

Chapter 26

Judy Baca: SPARC—The Social and Public Arts Resource Center¹

THE GREAT WALL

Los Angeles has a mural tradition which dates back to the 1930s. Spurred by the Depression, job programs developed by the Federal Works Progress Administration provided artists such as David Sequeros an opportunity to ply their skills on the walls of public buildings throughout the city. Some of these murals, now considered masterpieces, remain today. In the 1970's this legacy and a growing political awareness gave rise a new generation of muralists. The community murals movement, as it came to be called, continued into the 1980s. The results, works created by hundreds of artists, can be found in every Los Angeles neighborhood.

Tucked amid the constantly changing urban sprawl is a growing, sometimes tenuous, collection of what muralist Dick Crispo calls the "walls of change." The average life span of a mural in Los Angeles can be 20 years or more, with proper care. The city of the angels, though, is not enamored of tradition. As L.A. has reconstituted itself over the years, many murals have been lost to the wrecking ball, and others have succumbed to the adverse affects of the sun and the smog.

If you are adventurous enough to seek them out, you will find yourself gazing up at wall murals as high as five stories in unlikely locations all over the city. But the longest mural in Los Angeles, in the world actually, is found on the walls of a flood control channel that has been carved 20 feet into the floor of the San Fernando Valley. It is called the Great Wall of Tujunga Wash. The Great Wall is one-half mile long and took nine years to complete.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Judy Baca are taken from transcripts of the AOP Conference held on August 21, 22, and 23, 1986, or from interviews conducted by the author in December 1988.

Murals traditionally are designed and rendered by one artist or a group of collaborating artists. The Great Wall was more of a group project, a large group project. By its completion, hundreds of people had had a hand in the epic undertaking, which was begun as a Bicentennial project in 1976. All but a few of these stalwart collaborators were teenagers with arrest records and no previous art experience. Their efforts depict the history of Los Angeles, from its founding in 1781 to the present. Although most of the painting was accomplished by untrained hands, it doesn't look like a high school art project. That's because it isn't. The Wall is the product of an extraordinary educational and artistic process that has been developed by the founder and current artistic director of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), Judy Baca. The result is as beautiful as it is challenging.

When the officials of the Los Angeles County Flood Control District gave SPARC permission to paint a mural in the Tujunga Wash, they saw it as a beautification project. Baca saw it differently. She approached the Great Wall as she had the many other L.A. mural projects she had initiated. She designed the project "as an urban environmental artist concerned not only with the physical aesthetic considerations of a space, but the social and cultural as well."² The result was more than a mural. The Wall became an historical document that portrayed not only the familiar historical past but the forgotten and ignored as well. Baca admits to the discovery of her own historical ignorance and eventual education as a result of the project.

"When I first saw the wall, I envisioned a long narrative of another history of California, one which included ethnic peoples, women, and minorities who were so invisible in conventional textbook accounts. The discovery of California's multi-cultured peoples was a revelation to me as well as to the members of my teams. We learned each new decade of history in summer installments...Each year our visions expanded as the images traveled down the wall. While our sense of our individual families' places in history took form, we became family to one another. Working toward the achievement of a difficult common goal shifted our understanding of each other and most importantly of ourselves."³

The mural's familiar images include the faces of Thomas Edison and Luther Burbank and milestone events such as the coming of the railroad, and the Great War. But there is far more space devoted to personalities and events that, to the average viewer, are far less recognizable. In 1981, writer Kay Mills, described the then work-in-progress for readers of *Ms.* magazine.

² Judith Baca, "The Great Wall of Tujunga Wash." Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1981.

³ *Ibid.*

“The mural reminds passersby that black performers were shut out of white hotels, that Mexican-Americans were deported by the thousands in the 1930s, that California was no cornucopia for Dust Bowl refugees huddled in hobo camps, and that Japanese-Americans were carried off from their own land and homes to World War II detention centers.”⁴

“MURAL MAKERS”

Baca calls the multi-racial group of teenagers who volunteered for the project “Mural Makers.” Each summer, team members, 50 to 80 strong, would spend their vacations learning and carrying out the various jobs that contributed to the making of the mural. Most would spend their days (which began at 7 a.m. to avoid the heat) preparing the surface and transferring the complex images from the design cartoon to a grid that had been placed on the wall.

The Wall is, in fact, the left bank of a river that runs only five days a year. The majority of the year it is drenched in direct sunlight. Because of this, the surface required painstaking preparation. This process involved sandblasting, waterblasting, and the application of a sealant. While this was going on, a smaller group of artists and students were engaged in the research and design of the mural’s content. As images emerged, they were drawn onto one-foot by two-foot blueprints by Baca. Down in the “wash,” each blueprint corresponded to a numbered grid space on a prepared section of the wall. One inch on the cartoon translated to one foot on the mural itself. Then, beginning with a dotted outline, the students and a handful of supervising artists, transferred the images from the blueprint to the 13-foot wall.

For the students who spent their summer vacations working as Mural Makers, the Great Wall was an opportunity to learn and work together and contribute to their community. For Judy Baca the project was a 12-months-a-year struggle to keep afloat. It took \$150,000 to provide the paint, brushes, scaffolding, port-a-potties, and other materials for one summer’s work. Most of this came in the form of goods and services that were donated by the broad range of unlikely partners who supported the project. By the summer of 1980, Baca had put together a corps of sponsors that included the Army Corps of Engineers, the Teamsters Union, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Guard, and a whole host of community-based organizations.

Through their efforts, Baca and the Mural Makers not only produced a landmark artistic work, but they used that achievement as a catalyst for community development and community education. As a result of the Great Wall, many of the social and economic barriers that tend to

⁴ Kay Mills, “The Great Wall Of Los Angeles,” *Ms. Magazine*, Oct. 1981.

separate various urban communities were transgressed. The Army, gang members, and community organizers all found common ground in the Tujunga Wash.

MURAL TRAINING

On the final day of the Art in Other Places Conference, Judy Baca, invited the conferees into one of the organization's Venice, California, studios to view and discuss a work in progress. Baca began with a brief description of SPARC's history and then spoke in detail about the Mural Training Program and the half-completed Skid Row Project, which occupied the studio in which the conferees had gathered.

"This morning you are getting a look at the SPARC facility. This is an old jail. It was built in 1929. We liberated it from the City of Los Angeles in 1977. Previous to that it had been deserted for about five years. The area downstairs, which is the gallery, was originally the old cell block. The narcotics division of the new police department is the size of this entire building.

"One of the programs that SPARC is currently involved in is the Mural Training Program. It has come about after a lot of years of working with apprentices and people in various communities to produce public art. This is work which has been coined very often by the press as 'public art for the public good.' The majority of our work is done in consultation with the community in which it will be placed.

"The Skid Row Project is typical. The artists are a group of students who come from five different art schools and universities in the local area. The work is a mural for the Skid Row homeless. My task was to teach them about the issues they were becoming involved in through their painting and then help them to produce pieces which had some relevance to a constituency that had no art.

"What we are working on are two small panels which will be placed on the front of a single occupancy (SRO) hotel located in Skid Row. The hotel provides housing for people whose relief funding has been exhausted. The relief cycle is a significant problem for the community we are trying to affect. The \$228 per month relief payment will pay a person's rent for roughly half the month. If they want to eat, too, they might have some trouble making ends meet, so they end up back on the street.

"These panels are also being painted in the studio because painting in the street there would be really dangerous. We decided to do the work in pieces here and take them to the site to install them. Usually, I work right in the community with the people who live there. But I couldn't really make a team in Skid Row because so many of the people in that area are transient. I decided to use this project to educate people, like my students, on the issue.

“We are working with a community-based social service organization called Las Familias. We have also received some help from a group called the Corporate Volunteer Corps. They send volunteers from IBM or Security Pacific out into the community to try to help. This group came out and cleaned up the graffiti in the area to prepare the way for our bringing in the mural.”

SKID ROW ON THE MAP

“Before we began the mural, we found out everything we could about the issues and the characteristics of the area. This research is always the first step in the painting of a mural. The process is really one of asking basic questions. What’s the difference between the West Side homeless and the Skid Row homeless? What happens with the system of relief? How does the homeless cycle begin? What is the difference between a homeless woman and a homeless man? Where do the women hang out? The men? What are their lives like? What can you expect if someone has been on the street two weeks? Three weeks?

“To answer these questions we began to interview people in all the different agencies in the area. One good source, a woman named Nancy Lindy from the Legal Aid Foundation, talked to us about the relief system and how it treats people with mental illnesses. If you are mentally deficient you have to go through what Nancy calls the ‘148-step exclusionary process.’ There actually are 148 steps on 12 pages of forms, which these people, who can’t take care of themselves, have to go through to get relief. She is suing the county for this.

“Nancy had a jar on her desk which contained a formaldehyded rat from one of the SRO hotels. She gave us a lot of information about what it was like in those hotels. She said it would be ludicrous for us to paint something in the Skid Row that was a decorative piece. Even though it is within walking distance of the major art world in Los Angeles, there is no art for these people. They need immediate food, shelter and medical care. She said anything other than that would be a silly waste of time. We went back thinking maybe we shouldn’t do any art.

“After a while we began to brainstorm. This is the point in the process where we have to start setting criteria for design and content. We decided that if we were going to do this work, it would have to deal with the immediate need for food, shelter, and medical care. We also felt that it should be placed in a location that really aimed at the homeless people walking in the street.

“Our rationale for using art in this situation was as follows: Being poor means that you are stripped of amenities. The perception of the public is that providing for these essentials is all that must be done. Alice Callahan, a Presbyterian minister who is an activist and director of Las Familias Del Pueblo, has articulated a different point of view, which we subscribe to. She said, ‘People need to retain their humanity through periods of extreme hardship.’ We feel the arts are even more necessary for the poor to counter the degrading aspects of their lives.

“As we started to focus on the idea of providing useful information, we spent a lot of time looking at maps of the area. We noticed how the typical map was laid out for various constituencies. Looking at the downtown area we were amazed at how every map made Skid Row disappear. If you came into downtown Los Angeles from someplace like the near East, you would think you could have a picnic in Skid Row because on the map it looks like pastures. We knew from even our limited experience with the homeless that this was one of the ways our society deals with the issue. We literally try to make them disappear. So we made putting Skid Row back on the map one of our goals.

“We began to design a map, one that would help people find immediate shelter, food, and medical care within walking distance if possible. That really gave us an education. We had to figure out which places to include. Should we include the missions where the people can’t eat without getting a sermon? We had to check out these places to find out what they were like. The students went down there and came back with a real understanding of the minimal services that were available, and the struggle these people had to survive.

“The typical map of Los Angeles places City Hall at its center. Our design focused on the services and people of Skid Row. We also took a little liberty with the names of the places as well. The average Angeleno would not recognize them, but the people on the street will. The Catholic Workers Kitchen is called the Hippie Kitchen. Immanuel Baptist Church, where they must serve everything with gravy, is Gravy Joe’s.

“Each of these locations or landmarks was assigned to an individual student. They began by photographing their building and coming back here and working up the drawings. After that it was all tightened up, blueprints were made for the mural, and we went to work.

“The second piece, which will go up on the SRO Hotel, addresses the third goal we set for ourselves, which was to find a way to talk about the rights of the homeless. If one of these people makes a mistake in the relief process, they can get a 60-day penalty. This results in a loss of support for three months. A lot of people on the street are there because of the 60-day penalty. To help them, we wanted to do something which was empowering. Most of them have no idea what their rights are in this situation. Now these basic rights will be staring them in the face when they come to the SRO Hotel. Some of them will also see themselves because the people represented on the murals are Skid Row regulars. The homeless are depicted as phantom-like images, transparent; the streets are seen through their bodies. They are invisible and the streets run through them like veins.

“The two pieces together are called ‘The Street Speaks.’ It will have taken 10 to 14 weeks from beginning to end. Through this experience we have tried to give our students a perspective on the power and tradition of the medium. We were not interested in turning them into decorative painters or corporate advertisers. We are teaching them to do an analysis of an issue, to image content, and then produce a work which has some relevance to the location in which it is placed.”

GUADALUPE

In 1989, Baca began a project far removed from the urban intensity that had been her focus for so many years. The project, a series of four murals designed with and for the people of the small California central valley town of Guadalupe, has presented Baca with new challenges and opportunities. The town is small enough to allow her to work with an entire community for the first time. In a recent letter she described the project's progress and what she hopes it will accomplish.

"Guadalupe has a population of 5,000. It is an agricultural area on the coast with 100 miles of dunes spread north and south. It has remained relatively unchanged for a hundred years, and is remarkable in a number of ways. The town is a cross-section of the ethnic peoples so much a part of California's history. Portuguese, Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, and Mexican are the prominent groups that have labored in the fields, and their decedents are still present. I am producing a historical colonnade with four panels. The first panel is on the founders of Guadalupe; the second on the ethnic contributions; the third on agriculture and its concurrent problems for the farm workers; the fourth and last is entitled 'Hope For the Future.'

"I have set up a studio in an old Druid temple there. It is a place where farm workers, growers and other factions of the city all feel welcome. Part of my plan for the city of Guadalupe's mural is to employ many of the techniques I have applied on other projects. I have hired youth from the town. To assist on the project they have been conducting oral interviews with aged peoples in the area as well as assisting in producing the first collection of historical photographs and other materials. The City Council has, as a result of our efforts moved to form the first Historical Society of Guadalupe. The Guadalupe population has a ratio of 16 men to each woman. Much of the population is a transient population that travels back and forth between Mexico and California. Sharecropping is very much evident in the area, as well as polluted water sources, work-related injuries, and pesticide health problems. Integrating myself into this place has been an interesting task. I believe, after four months, I have finally accomplished this to the degree that makes me effective. I have a photographer on my team as well as a full-time assistant. We are documenting the farm workers at work as well as some of the more severe problems that are occurring there....The city...has become a ghetto for the nearby Santa Maria, with a history of drug busts and prostitution. Because of this we are addressing the image of Guadalupe as well. We have invited the entire town, all 5,000 people, to step into the streets of Guadalupe for a family portrait, which will be taken from above. This poster will be published as a testimony of the humanity of the place.

"Perhaps the most significant development in Guadalupe, for my work, is that once again I am addressing the issue of architecture specifically built to house the mural (a historical mural colonnade). The second development is that in order to plan the future panel we had to

do much historical research on the past. The ‘Ethnic Contributions’ panel shows the city’s downtown street filled with its past notable residents—some ghosts, some living—all together on the streets once again. I have held a number of larger community meetings, one of which was a brainstorming session, with all the factions of the community present to speak about the future of their town. This brainstorming session was highly successful in developing common ground between the factions.”⁵

Whether they are working on river walls of concrete, on skid row buildings, or historical colonnades in a small central California rural town, Judy Baca and the other artists affiliated with the Social and Public Art Resource Center have been dealing with the issues of communication, empowerment, and change. Baca and her fellow artists use many languages to reach their audiences and to make their points. The languages spoken range from Spanish and English to bureaucratic, economic, and aesthetic. SPARC uses these languages and art to translate, mediate, and inform. Through their work these artists has become a valuable public resource that transcends cultural and political barriers. A wall that becomes a mural becomes a bridge to useful knowledge, ideas, and inspiration.

⁵ Judith Baca, letter to the author, January 1989.