Holbrook says he remembers from his own teenage years the luring power of street life and knows its dangers well: Several of his friends were killed as the result of gang violence. Holbrook says art was the only class he attended regularly, and he believes his passion for art saved him from becoming a crime statistic.

"His life example has allowed him to establish a special credibility with young people," says Germaine Williams, the Pittsburgh Foundation program officer who handled the MLK grant.

in Wilkinsburg's business district.

The Rev. Marcus Harvey, Strength's executive director, who also serves as board president of the MLK project, says Holbrook typically plans months ahead of the actual painting work, running community meetings, scouting sites and promoting the project to young people.

Harvey describes Wilkinsburg's community makeup as a "stew," which should complement Holbrook's mural work, and he's surprised that some ingredients have been working against it. "You throw in some tomatoes, some onions, but you might want some garlic in there," he says. Holbrook's art creates just as strong a mix of flavors, says Harvey. "This art is alive. This art is living."

One of the more ardent objectors to the Whitney Avenue mural was long-time Wilkinsburg resident Bonny Alonzo, whose condominium unit in a neatly landscaped white brick building is at the corner of Whitney and Penwood avenues, directly across from the pedestrian tunnel.

As the project got under way in the spring of 2007, public protest of the artwork was, she says, the furthest thing from her mind. Despite notice of Holbrook-led meetings and the formal borough council session in which the mural project was approved, Alonzo says she was surprised when a group of teenagers and an adult supervisor appeared one morning to unload cans, spread drop cloths and begin preparing the tunnel for painting.

As for the painting itself, she actually liked it, she says, in its beginning stage. There was an aquatic

scene with fish and mermaids. But then, the way she remembers it, the mermaids were soon eclipsed by faces; the aquatic palette became red and purple.

In its final form today, the tunnel mural is relentlessly eclectic, an agglomeration of figures and motifs. Influenced by Puerto Rican muralist Andres Ortiz-Ferrari, who worked with the students on the project, the images include a pair of stark, elongated faces with deep semi-circles beneath the eyes, a series of cubist figures, complete with a Picasso-esque guitar, and a Latin American campesina girl in a straw hat. Stylistic gestures are strong in the piece—a cubist flourish here, a Dali-esque plate of bacon and eggs over there.

In her letter, Alonzo rendered a withering review of the finished mural, writing that Wilkinsburg “is being overrun” by Holbrook’s “giant, abstract paintings,” in reference to the Strength Inc. piece and others along the busway. “It sticks out as an eyesore. . . .and the tunnel now boils down to basic graffiti, with loud colors and shapes that are an assault to the senses.”

Other letters had similarly dismal opinions of the work and its effect on the community.

Holbrook was frustrated, given the borough council’s approval and the positive response he received at several community meetings. But there was criticism, too, about his defensive response to neighborhood opinions. At the least, some residents say, he should have met with those whose homes would have front-and-center views of the artwork. In the wake of the complaints, others in the community lined up to support the artist, especially young people connected to the project and younger professional residents in the borough.

Indeed, community residents familiar with the painting and those who were invested in it by virtue of participation or location, seemed to divide along classic lines. City planners, museum curators and public art managers say this is often the result when art is employed as a permanent marker of community life—especially at the local level and especially in a locality as diverse as Wilkinsburg.

THE ARTISTRY OF PUBLIC PROCESS

When it comes to art, beauty certainly is in the eye of the beholder. But in a public art setting, the eye of the grant maker needs to be focused on how well artists and project commissioners deal with an entire community of beholders.

In keeping with The Heinz Endowments’ goal of sharing its grant-making experiences in the region, Arts & Culture Senior Program Officer Mary Navarro and Program Officer Justin Laing offer some advice to all those working at the intersection of art and the public realm. These points are derived from recent adventures in public processes that have turned artists’ ideas into valued markers of community life:

1. In most cases, the role of commissioning a public art project should go to a respected community organization that can support the artist and manage the intricacies of developing, fabricating and installing the work.

2. Commissioners and funders of permanent projects need to consider long-term maintenance issues and costs. For temporary projects, there needs to be support for the eventual removal of the artwork. For both types of projects, funding must be available to support key elements of the public process: education, documentation and community celebration.

3. Public art project proposals should evidence strong and authentic collaboration between the artist and the community. A deliberate, competitive and open process helps ensure that an artist’s skills match community needs.

4. Project participants must use all the expert resources available. Expert practitioners can offer practical advice and identify potential problems and opportunities.

5. Before submitting a proposal for funding a public art project, planners must be the devil’s advocate and draw out as many potential controversies as possible for discussion. A quality project plan will include strategies to address them should they occur.

6. Stakeholders should talk early in the planning stage with artists on public projects about how they will engage with the community in which they’re working. Artists must be able to incorporate valid public commentary, including criticism, into the work without compromising artistic vision. The goal is to communicate, educate and illuminate throughout the process.

7. The end result is worth the effort. There are few public endeavors more lasting or meaningful than producing art that reflects the individual artist’s creative vision and the values of an entire community.



In the opinion of borough officials, the Endowments' Laing and those observing attendance at public meetings, those who were giving the artwork a thumbs up tend to be younger, predominantly African American and representing a mix of professional and working class backgrounds. Those who were giving a thumbs down skew older and white (the mural location is in the middle of a predominantly white neighborhood), and many are retired.

"As funders, we had all these expectations of the artist," says Laing, "but we never asked ourselves whether there might be different responses to the artist's work based on the varying demographics in the participating communities."

In the complex circumstances of producing public art, most people look for elements of themselves and their own experiences in the finished piece. Years after the paint has dried on the mural, Alonzo says she still can't relate. "It would have been nice to see a little old white lady planting flowers instead of angry men," she says wistfully.

And while no public art process, no matter how well constructed, can deliver on the promise of unanimous satisfaction, there are planks that can be hammered in place to make art quality and resident participation more likely.

To that end, Laing worked with his Arts & Culture Program colleague, Mary Navarro, and Renee Piechocki, director of the Endowments-funded Pittsburgh Office of Public Art, to offer education and training for Wilkinsburg residents on how to create a formal public art process. In one community meeting, Piechocki and Lea Donatelli, also of the Office of Public Art, gave a PowerPoint presentation on how different cities—Alexandria, Va.; Chapel Hill, N.C.; and New York City—run their art programs. Navarro helped lead a three-year,

\$350,000 Endowments investment, in concert with the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council and city government, to create an Office of Public Art. It complements another Endowments-supported position, the city's public art manager, whose responsibilities include staffing the city's Art Commission.

The Endowments grants to the borough and the Office of Public Art have made Piechocki and Donatelli available as consultants to assist Wilkinsburg's newly formed local public art committee in developing guidelines for future projects.

As that process heads to a conclusion this year, the anger-filled January session is a distant memory. Many in the borough are looking forward to other projects but with the benefit of having taken stock of the Whitney Tunnel experience.

Holbrook is proud that he accomplished his objective of engaging youth through public art. "When you stay positive and do what you want to do, nothing can stop you," he says. Laing and Navarro are already discussing how to transfer the soon-to-be-completed Wilkinsburg art committee guidelines to other smaller communities in the region. And several of the mural-project funders are now supporting another Holbrook project on Pittsburgh's North Side by way of a strong nonprofit manager, the North Side Fair Housing Coalition.

Natisha Washington, one of the apprentice painters from the borough who worked with Holbrook, is headed to The Pennsylvania State University this fall. She says she will have more confidence in dealing with college life based on her experience of painting a pair of praying hands and a portrait of Tiger Woods on a busway mural. "People would stop to just admire it, and that felt so good," she says. *h*

As part of the Moving the Lives of Kids: Community Mural Project, teenagers and young adults use the walls of businesses and public infrastructure across the Pittsburgh region as their canvas. Here, Derrick Tajiri, 19, (above left) and D'aja Mallory, 16, (above right) help bring to life artist Danny Devine's nod to Little Italy, fresh food and open air markets, which are depicted in a mural on the side of Del's Restaurant in the city's Bloomfield neighborhood.