



Birth of a movement 35 years in the making of sites of public memory

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Perhaps it was the abundance of concrete, or the year-round painting season, or the city full of Mexican workers that made Los Angeles the place where murals began to be a predominant art form. Or perhaps it was because an entire population—the majority of the city— had been “disappeared” in textbooks, in the media, in cultural markers of place, and needed to find a way to reclaim a city of Mexican and indigenous roots.

In 1932 a mural was painted on Olvera Street, the birthplace of Los Angeles, by the great maestro David Alfaro Siqueiros, Siqueiros, the most revolutionary of the Three Greats in materials usage, social intent and content, worked for a period of time in Los Angeles. His 80-foot-long mural *America Tropical* spoke to the exploitation of the Mexican worker. Commissioned by the city fathers for a Bavarian beer garden the mural was intended to depict a kitschy Mexican village scene for the benefit of tourists. Instead, Siqueiros made the central image of the mural a crucified figure.

With increasing demand for low-wage immigrant labor and massive migrations of Mexican and Central American workers to Los Angeles over the last years, this image is even more relevant today than in the '30s. The mural was partially whitewashed shortly after its completion and then fully painted over within its first year on public view, beginning a legacy of censorship that still haunts Los Angeles. In the 1970's, forty years after it painted over, the image began to reemerge from the whitewash. We saw this as a symbol, an apparition coinciding with the growth of Los Angeles's Mexican population and strength of the Chicano movement.

Siqueiros painting the first outdoor mural in Los Angeles prophesied that someday every street corner of Los Angeles would have a mural, brought about by

the freeing of the artist from the tyranny of laborious frescos. Siqueiros predicted that a form of Muralism would exist somewhere between the moving picture and photography. He did not know of computers, but I would like to think, having been a student of the Taller Siqueiros led by Luis Arenal in 1977, that Siqueiros would have embraced the role they are now playing in mural production at the UCLA/SPARC Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab housed at SPARC (the Social and Public Art Resource Center, which I cofounded in 1976).



Murals in Los Angeles were the first artistic medium to support and then shape a movement toward identity and justice that reached a mass population. This artistic occupation of public space forged a strong visual presence of a people who at that time (late '60's, early '70s) lacked representation in public life, with neither voice in elections, nor elected representatives. No person of Latino descent served on the City Council or on the School Board, despite the fact that in actual numbers we were fast becoming the majority of the population. Parallel to and perhaps growing from this new visual strength, many citizens of emerging Latino communities organized, with very little money and freely given labor, toward the mutual goal of improving the conditions of their communities. While many of the early Chicano Muralists were the first generation with advanced degrees in their

communities, a racially unsophisticated society, tied the Chicano artist to the conditions of the barrios, or Latino neighborhoods regardless of their educational status. SPARC was born of the spirit of this movement, taking its name from the notion that it takes only a spark to start a prairie fire. The organization has been intent on nurturing this healthy fire within the city as a whole for 35 years.

As the fire of Muralism progressed, distinctions began to emerge. Apart from its initial purpose of creating a capacity for the imagery of the people to occupy public space, Los Angeles murals spoke to the cultural demands of previously under-represented peoples. Some works became cultural-affirmation images, asserting only that we exist as distinct cultures; others addressed the hard task of articulating and advocating for resolution of issues affecting the places where people lived and worked.

This new social power was not limited to immigrant labor nor indigenous people, but spread to the multiplicity of Los Angeles populations. African American, Thai, Chinese, Jewish and women's murals began to appear on the streets of Los Angeles. Before long, community murals began to attract media attention and documentation. Murals began to tackle larger issues of police brutality, border crossings, drug addiction gang warfare, and other difficulties of a life of poverty and exclusion. Early in the movement space was freely available and uncontested. If you had the paint and the time, the wall and the message were yours. In this environment the movement flourished. In the early seventies a visitor could drive from site to site and could have seen Carlos Almaraz, David Botello, Willie Herron, and I, all painting simultaneously on the streets of Los Angeles.

While Mexico was experiencing the rupture of the Mexican school of Muralism, our movement progressed, common themes emerged, variations on those themes developed and our stories began to crystallize. We consciously avoided Western European aesthetics, instead privileging Chicano popular culture, religious iconography, Mexican calendars, tattoos, street writing, whatever could better and more accurately portray our direct life-experience. In this way, we were able to create a unique and specific art form that spoke to our own lived experience in the barrios and inner cities of Los Angeles.

This movement spread to the rural communities of the Southwest and developed concurrently, though distinctly, on the East Coast.

In 1970, I began working for the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, teaching art in Boyle Heights, a neighborhood with the highest number of gangs in the United States. Similar to the neighborhood I grew up in (Pacoima), Boyle Heights had cultural markers — graffiti — with roll calls written on the walls that told you who lived there, what the neighborhood was called and who was from there. But this stylized iconography often triggered destructive conflict,

part of the contesting of public space by rival gang members. I began working with gang members from different neighborhoods to establish networks between them to promote peaceful solutions to such conflicts. Redirecting gang members' inclinations toward public expression via my own artistic training as a painter, we began painting murals as a way to create constructive cultural markers.

Our first mural, entitled *Mi Abuelita* ("My Grandmother") was painted in Hollenback Park's three-sided band shell, where the Feria de Los Niños ("Children's Fair") occurred annually. This work recognized the primary position of the matriarch in Mexican families as a reflection of our indigenous roots. It also marked the first step in the development of a unique collective process that employs art to mediate between rival gang members competing for public space and public identity. Through this work we formulated a group incorporating four rival neighborhoods within the same team, named Las Vistas Nuevas ("The New View").

Three years later, I initiated a proposal to the Los Angeles City Council that became the first citywide mural program of its kind in the country. More than 400 mural productions were supported through the Citywide Murals Program under the Department of Recreation and Parks before the program was disbanded. Scaffolding, paints, youth apprentices and stipends were distributed by the small staff of Eastside youth from previous mural crews whom I hired to run the program, supporting hundreds of mural sites in every community of the city.



The Great Wall of Los Angeles Model

The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) was formulated as a not for profit organization to become independent from the City government to avoid inevitable censorship and the risk of the creation of “official Art”. SPARC’s first project was the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* mural. Having worked on murals across the 75-mile expanse of the city through the Citywide Mural Program, I was called to a local site not far from my hometown in Pacoima. The site was a concrete flood-control channel built by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Once an arroyo the concrete channel was an ugly dividing line within the community with two dirt belts running along either side.

The Army Corps of Engineers first began concreting river-bottoms in the Los Angeles basin because of the problem of seasonal flooding associated with the Los Angeles River.

This decision to concrete the Los Angeles River would affect the people of the city for generations to come in subsequent planning and development decisions and spiritual discord associated with the land.

The concreted rivers divided the land and left ugly eyesores, carrying the water too swiftly to the ocean, bearing pollution from city streets, affecting Santa Monica Bay and depriving the aquifer of water replenishment through normal ground seepage. In a sense the concreting of the river represented the hardening of the arteries of the land.

If the river overflowing its banks regularly destroyed opportunities for the real-estate expansion that fast became the chief commodity of the fledgling city of the 1920s, then the river would simply have to be tamed. These first decisions about the river made it easier to displace historic indigenous and Mexican communities in the name of city development. If it is possible to disappear the river on the banks of which the city was founded how much easier is it to disappear the stories of the original people?

I worked with the Army Corps of Engineers’ Aesthetic Planning Division to develop a plan for a stretch of the channel running more than a mile alongside two schools and through a neighborhood. A park was proposed for viewing access to the channel walls. I saw an opportunity for a seemingly endless wall. 13-1/2 feet tall and belowground level running miles through the city. The endless wall provided a natural site for a narrative work. Fresh from organizing in the disparate communities of Los Angeles, I was hopeful about a site that necessitated cooperation of a large team. Unclaimed by any one gang, it was an excellent place to bring youth of varied ethnic backgrounds from all over the city to work on an alternate view of the history of the U.S. which included people of color who had been left out of American history books.

The concrete river invaded my dreams, its significance becoming clearer to me as the correlation between the scars on a human body and those on the land took shape in my mind. Standing at the river on that first day, dreaming of what it could become, I saw the concrete as a scar where the river once ran and our work in the channel producing the narrative mural, as a tattoo on the scar. The defining metaphor of what came to be known as the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* became “a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran.”

The *Great Wall of Los Angeles* production began with 80 youth recruited through the juvenile-justice system and paid by a program to employ economically disadvantaged young people. When completed, this project had employed over 400 youth along with 40 historians, 40 artists working under my direction, hundreds of historical witnesses and thousands of residents involved in the production of a half-mile narrative mural. I designed the mural as a monument to interracial harmony as I developed the pedagogy to work across the differences of race and class. As a result, relationships were formed that are now 35 years long. This summer the massive mural was restored with the support of the California Cultural Endowment who granted the project 2.1 million dollars to restore the work and to build an interpretive green bridge over the expanse of the river from which to view the mural.

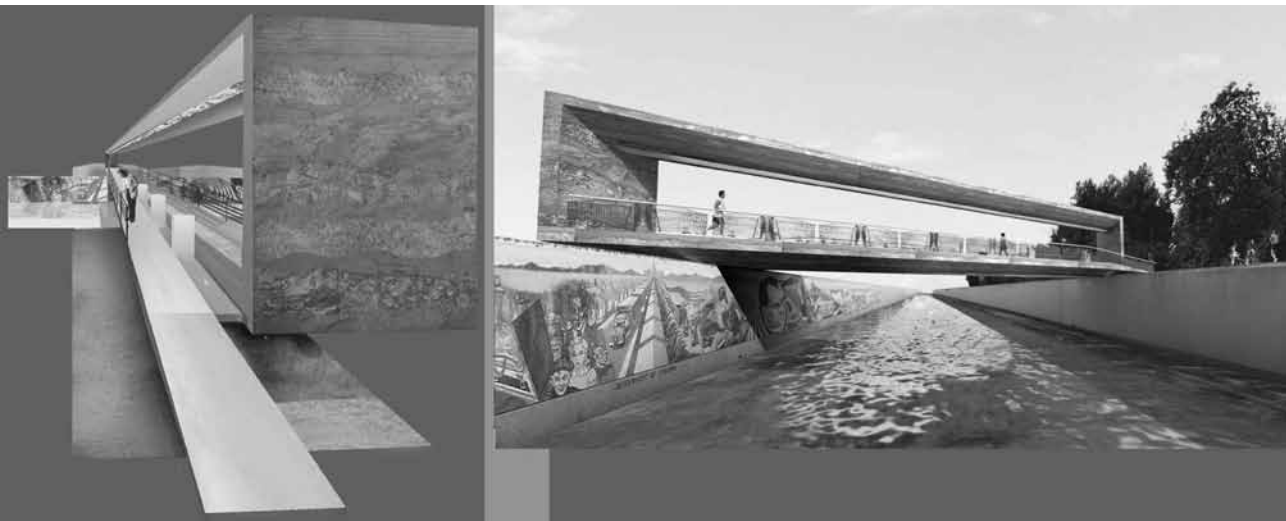
The work has been acknowledged as a site of historic importance. The bridge will be partially composed from the debris of the river and will tell the story of the river correlating it to the stories of the people.

Today, the basic tenets of the early mural movement still hold true.

The interpretive Green Bridge over the Great Wall

SPARC is dedicated to ensuring the maintenance of a tradition that finds expression through the hands of well-established artists and of young people with spray cans. The beginnings of Muralism in Los Angeles are rooted in the need for public space and public expression. In a city where neighborhoods were uprooted through corporatization (as with the Chavez Ravine Sports Stadium) or the construction of freeways through low-income barrios or ghettos, or the destruction of rivers, the need to create sites of public memory became increasingly important.

From successful mural productions, methodologies were gleaned that laid the foundation for subsequent SPARC projects. During its production, one of the youth assistants suggested making the *Great Wall* global. “*We should take what we learned working with different nationalities here in Los Angeles to the world,*” the 16-year-old said. In 1987, we began work that still continues on *The World*



Wall, a portable installation of murals by artists from countries around the world offering expressions of world peace.

The World Wall: a Vision of the Future without Fear

Through the *World Wall* project, artists were asked to articulate a particular moment, an apex of change for their countries that best described the time in which they live and which could benefit people of other countries and realities. The concept of “from the neighborhood to the global” motivated the development of the *World Wall*, a traveling installation mural equal in length to one 350-foot segment of the *Great Wall*, which could be assembled indoors or outside in a 100-foot diameter circle as an arena for ritual and dialogue. These works from Russia, Finland, Israel and Palestine, Mexico, combined with the four painted by me and team members in Los Angeles compose a nine 10x30 ft panel arena for dialogue encompassing the viewer in a healing circle. The murals function as a visual primer for societal transformation toward balance and peace.

This work continues to move internationally adding work as it travels. The next work in progress is from the Canadians, entitled: *The Inuit Sent us a Canary* addressing the global climate changes occurring.

In 1988, the concept of the *Great Wall* was taken to a city-wide level in Los Angeles with the “Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited Program”, which has so far sponsored more than 104 murals by over a 100 different artists from different parts of the city reflecting the issues of diverse groups in their own neighborhoods.



Most recently, my work has led me to experimenting with digital mural-making techniques in our research and teaching facility: UCLA/SPARC/Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, created in 1996 where I also teach classes in Muralism for UCLA.

This new collaboration between SPARC and the University of California at Los Angeles is experimenting with new methods of producing permanent murals via computer technologies. Research in the lab is yielding new substrates for murals, methods of expanding community dialogue via the Internet and murals that can be replicated if censored or destroyed.

La Memoria De Nuestra Tierra Denver International Airport

Most all of my work has been concerned with learning to listen to the land to hear the story hidden there. It is this concept: That the land has memory... and that learning to put an ear to the ground to listen and to understand the spirit of place that has been the basis of my public art making for the last 35 years. I am certain that my notion that the land has memory came from Francisca, my grandmother and this mural is her story.

My mother was born in La Junta, educated in Colorado's segregated school system, and raised in its' segregated housing in the 1920's and 30's.

The simple fact that, even in death the bodies of racially different people were required to remain separate, was what moved me to create an artwork that would give dignity to the Mestizo's story and the stories of countless others who toiled in the mines, fields, and railroads of Colorado. Not only to tell the forgotten stories of people who, like birds or water, traveled back and forth across the land freely, before there was a line that distinguished which side you were from, but to speak to our shared human condition as temporary residents of the earth.



These figures 8 ft in height are walking on water as they come into the Southwest. They are a counter to media depiction of the immigrant as undesirable and part of an “*alien horde*”. Teodoro my grandfather is depicted both as a digital image and as hand painted with the choices he faced in the United States. He could work in the fields, the railroad or the mines. It is a story that has been little chronicled and one for which I was anxious to create a visual record.

The Migration of the Golden People: The Central American Resource and Education Center

This work chronicles the migration in the 1980's of the people of El Salvador into the Pico Union district of Los Angeles. It is composed of images collected from family albums carried out of the country during a vicious civil war in which 75,000 people died. The images are composed of first source materials and were constructed with the assistances of historians, parents, children and community



people. It is both hand painted and digitally produced and applied permanently at the Carecen Center through a marouflouge technique.

Cesar Chavez Monument

The concept of the monument is to commemorate Cesar Chavez's the founder of the United Farmworkers Union work to improve the conditions for the campesino in the California fields, which inspired so many to join his efforts to achieve social justice.

In keeping with Chavez's own ideals, the monument focuses on his beliefs and is designed to be conducive of contemplation and meditation. Modeled on a Mayan corbelled arch combined with mission colonial arches.

The arch includes two important personages to the movement: Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers and Chavez's partner in the movement's endeavors, and Mahatma Gandhi, also depicted in the fields to honor him as Chavez's inspiration for the real possibility of social change through non-violence and spiritual practice. Five byzantine glass mosaics are in the arch. While the Cesar Chavez digital mural lab is working on advancing into the 21st century with new technologies, we are also preserving historic techniques.





Tiny Ripples of Hope and Seeing Through Others Eyes at the new Robert F. Kennedy Learning Center School

It is the newest of my digital works produced in the historic Ambassador Hotel on site where events that occurred changed the course of American History. The work was commissioned for the Ambassador Hotel ballroom where Senator Robert F. Kennedy was murdered in 1968.

The Ambassador Hotel was the site of the Coconut Grove, the early Oscar ceremonies and today has been transformed into the Robert F. Kennedy Learning Center. I produced two 55 arches in what was the Embassy ballroom where Kennedy gave his final acceptance speech in 1968 and upon leaving the podium was shot. Kennedy represented for many the hope for leadership we all dreamed



of and many argue that the country was forever changed taking a turn in leadership from which we are still recovering. This is a digital painting done on computer of a 15ft images for two arches 55 ft each. This image was hand painted on a digital screen. Inspired by this Kennedy quote: “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope”.

If the previous work is about hope then this second arch is about compassion. Therefore the lotus becomes the structure of the second mural. *Seeing through Others Eyes* depicts Cesar Chavez and Robert F. Kennedy at the moment of the breaking of the grape boycott fast. Each blossom represents a different issue that Kennedy said people of our generation (the 60's) would face: war, healthcare, poverty, injustice, education and the environment. Remarkably the same issues we face today. This is the basis of the curriculum of the new high school for Social Justice.