

Shaping Places Through Art  
Mural Art as a Strategy for Place-making  
in Deptford

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What is the impact of public art in developing neighbourhoods  
and how have artistic mediums effected communities during  
the pandemic?

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March the 23rd 2020 marked the beginning of the first UK lockdown following a rise in Covid-19 cases as part of the pandemic. This was an anticipated moment as we witnessed countries across the globe implementing their own restrictions, changing our day- to- day routines. Being told to remain at home and to only leave for essentials, with restrictions in place determining how much time and what activities could take place outdoors has had a massive impact on the population at large and the way we interact with our surroundings and with each other. The pandemic has globally shifted relationships with neighbours, communities, and with the street.

Our homes have shifted from places to live, to multi-functional offices, gyms, studios, and more. Activities which usually take place outside of our homes have collapsed into one singular location. Going out for a walk has become a reward, something which we look forward to after countless and endless hours in the home office with days and weekends blurring, or from doing very little at all, as 8.86 million people were enrolled on the government furlough scheme with the highest recorded number in May,<sup>1</sup> and a rise in unemployment. Having to remain within a few miles around our homes, with limited outdoor exercise allowance,<sup>2</sup> led to a greater familiarity with our local areas, connecting to our immediate surroundings which we otherwise would pass by in a rushed haze to elsewhere. The first few days of quarantine indicated a change in our cities with streets, parks, and public spaces left deserted, it put into perspective ‘the powerful effect that humans have on urban spaces’.<sup>3</sup> We gained a better appreciation for time spent outdoors, acknowledging its benefit to our mental and physical wellbeing, the lockdown saw people seeking outdoor spaces for ‘exercise, community, and healing’.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Cumulative number of jobs furloughed under the job retention scheme in the United Kingdom between April 20 and November 15, 2020”, *Statista*, Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1116638/uk-number-of-people-on-furlough/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chelsea Ritschel, “Lockdown: How many times can you exercise a day?”, *The Independent*, June 1, 2020. Accessed December 22, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/uk-lockdown-exercise-rules-outside-once-a-day-a9507636.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Santiago Baraya, “Public Spaces and Human Scale: The City at Eye Level”, *ArchDaily*, November 9, 2020. Accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.archdaily.com/950734/public-spaces-and-human-scale-the-city-at-eye-level-while-moving-at-5-km-h>.

<sup>4</sup> Cassidy Randall, “Why Going Outside Is Good for Your Health, Especially Right Now”, *Forbes*, April 9, 2020. Accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cassidyrandall/2020/04/09/why-going-outside-is-good-for-your-health-especially-right-now/?sh=3d9591562de9>.



fig 1. Banner hung from a window in Venice with the slogan Anrda Tutto Bene and the rainbow icon. (Photograph by Luisella Romeo, 2020)

Andrà tutto bene,<sup>5</sup> a message of hope that everything will be alright spread across Italy as it became the earliest country in Europe with a severe outbreak of the coronavirus. This slogan of reassurance was represented in the form of a rainbow, following panic and uncertainty children across the country adjusting to remote learning, started to create these rainbow images in various mediums, an activity adopted here in the UK. It became part of a growing collective experience to design and create these polychrome arches as symbols of hope and resilience, displayed in front windows, chalk-drawn across pavements and painted across walls, augmenting the urban realm. Rainbow spotting was a new activity that took place on our daily walks, there was something reassuring about seeing them repeatedly in their multitude, acting as a reminder of unity, that not just locally but spreading globally and connecting people trapped and isolated in their homes. As described by Shawn Adams, community means togetherness, it is an intangible moment of unity.<sup>6</sup> People across the country showed support for ‘the front line’ key workers through the ‘Clapping for our Carers’ movement, a weekly applause from our doorsteps. While terminology like so many new phases was borrowed from military language, this was a moment ‘uniting communities, public figures and news broadcasters in their support’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jedidajah Otte, “Everything will be alright: A message of hope spreads in Italy”, *The Guardian*, March 12, 2020. Accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/12/everything-will-be-alright-italians-share-slogan-of-hope-in-face-of-coronavirus-crisis>.

<sup>6</sup> Shawn Adams, “What Is community and the role of architecture in shaping communities?”, *DE ROSEE SA*, 2020. Accessed December 13, 2020, <https://deroseesa.com/architecture/what-is-community-and-the-role-of-architecture-in-shaping-communities/>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Clap for our Carers movement”, Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://clapforourcarers.co.uk/>.



fig 2. BIG THANKS NHS graffitied billboard by Nathan Bowen, photographed on a lockdown walk in Forest Hill. (Photograph by Asli Aktu, 2020)



fig 3. A mural in Vancouver shows author and illustrator Roger Hargreaves's Little Miss Sunshine character wearing a face mask (Photograph by Andrew Chin, 2020)

The motion of clapping joined neighbours for a few minutes each week reminding each other of their presence and support of not only the key workers but of each other, before disappearing again into their homes.

The pandemic situation encouraged creativity generally, with everyday life now remote from familiar routines we were forced to initiate new methods of action to adapt and circumvent the stifling walls of our homes. As entertainment and creative industries were closed down by social distancing measures, a variety of new approaches to entertain emerged, spilling from the lock-down into the urban realm. The importance of public space became even more evident, through long days of being homebound a new important interface of exchange was given to windows, balconies, and roofs.<sup>8</sup> Apartment bound citizens took to these spaces to sing, play music, and entertain one another, using household equipment to

<sup>8</sup> Alan Taylor, "Music and Encouragement from Balconies Around the World", *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2020/03/music-and-encouragement-from-balconies-around-world/608668/>.

create mock-up DJ sets and performances, uniting people through self-isolation.

When discussing the position of art in parallel to political and social events it is important to also mention a movement that occurred in the midst of the pandemic summer. 2020 experienced another historic moment as the Black Lives Matter movement swept across the world in response to the killing of George Floyd. Various art mediums were used to depict unity and support, from the fist symbol which similarly to the rainbow was pasted across windows and streets to painted Black Lives Matter slogans and murals claiming the streets as powerful works of art.<sup>9</sup> The proliferation of murals globally critiquing systemic oppression and representing a desperate need for change. Appearing as an instant reaction to events, responding and promoting to them like, have become an essential way to demonstrate through the urban environment a cultural shift and urgency to acknowledge more complicated historic narratives.

The original success of politically motivated murals came from their immediacy, boldness, and ability to reach a vast range of people, something which is still evident today.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Arwa Haider, "The street art that expressed the worlds pain", *BBC*, December 14, 2020. Accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201209-the-street-art-that-expressed-the-worlds-pain>.

<sup>10</sup> Daljinder Johal, "Murals and Politics: What's the link?", *The Boar*, July 6, 2016. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://theboar.org/2016/07/murals-politics-whats-link/>.

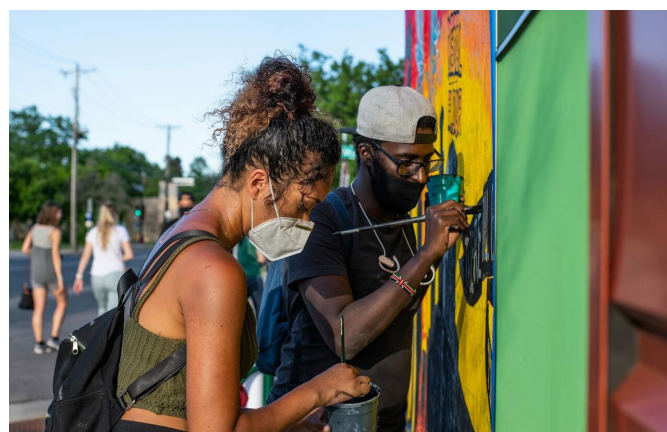


fig 4. Fighting racial injustice and systemic racism, image of two young Americans partaking in the #Creativesaftercufew, painting a mural in support of BLM. (Photograph by Chloe Krenz, 2020)





fig 5. Black Lives Matter street mural was created in collaboration between the City of Charlotte and 17 local artists, each one designing a designated letter. From conception to finish, it took 72 hours.



As the pandemic progressed, receded, and remerged in full force during the winter months, artists have used the city to ‘bring urgent messages of hope, resilience, and dissent’<sup>11</sup> through a visual portrayal across streets, walls, floors, and other surfaces. As galleries and museums were forced to close, public artworks, which are often considered more accessible,<sup>12</sup> have depicted this moment in a plethora of artistic mediums. Evan Meyer, founder of the Mural Art Exchange Programme in California, commented on the importance of bringing art to the streets during this time, “We want to save our streets today and bring them back tomorrow, get people excited as we start to come out with hope and positive messages... The streets will be beautiful”.<sup>13</sup> For Meyer, murals are a powerful tool influencing our visual environment and thereby promoting cultural, political, and social change.

Our relationship to the street has undoubtedly shifted throughout the course of this past year, with outdoor public spaces becoming a kind of surrogate ‘living room’,<sup>14</sup> a social space with new meaning and importance. Artists have embraced the street and the built environment as integral to their work and practice, individual pieces reflecting context and location as surfaces become living canvases, rehumanizing the urban landscape. Stephen Powers’ project ‘A love letter to the city’ explores through his murals and imagery a method to ‘convey the feeling of a city back to itself’,<sup>15</sup> each piece is a response to a specific place and its inhabitants. While that simply adding colour and imagery does not directly solve entrenched problems within society, empowering these walls as bearers of a message can become part of an important process, portraying a new vision of life, hope and establishing new standards for our urban environment.



fig 6. Euphoria mural in Brooklyn, part of Stepher Powers’ A Love Letter To The City collection which wraps around an entire garage. (Photograph by Matthew Kubron)

The concept of ‘cultural place-making’<sup>16</sup> has had an increasingly impacted British urban regeneration since the mid- 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Placemaking is the idea that people can collectively revitalise public spaces, improving a neighbourhood through the integration of art. Culture-led regeneration and creative placemaking led by community members can be considered as methods of enhancing engagement with the city and creating a better sense of place. Artists are often at the heart of places undergoing transformation, prominently seen in post-industrial cities such as with Hoxton in the 1990s,<sup>18</sup> where previously industrial parts found new uses. Across the country murals, street art, and other art forms enrich the cultural identity of places and can re-contextualise a building. On a larger scale we can see the regeneration at Kings Cross and Stratford City as this type of post- industrial development led by methods of cultural placemaking.<sup>19</sup>

The next section will discuss how murals promote the enrichment of public spaces, exploring murals as a commentary on its environment and their impact on a street-scape. I will be specifically focusing on a mural that I volunteered with the painting of, ‘Empathy by the Bucket’ in Deptford that was designed and curated over the pandemic summer.

11 Benedetta Ricci, “Coronavirus Street Art: How the Pandemic is Changing Our Cities”, *Art Land*, 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://magazine.artland.com/coronavirus-street-art-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-our-cities/>.

12 Tiffany Renee Conklin, “Street Art, Ideology, and Public Space” (Dissertations and Theses, Portland State University, 2012), 3.

13 Naja Sayej, “I wanted to give hope: The artists making upbeat coronavirus murals”, *The Guardian*, May 19, 2020. Accessed December 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/may/19/artists-murals-coronavirus-santa-monica/>.

14 Nicholas Alden Riggle, “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68, n. 3 (Summer 2010), 246.

15 Stephen Powers, *A Love Letter to the City*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014), 5.

16 Kia Knight, “How public art can enrich the urban realm”, *The RIBA Journal*, January 17, 2020. Accessed December 23, 2020, <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/commissioning-better-public-art-kia-knight-1-of-1-art-group>.

17 Charles Landry, Lesley Greene, Francois Matarasso, Franco Bianchini, *The Art of Regeneration: Urban Renewal through Cultural Activity*, (Demos, 1996), 8.

18 Loretta Lees, Clare Melhuish, “Arts-led regeneration in the UK: The rhetoric and evidence on urban social inclusion”, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 22 (2013), 244.

19 Anna Minton, “The PROJECT initiative” in: *Artists and places: Engaging creative minds in regeneration*, (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and Arts & Business, 2008), 16.



fig 7. The famous street market on Deptford High Street, south London. An area of diversity and international culture. (Photograph by Simon Turner)

Deptford is a neighbourhood of South East London in the borough of Lewisham. It has been described as an area which ‘pays homage to its past while looking to the future’.<sup>20</sup> Research and innovation began in Deptford around the 16th century with Henry VIII’s establishment of the first Royal Docks.<sup>21</sup> It is an ethnically diverse area and became home to different immigrant groups, especially from the 1950s/ 60s with the settlement of Afro-Caribbean residents.<sup>22</sup> But the multi-ethnic nature of this society can be traced back to the docks, which was its main driver for employment.

Today, the area is diverse in both its inhabitants and in urban development, with the northern section built up with council housing and has high concentrations of people experiencing poverty, whilst towards the Deptford Station there is evidence of regeneration, also because of this infrastructure, suggesting

20 Mark Flint, “Living in Deptford: A town full of creativity & Culture”, *Essential Living*, April 6, 2020. Accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.essentialliving.co.uk/blog/living-in-deptford/>.

21 Alice Circolini, “Radical Deptford: A Place in Constant Motion”, *Studio Circolini*, December 2015, 53.

22 Dr. Gareth Potts, “Overview of Deptford, London”, *University College London*, September 2008, 12.

a ‘trendy’<sup>23</sup> arts and music scene which is popular with students and artists alike. The high street remains busy with a combination of independent stores which over the decades have amplified the trading vibrancy, and its well-liked weekly street market.

Deptford has been consistent with innovation, it’s a place of ‘making and doing, creating something from nothing- that the Highstreet and its many artisan studios continue to encapsulate’,<sup>24</sup> resulting from the multitude of new settlers. With decline of the docklands came increased poverty, towards the late Victorian period Deptford saw a greater encouragement of new social engagement. Establishments of institutions such as The Albany, a thriving arts and community centre, acted as a force for social change. Deptford can be considered hybrid in nature with architectural elements reminiscent of its history, juxtaposing newer urban changes including the Herzog de Meuron Laban building. 43% of the Lewisham and Deptford constituency are

23 Anita In- Deptford, “Somethin’ don’t feel right”, *Deptford Is Changing*, October 2, 2019. Accessed December 23, 2020, <https://deptfordischanging.wordpress.com/2019/10/02/somethin-dont-feel-right/>.

24 Circolini, “Radical Deptford”, 54.



described as consisting of ethnic minorities, while in comparison the London average is only 8%,<sup>25</sup> and its one of the most densely populated constituencies in the UK. This is a diverse and bustling neighbourhood, the inhabitants making it a ‘true community’.<sup>26</sup> Patricio Forrester, founder of Artmongers, a South London community initiative who combine research and creativity to develop site and user specific art, describes it as a ‘place for newcomers’.<sup>27</sup>

Deptford is unique, almost village-like, and while the locals are determined to improve the neighbourhood, they also want to protect its characteristics as gentrification has too often proven to break up

communities and ‘marginalize the history of a neighbourhood’<sup>28</sup> in the process of attracting more affluent residents into such cultural rich areas. As a city develops identity can be lost due to the fast paced nature of change, designers must understand that ‘place identity is essential in order to design for identity needs’.<sup>29</sup> A lack of focus on the inhabitants can lead to the development of spaces lacking identity, something the neighbouring borough of Greenwich has been criticised of.

25 Dr. Potts, “Overview of Deptford, London”, 13.

26 Anita Strasser, Deptford is changing: A creative exploration of the impact of gentrification, (Anita Strasser: London, 2020)

27 Patricio Forrester (Founder of Artmongers), interviewed by Asli Aktu, December 19, 2020.

28 Tracy James, *Dispatches Against Displacement: Field notes from San Francisco’s Housing Wars* (AK Press, 2015),

29 Eman El Nachar and Aleya Abdel- Hadi, Place identity/ place making in the built environment- towards a methodological perspective, in *Cities’ identity Through Architecture and Arts* – Catalani et al. (Eds)(Schipholweg: CRC Press/Balkema,2018), 73-77.

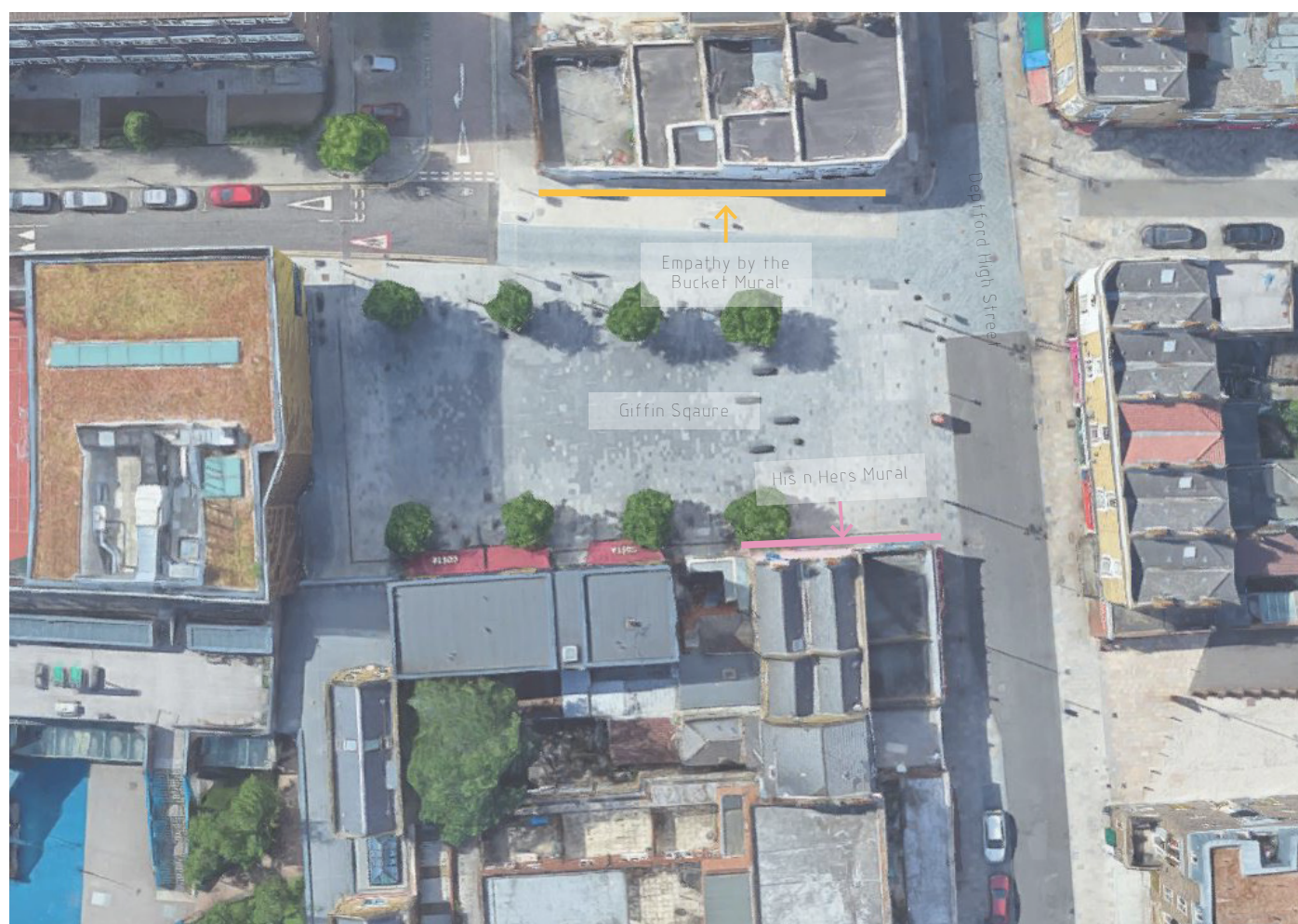


fig 8. Site location of the mural  
(Image from Google Maps)





fig 9. Site location plan (not to scale)

Art in its various forms can be identified throughout the area. In 2002 Deptford was designated as a creative enterprise zone by the London Borough of Lewisham,<sup>30</sup> but even before this, it was considered a hub for artist communities. The ‘Empathy by the Bucket’ Mural, created in collaboration with two Deptford based art organisations, Artmongers and Heart ‘n’ Soul, was funded by the Deptford Challenge Trust Grant allowing for these organisations to design and curate a mural that brings community ownership to public space. The mural is painted onto the old Midlands Bank building, located along Giffin Street and Deptford High Street. Artmongers approached the Landlord of the building with a proposition for a new mural and restoration of the building, which was completed over a 3 week period.

The mural gives more visibility to the ideas, creativity, and talent of people with learning disabilities,<sup>31</sup> giving voice to members of this less visible community.<sup>32</sup> Community murals have the ability to represent ‘values, concerns, identity’<sup>33</sup> of a specific group, becoming an urban form of social expression, an art form embedded in everyday life, they are a tool for placemaking. Having the ability to physically change our urban environment heightens an individual’s sense of power and importance.

The mural was designed by six artists, all with disabilities, joined by a team of volunteers to assist with the technical challenge of restoring the building façade and painting of the mural, enhancing the urban realm through a rejuvenation of the existing architecture. 85% of the UK’s population agrees that the ‘quality of the built environment influences the way they feel’.<sup>34</sup> In line with this, Ben Connors from Heart ‘n’ Soul explains that murals have the ability to highlight different features of a building whilst changing people’s perception of the street, ‘the shape of the road, the building, it gives community

members a chance to play with the architecture’.<sup>35</sup>

But the process of creating public art is far from spontaneous. Correspondence with the council and conservation officer needed to take place before painting as the old bank building that is to be integrated as part of the project is within a conservation area.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Connors (Heart ‘n’ Soul), email message with Asli Aktu, 28 December 28, 2020.



fig 10. Empathy By the Bucket mural adding vibrancy to the street on a rainy day. (Photograph by Asli Aktu, 2020)



fig 11. Work in progress, volunteers adding final details to the mural. (Photograph by Helen Murray Pix)

<sup>30</sup> “Creative Enterprise Zone launched in Deptford and New Cross”, *Lewisham Council*, Accessed November 26, 2020, <https://lewisham.gov.uk/articles/news/creative-enterprise-zone-launched-in-deptford-and-new-cross>

<sup>31</sup> “Empathy by the Bucket Mural”, *Heartnsoul*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/whatson/mural>.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Connors (Heart ‘n’ Soul), email message with Asli Aktu, 28 December 28, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Sang Weon Bae, “Balancing Past and Present: Reevaluating Community Murals and Existing Practices”, (*Theses*, University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Art in the Public Realm: Creating Healthy Streets”, *Cross River Partnership*, October 2018, <https://crossriverpartnership.org/?publications=art-in-the-public-realm-creating-healthy-streets>.



Still with a majority of the design decisions in the hands of the artists, the result is far more vibrant than what the council might have done without the groups involvement.

The presence of art has been discussed in parallel to the gentrification of areas, such as with parts of East London where the street art scene is described as ‘one constantly growing, mish-mashed, graffiti glazed, saturation symphony’.<sup>36</sup> The language of art is difficult to define, although we can differentiate graffiti, street art and murals through their purpose and intended function. There has been an evolution of graffiti writing to a more social and artistic movement over the past decade. Graffiti became popular in the 1970s by artists tagging New York with ‘abstract typography’.<sup>37</sup> It is commonly understood that graffiti is done without permission using spray cans as primary material and could be considered a Guerrilla response to environmental and social conditions of the location.<sup>38</sup> Street art stems from the notion of graffiti, both based on the empowerment of the individual artist as a method of expression, yet graffiti is often labelled as vandalism. Edward Fuentes explores the idea that murals give ‘visibility to residency whilst street art is a temporary occupation of space’,<sup>39</sup> we can understand it as a homage to

36 “Graffiti Chronicles LDN: A Visual Guide to Brick Lane Street Art”, *Like Locals*, December 13, 2019. Accessed December 27, 2020, <https://likelocals.blog/graffiti-chronicles-ldn-a-visual-guide-to-brick-lane-street-art/>.

37 Edward Fuentes, “The abstraction of content and intent between murals and street art”, *Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art* 7, no.1 (2018): 13, doi: 10.1386/vi.7.1.9\_1

38 Balarezo, M. G. and K. Karimi. “Urban Art and place. Spatial patterns of urban art and their contribution to urban regeneration.” (Universitat Politècnica de València, 2017), 589.

39 Fuentes, “The abstraction of content and intent between murals and street art”, *Visual* (2018), 4.



fig 12. Wall by Rize and Lil Man, Ven. Washington Heights, Manhattan, NYC, 1986 (photograph by Henry Chalfant)



fig 13. Love in the time of Covid illustrated on Venice Beach by street artists Pony Wave (Photograph by Mario Tama)

life and art rather than carrying a distinct narrative relatable by a community, yet both encourage engagement. Nicholas Riggle describes street art as a significant source, something which ‘has the power to engage, effortlessly and aesthetically, the masses’,<sup>40</sup> as a public display of art, its capable of encouraging conversation, reflection and visual focus.

But what is the function of street art? Does the higher presence of art in run down areas attempt to ‘pacify’<sup>41</sup> these more deprived neighbourhoods rather than dealing with the actual social and environmental issues? Raising questions about control of the streets and of the local council. Would Street art function differently in more well- to- do neighbourhoods? Are there even examples of this? Artists are often considered agents of the gentrification process, there is an evident correlation between art based communities and residential gentrification, a tool per say, for ‘urban renaissance’.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Deptford, this is debatable. Art, culture, and community led developments are valued characteristics of the neighbourhood, advocating its chain free high-street and consistent individuality, unlike much of London. As explained by Jane Jacobs the most successful places are those that champion diversity,

40 Nicholas Alden Riggle, “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68, n. 3 (Summer 2010), 243.

41 Stephen Pritchard, “Art washing: Social Capital & Anti- gentrification activism”, *Colouring in Culture*, June 17, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2020, <https://colouringinculture.org/uncategorized/artwashingsocialcapitalantigentrification/#:~:text=Artwashing%20uses%20art%20to%20smooth,1%20call%20corporate%20artwashing.>

42 Charles Landry, Lesley Greene, Francois Matarasso, Franco Bianchini, *The Art of Regeneration: Urban Renewal through Cultural Activity*, (Demos, 1996), 8.

‘they are full of stimulation and creative interplay’,<sup>43</sup> supporting that creativity must cultivate society as much as the individual. The integration of murals and other art forms throughout the area creates a sense of common place and identity. It’s the chance for a city to transform itself through an urban adaptive governance,<sup>44</sup> local communities are utilising artistic methods in order to create necessary urban changes. By allowing for public art to occur the council gain an advantage without having to be directly involved. Arguably, that power for murals would be less authentic if strategically designated by leaders. If they’re about local empowerment it’s important for murals and street art to organically develop in the hands of the artists and community for a place to transform itself.

The city of Heerlen in the Netherlands was marked as a degenerated area following the decline of the mining industry, they have since adopted the urban trend of place-making with the creation of community led murals throughout the city. There is an understanding that people care more about public spaces when they can feel some sort of connection, murals have the ability to re-energise abandoned public spaces increasing local identity and creating a better sense of well-being through community engagement.<sup>45</sup> Heerlen is a prime example where murals have been utilised to reactivate deteriorating spaces, increasing the attractiveness of the city, and thus forming a better sense of place. The addition of public art into the urban realm can generally be considered as a method of improving neighbourhoods without the need for any real structural development. While the planning process can be long and complicated, murals can respond more rapidly and give the community power. As proven with the case of Heerlen, they were able to use street art as a faster way to tackle social and urban deprivation, which still continues.<sup>46</sup> Patricio Forrester explains that ‘murals make it easier for a city to change faster’,<sup>47</sup> especially in areas such



fig 14. Bier & Brood mural, part of the Heerlen mural programme using the streets as exhibition space. (Photograph by Henrik Haven)

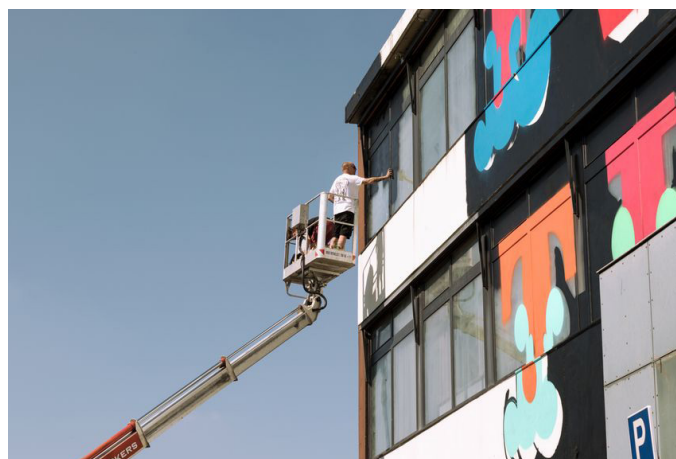


fig 15. Ben Eine, in attempt to gain positive attention to the city of Heerlen each artists created a mural with words of local context. (Photograph by Henrik Haven)

<sup>43</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, (Basic Books, 2002), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Rafael de Balanzo, *The role of the arts in urban resilience: vancouver neighborhood and recreant cruilles street- scape. Grassroots case studies in Barcelona, Spain: The Role of Artists & The Arts in Creative Placemaking* (Baltimore MD: Goethe Institut, 2014), 25-26, [http://www.petkovstudio.com/bg/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2014\\_Symposium\\_Report.pdf](http://www.petkovstudio.com/bg/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2014_Symposium_Report.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> “Street art murals for urban renewal: Building community engagement, fostering urban regeneration through mural street art”, *Urbact*. Accessed January 7, 2020, <https://urbact.eu/street-art-murals-urban-renewal>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Patricio Forrester (Founder of Artmongers), interviewed by Asli Aktu, December 19, 2020.



as Deptford, it is a process with more immediate effect that demonstrates to people that they too can influence their visual environment. ‘Empathy by the Bucket’ completely transformed the deteriorating building and improved adjacent public space. Murals can be considered a starting point for progression. Despite that this specific art form can often be short lived by being painted over again by other artists, it activates empty spaces.

A mural is a form of artwork that is painted on a wall, ceiling, or floor, it works with its canvas, in most cases, elements of the architecture. Murals have an ancient history and have existed as far back as memory of human culture. Gaining increased popularity in Europe during the Renaissance period, they were commonly painted on interior surfaces. Over time murals have transitioned from pieces commissioned to display power and wealth, to visual communicators of political and social messages, further enhanced by the Mexican Mural Movement in the 20th century. ‘Los Tres Grandes’,<sup>48</sup> Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, can be considered as the ‘originators of the community mural movement’,<sup>49</sup> laying down the foundations for urban murals. Supported by Jose Vasconcelo, Secretary of Public Education, who believed in a cultural manifesto to shape national identity by bringing art to the masses which further maximised the capabilities of mural art in a successful attempt to communicate a message and with efforts to reunify the country under the post-revolutionary government. Their mural painting was a combination of art, tradition, culture, and determination to tell a story that even illiterate members of the community would be able to understand and support. The painting of an exterior wall creating art primarily for public viewing could be considered a symbolic entry point for street art to evolve. Today murals are notably utilised as a method to enhance and uplift neglected spaces, whilst others still continue to illustrate a particular moment. They positively contribute to the urban landscape, and through this the wellbeing of ordinary people, by the means of a visual improvement of such surroundings.



fig 16. El Polyforum, A mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros (Photograph by Karina Tejada)



fig 17. Mural by Diego Rivera, History of Mexico: From Conquest to the Future 1929- 30. (Photograph by Augustine Florian)

<sup>48</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>49</sup> Fuentes, “The abstraction of content and intent between murals and street art”, (2018),

It is important to reflect on the process and creators of ‘Empathy by the Bucket’. Heart ‘n’ Soul is an award-winning creative arts company and charity, ‘a collective who believe in the power and talents of people with learning disabilities, providing opportunities for all’.<sup>50</sup> Artmongers work on projects aimed at improving public spaces and the urban realm, increasing user ownership, and addressing public needs through research and inventive responses they have produced several recognisable murals across South London and have a notable presence in the Deptford art scene as well as having produced work globally.<sup>51</sup> Patricio Forrester explains the groups aim to convert neglected spaces, ‘urban wounds’,<sup>52</sup> as he described, and believes in ‘culturally led regeneration through the use of murals’.<sup>53</sup> Both organisations provide opportunity for different groups of people to have an active role within their community, the combination of both teams allowing residents to reimagine their streets.

Five online workshops took place throughout the lock-down in May with the six artists from Heart ‘n’ Soul and Artmongers’ muralists. Whilst the restoration of the building and painting of the mural began in September with 10-12 different volunteers. Progress from each day was recorded and shared on social media, encouraging new participants to get a variety of people involved. The volunteers began by preparing the old wall, scrapping, filling, and cleaning the surface before applying a base layer. An outline of the design was sketched onto the wall with each volunteer designated to a specific task, shifting to different responsibilities throughout the day on both the mural and the Bank building. The mural project provided an opportunity for this collaboration to express their views and feelings towards being in a public space and encouraged community engagement from both the volunteers and the audience. It is a reflective piece depicting their relationship with the area and a story of the local community. The mural invites viewers to stop and consider how they perceive disabilities; it invites dialogue at the same time as bringing visual interest into the neighbourhood.



fig 18. A graphic representation of people with disabilities partaking in community activities championing individuality for everyone. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 19. Empathy By The Bucket Here, Deptford is a place for everyone as illustrated by the mural. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)

<sup>50</sup> “About”, *HeartnSoul*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/about>.

<sup>51</sup> “Home”, *HeartnSoul*, accessed December 17, 2020, <http://artmongersaction.org/home/>.

<sup>52</sup> Patricio Forrester (Founder of Artmongers), interviewed by Asli Aktu, December 19, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*



Community murals establish a sense of residency and inspire social change and change to the urban environment. From the outset, we are greeted with a display of vibrant colours, slogans, and text illuminating the façade of a previously deteriorating building. The artists had a vision to create something ‘sunny, inclusive and uplifting’,<sup>54</sup> words of a participant. The mural greets the street with vibrant bursts of pink, orange, blue and yellow tones blended together to create an array of scenes and icons, spilling across all surfaces of the building, forming points of interests which can only be viewed from specific parts of the street, or from a distance. We can understand this piece as an appeal for more inclusivity and the acceptance of people with disabilities through the use of words such as ‘Acceptance guaranteed’ and ‘Join in- As yourself’, but at the same time, it celebrates and illustrates features of the local area, with motifs of the market stalls and other activities. It’s in the name empathy by the ‘Bucket’, this mural seeks to break expectations and celebrate the diverse nature of Deptford. This is a mural with a purpose to elevate the street to a much more vibrant scene and inspire the people it is representative of by allowing for them to be in the forefront of the public eye.

The strategic positioning of this mural is important to the development of the area and specifically of the public space it faces, the mural is in parallel to another Art Mongers piece ‘His n Hers’ which has become an icon of Deptford, both framed between Giffin Square. ‘His n Hers’ was painted in 2002, funded by donations from local businesses. It generates an atmosphere of surrealism depicting the image of a necklace and tie which appear to hang from the two chimneys of the Victorian terrace.<sup>55</sup> The mural transformed the empty surface of the terrace end wall into a pink vibrant emblem. Despite having no distinct narrative, it’s an iconic element of the area. Giffin square is used for a variety of events and activities and hosts sections of the Street Market. It is brought to life with the activities and people which utilise the space. But without the activities, the actual square can appear abandoned with rectangular stone

benches for seating and grey tiled floor. The two murals on either side then help to give place to the lifeless piazza. The mural is a ‘invitation to think, it is an invitation to enjoy, it is an invitation to connect’.<sup>56</sup> He believes that it is not about having explicit meaning but connecting the space to the people on different levels. The integration of the new mural revitalises a neglected space through colour, meaning and narrative, it offers a sense of familiarity in contrast to the adjacent new Deptford Lounge building which is a stark contrast to the existing character.

<sup>56</sup> Patricio Forrester (Founder of Artmongers), interviewed by Asli Aktu, December 19, 2020.



fig 20. His n Hers vertical Chimneys surrealism in juxtaposition to the high-street. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 21. His n Hers mural, a prominent part of the public square, adding vibrancy to the piazza. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)

<sup>54</sup> “Empathy by the Bucket Mural”, *Heartnsoul*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/whatson/mural>.

<sup>55</sup> “His and Hers Mural: A clever and amusing mural by Artmongers”, *London Mural Preservation Society*, accessed January 6, 2020, <http://londonmuralpreservationsociety.com/murals/his-and-hers-mural/>.

The addition of murals creates an ‘alfresco’<sup>57</sup> gallery, making art more inclusive and accessible. But it also is adding commercial value by attracting more tourists. From the mid-1960s Paul Curno, director of The Albany and a significant figure to the development of Deptford, had strong intentions to have art as the driving force, he believed in the power of art inclusivity.

Art has taken up an increasingly prominent role in the neighbourhood, a noteworthy mural being the ‘Love over Gold’ located opposite Crossfield’s estate, it was created in 1989 as a collaboration with local school children and the band members of Dire Straits who grew up in the estate. The Crossfield estates community shifted in the 1970s as families were relocated, singles moved in establishing a new creative community where art and music flourished.<sup>58</sup> The mural is a portrayal of ‘the local area, issues of wealth distribution and the environment as well as disability and equality of opportunity’,<sup>59</sup> it illustrates scenes of the local area and the people who form this diverse community. Created thirty-one years before ‘Empathy by the bucket’, both empower members of the community offer a visual interest point, though the central positioning of the ‘Empathy by the Bucket’ mural gives a heightened sense of place identity.

57 Jonathan Skinner, Lee Jolliffe, *Murals and Tourism: Heritage, Politics and Identity* (Routledge, 2017), 3.

58 Kjartan Pall Sveinsson, “Creating Connections, Regenerations & Consultation on a multi- ethnic council estate”, *Runnymede* (2007), 10

59 Gary Drostle, “Love Over Gold, Deptford 1989”, *London Mural Preservation Society*, accessed December 17, 2020, <http://londonmuralpreservationsociety.com/murals/love-over-gold/>.



fig 22. Love Over Gold mural by Gary Drostle, 1989. Commissioned by Lewisham Leisure, Outset UK, Dire Straits, ILEA. Developed with local primary schools, the mural depicts children and adults’ musings on their environment.

The significance of the new project taking shape during the pandemic comes from its impact on different groups of people, giving artists and volunteers focus and direction, to work on something which would massively impact not only the building but a public space, something which we have gained a greater appreciation for through the experience of extreme social isolation. Whilst members of the community were able to watch the work evolve from week to week, encouraging engagement. People from all parts of the community have come to observe, to stop, sit, and watch.

Deptford is an area which responds well to the energy brought by murals.<sup>60</sup> Continuing its ongoing confidence in the power of the art. Unlike street art, muralism is a group effort, the support of volunteers ‘generating energy’,<sup>61</sup> driven forward by the collective desire to improve a space for its continued enjoyment. Enthusiasm is derived from the speed of the process, the whole project took 3 weeks to complete, an unmatched time scale if working alone. Collaboration is a significant element of public art, especially in your own neighbourhood and at such scale you feel a sense of empowerment and pride for making a mark on the urban fabric.

60 Ben Connors (Heart ‘n’ Soul), email message with Asli Aktu, 28 December 28, 2020.

61 Patricio Forrester (Founder of Artmongers), interviewed by Asli Aktu, December 19, 2020.





fig 23. Restoration of the bank facade with a new coat of paint (Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 24. Progress from half a days works, outlines of the figures are starting to be filled. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 25. The facade along Giffin Street, bursting with vibrant colours and iconography depicting activities that the artists enjoy taking part in with Heart n Soul. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)





fig 26. Artists at work on the final details  
(Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 27. The most fundamental element of placemaking is  
the collaboration aspect, here are the volunteers at work  
along side one another. (Photograph by Helen Murray)



Before the restoration of the building façade, the walls facing towards the square had been littered with graffiti tags, cracked plaster, and falling layers of paint. The building had been neglected by the landlord for years, was painted in tones of grey and was not looked after. This type of art, through environmental design, can reduce acts of vandalism,<sup>62</sup> which is evident across the high street where restored buildings are more likely to remain clean and graffiti-free. Arguably, the sanctioning of street art in turn reduced unauthorised vandalism. A concentration of art revitalises the neighbourhood with a heightened sense of place identity, these spaces feel safer and more vibrant.

As a piece of public art, we have to consider the reaction of the people. On the day of painting, we had various passers-by stopping for conversation, some locals thrilled by the idea of a freshly painted building, adding more life and colour to the streets, thanking us as we worked, whilst others were not as positive. One lady, in particular, stopped to ask who permitted us to paint here and why it was allowed, interrogating aspects of the work. This raises questions about control of the streets. The mural is its own sign and emphasises a point that public art marks territory and allows citizens to reclaim the streets, even though the endeavour has been officially sanctioned. We have to consider how the success can be measured in these situations, is it about public opinion? Or is it about the engagement and improvements which follow their establishment?

In terms of the ‘Empathy by the Bucket’ mural we could argue that art is being deployed in such a way that it is beneficial to the council, by restoring and covering a façade which in its previous state reflected poorly on the neighbourhood, and at the same time it has given voice, acting as a ‘mouthpiece’<sup>63</sup> to a group who all too often is otherwise overlooked. The mural enriches a public space through aesthetic improvements, the addition of a mural in this location strengthens the connection between people and place.



fig 28. The old bank building on day one of restoration, the dire state of the building before can clearly be seen from the layers of Graffiti and falling paint.



fig 29. Walking along Deptford High Street, many empty walls are filled with tags. ( Photograph by Asli Aktu)



fig 30. Three buildings along Deptford High Street restored and painted in brighter colours, with a more abstract design focus. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)

<sup>62</sup> “State of the Art: 4 cities using murals to revitalise the public realm”, *Projexity*, April 12, 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://medium.com/projexity-blog/state-of-the-art-4-cities-using-murals-to-revitalize-the-public-realm-a34304ee0f46>.

<sup>63</sup> Benedetta Ricci, “Coronavirus Street Art: How the Pandemic is Changing Our Cities”, *Art Land*, 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://magazine.artland.com/coronavirus-street-art-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-our-cities/>.

The 'Empathy by the Bucket' mural ends on a corner which is significant for two reasons. One, it enhances the interactivity of mural art by forcing viewers to walk around the building in order to experience the whole piece. This demonstrates the idea of community muralism as a performance of public expression and extends the presence of art. Two, the connecting wall and fence is covered in graffiti and tags, there is this definite stopping point where the freshly painted orange and pink tones end, and a defaced surface continues. We could consider this as a metaphorical reminder that the deep-rooted issue within the urban realm and the community remain. The mural goes some way to heal both urban realm and bridge social cohesion, but it's only a starting point.



fig 31. At the corner of the 'Empathy by the Bucket' mural the joining wall is completely defaced demonstrating the reality of the neighbourhood. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)





fig 32. Empathy by the Bucket brightening the street scape on a public facing wall. (Photograph by Asli Aktu)

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Figure 20. Aktu, Asli. *His n Hers vertical Chimneys*. December 2020, Photograph.

Figure 21. Aktu, Asli. *Giffin Square*. December 2020, Photograph.

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Figure 24. Aktu, Asli. *Empathy by the Bucket work in progress*. December 2020, Photograph.

Figure 25. Aktu, Asli. *Empathy by the Bucket, a burst of colour*. December 2020, Photograph.

Figure 26. Aktu, Asli. *Artists at work*. December 2020, Photograph.

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Figure 28. Artmongers, "Restoration of the old building", *Twitter*, September 2020. Photograph, <https://twitter.com/artmongers/status/1307658220505370624>

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Figure 30. Aktu, Asli. *Murals on Deptford High Street*. December 2020, Photograph.

Figure 31. Aktu, Asli. *The end of the road*. December 2020, Photograph.

Figure 32. Aktu, Asli. *Empathy by the Bucket adding vibrancy to the street*. December 2020, Photograph.



Raw transcript from phone Interview with Patricio Forrester founder of Artmongers on the 19th December

**What impact do you think murals have on a street scape?**

We take neglected spaces, a sort of urban wound- we want to contribute to the urban landscape, to transform a dead space to a live space.

The bank was neglected by the landlords, painted in grey, and not looked after.

The mural adds something if it is done to a space that needs it.

Some murals are created that do not connect to a space

It has the power to add to a conversation.

Murals make it easier for a city to change faster, the planning process is long and difficult.

Landlords can paint their building as they like, but it has to be proven if it is an eyesore before it is taken down- this is the power of ownership.

Sail and wind behind the desire of individuals without a lot of money

**What is it that you enjoy about creating them and having community members involved?**

Volunteers generate energy

Owner asked for them to paint the toilet- its not about benefiting the landlord

Its about improving a public space through the building

There is an energy created when people feel like they are improving a space

The mural took 3 weeks to paint and restore- the speed of this is exciting, sense of excitement from making a change to the public space so quickly.

Sense of excitement from being involved in a group creating something larger than yourself, something you could not have created yourself.

Economic elements- not much money in muralism, having more volunteers means that we can maximise how much space we use- the whole bank wasn't meant to be painted but with more volunteers enlarges how much work can be done without blowing the budget.

Having volunteers and participants- another level of engagement. Participants were involved in the creative process. It was their ideas which led to the chosen colour palette.

**Do you think street art and murals have an important role in Deptford? How does it affect the community? Would you say the council are trying to 'gentrify' the area through the use of art?**

We have been accused of art washing, it's a complex issue.

Its not an easy topic but what is the alternative

Its about engagement in Deptford not about making money

The murals have been misunderstood and mis observed

They have a massive impact on how the community enjoy the public space.

Gentrification is not necessarily a bad thing

No one can speak for Deptford, Deptford wants different things

The alternative Is to stay poor with no change

As an artist you have to want change and change in how people see themselves

The council is not strategically using art- the work of the local government is to improve peoples lives

Resilience is underestimated

Deptford is for people from all over the place it is a place for newcomers.

Change is a good thing

There is no simple answer to anything

I believe in culturally led regeneration through the use of murals

Plazas In Italy, they are the centre, people go here for fun and art can make this happen.

**What impact do you think the 'Empathy by the Bucket' mural has on the area and the people it represents?**

People with disabilities have felt like they have had to hide, not they are in the middle of a public space, they are reclaiming the public space

Its about empowering the voice of people who may other wise not get the chance to

**Do you think its important for murals to have a political/ social/ message about an issue or is it more about bringing life and colour/ fun to an environment?**

I do not think murals necessarily need to have a message

Even painting a flowers would be political

Political is anything that happens in the street

Not openly political but political in nature.

Its something that people have to live so it needs to have a long life span and remain relevant which is the biggest challenge.

I do not think it's about a message- murals create an environment where questions are asked.

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It is an invitation to think, it is an invitation to enjoy, it is an invitation to connect.

It not about the meaning its about connecting on different levels.

**Info on the empathy by the bucket mural:**

**Who owns the building?**

**Who granted permission for the mural?**

**Where the Art Mongers reached out to create the mural?**

**Where there any specific requirements?**

**How long will it remain in place for?**

Owner of the wall has too much power to the money etc is divided.

It was a 2 part project- the mural and the bank

The owner has no say, the whole mural cost £6,000 and they contributed £750 towards the paint.

The bank is in a conservation area, so we needed to talk with the council

To create something that the village would enjoy

Set up common grounds, we used brighter colours than they would have done.

We lifted to the building to look like it should be in Havana not Deptford

Different to whats going on in Brick Lane where street artists are painting over each other to see who can do better, unilateral domination. There is no engagement, fighting over space its not relevant to what the people want.

Muralism is more than one person involved... it is a group and public effort.

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