

Mural Making 101

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Introduction.

So you want to make a mural. Easy enough, as long as you know how to prepare and properly execute. Community murals are very popular and attainable ways of beautifying a neighborhood, establishing landmarks, honoring individuals or ideals, and adding art into the visual landscape of our neighborhoods. Murals can be found anywhere and everywhere around the world. In the United States, the form of community murals that we know today were largely born out of institutions like the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) program in Los Angeles, California in the 1970s, and the Philadelphia Murals Arts Program in the 1980s.

The focus of this resource guide is on large-scale painted murals. It presents information about how to choose a location, select an artist, community participation and design review, as well as fabrication and maintenance considerations.

There is simply no other medium for art that offers such a substantial “bang for your buck” as that of a painted mural. For a fraction of the cost of mosaic, monumental sculpture, lighted or multi-media artwork, one can transform an entire façade or sidewall of a multi-story building or a stretch of a street or intersection. But while murals are relatively easy to implement, they must be maintained — typically more so than artworks made of more permanent materials such as steel, glass, etc. Well prepared surfaces in appropriate locations, high quality paint, and a final clear coat are as essential to a long lasting mural, as is a plan for routine maintenance that includes retouching, cleaning, and properly done graffiti removal.

If this approach is followed, one could expect to get 10-15 years or more out of a painted mural before any major repair or retouch is required; with proper periodic retouching, one can help extend the life of any mural indefinitely. However, keep in mind that murals do not have to be permanent. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program’s Eakins Oval project is an excellent example of a temporary mural program, in which a ground-based pedestrian path inside of a major urban park is repainted each year with a new artist and artwork. At the Rose F. Kennedy Greenway in Boston, Massachusetts, a new mural is commissioned every 12-18 months in the most prominent part of the park to promote vibrancy and attract repeat visitors.

This guide walks you through creating and maintaining a mural that will leave a lasting and positive impact for your community, no matter how long it is intended to be in place. Enjoy and good luck!

Choosing a Location.

There are several things to consider when choosing a location, including visibility, condition of the surface, and needed permissions.

Visibility

Potential sites should be visible from multiple vantage points and perspectives, and should consider how it will be viewed by pedestrians, automobile traffic, public transit riders, and cyclists. Murals can be successful in more secluded areas as well, as long as there is a natural audience that frequents the

space. Examples include urban community gardens, playgrounds, athletic fields, swimming pools, and other places that have a built-in audience.

Surface Conditions

The condition of the surface to be painted is perhaps **the** greatest concern. If the structural or surface integrity of the wall or other surface is failing, the paint will too. Even a dirty surface can cause paint to fail. To ensure a successful and long lasting mural, a prospective mural surface should be carefully inspected for:

- loose or peeling paint
- loose or broken concrete
- cracked stucco material upon its surface
- signs of water leaks (new or old)
- staining or rusting
- the ability to remove metal screws, anchors, or nails (recommended)
- large cracks
- foreign material such as plant or synthetic material growing through or being deposited from an adjacent or nearby source
- bird or bat droppings, insects, etc.
- electrical wiring or other nearby safety and access hazards

The **best** type of surface to receive paint is one that is a raw, unpainted stone or concrete material that is free of any of the above conditions. Wood, metal, and other materials that are in new or good condition can also be satisfactory if properly prepared and sealed. If the surface is not new, or if there are any causes for concern, consult a reputable artist, mason, or painting contractor for further assessment and recommended treatment.

Alternatives to Working on Existing Surfaces

If the needs and desires of your venue demand that you utilize a wall or other surface that is not in satisfactory condition, you might consider painting on a separate substrate that can be affixed onto the wall either before or after the artwork has been applied to it. Examples of excellent substrates include, but are not limited to:

- aluminum sheet or panel
- aluminum composite sheets, such as Dibond, Alucobond, or Reynobond
- medium density fiber board (MDF)
- cement board, such as Wonderboard; Cement board is also known as backerboard and typically used with mosaic tile murals
- polyester fabric (aka “parachute cloth”)

These types of substrates have been used very effectively for large scale murals where site conditions required use of a substandard wall. Painting the mural on a separate substrate is also beneficial when community members such as children are participating in the painting as it allows access to the full

surface while avoiding creating hazardous conditions that would require them to climb a high scaffolding. Another benefit is that the artwork can be created in a sheltered space, including during winter or inclement weather conditions.

Utilizing a substrate can also allow the removal and relocation of your mural as well, on the possibility of the property changing owners or the wall is scheduled for future destruction or removal. Some spaces even utilize a fixed structure that offers the ability to display temporary fabric or vinyl murals in an outdoor revolving “gallery”.

Substrates should always be carefully installed by professionals, and when the scale might require so, engineers to calculate weight, load, fasteners, and spacers upon a particular wall surface. Your local community development corporation (CDC), design coalition, or American Institute of Architects chapter (AIA) can help connect you to an engineer, architect, or design firm to assist with the technical aspects of adhering substrates to walls.

Surface Preparation

Before you start any painting, including priming, your surface should be clean, dry, and free of loose material. Make any patches or repairs that are required and allow sufficient time for materials, such as mortar and cement, to cure and dry thoroughly. If you are working on an existing surface that has been in place for some time (e.g. not new construction), you should power-wash the wall. Allow sufficient time for the wall to dry out after washing. Remember that some materials such as masonry will absorb water and “wick” it to the interior, so even if a surface appears to be dry quickly, give it some additional time.

Permissions

There may be several layers of permission that need to be obtained to paint a mural. Even if you have a perfect wall in a perfect location, it does not mean a mural is going to be able to be painted on that site. Here are some questions to research before an artist is hired or a mural is designed.

- Who owns the proposed mural site and what permission do they require?
- Is the site located on public property or private property? Does a government office need to give permission to have a mural there? We suggest contacting the local Art Commission, Planning Office, or Zoning Office to ask about the rules for specific locations.
- Is the site in a historic district? If so, reach out to the local Historic Commission, Planning Office, or Zoning Office to ask about rules in historic districts.

The wall owners may require review and approval of the design, insurance policies, street closures, or demonstrated community review and approval of the mural before you start painting.

In many cities, murals of purely “fine art” (as opposed to ones that contain advertising or signage messages) are not regulated at all—and this is as it should be. However, if you are on city property, or inside of a historic district, you might be required to gain approval of the use and design by a city’s Art Commission or Historical Review Commission or other. Additionally, try to avoid any usage of business identification or imagery related to a nearby businesses in your mural design, as this could be construed

by a city zoning department to be business signage, and therefore subject to regulation as such. This is all a little bit of extra footwork, but well worth the effort when you consider the alternative.

Most city staff are very helpful on these issues. They simply need the address of the site, and a preliminary design with dimensions in order to properly advise you on your project. Gather these materials and give them a call, even as early as the budgeting stage, as permit costs should be ascertained and included.

Selecting a Paint System.

Ah, the fun part! The paint! Obviously, choosing quality paint is essential to a mural, but what does that mean? Generally, the answer comes in three parts, which together comprise the “paint system”: primer, paint, and final clear coat.

Primer

First, you must always match the type of primer to the type of substrate or surface that you are painting. Primer can be purchased at any quality paint retailer. Primers will come in gallon or five gallon buckets and they will be labeled as to which surface types they are conducive. Primers are simple and straightforward, but remember that any paint store will tint the primer to any color for no additional charge. A light neutral grey, for instance, is typically preferred to a bright white when painting on a large-scale, highly visible/bright wall—simply for an easier painting experience, or for a particular effect of the subsequent artwork.

The most common surface is masonry of some sort. For this application, a good, time-tested product for large scale painting is 100% acrylic artist-grade paint/primer. As noted above, always begin with a power-washing of the wall, and a 100% acrylic primer made for the same surface type.

For surfaces other than masonry, use a corresponding primer type. There are myriad types for several surface types, and any good paint retailer can provide advice. 100% acrylic, water-based or “water borne” is always preferred for longevity, clean up, and environmental concerns, but some materials, such as certain metals, may require a different type of primer. Consult with a paint supplier about the specifics of your surface if you have questions.

Primer can be applied to the surface by spray, roller, and/or brush. Roller, combined with brush, is the most typical and usually most effective method. Choose a roller type based on the surface texture on which you will be painting. Spray rigs can be rented, and/or implemented by a paint contractor. Sometimes for rougher surfaces, or surfaces that have deep groves or mortar lines, spraying can either cut down on prep time or be the only good solution.

Paint

When selecting the actual paint, 100% **artist-grade** acrylic is preferred. Try to avoid using “house paint”—the type of paint that is tinted onsite at the retail store using a base paint. Artist-grade paint is pigmented at the factory, and the difference is readily apparent when painting artwork at large scale. The artist grade paint is more opaque, rich, and vibrant than house paint.

There are many retailers that offer 100% acrylic artist-grade paint in larger quantities made for large scale application. Typically, these quantities are gallons and five-gallon increments, but increasingly can be found in pints and quarts as well. These paints are similar or identical to other artist-grade paints in nomenclature, i.e., cadmium orange, dioxazine purple, phthalo blue, etc., and also should have lightfastness ratings that describe each color's ability to resist fading in sunlight. Lightfastness ratings of #1 are best, decreasing in resistance from there as numbers increase to #2, #3, etc. Always pay close attention to reds and yellows on this rating as you can greatly affect the longevity of your artwork by simply choosing one type of red over another while not really changing the initial palette at all.

Always use a manufacturer's directions on paint dilution. A mural painter will always want to make the paint as spreadable as possible over the large surface, while also retaining opacity or creating a desired translucency. Typically, most acrylic paint manufacturers advise no more than 10% dilution of water by volume. Acrylic mediums and extenders/retarders can be utilized as well—again, check the manufacturer's advice on such things before using, and perhaps utilize a test area before using at scale. Above all, DON'T SKIMP on the paint. Use quality paint and use a lot of it. Even when translucency is desired, try to achieve the effect by carefully mixing shades rather than “washing” the paint over the surface, as one might prefer on a canvas. By painting as much as possible with undiluted lightfast paint you will extend the life of your mural by years.

Clear Coat

Finally—the clear coat. There are a few different opinions on the type of clear coat to apply to your finished mural, but there should not be any argument as to the need of some type of clear final coat.

The most common type of clear coat used on murals is simply a 100% clear acrylic, which is the same composition as the primer and paint that was used on the mural itself. In this way, retouching can be made directly upon the surface, with a subsequent retouch of clear coat in a very easy manner over its entire lifespan. 100% acrylic clear coat is also available in many different types of sheen. You can choose from matte, semi-gloss, high gloss, etc. Semi-gloss is the most commonly selected sheen, as it most closely resembles the fresh, undiluted paint itself.

Acrylic clear coats can be applied by spray, brush, or lint-free rollers (always try for the lowest nap for clear coat), and are typically applied in one to two coats. Only use products labeled as “non-yellowing.” They are readily available from artist-grade retailers, home improvement stores, and commercial/residential paint retailers.

Certainly, if you are painting a mural in or on a highly-vandalized area or surface, you might want to explore a true “anti-graffiti” type clear coat. There are two categories of anti-graffiti coatings: sacrificial and non-sacrificial.

Sacrificial coatings are typically also water-borne acrylics, and create a protective layer between the final paint and any graffiti that is applied to it. To remove the graffiti, the sacrificial coating is also removed. A new layer of the coating is then applied to the painted surface to protect the artwork from future graffiti. If you choose to use a sacrificial coating, ALWAYS test it on a sample area or mock-up to make sure that removal technique works without damaging the artwork.

Non-sacrificial coatings create a “scrubbable” barrier between the artwork and the graffiti, and traditionally have been two-part epoxy paint systems. This allows graffiti to be removed without removing the coating. Epoxy systems can contain very harsh chemicals, and should be used with caution as they can be highly toxic, and even illegal in your state. However, there are increasingly more environmentally friendly products on the market in many states. It is critical that manufacturer’s instructions are followed and highly recommended that they are applied by certified professional.

Be well aware that once an epoxy system is applied to the artwork, there is no going back. No removal or repair can be made to the painting underneath should you experience spalling, discoloration, peeling, etc. Regarding discoloration, there can also be adverse chemical reactions of this type of clear coat to paint underneath—sometimes an acidic yellowing, or worse. This type of clear coat should only be used in extreme circumstances, over top of the highest grade of acrylic paint, and under the highest of professional supervision. Always consult your local retailers regarding the availability and proper use and disposal of these types of products in your area

Calculating Paint Quantity and Budget

Calculating paint and other materials for a mural project may seem daunting, but if you follow these steps it will help you figure out how much paint you will need. This can be done before or after you have a specific artwork in mind.

- First, determine the square footage of your wall. For example, if you are painting a 10’x10’ mural, you need primer, paint, and sealer to cover 100 square feet.
- Second, read the product labels for the coverage rating on each product you are considering. For example, one gallon may equal 200 – 300 square feet of coverage.
- Third, consider how much of each product you will need to cover the square feet you are painting and add 10% contingency.

There are additional considerations. It’s not that simple! In our example above, you may only need one gallon of primer and sealer, but many different gallons of paint colors depending on your design. Or, if you have a tight budget, you may only be able to afford to buy a limited number of colors and ask the artist to design to that palette. It is better to buy a smaller quantity of high quality paint and work with a limited palette than to use a lot of cheap paint that will fail more quickly. The life of the mural is the highest priority in most cases.

Always plan on at least one, sometimes two, coats of primer and clear coat.

There are other considerations with the coverage rating printed on the labels. Usually, this rating system is fairly accurate in tinted “house paints” but can vary a bit when using primer on a raw, absorbent surface such as masonry, and most brands of artist-grade paints do not have such a rating. A good rule of thumb is to go by the “house paint” coverage rating of approximately 200 square feet per gallon for the artist paints that will be used to paint the mural, and use the manufacturer’s rating printed on the label for all primers and clear coats..

However, the two paints that you will most likely run low, are primer and the color white. This is particularly true when applying primer to an absorptive surface such as concrete or masonry. You will almost always use at least 10% more of each than you initially think you will use. Definitely make sure that you have this covered in contingency and project budget.

Determining quantity of paint by square footage is relatively easy, but translating a design into a paint order might seem rather complicated. Work with the artist who designed the mural to make the final decisions on how much paint to buy. Consider buying paint from a company that will let you return anything extra if it is unopened. This is rare, but worth asking about before you purchase. Once you produce a scale design in color you can pick out all solid colors within the design, roughly apply scale of each, couple that with coverage ratings (allow a little overage for caution), and you should be able to come up with a fairly accurate paint order from this exercise. Colors like that require mixing, such as skin tone—colors that are not going to be straight out of the can, so to speak—are a little trickier to estimate, but again, once you've determined the larger direct colors you can gain a better sense of the more nuanced ones in terms of quantity.

Note that most local stores DO NOT carry artist-grade paints in gallons or five gallon pails. Therefore, if you order online or from a local retailer and are required to pay for shipping, you can run a great risk of NOT having a budget that would accommodate multiple shipments. A good method is to be as accurate as possible on the first order, and have a budget that would allow for a second smaller order—either as contingency or padding.

You will notice that all paints are not priced equally, particularly when you are dealing with the artist-grade variety. On a mural-scale order, this could drastically change your overall budget. So—how does one provide an initial project budget when the design isn't completed or even discussed? Most materials: scaffolding, brushes, primer, clear, etc., will be the same cost no matter what—you just need to know the square footage. On the mural paint, you could either choose to budget for the most expensive colors or a mixture of your favorites and the most expensive.

Developing a Project Budget.

A good budget will include these categories:

- Cost of preparing the wall including power washing, masonry work, etc.
- Size of mural/Square footage
- Purchase of equipment and installation materials (brushes, rollers, tarps, buckets, etc.)
- Cost of Primer, Paint, and Clear Coat
- Rental of Scaffolding or Lift equipment
- Artist Design Fee
- Artist Labor Fee,
- Assistant Fee
- Contingency to cover the “unknowns” such as additional paint or other materials. This is typically set at 10% of the total project budget.

Depending on the location, other items may include:

- Street closures
- Permits
- Portable toilet rentals for artists and assistants
- Cost of on-site water for cleaning up materials or drinking
- A tent or shade structure for artists or assistants
- Other supplies, such as snacks and drinks, particularly when working with volunteer participants
- Opening reception or event

It's great to have access to storage, water, and restroom facilities on-site but if these things cannot be negotiated for no cost, then definitely include them in the budget.

Worksite Considerations.

A mural project should be considered a worksite. Like any construction project, all rules for safety, compliance, and permitting should be followed. Anyone working on the project should be trained about the on-site rules, and if you are working with volunteers or more than small group of, it is recommended that rules be posted for everyone to see.

Getting up High: Scaffolding and Lift Equipment

In order to properly access and paint on an exterior or interior surface that is more than 10 or 15 feet tall, using scaffolding or a hydraulic lift of some type are really the only ways to go. Even on smaller walls, ladders and step ladders are not the safest or easiest options. Even one section of scaffolding as an alternative to a step ladder will save you worry, ease of access, and prevent injury or accident. For larger walls, one must look at the context of the potential mural wall in terms of access below the wall, and whether scaffolding could be placed there or whether another type of equipment would be more conducive. Types of equipment used for murals include:

- Scaffolding
- Articulated boom lift: also known as a “cherry picker” or hydraulic bucket lift machinery
- Scissor lift: a hydraulic lift that just goes straight up and down with “scissor-like” extending mechanism
- Swing stage: a wide, but narrow platform that one sees window washers use on tall buildings. The platform travels up and down wall via cables
- Fraco: a device that resembles a swing stage, but travels up and down a wall via two or more large column-like metal framework

Slope of the surface beneath the mural site is always a concern when deciding how best to access it. Scaffolding can accommodate quite a bit of slope—as one can employ leveling legs with it, but lifts really can't take much slope before their own safety mechanisms will disallow use.

Additionally, some lifts are electric and might require a chord charge overnight, while others are gasoline or diesel-powered. There are many local companies that will be glad to rent the equipment to you or your client for your use.

Most rental companies offer information on a website, but the best way to start is to meet their representative estimator on-site and procure a quote from them. It is a good idea to have the rep visit the site with you because he or she would be able to apply their experience to your situation, potentially saving you money or time, but also perhaps finding the right equipment and solving safety concerns that you might not see. It is a good idea to get quotes from multiple suppliers in order to get the best price..

Usually, it is more cost effective to employ scaffolding for a longer-term project, and a hydraulic lift for a shorter one. But this isn't always the case, and your site conditions may dictate one over the other. In urban settings for instance, you may be required to procure a city permit—sometimes not for the mural, but for the scaffolding—and to provide a walk-through type scaffolding over a sidewalk, and the use of a motorized hydraulic lift may be prohibited in that area or application. Or, there may be certain times of day where loading in of equipment or scaffolding is allowed. A good company rep will know these things, and can help cut through the complexities.

Here is a suggested procedure:

- 1) Contact at least 3 scaffolding companies and procure quotes. Ask them about City/Borough permitting in the proposed area. Ask if they have knowledge of, and whether they handle such as part of the rental;
- 2) Double check or check with local City or Borough permitting agencies for scaffolding install/de-install/duration requirements; and
- 3) Ask about the insurance that the rental company provides.

Again, safety cannot be overstated. On-site, you must restrict access to the scaffolding or lift equipment to avoid incident while work is being done, as well as when no one is present. Utilize common sense and extra caution when volunteers or assistants are present, and limit the number of volunteers and assistants that are present each work session. When and if volunteers are desired, keep them only on the first/lowest level of scaffolding or on the ground. Give them some ground rules including “no open-toe shoes” and “no music head phones” that can help keep you and them safe and focused.

Finally, scaffolding, lifts, paint, water, electricity, brushes, etc., must all have a secure place at the jobsite when you are not painting. Lugging these items back and forth each day is NEVER a good idea. This can also be a deal-killer for site selection, in some circumstances. Know to ask about these things and work them out with the property owner and interested parties ahead of time.

Insurance

Regardless of the scale of your project, you should give consideration to insurance needs. It is highly advisable that you procure General Liability insurance that will cover the project. General Liability will

cover damage to the site and injury to bystanders who are not working on the project. It does not cover people working on the project, employees, or volunteers.

General Liability Insurance is required when equipment is rented. Actual coverage parameters frequently changes, so this must be ascertained from each vendor at the time of budgeting or rental. Typically, insurance is required by each vendor to protect their equipment from damage and injuries during the period of the rental. Most scaffolding and lift rental retailers will offer an insurance rider that one can purchase as part of the rental, but since it is advisable to procure a general liability insurance policy for the entire project anyway, you may add any insurance requirements from the scaffolding retailer to that of your general liability policy for the entire project. This will usually suffice, and not require additional insurance cost.

In addition to General Liability, you may want to consider Volunteer Insurance , which will cover accidental medical expenses, and Workers' Compensation Insurance for employees. Fractured Atlas has excellent on-line resources that explain the different types of insurances.

Choosing an Artist.

There are many ways to select an artist for your public art project. The two major forms of artist selection are to directly select an artist or solicit applications through a call for artists. Many communities have an artist registry that can be consulted or utilized for direct selection, or solicitation. In Pittsburgh, the Office of Public Art's (OPA) *Pittsburgh Artist Registry* is a good resource for artists. OPA also manages an Artist Opportunities List where you can post your artist opportunity. There are many existing resources about best practices for artist selection and the pros and cons of each method. You can learn more at www.publicartpittsburgh.org.

Here are some considerations for choosing artists to paint murals:

- Is the artist talented? Do you like their work? Does their existing work exhibit the quality and/or artistic merit you want your mural to have?
- Does the artist have experience working at the scale of your mural site?
- If your project requires community participation, does the artist have experience working with community members to produce a mural?
- Does the artist have a commitment to on-site safety?
- When you call the artist's previous clients, do they seem happy with their work? Would they work with them again?
- When you interview the artist, are you excited to work with them? Do you feel confident in their abilities?
- If the artist has no mural experience, is this a realistic first project for them? Will they be successful? Are you willing to give inexperienced artists the support they need to ensure their success/to make a good mural?

Artists should always be interviewed in-person or via video conference for a commission before they are awarded the contract. It is a good idea to interview a pool of 3-5 artists to choose the one that best fits your project.

You can use this as a guide, of course—perhaps not all projects would get enough applicants to require a finalist stage—but it is important to meet competing artists and talk through their methods and experience. Even if you directly select an artist from an artist registry, meeting and discussing (if not interviewing) the project in person FIRST is immensely helpful. You would be surprised as to how many times this makes all the difference.

Contracts and Agreements.

It is absolutely essential to have a contract with the artist who is painting the mural. There are no exceptions to this rule. The contracts should outline all of the expectations for design, fabrication, and working with the community, copyright, lifespan of the artwork, the ability to remove the artwork, and the payment schedule for the artist. You can find sample contracts to review at publicartpittsburgh.org.

In addition, you should develop an agreement with the property owner where the mural will be located. Such an agreement should identify:

- Site for the mural
- Responsibilities of the property owner versus the commissioning entity.
- Any work that the property owner has offered to provide, such as repairing the surface, providing a storage area, access to water or bathrooms, etc.
- If applicable, financial commitment from the property owner
- Intended timeline for the project.
- Hours of operation, when the artist and team can be on-site working.
- Intended lifespan of the work.
- Maintenance agreement: who will maintain the mural?

Putting these commitments in writing at the beginning of the process is critical so that all parties understand the expectations and their responsibilities in the project.

Content Development.

The development of the content of the mural is an exciting process. Remember, you hired an artist. Let them do their job! Don't allow the community to dictate all of the mural content unless the artist is asking for their participation. Help the artist connect and understand the context of the site and then allow them time to develop a concept that can be reviewed. If you want the artist to collaborate with anyone to develop the content, but sure that you are clear about that in the beginning and that the artist agrees to that process. Or, if the artist wants to gather their own group of people to collaborate with or find inspiration in other community resources, help them connect with that they need. Remember that murals can be anything—they need not be historical depictions of the area, or

memorials to ideals or individuals or organizations, or “inspirational.” They certainly can be these things, but they can also simply be art (for art’s sake)!

But what is its context? In the urban setting, there is an architectural context of course—a visual one. But many times there is also a historical, social, and other environmental/natural context(s) of a site. The design should have investigated and addressed the total context(s) of the site in some manner—but it never should be bound by that context. The best murals transcend and transform/add to context. They don’t just repeat what is there already. Also—sight lines, legibility, and different viewer perspectives are often overlooked by amateur muralists when designing for a space. All of these are crucial to a successful design.

Each mural design must be thoughtful of its viewers, and respond in design. For instance, one should not include a lot of delicate, intricate design work on a mural that is located 30 feet above the heads of viewers—they won’t be able to read it. But in other locales where one has a captive audience on the ground, respond to that by giving a pedestrian something to look at on their level. When you have both a long sight line/view shed, and multi-modal viewers, consider including elements that work from far away and up close.

It is important that many of the people who experience the wall you are painting on want to experience the mural you want to paint. Take steps to engage residents, business owners, and frequent visitors in the review process of the mural’s content. You can’t please everyone, but taking steps to make sure people are informed and included in the discussion will result in a more engaging process. People are likely to appreciate that you asked for their point of view even if the end result is not exactly what they asked for. Hopefully the finished product will be even better as a result!

Working with Community.

It is advisable to work with the community throughout all aspects of the process. Think of it this way: You are about to create something that the community will see EVERY day. Be a good neighbor. Treat them with respect and involve them in this commission. Here are some suggestions:

- Get permission to use the wall and be clear about how community members will be involved with the project. You don’t have to say yes to every request to participate in every aspect. Work with what is realistic within your community.
- Involve the community to participate in the artist selection process. Ask them to serve on the panel that will choose an artist or ask them to spread the word to artists to apply for the project.
- Invite community members to meet the artist during the design development stage. Host an artist talk or informal gathering for the artist to get to know the place they are working.
- Invite community members to review the artist’s concept and give their feedback. Consider if the feedback will help you improve the mural, or if it takes you off track. The artist may need to develop more than one concept.
- If appropriate, select a few volunteers to assist with priming or painting if the artist is open to this concept and it is realistic for the site.

- Develop temporary on-site signage that explains the project. And if possible, do same for a community website or blog about the project. If people encounter a half-painted wall, they will know what is happening.
- Have an opening reception and invite the entire community to attend.
- Install permanent on-site signage that gives the title, date, and name of the artist. This can be also painted onto the mural by the artist if desired.

Maintenance.

When you are planning to begin a mural, consider the end of the mural as well. There are three questions to ask:

1. What is the desired lifespan of the mural? How long do you want it to last?
2. Who will maintain the mural?
3. Who will pay for the maintenance of the mural?

If you do not have an identified source of funding or a partner who will maintain the mural over time, do not consider your mural to be permanent. Define a lifespan that is appropriate for the budget and entity commissioning the mural.

The contract should outline the responsibilities of the property owner or commissioning agent or third party/nonprofit partner responsible for funding of any ongoing maintenance needs in the agreement, and listing giving the artist first right of refusal for performing the maintenance. Outline “routine items” and “major items,” and define which the artist would do, and which could be done in house or by property owner.

There typically is not very much maintenance required of a mural painting if it was properly applied to the surface or substrate. However, there are always issues of unforeseen natural or man-made incidents, graffiti, and just plain old age. At some point in its life, the mural will need to be partially or wholly retouched. This can be done, but typically not done by your run of the mill “house painter.” It is important to hire an artist to do the repair or retouching work so as to properly replicate the original “hand” of the work, although it may not have to be original artist for the work.

Obtaining a modicum of a “maintenance manual” from the artist is a great idea as well. A simple run down of material types, colors, contact information of artist, assistants, and retailers/vendors used on the job will be essential when it comes time to repair the piece. Additionally--get a scan, or the actual original design to keep. The artist, commissioning agency, and property owner should all keep a copy on file just in case. Beyond keeping an interesting artifact from the event, murals can be totally re-produced from that design if needed, either elsewhere, or upon the original site---if acceptable to the artist and other parties, of course.

Closing Thoughts.

Community murals are a very bold and accessible way to enliven a neighborhood and employ artists. With a little preparation and good design, you can have a lasting landmark artwork in your city that your residents and visitors will cherish.

Think you are ready to create yours now? Hopefully, this brief guide will give you enough to go on--just remember to never be afraid to pick up the phone and ask questions of experts, local or otherwise. This is key. Making art for the public realm is fraught with process—it just always is. But it is also more rewarding than just about anything else you can ever do. It's worth it! And so is your community. Go forth and conquer. The public realm awaits!

About Morton Brown.

Originally from Arkansas, Morton completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Central Arkansas in 1996. While he earned his Master of Fine Arts in painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Morton also worked as a mural artist with the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program before moving to Pittsburgh, in 2001. From 2003 to 2007, Morton helped create and administrate the Sprout Public Art Program, a nonprofit organization that utilized local artists to paint community murals throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. From 2007 to 2009, Morton worked as an art consultant for Pittsburgh Citiparks, and as an instructor at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. Morton was hired as the Public Art Manager for the City of Pittsburgh in 2009, a position he held until his resignation in late 2015. Stationed as the Head of the Public Art Division and housed within the Department of City Planning, he maintained the City's public art collection, developed plans, policies, and implemented new works of public art and programs, and was the staff person for the City's Art Commission. Morton is currently an independent art consultant in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Resources.

Artist agreements/Legal help

Chicago Public Art Group: <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/>

The Office of Public Art/Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, Pittsburgh, PA,

www.pittsburghartscouncil.org/public-art/technical-assistance

Americans for the Arts, www.americansforthearts.org/commissioningaworkofartagreement

Insurance/Fiscal Sponsorship, etc.

Fractured Atlas, <https://www.fracturedatlas.org/>

Paint

Nova Color Paint, <http://www.novacolorpaint.com/>

Golden acrylic paint, <http://www.goldenpaints.com/>

M. Graham, <http://mgraham.com/products/acrylics/>

Utrecht, <http://www.utrechtart.com/>

Dick Blick, <http://www.dickblick.com/>

Murals

Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, www.muralarts.org

SPARC, www.sparcinla.org

Pittsburgh Art Places, www.pittsburghartplaces.org