

2020 MAVCS Symposium Script

April 26, 2020

Haerim Lee

Chicago Mural as Social Infrastructure

Today, I want to talk about my thesis, *Chicago Murals as Social Infrastructure*. I investigate how some public murals embody the voices of the community, including collective voices that have historically been marginalized. The murals are also an expression of creativity, collective activity, and a sense of belonging in an urban space.

These murals assume and have assumed a critical role in revealing aspects of how these communities see themselves and express their identity and history. As an international student from South Korea, I have been examining the history of African-American murals in Chicago since 2015. During that time, I have visited many neighborhoods and built environments on the South Side, focusing my analysis on public murals displayed across various communities. I started to think about how some South Side murals reflect Eric Klinenberg's notion of social infrastructure as "[a physical space where people can] fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors."¹

In this context, certain South Side murals, such as *Major Taylor Trail* (2018), reflect a marriage of community organizations and citizens to transform a space into a vibrant part of the community's shared social space, one that is both of and part of the community. I want to address the process of making murals with the community as a social infrastructure to activate social life.

¹ Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 5.

Along with my thesis, I present artist books in this presentation. By unfolding the accordion books, which contain mural imagery from my writings and texts from the interviews, I attempt to capture and record the mural. The artist books function as a visual archive to contain information of the community murals such as *The Wall of Respect* (1971), *The Spirit of Hyde Park* (1973, restored 2010) as well as contemporary murals such as *Major Taylor Trail* (2018). I imagine creating a table installation with the artist books includes research books. The idea alludes to a library that the audience can go to access the information. Klinenberg argues that certain “physical places and institutions ...shape our social life [and] are just as real as the infrastructure for water, or for power, or for communications.”² Schools, libraries, and other shared public spaces, he argues, not only provide important quality-of-life needs, but facilitate human interaction across class, race, and other factors that otherwise keep people detached from one another and society at-large.

Today, I want to talk about what makes *Major Taylor Trail* an example of social infrastructure. The mural is not just the work itself, but the process by which it was envisioned, created, and produced: *of, by, for, and with* the community, in its planning and the actual artmaking. The *Major Taylor Trail* is a work that involves multiple organizations and individuals in the community. The communities were involved in the funding, planning, design, and painting of the mural with muralist Bernard Williams, transforming the process of producing the work – as well as the work itself. Williams was determined to create the work by involving the community in every aspect of the process, in a way that, as several participants noted, made them “feel safe” about his involvement with them and the larger community. It poses the question—

² 99 % Invisible. 99 % Invisible (blog). Palaces for the People, March 19, 2019. <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/palaces-for-the-people/>.

how are distinguishable elements of the community mural making embodied as the essence of social infrastructure? The process of the mural making was vital to providing an educational purpose. The process accomplishes telling the story of Major Taylor through public art, creating knowledge.

Repurposing and recycling old urban infrastructure into community-based social infrastructure is surging in the US. But more than serving as a venue for social interaction and activity when completed, the mural itself became a magnet for human and social interaction from the moment it was envisioned, from concept to design to completion.

The Major Taylor Trail, like other recent forms of repurposed urban space, required careful organization, time commitment, and civic partnership. It required many core leaders—muralist Bernard Williams, Manhwa Lee from the Architresures organization, and Dr. Brenda Dixon—alongside committed individuals and community members contributing their insight, perspectives, and labor.

For Williams, researching the real-life Major Taylor was an important part of the design before he started to create a mockup of the *Major Taylor Trail*. Williams discovered the story of Marshall Walter “Major” Taylor, who was born in 1878 in rural Indiana but grew up in Indianapolis. Major Taylor started to bike and got his first bicycle when he was about 12 years old. At the age of 13, Taylor went on to bicycle race regularly, frequently calling out racism in the track competition world. By 1899, he held seven world records, then wrote his autobiography, *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World* published by Wormsley Publishing Company in 1928. Williams mentioned how the mural has as an informational purpose of sharing information about the historical figure of Taylor. During the design process, he also

met with members of the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Chicago as well as neighborhood committees.

Dr. Dixon, president of the Major Taylor Cycling club, initiated the idea of making the trail a more welcoming place. She emphasized that before the mural was painted on the bike trail, the space was secluded because one section of the trail was a graffiti-covered railroad bridge which was an eyesore to the community. She said,

(Dixon's voice record) There was the graffiti originally filled with graffiti. Oh, okay. Oh really? Yeah, I do. It's um, I can, um, if you want, I can just search on, send them to you. We wanted to get it cleaned up and make it a point of pride, which was why, um, you know, which is why we chose that location as the first location.

Cause we really want to, we want to revitalize and have the entire seven and a half mile trail that winds and twist through, I think four different words and several different neighborhoods. Um, we'd want it to be a focal point in the point of pride through all of those neighborhoods. But that one was the one that was the biggest eyesore, you know, that. And we knew that with the plans that, that the forest preserve and the other cities, um, had with the cow sack trail that it was a goal to connect the Cal sack to the major Taylor trail. And we just didn't want people to come from the cattle side, from out in the West suburbs. And the first thing that they see w cause literally that bridge is the entry into Chicago. So the South end is Riverdale and the North end, the North end is welcome to Chicago. We did not want this bridge filled with, with graffiti to be welcomed.³

Manhwa Lee, who is an executive director at the Architreasures, explains the process of the planning. First, there is a public initiative called 'Great River Chicago.' It's the city's vision to tell stories around the river, so the mural is also part of 'Great River Chicago' planning.

⁴Also, the Metropolitan Planning Council connected Lee and Dr. Dixon so that they initiated the mural project. According to Lee, the Architreasures organization supported bringing

³ Dixon, Brenda interview. Jan 20, 2020, 6100 S. Blackstone Ave, Chicago, IL, USA, interview by Haerim Lee

⁴ Manhwa Lee interview, first floor west, 3500 S Lake Park Ave, Chicago, IL, USA, Jan, 10, 2020, Interview by Haerim Lee

different committees from the different communities in the design process. During the design process, William shared and embraced the community's perception of Major Taylor. At that meeting, he gave a presentation on the cyclist and his accomplishments. The Major Taylor Cycling Club of Chicago also provided information about history for the mural design. With this background and input, the mural was then carefully designed with the community to incorporate its voice and philosophy.

First Williams brought his initial mockup design to show the community to illustrate the vision of the project. After that, he provided art workshop sessions to the community members so they could participate in the design process, which involved having the community cut images of bike icons, pedestrians, and human icons with simple bike tires and bike traffic signs. Williams gathered these images and integrated them into the design with symbols, text, and figure imagery. The process of the design and the workshop became a time when the artist taught about the historical figure depicted on the mural as well as creating a design for the mural to foster identity and create a sense of belonging.

Dr. Dixon was also on the design review committee for the mural. She said there were some committees that wanted to pick the artist from the nearby Pullman or West Pullman neighborhood communities. However, Williams was chosen among the finalists because the committees were looking for an artist who could actively search from the source material and tell Taylor's story in a way that felt safe and authentic. She said, "We knew that we had a preference for selecting someone that was from the community. However... there was something about Bernard's presentation that made us feel safe... We wanted someone that was going to be willing

to actually go to his source, take the time to really research, go to the source and tell his story the way one of us would have told his story and we felt safe with how he presented...”⁵

She also emphasized how the mural would, when completed, look like “an annotated picture book” to deliver the story of Major Taylor to make him a real person.

(Dixon’s voice record) We knew that we had a preference to it to, to selecting someone that was from the community. However we did, we were not going to compromise selecting someone from the compete from the community for design and concept. And there was something about Bernard's presentation that made us feel safe. We wanted someone that was going to be willing to actually go to his source, take the time to really research, go to the source and tell his story the way one of us would have told his story and we felt safe with how he presented. We want it almost to be like an annotated picture book. That's how he was selected, because of all of the artists his mockup was the closest one to portraying Major Taylor as a real human being while still having it being done in an artistic way.⁶

There were community painting days during the mural project on two days, June 29th and 30th, 2018. Although these were the hottest days of the year, people from all over the neighborhood and nearby communities volunteered to paint. Before the community painting day, Williams and three assistants (including myself) sketched a guideline on the wall to paint. We used the pouncing method, the technique Michelangelo used to transfer his full-scale drawings onto the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Williams also set up little paint containers on the folding outdoor table. On the first community painting day, there were six volunteer participants from the neighborhoods, bike community, and Architresures members. Three African-American high school students joined them.

⁵ Dixon, Brenda interview. Jan 20, 2020, 6100 S. Blackstone Ave, Chicago, IL, USA, interview by Haerim Lee.

⁶ Ibid

He also set up different colors of paint containers and brushes on the folding outdoor table so that the participants could select the color they wanted to paint for the section on which they worked. Then he demonstrated how to do the painting. At the outset of the community painting day, things were relatively quiet as volunteers focused on their work, but then Williams began to play music, such as Michael Jackson's "Black and White," which added to the interaction and energy, as people became to sing and dance while they painted. The entire environment created a sense of excitement and welcoming, dynamics, and nurturing. (Black and White music 🎵)

There was a great impact and outcome after the mural was unveiled. Dr. Dixon noted that since the mural was completed, it has stayed intact, with no graffiti against the work. She suggested that respect for the completed work is an important sign of its impact. "[Graffiti artists] have not touched [it because] they were respecting [it]...[the] community could also see...themselves." ⁷

She also has a future vision of how she wants to integrate the mural experience into the K-12 education curriculum. Because her primary work is a research and evaluation officer at the Illinois State Board of Education, she is interested in adding QR barcodes on the surface of the mural for educational purposes.

(Dixon's voice record) Hopefully hoping to use part of this grant to actually hire someone to write the write out, help us with developing the content or you can call the curriculum if you want to go with K-12 and develop that content and the audio and the video that would, that would be hosted on the trail keepers website that is going to really lend itself to enabling um, a class to really go there and have an interactive, it could be it, the whole trail could really be an interactive field trip. Even though I doubt the kids are going to go on a school is it's going to take kids on a bike from, for seven and a half miles. They really could take them on a field trip. They started Whistler woods.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Lee from Architreasures also shared some vision and interest around the neighborhoods. She said there is a plan to create new murals and new community buildings, which is promising. In a way, the process of mural making will never stop, as the mural is expected to add layers over time. By adding the QR code in the future, the mural space will continue social interaction to create social life.

So, here we are, I want to move on to the conclusion. In modern mural history, particularly in Chicago, the influence of artists of color was profound. For example, Bill Walker was heavily influenced by Diego Rivera's visual aesthetic and philosophy. Chicagoans live in the "built environment," which can carry the risk of a less than sustainable or unhealthy environment. But the impact of the actual mural making described in the case study in this thesis is significant, contributing in important ways - physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

While writing this thesis, I have taken to heart the appreciation for the people who were involved with the mural. My intention was to record some of the contemporary murals in the South Side of Chicago with the people and community in Chicago— bringing historization into the institutional dialogue and academic writing. In a way, my work relationship and all of the process —building a good work relationship with people, reaching out, arranging time for the interviews, participating, being in the mural space, being an active listener, recording interviews, and respecting the oral history—are important components of this project. I explore the idea that the actual process of mural creation in physical time and space can also be important components of "social infrastructure." By grounding my argument in the work of Klinenberg yet expanding on his concept, I hope I have demonstrated the relevance of his theory in relation to the larger visual culture. (Black and White music 🎵)