

# Being Here:

## GENERATING SPACE IN CROWN HEIGHTS BROOKLYN

By **Laura Wing**

### **DESCRIPTION**

THIS PROJECT DEALS WITH THE GENERATIVE QUALITY OF MURALS IN THEIR CONSTRUCTION, CONCEPTION, AND LIFESPAN. PRIMARILY IN CROWN HEIGHTS, THE MEDIA MAP COLLECTS A STORY OF NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH PAINTED IMAGES IN THE SHARED SPACE OF THE STREET. I invite you to explore this proposition through the following three arguments:

1. Murals and 'the production of space'
2. Murals as sites of negotiation
3. Murals as subaltern histories

(Note: To view the map and the accompanying media, visit <http://urt.xyzlab.org/research/project/citing-gestures-murals-and-place-making-in-brooklyn>)

### MURALS AND 'THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE'

The third restoration of Brooklyn the Beautiful took place in the Summer of 2013 just outside the entrance to the Q train at

Prospect Park. Over the course of nearly 6 months the artist Kwenci Jones and volunteers from the Crown Heights Youth Collective labored on mounted scaffolding, transforming the weathered walls out in the hot sun. I became increasingly aware of the cascading effects on my perception of the space and of the adjacent streets.

On Jones' website, Muralopolis, the expressed mission of the project is to "Make art that makes a difference." I am particularly interested in the part of that statement which suggests the generative capacity of the artifact: making art that makes. Muralopolis is an intentional act of sensory re-making:

"Murals are grandiose expressions of epic simplicity designed to stimulate the sense of sight into a visual dialogue with the cerebral. Murals may encapsulate time by recording history or project the future by conceptualizing idea. These painted images are effectual and can significantly



*All three images are taken by Laura Wing.*

influence human behavior. Murals are important in that they bring the art process into the public sphere. Large public mural projects typically take several months to complete, giving the local community a unique opportunity to appreciate, witness, and possibly participate in the project from start to finish. Murals can have a dramatic impact consciously or subconsciously on the sensory perception of the viewer. When they are added to areas where people live, play and work. It can be argued that the presence of large, public murals can be beneficial for everyone.” [1]

This map aims to explore murals as acts of place-making and as “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’” [2]. As the systemic problems of neighborhood violence and division cannot be “solved”

through singular adjustments to public policy, the act of mural painting proposes an intriguing contribution and demonstration of action. No longer are the participants (and, I would argue, all community members who bare witness to the act) victim to an alienating environment, the action becomes a relational tactic to create an alternative space in which the community members become subjects and establish a sense of ownership.[3]

Henry Lefebvre defines public space as a social construct; it is produced through the interplay of social relationships that by definition manifest themselves in space. Space is therefore both the condition and the product of social interaction. [4] Accordingly, murals generate public space in that they are the site of social interactions that provide the conditions

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to construct relationships.

Building on Lefebvre's theory of public space as a condition and a product, community organizations such as the Crown Heights Youth Collective, the Crow Hill Community Association, Project CURE, and the Crown Heights Mediation Center work to construct relationships around the act of mural painting (among myriad other activities) in order to, as Richard Green says in his oral history interview, 'get people to talk to each other' and to recognize the value and history of their neighborhood. The organizations and the murals themselves work to empower participants and people who witness the process of the murals in the space of the neighborhood and to utilize the public art form to act as a function of communication.

#### **MURALS AS SITES OF NEGOTIATION**

For political theorist Hannah Arendt, the public realm is a space of appearances, a human artifact, and a product of human hands and minds. As such, "only when things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear." [1] This suggests that the public realm must be transcendental

and constructed through equals who are different. This provides a useful framework when considering the murals in Crown Heights and their ability to produce a space for public discourse wherein 'those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity.'

To illustrate the way that murals can serve as a fulcrum or junction dependent on what Margaret Crawford refers to as the 'right to difference'[2] we will look at an incident that happened shortly after the Crown Heights Riots.

In 1992 a mural titled "Unity Wall", depicting scenes from Noah's Ark, interracial cooperation, and black and Jewish cultural symbols, was painted on the exterior of a building at President and Utica streets. The mural was intended as a gesture of understanding and peace. It was conceived after racial disturbances occurred throughout the Brooklyn neighborhood after a car driven by a Hasidic man struck and killed a 7-year-old black child, Gavin Cato, near the intersection where the mural was later painted. There had been an undercurrent of tension in the neighborhood and community leaders said that the defacement of the wall demonstrated the need for further communication to heal deep divisions.



David Lazerson, a Hasidic Jew who heads the youth group Project CURE (communications, understanding, respect and education), called the defacement a learning experience. “I think the problem was we jumped ahead to step three or four in doing the mural. For that part of Crown Heights it was premature because we haven’t built up that basis of trust and communication. I’ve been out there every day and night with the youth on the corner. They said we want to do constructive things together but we need to meet face to face.” “We’re going back to scratch,” said Richard Green, the head of the Crown Heights Youth Collective and a key organizer in the effort to unite blacks and Jews. “We’re putting up a landscape that is neutral; apolitical, asocial, a-everything. I also talked to people about the rhetoric that has been flying.”

... “Whoever did it, it was very stupid and mean,” said Shimeon Kaplan, a 16-year-old

student working on the wall. “But we’re not going to let crazy people destroy us. Jews and blacks will always live together. We’ve had the same trouble, we’ve been kicked out of the same places.”[3]

As this incident demonstrates, the mural does not attempt to absolve difference; it functions to preserve the public space as a negotiation of difference in its imperfection. The difference provides a platform to support ways to maintain difference. Neither the Hasidic community nor the black community is required to chance their identity, even in the presence of violence, conflict, or defacement. Each community must work to invent ways to find common ground, and in the instance of painting the mural, this can be to celebrate heterogeneity and the right to autonomy.

**MURALS AS SUBALTERN HISTORIES**  
There is no political power without control



of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. [1] This project proposes a way of interpreting murals in the neighborhood of Crown Heights as a demonstration of accessing the public archive through interpreting events publicly on the wall, thereby proposing additions to what constitutes the public memory of the neighborhood.

After the Crown Heights Riots in 1991, the public identity of the neighborhood was enveloped in violence and racial tensions. Many of the murals catalogued in this map were created after the riots and work to celebrate the success of the neighborhood in establishing working relations and highlight myriad aspects of the place that had been overshadowed by violence, as discussed by Dellon Wilson

in his oral history. The murals function to expand the neighborhood's identity of itself and act as a kind of monument to remind people in the neighborhood of the capability to demonstrate and declare a history of agency and pride. This collection of mural images attempts to display a constellation of physical artifacts that function to expand the history of the Neighborhood of Crown Heights.

There are many murals throughout the neighborhood depicting Jackie Robinson and Ebbets Field. As Richard Green states in his oral history interview, Ebbets Field is where "Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues. Ebbets field is very sacred grounds to America, Dr. King had a lot to do with change in America, but Jackie Robinson was the first catalyst for change, baseball was America's pastime. The entire nation had to realize that they needed to integrate this major group of people."

Ebbetts Field is now a major housing complex where Green works with many youth who participate in the Crown Heights Youth Collective.

Another depiction of community history was painted by a group of young women involved with Groundswell Mural Project. As part of Groundswell's Voices Her'd Visionaries program, a group of young women created "A New Day" through a series of discussions, writing, and art activities.

Inspired by feminist history and leaders, the young women identified a mural theme of "Strong Women Build Safe Communities."

This theme is illustrated through ten figures, each of which represents an individual member of the mural team. Each wears a gown that depicts one of ten tenets of strong women building safe communities. The tenets are: (1) high literacy and good schools; (2) involvement in and critical consumption of the media; (3) involvement in politics; (4) financial independence; (5) high employment and career alternatives; (6) parental supervision and involvement; (7) healthy bodies and foods; (8) honoring the ancestors; (9) afterschool programs; and (10) clean and liveable streets. [3]

In *The System of Objects* Jean Baudrillard challenges the limits of structural analysis of the object, in questioning what might be learned from thinking about "...how objects are experienced, what needs other than functional ones they answer, what mental structures are interwoven with—and contradict—their functional structures, or what cultural, infrastructural or transcultural system underpins their directly experienced everydayness." [3] Thinking about the

capability of the object of the mural, we might consider what can be learned about public agency from the mural as object in its contribution to and dissemination of history in the city. The everydayness of the object in its location and the sense of embedded time function to construct alternative voices and act to propose ways to provide access to stories of the neighborhood that may have gone unheard.

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