El Puente is a community organization based in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn that conducts a wealth of programming in the arts, education, and social justice, among other topics. One of El Puente’s major segments is a group called “Los Muralistas”, an artist collective led by Joe Matunis that has painted murals in the community since 1990. This summer, I researched El Puente’s murals under the guidance of Professor Susan Bell. For my project, I completed semi-structured interviews with two current and one former muralist at El Puente; spoke informally with multiple youth artists; conducted twelve site visits and observations of passersby to murals in the community and El Puente itself; documented the mural sites with photos; read about the history of murals in the United States, theories of art as social engagement, and the history of South Williamsburg; and used census data from Social Explorer to better understand the neighborhood and mural locations. I used these various different methods for my research to create a comprehensive understanding of the role public arts programs, specifically community-based murals, play in individual and community empowerment. My summer project was guided by the following questions: Do El Puente’s community murals contribute to their mission of “inspiring and nurturing future leaders of peace and justice”, and if so, how? Furthermore, how does El Puente use the murals to advocate for the community in the face of a changing landscape of a historically low-income, largely Puerto Rican neighborhood, brought on by gentrification?

When Joe Matunis began to paint murals in South Williamsburg over 20 years ago, public art was not yet prominent in the neighborhood. In 1990, the census tract that El Puente is located in was over 93% Hispanic and the average income (in 1989 dollars) was $14,892. Although the area is still predominantly Hispanic, in 2010 the area was 64% Hispanic, and the median income has more than doubled. Throughout these changes, El Puente has played a role in the lives of youth and the general visual landscape through its murals. Through my interviews with the muralists, I learned that El Puente’s murals have functioned as a way for marginalized people to assert agency. What sets El Puente’s murals apart from other public works and art forms in general is their collective aspect. El Puente’s murals often involve a team of youth muralists, traditionally from the community. El Puente provides youth muralists an opportunity to have their voice heard on a public level, through the process of deciding a mural theme, the ceremony of a mural dedication and the presence of the completed mural. Participating in the creation of a mural empowers youth by teaching them tangible art skills, and work skills in general, and by giving them a sense of stake in their community. Each professional muralist I interviewed told me that they noticed positive changes in many of the youth they’ve worked with.

Through my observations of eight different murals in Brooklyn, I was able to gain a sense of how El Puente prioritizes issues that are important to the historically Puerto Rican community in Los Sures (South Williamsburg). Some murals depicted health issues like child obesity, pollution, and smoking, while others addressed histories of immigration and colonization, which are inextricably part of the Puerto Rican experience. Because El Puente’s murals were rooted in community input, they naturally addressed the community’s concerns. Their most recent mural addressed the very relevant issue of gentrification in the community. The murals provide a legitimate and public venue for the community to display its concerns to anyone who passes by. Community based murals also have the potential of providing a sense of collective ownership to those involved in their creation. The professional muralists noted that the youth muralists are often in disbelief or awe when viewing their completed mural. Youth artists are given the sense that they have made a mark – which is especially significant in a community where ownership is slowly disappearing, both symbolically and literally. The cultural shift in the neighborhood can be a source of tension, and over 90% of Occupied Housing Units are Renter Occupied according to the 2010 American community survey. Murals can provide that sense of collective ownership that might not be present in other areas of their life.

At El Puente, artists do not view simply creating a mural as their goal; the process of creating a mural is what has the potential to socially activate and empower youth artists and engage onlookers, and the mural’s continued presence in the community has the potential to create a dialogue about the relevant theme or issue. At the same time, by beautifying the community with murals for the past 25 years, the muralists at El Puente have permanently altered the visual landscape of the neighborhood.
Receiving the Craig A. McEwen fellowship allowed me to immerse myself in the Los Sures community and learn about El Puente’s murals and general mural culture. Through my interviews and observations, I gained an understanding of the influence that collective art making has on participants. I will use my summer research to conduct an independent study in the Spring, where I will further analyze the lasting influence collective art projects can have on communities.

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