



Senior Project Write-Up

The Ballard Mural Project

By: Gustavo O'Connell



## **Abstract-**

Rapid urbanization is a tidal wave that is taking over many Seattle neighborhoods that we know and cherish. Identical large scale apartment buildings are tearing down culturally significant buildings and simultaneously tearing away at the identity of a neighborhood. A way to combat this unforeseen growth is urban art. On top of combatting this urban growth, urban art also has a lot to offer the business owners, residents, and visitors of an area. Urban art is beginning to be more widely accepted around the world and is seen as a way to beautify our streets while also combatting illegal graffiti. Business owners and community organizations are considering the benefits of introducing murals onto their businesses and communal areas. The purpose of this project is to work jointly with The Ballard Alliance, whose Business Improvement Plan includes a section highlighting the importance and goals of implementing urban art in the commercial core of Ballard, and create a mural on a wall within the Ballard Improvement Area. Working with a non-profit in such a unique and vibrant area of Seattle such as Ballard will provide an example to the greater community that murals are a great medium to showcase an area's identity, combat urbanization, and a way to support the arts.

## **Introduction:**

This project was created through my passions of urban beautification projects and community engagement. I felt that a mural would be a great medium to tackle both interests. Murals transform blank walls into vibrant and colorful scenes that can pay homage to an area's

history and identity. I decided to focus this project in Ballard because the community association: The Ballard Alliance, and I met and talked about the project. They let me know that this is a project they have been attempting to work at, yet did not have the time to complete it. They also let me know that they had recently formed a Public Art Committee, so I would have a lot of support going forward with this project.

Ballard has a very prominent maritime and Scandinavian history, and I thought it would be a great place to create a mural. I created a mission for myself at the beginning of the school year for my senior project that said: "As an individual, I will work with individuals who will aid me in bringing a community inspired mural to Ballard." To complete this mission, I cold pitched the idea of a mural to many businesses in the commercial core of Seattle to find a wall to house our mural. We have had many partners who have come and gone, and these trials and tribulations have been a great view into the process of starting a grassroots movement to bringing a mural to an area.

### **Context-**

Ballard is a neighborhood in Seattle that has a rich history and a strong communal vibe. Recently they have begun talks about adding vibrancy to their commercial downtown through the help of the neighborhood non-profit organization and community members. This entails new art events and art projects throughout their commercial core. Creating a mural in their commercial core, it will bring a vibrant sense of ownership over the buildings which residents, visitors, and business owners walk past every day. Art can give individuals of a community power over their space, can increase property value, and add foot traffic to a location (Sile 2016). This mural will be finding its home somewhere in the commercial core of Ballard.

Murals are broadly defined as a painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall, ceiling, or other permanent surface (Project 2018). Today, murals have become very popular around many large cities across the world as their benefits are being recognized by community members, governments agencies, artists, business owners, etc. Murals at times are done to transform blighted or overlooked areas of cities into public art galleries. Murals have been found to make these types of areas have a newfound sense of safety (Benefits 2017). In addition, through these large-scale art projects, overlooked communities are given job opportunities, and a new-found pride appears in their space (Matthews 2017). Murals have also been used as tools by business owners as advertising space or used as a strategy to keep illegal graffiti from finding itself on their property (Oyler 2018). Murals can represent a plethora of topics and themes. Some topics and themes they touch on include the representation of the history of a place, the present-day identity in an area, political issues, or can be abstract art that adds beauty or therapeutic colors to what was before a blank wall.

Knowing the background and rich history that Ballard has is very important, as one of the key elements of this project is that it represents the traditions and culture of the Ballard neighborhood. The land that today is labeled Ballard, was once a Tribal Duwamish community. Through white settlers moving West, the land was slowly taken over by white settlers and was used for timberland. In 1890 Ballard became its own U.S. city and soon after, found itself a main settling ground for Scandinavian migrants, especially from Norway and Sweden (Phillips 1999). Ballard soon became home to a large ship canal that opened in 1911 and became an economic force through its proximity to Salmon bay and the greater Shilshole Bay (Phillips 1999). At the time, fishing and timber were its primary industries, and well known for its output of wooden

roof shingles, earning it the name, “The shingle capital of the world” (Ernst 2017). While Ballard has a history of being separate from Seattle and being a settling ground for migrants, I feel as though through this Scandinavian history, creating a mural that represents this identity would be greatly treasured by the residents and the different generations of Ballard residents. The industries that supported and made Ballard what it is today, lumber and salmon, could also be something that could be represented on the mural. Another great option would be to choose to look past the history of what we know as Ballard, and acknowledging the original inhabitants of this land: the Duwamish community called the Xacho-absh, or “Lake People,” who long populated the area (Phillips 1999).

### **Methodology-**

Neighborhood Assessment- I assessed the neighborhood and to familiarize myself with the Ballard Improvement zone and cataloged potential walls that could home the mural. Within this zone, I was granted support by the non-profit: The Ballard Alliance.

Research- Continued research of the benefits of murals made my chances of finding a willing business owner to put up a mural on one of their walls much more likely. Research allowed me to familiarize myself with the practices, history, and benefits of murals. I became familiar with the world of murals so that the business owners and residents of Ballard saw me as a trustworthy individual to finish this project and do it well. Supplemental to research on murals, I conducted more research on the area of Ballard so I got the best ideas on what to depict on the mural.

Seek Public Feedback- While searching for a wall, I gained public feedback and also considered all comments and suggestions given from the Public Art Committee who acted as the community's voice throughout the project.

Find a willing property owner- I pitched my project to multiple property owners with a wall that could host the mural. I talked to the owner about the benefits of murals and tried to convince them to allow us to use their wall for the project. After a property owner was on board, we asked if they were interested in funding the project themselves, or if we had to seek a grant. If they wanted to fund it privately, skip the next step in the methodology, if they couldn't fund it, continue to the next section.

Find a grant- Since the building owner was unable to fund the projects themselves, I sought after grants through the Department of Neighborhoods. I used The Ballard Alliance as my non-profit sponsor while searching for grants.

Release a Request for Qualifications- After a wall was secured, we released a Request for Qualifications (RFQ), basically a document that was sent out to the art community of Seattle letting them know about the opportunity of creating this mural. They sent their applications to me, and then I met with the Ballard Public Art Committee to choose artist.

Choose an Artist- I worked with the Ballard Public Art Committee to sort through all the applications we received from the RFQ and democratically choose an artist we thought was the best fit for the project.

Create the Mural- Artist chosen, we just had to wait on a spread of good weather and we could begin painting.

## Literature Review-

My literature review consists of researching peer-reviewed articles and online articles that touch on how murals can help achieve the goals of the Ballard Improvement Area through economic and business development, public safety, and communal identity. The sources I have gathered come from researchers, city planners, community members, and mural artists. The research is split into those three sections found in the Ballard Improvement Area: how murals effect economic and business development, community safety, and communal identity.

I will be jointly working with a non-profit: The Ballard Alliance to create a mural in their downtown commercial core. Knowing about the Ballard Alliance's Improvement area will aid me in being a trustworthy partner so that their values and goals are met through this mural project. The Ballard Alliance came to be on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 after the City of Seattle approved the creation of the Ballard Improvement Area in the Fall of 2016 (Seattle 2018). The Ballard Improvement Area is a seven-year program funded through assessments on commercial and residential properties in the Ballard core (Seattle 2018). One of the Ballard Improvement Area's goals is the Business and Economic Development section. This portion states, "The Ballard Alliance uses a variety of programs, engagement strategies and promotions to support the local community...the Alliance works year-round on programs to enhance the vitality of the neighborhood." (Seattle 2018). Another goal in the Ballard Improvement Plan is Public Safety. The improvement plan states this goal as, "The Ballard Alliance is committed to creating a safer neighborhood for visitors and residents." (Seattle 2018).

*Murals effects on Economic and Business Development:*

In the article, *Community Murals as Economic Development Tools*, written by Amy Whitehead and Katelyn Wilkins, they touch on the how the arts can be a useful tool for economic development. They say that, “Many cities that want to begin working on a community-based arts initiative begin with a mural in their downtown area.” (Whitehead 2015). “(Murals) can be fast and cheap...the actual time needed to paint the mural is only one to two months... and murals only cost between \$25,000 and \$35,000 for the artist, scaffolding, paints, signage, and other supplies.” (Whitehead 2015). Art is a large focus for the Ballard Improvement Area, and murals act as a great way for a community to transition into a successful community-based arts initiative.

Additional research on how murals benefit businesses in Ballard will be beneficial so that a business owner will allow his wall to be used for this project. In an article that speaks about how murals can boost foot traffic near a business, author Libby Sile speaks on how murals have the power to boost foot traffic by creating an Instagram hotspot (Sile 2016). Pulling people to hangout and congregate near the art located on a business can improve business publicity (Sile 2016). Other benefits that have been found from business owners putting up murals is that it repels illegal graffiti on their property. In an article from The Midtown Gazette, a muralist, Danielle Mastrion is interviewed, and she says that, “When they (murals) go up, it really does keep away graffiti. Graffiti writers feel a sense of respect for murals that prompt them to not tag over these works” (Weissman 2014).

In a study from The UK’s University of Warwick, they found that neighborhoods that have a higher proportion of urban art such as murals, outdoor sculptures, or even local art events, have experienced the increase of the market value. (Martinique 2016). This study can



help convince the Ballard Alliance and potential businesses that murals will be very beneficial for their community. “The presence of street art may signal the improvement of the neighborhood causing a feedback loop effect when it comes to driving up demand for the area.” (Martinique 2016).

### *Murals and their effect on Safety:*

According to a professional mural artist, Mary Thiefels, “Murals absolutely transform blighted areas and create renewed interest in an area, increasing everything from tourism to crime reduction.” (Benefits 2017). Through creation of art, foot traffic increases, an area is now being watched and looked at, therefore crime is reduced. In an article from the CRP Bay Area, they call this the “Broken Windows” theory in reverse. In an NPR article, they define the “Broken Windows” theory as an influential theory on crime and policing in America. It was a field study done by psychologist Philip Zimbardo that demonstrated that anything that is neglected can quickly become a target for vandals. “The idea is that once disorder begins, it doesn’t matter where, things can begin to get out of control.” (Vedantam 2016). Creating Murals is the opposite of this. “Murals create the feeling that a location is cared for, which in turn makes crimes of opportunity...less likely.” (Benefits 2017). Murals offer a fun and different way of approaching crime reduction in their neighborhood.

### *How murals build Communal Identity:*

In Tony Matthews and Deanna Grant-Smith’s research: “Cork as canvas: exploring intersections of citizenship and collective memory in the Shandon *Big Wash Up* murals,” they

explore the effects of public murals as part of a successful process of reversing decades of stagnation. Their focus is on the city of Shandon, Ireland, and how public art can facilitate an interplay between their past, present, and future. (Matthews 2017). They found that Public art like murals can visually identify and define a community and contribute to the creation of a sense of place that distinguishes a community from neighboring streets and from comparable locations in other towns (Grant-Smith 2014). A community-based mural project in Ballard will aid the area to continue being a diverse and unique neighborhood that is unique and special to Seattle. A property owner in Houston, Alex Smith, who has had murals painted on his properties spoke from experience saying that, “With a well-conceived mural, not only is there an opportunity to elevate a property to an area landmark, but also provide a community with a focal point that speaks to what makes it unique” (Oyler 2018).

### **Findings:**

- Difficult to work with large companies whose corporate offices are out of town, miscommunication is bound to happen.
- Many hoops to jump through in order to create a mural, even when backed by a nonprofit, a funding partner, and an art committee.
- People are generally excited and welcoming to the idea of implementing murals. Most individuals just don't make the project a priority.
- Some individuals don't buy the benefits of murals. One Landlord we met with didn't believe that they actually deter graffiti even with overwhelming evidence.

- Muralists are in high demand all over Seattle, and the trend of introducing murals to all sorts of businesses is higher than ever.
- Residents of Ballard are super stoked about the idea of there being more murals in their neighborhood. From speaking and meeting with them they have said that they think it is important to support the arts while also keeping their downtown fresh and fun.

### **Reflection and Next Steps-**

This project has been strenuous and difficult, but most of all it has been very eye-opening. To be able to talk with CEP alumni about my passions and interests, and to actually work out in the field and work at a physical product has been an amazing and once in a lifetime academic excursion. Only in CEP could a project and experience such as this be found. Working with the Ballard Alliance, we started searching for a wall in November, and got very close with two companies within Ballard, but at the moment I write this, we have no wall. The project has given me an insight into working with large and small businesses, managers and landlords, and how difficult it is to actually convince individuals to follow through with the project. We were very close to landing the mural on Lagunitas Brewery, we actually got to the point of releasing the RFQ and choosing an artist when last minute they dropped out due to their corporate offices in California pulling the plug. We then took the artist we had chosen and talked to Heritage Distilling about the project. They were open to the project, yet they did not own the building. So, we got in touch with the landlord and swapped emails for about a month. The signs were promising but once again at the last minute he decided to change his mind and pull out. At the moment, we are still working with the artist chosen: Gretchen Leggitt, and have found a private funding partner: Western Towboat. We are in talks with the owners of an

apartment building in the center of downtown Ballard and they seem very interested. We are going to continue pursuing this wall and if this fails, we have a few backup routes we are interested in taking in order to complete this project. The final product will come to Ballard this summer of 2019.

This project has gotten me really intrigued by the world of public art and murals and I aim to be a part of more projects like this in the future. The amount of positive feedback I received when speaking to individuals about the idea of murals is very hopeful. I could see murals becoming a trend as a way to not only combat illegal graffiti, but as a main line of defense to gentrification and unforeseen urbanization. Thank you for taking the time to read about my project. Reach out to me if you have any thoughts or questions:  
oconnellgustavo@gmail.com.

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