

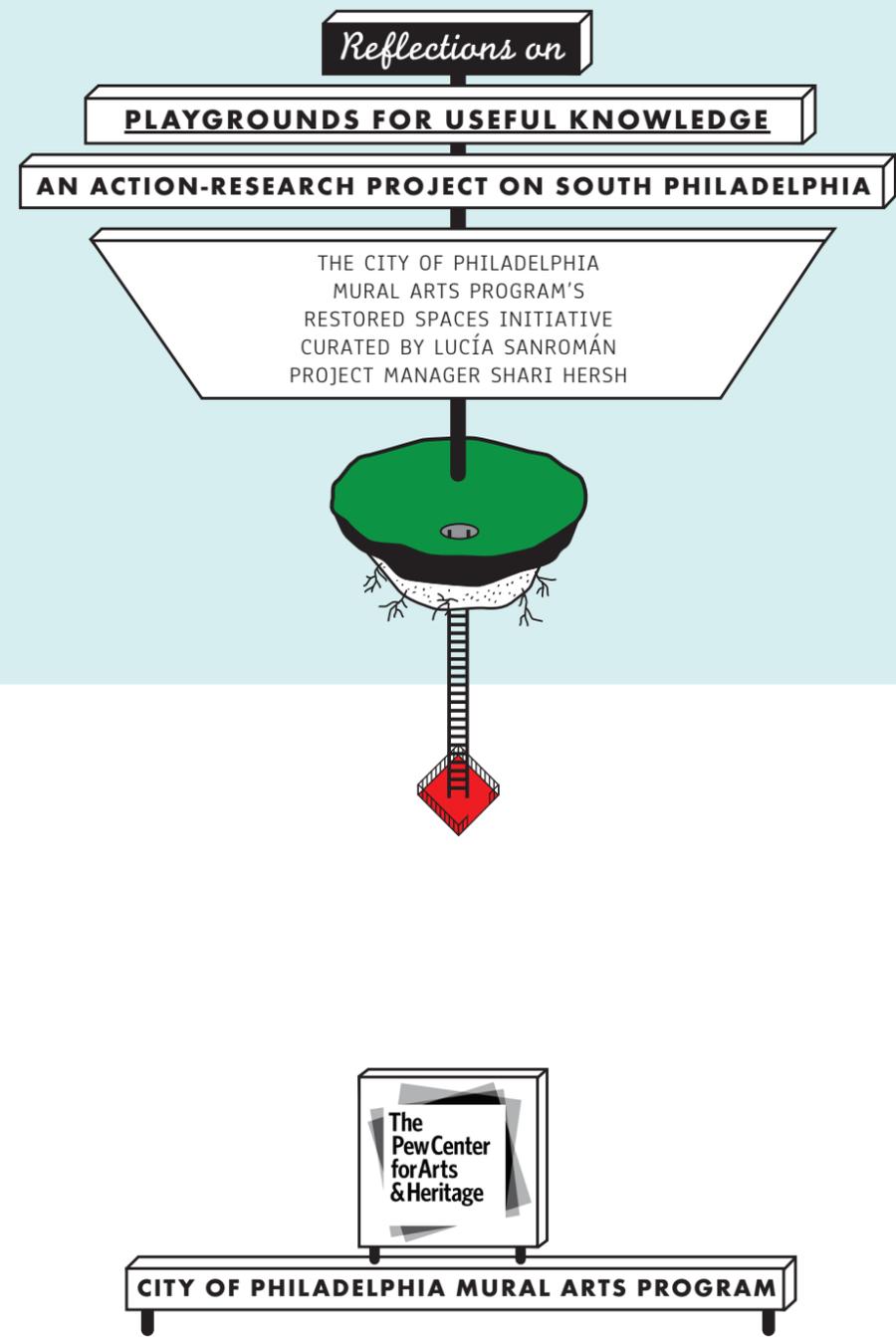
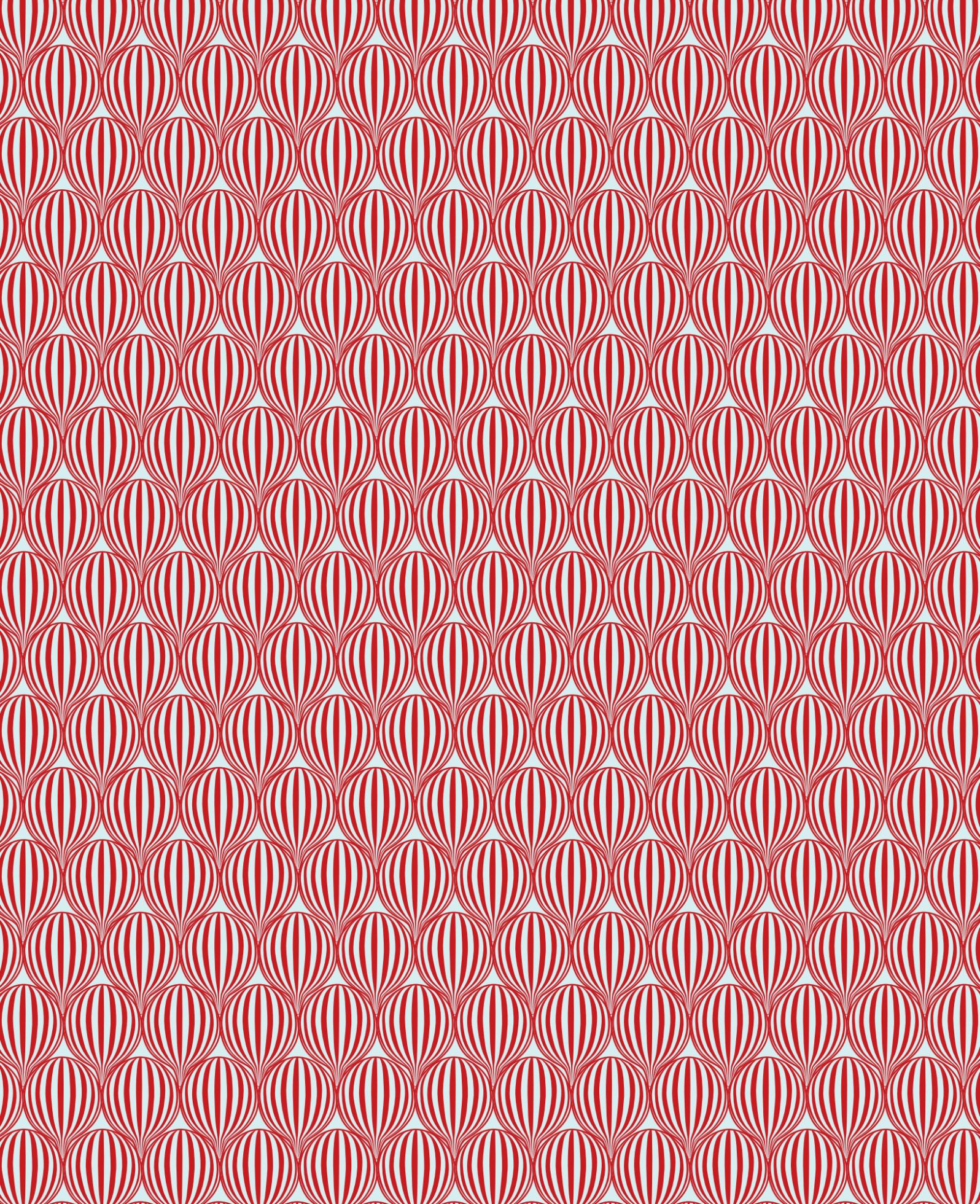
Reflections on

PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

**AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT
ON SOUTH PHILADELPHIA**

**THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS PROGRAM'S
RESTORED SPACES INITIATIVE**





Cohabitation Strategies
Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge

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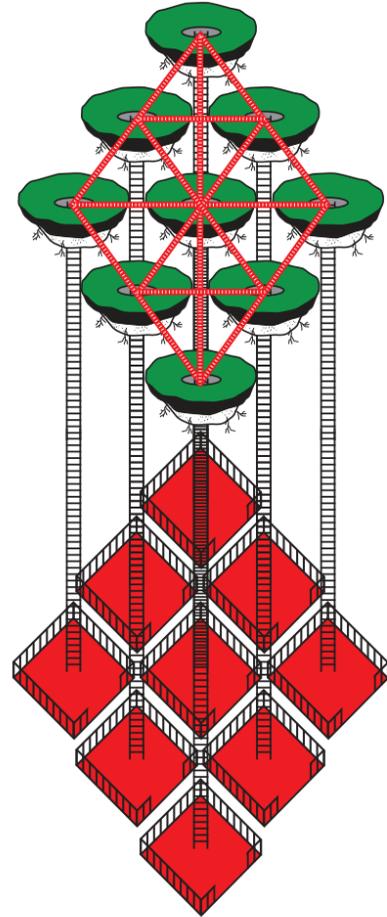
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CURATING AS AN INTERVENTION INTO INSTITUTIONS AND URBAN CONTEXTS

Lucía Sanromán

What does it mean to “curate” institutions, social or political systems, and urban contexts? To begin to answer, let me briefly recall the term’s meanings and history as well as some of its connotations. Curating is currently associated with a wide array of activities, to the point where it is sometimes confused with the words organizing, cataloguing, or suggesting, but always entails a specific point of view, a procedure that in and of itself gives the “curator” authority. While this diffuse meaning is perhaps more reflective of the era of social media, where the individual’s opinions are foregrounded out of the network of social relations, this broadening of the term is less useful than we might think. The term “curation” as we currently understand it in relation to art has its origins in princely halls and palaces,

where a “curator” was the person in charge of the aristocratic collections, caring for paintings and sculptures as well as furniture, jewelry, clothing, and other household goods by preparing and staging them for view or use, often “curing” or mending objects through their restoration and maintenance. A curator was then considered a steward and, in the context of art historical museums that have inherited both the objects and rituals of the court, has become a professional, an expert who catalogues, interprets, and researches a collection and its history, providing a context for its understanding and aesthetic consumption in the present.

While the association of a curator’s activities with elite patterns of consumption is not accidental, contemporary art curating can trace its conventions of display, knowledge production, and institutional and artistic mediation to Harald Szeemann and Walter Hopps, whose work primarily as independent curators in the post-World War period redefined the profession and its relationships to art institutions and artists. Szeemann and Hopps were fundamentally anti-institutional in that they saw their role as one that supported experimental artists who sought to advance Modernist history by challenging established canons. They contextualized the presentation of such work by creating new ways of

seeing generated by the exhibitions themselves, creating a platform of knowledge production. They eschewed art organizations’ bureaucracies and strategies for maintaining a dominant position in relation to the production of the economic and symbolic capital needed for institutional preservation. As is widely recognized, Szeemann and Hopps opened up the possibilities of curating beyond merely overseeing collected objects, becoming in the process cartographers of culture: tracing and bringing to visibility art’s furthest experimental edges and providing novel interpretative frameworks through the format of the exhibition that allowed contemporary art to be associated with the moment’s cultural trends and movements. They saw their role as mediators between artists, art institutions, and their publics and often positioned themselves in productive antagonism to institutions in order to guard the artist’s need for reinvention in the face of the museum’s predisposition towards stability and its need for administrative protocols.¹

While this brief history allows us to trace the task of the contemporary art curator, it only serves as a partial guide to understanding how a curator can or should endeavor to see her role in relation to wider social processes, as a generator of significant institutional changes, or as a professional who can or should shape urban and political sites. However, this is a pertinent and even urgent question today, when more and more artists are developing practices whose aim is not defined by the object as a detonator of new experiences and sensations and frequently do not see the exhibition as their work’s primary frame of reference, seeking instead to enter “the economy of the real,” as Stephen Wright describes the phenomenon of artists abandoning the symbolic, representational realm to engage in activities that can better be described by means other than art or that utilize multiple disciplines to affect urban spaces (Wright, 2004).

As curators, how do we address the extensive array of artistic manifestations that fall under the umbrella term “social practice”? If the historic role of the curator has been to care for, present, and interpret objects housed within museums and other art institutions and displayed using the formal mechanisms of the exhibition, what is our function now,

when the means of many practitioners blur with disciplines beyond art to address the complexities of the public domain? What forms of mediation and negotiation are pertinent when the aim of artistic projects is not to make aesthetic gestures or objects meant to fit within collections and to art histories built on a linear conception of time and independent from other fields of human activity? More broadly, when the artists we curate are in fact creating or altering existing social, urban, and political systems, what is our responsibility?

Engaging with a different history of the term curator, one that takes us to its Latin origins, may provide some answers to these questions. As David Levi Strauss explains:

Under the Roman Empire the title of curator (“caretaker”) was given to officials in charge of various departments of public works: sanitation, transportation, policing. The curatores annonae were in charge of the public supplies of oil and corn. The curatores regionum were responsible for maintaining order in the 14 regions of Rome. And the curatores aquarum took care of the aqueducts. In the Middle Ages, the role of the curator shifted to the ecclesiastical, as clergy having a spiritual cure or charge. So one could say that the split within curating—between the management and control of public works (law) and the cure of souls (faith)—was there from the beginning. Curators have always been a curious mixture of bureaucrat and priest. (Strauss, 2007)

This split between managing civic resources and psychological shepherding serves as a better starting point for understanding the type of mediating, curing, and interpreting I have practiced as curator of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*, the year-long art and action research project by the cooperative Cohabitation Strategies, which is the subject of the reflective essays gathered in this publication.

Created for the Restored Spaces Initiative, the urban infrastructure program at the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, *Playgrounds* began with my analysis of the existing artistic and design methodologies and institutional alliances created by the Restored Spaces director, Shari Hersh. These methodologies sought to develop a branch of Mural Arts’ community outreach through public art that

“...when the artists we curate are in fact creating or altering existing social, urban, and political systems, what is our responsibility?”



¹ This interpretation of Harald Szeemann and Walter Hopps owes much to David Levi Strauss’ essay “The Bias of the World: Curating After Szeemann & Hopps” (see references).

“Playgrounds sought to offer new tools and means for community engagement that can be more responsive, horizontal, and vibrant”

involves environmentally sustainable infrastructural improvements, anchored in underfunded schools and community centers in some of Philadelphia’s most vulnerable neighborhoods. During a previous six-month residency in 2013, my first task was to observe the production framework for Mural Arts in general and of Restored Spaces specifically. While as an independent curator I had inherited the need to establish critical distance from arts organizations in order to generate the most advantageous conditions for artistic production, I saw my role in this case as ultimately benefitting and improving specific aspects of the Restored Spaces Initiative through an artistic project. In other words, like Szeemann and Hopps, I too believe in the necessity of protecting artistic autonomy, but unlike them, this project was conceived as “useful” institutional critique, meant to provide new methodological and structural tools for the institution that would allow it to engage more deeply in areas of public practice that Mural Arts and Restored Spaces were already addressing.

Mural Arts is a unique public/private organization that operates with both public funds from various City of Philadelphia social services branches and private funding from grants and donations to create ambitious, permanent, and ephemeral public art projects. This is an advantage and a disadvantage, as Mural Arts is uniquely positioned to address wide-ranging social and policy issues through its art programs, exemplified by its extraordinary restorative justice and mental health initiatives, while it also exerts undeniable cultural and political power in Philadelphia, leading to the sometimes unintended result of creating a client-patron relationship between Mural Arts and the communities and agents it seeks to serve. Within this context, the Restored Spaces Initiative has developed the necessary foundations for creating urban improvement projects that take the needs of specific communities into consideration. Restored Spaces brought together city funding earmarked for new greening and environmentally sustainable infrastructure from the Philadelphia Water Department and Parks and Recreation, among others with NGO and foundation funding, and focused these resources on a specific school and community center to improve the site,

designing and building new gray water infrastructure, gardens, murals, and other components. Hersh’s methodology was clearly conceived and involved collaborative work with a planner, who was tasked with creating the program for the space. Input from artists and sometimes from social practitioners was included, and the project encompassed a limited participatory planning process with the space’s users—nearly always students and teachers as well as the school’s immediate neighbors.

Several remarkable projects emerged from this process, which pointed towards Restored Spaces’ potential to expand beyond individual schools and affect a wider neighborhood. However, I also observed that the program’s participatory planning process and community outreach were inadequate and needed to be made more robust to offer the genuine possibility of an endogenous social and community process that provided the neighborhood’s voices with as much weight as the institutional directives and priorities of Restored Spaces and its organizational partners. In the summer of 2014, I invited Cohabitation Strategies (CohStra) to submit a proposal to The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage with Restored Spaces to fund an artistic project including both more detailed, neighborhood-wide planning analysis and documentation as well as the tools for Restored Spaces to obtain more resilient, sustained, and constant community input in order to widen its scope to produce larger infrastructural projects at the neighborhood scale. Key to such a project was the development of a cohort of interested, committed, and diverse community representatives to voice the neighborhood’s interests and priorities.

CohaStra seemed a perfect fit for such a task. They describe themselves as a non-profit cooperative whose action-research processes aim to develop transformative and progressive urban intervention projects with a variety of organizations and individuals, including municipalities, activists, and arts organizations, to respond to the desire for social, spatial, and environmental justice.² The resulting proposal, *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*, fits uneasily between urban planning analysis, community organizing, and social practice or dialogical art. Yet it is precisely in this artistic ambiguity and

disciplinary awkwardness that, in my opinion, the value of the project lies, as Stephen Wright explains in relation to multipronged artistic projects such as this one:

So what happens when art crops up in the everyday, not to aestheticize it, but to inform it? When art appears not in terms of its specific ends (artworks) but in terms of its specific means (competencies)? Well, for one thing, it has an exceedingly low coefficient of artistic visibility: we see something, but not as art. For without the validating framework of the artworld, art cannot be recognized as such, which is one reason why it is from time to time useful to reterritorialize and assemble it in an art-specific space. (Wright, 2004)

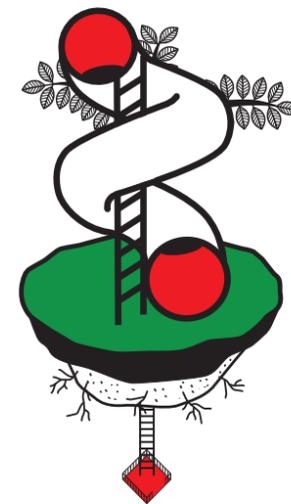
Playgrounds sought to offer new tools and means for community engagement that can be more responsive, horizontal, and vibrant than those already in operation in previous Restored Spaces projects. Yet, their process often did not look anything like art, and its visible outcomes such as gatherings, activities, festivals, and an urban planning document operate in the world as events and processes other than “art.” What frames their practice as art, however, is their insistence on occupying the slippage between disciplines—the transactional junction between community organizing and artistic authorship and between urban planning and community engagement, for example. In fact, *Playgrounds* grows from and inhabits the contradiction implicit in such transitions for the sake of re-imagining what urban planning and civic organizing can be once they are pushed out of their normative and institutional boundaries by the creative restructuring only art allows. Such work, however, is made operational by functional “art world” structures—in this case, the commissioning organization is a famed public art institution, and the project is managed by a contemporary art curator and by Hersh, an extraordinary public art producer. This allows *Playgrounds* to maneuver within and outside art; as Wright observes, “since it is not partitioned off as ‘art,’ that is, as ‘just art,’ it remains free to deploy all its symbolic force in lending enhanced visibility and legibility to social processes of all kinds” (Wright, 2004).

Playgrounds’ conception, tasks, and execution were developed by CohStra members Lucia Babina,

Emiliano Gandolfi, Gabriela Rendón, and Miguel Robles-Durán, who are its authors and whom, for both strategic and practical purposes, I related to as artists, although their work actually involves other disciplines and additional collaborators, foremost amongst which are urban planning, urban anthropology, organizing, participatory theater, and design. Indeed, anthropologist Beth Uzwiak played a fundamental role, which she describes in more detail in her text in this book. The timeline and several key deliverables, however, were made necessary by the parameters of the Pew Foundation grant, which we received with gratitude and without which this project would not have been possible.

As granting organizations tackle art projects that look like anything other than art, and as the artwork’s intentionality increasingly changes and improves the social and physical conditions of place, it becomes harder and harder to establish parameters for the evaluation of such projects within the framework of aesthetics. Therefore, the grant had several structural requirements, including residency periods, the hub component Hersh’s essay discusses in more detail, and a two-part publication of which this is the second volume and that includes a key analytical essay of the whole process by Maria Rosario Jackson, who was invited from the inception to accompany and assess the project. Pew also asked that there be moments of intensified, public visibility or impact distinguished from more intimate or invisible social interactions, all taking place within a rather punishing year-long timeline from November 2014 to November 2015.

In twelve months, CohStra had four periods of fieldwork residency, beginning in mid-November to mid-December 2014 with an intensive stage of far-ranging research in Philadelphia to determine the specific neighborhood where the project would be founded and to suggest a site for future concentrated Mural Arts and Restored Spaces intervention. The second period of residency took place during the last two weeks of March and marked the beginning of community interaction in South Philadelphia, which became the focus of CohStra’s project. A third residency took place from mid-June to mid-July.³ Each residency was marked by key “actions” that were



² As described on their website, CohStra’s strategies focus on these points:

- (1) Producing new spatial relations between citizens through the design of urban pedagogy frameworks, community workshops, and urban campaigns that call for and exercise the right to the city in all its derivatives.
- (2) Researching and projecting the complex ecology of cities by employing trans-disciplinary methods of analysis, with the purpose of producing useful and operative knowledge on how to address new urban initiatives and/or specific urban problems.
- (3) Formulating non-speculative and collective property and pursuing local initiatives that encourage the production of alternative property models: community land-trusts, limited equity cooperatives, co-housing schemes, and the development of experimental models of living.
- (4) Transforming everyday life: the design and development of parallel social structures for the commons, community-managed housing, cultural initiatives, autonomous infrastructures, transportation alternatives, and food sovereignty.
- (5) Developing alternative, contentious, and collective labor processes in urban or rural areas: informal markets, work cooperatives, occupations, communal farms, guilds, and urban unions.
- (6) Speculating with radically new urban imaginaries: stronger local solidarities, communal politico-economic subjectivities, social networks on larger scales, and parallel urban economies.

³ A detailed description of the research methodologies, scope of action, work, and conclusions reached during each period are offered in this publication’s companion book titled *Playgrounds of Useful Knowledge: An Action-Research Project on South Philadelphia*, specifically in the chapter “Cohabitation Strategies’ Action Research Framework.”

conceived as playful moments of public interaction in the South Philadelphia hub space at 632 Jackson Street, where various community stakeholders culled mostly from local civic and community organizations interacted through activities that used play to softly query neighborhood residents' dreams, desires, and preoccupations. As described on the project's website, *Action 1: Sharing Knowledge* involved community members and representatives of local organizations who were "invited to share their knowledge, experiences and vision of the area through the exchange and performance of stories and personal narratives." Committees were formed to address urgent local issues that emerged from this conversation. *Action 2: A Space for Urban Reappropriation* took place on July 18 and through participatory theater and other means dealt with the participants' aspirations for the area's urban development. On September 19, Action 3 moved out of the hub space and into Mifflin Square for the *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival*, which brought together members of the diverse and sometimes competing communities that make South Philadelphia such a vibrant and multifaceted site.⁴ The final event was a convening on November 13, 2015, organized primarily by Hersh and her team with input by CohStra and me that presented the findings in the form of a report, the first in our two-part publication.

For more information, see <http://www.playgrounds.restoredspaces.org/convening-2/>

My role in the relationship to CohStra's process was to provide a wider context for their project, asking them to conduct an in-depth and complex urban planning analysis gathered in the report publication, while at the same time helping to negotiate the project's social and institutional aspects. Both conceptual and administrative, my job was to help sharpen ideas and strategize about process, meet the many and constant deadlines, and understand and consider Restored Spaces' priorities. But my task was also largely one of mediation between CohStra, with their at times intuitive methods, and Hersh, who as project manager and Restored Spaces' founder, often found CohStra's approach unnecessarily veiled, proprietary, and non-collaborative.

As with many other social practice projects that aim to address the city and its complicated dynamics, conflict was in many ways a productive engine. In *Playgrounds*, this conflict manifested itself most obviously in CohStra's constant resistance to the various timetables and deliverables required by the grant (written by all of us with excessive optimism), which in reality imposed a nearly impossible calendar of production with continuous pressure to produce something as abstract and ephemeral as a social network of constituents. Conflict also manifested itself in miscommunication between the artists and Hersh, who, as Restored Spaces' representative, expected the project to be a collaboration and not a commission. In addition, I used my curatorial authority to push forward the project and meet deadlines, particularly concerning the production schedule of the report publication, also causing conflict.

To negotiate these rough spots, I placed myself squarely between the artists and the institution, often ending up on the side of artistic autonomy over cooperative horizontality to provide CohStra the space to maneuver the complexities of their all-too-quick immersion in South Philadelphia independently and not as Mural Arts representatives. At the same time, I worked towards being fair, respectful, and attentive to the needs of Restored Spaces, Hersh, and her team, as they also faced the same deadlines but had the added stress of representing Mural Arts in the area and continuing the project and its community relations beyond the *Playgrounds* timeline, often without knowing what CohStra was working on and with whom. CohStra's resistance to sharing the social relations as they were established has required Hersh and her team to re-stitch themselves into an existing community in a way that seems unnecessary and works against the model of resiliency and participation we were hoping to achieve. Nevertheless, hand in hand with Hersh, we managed to give CohStra a space of relative freedom as they negotiated the relationships that are at the core of this process on their own and with their team.

Furthermore, conflict may in fact be at the heart of CohStra's practice, as they oppose anything that ratifies the forces of capitalism in shaping the city. As such, they often did not

wish to create consensus but wanted to provoke, critique, and deconstruct the operative models of production—of the city, art, urbanism, and social relations—that maintain and support existing power structures. Implicit in this is the potential to deploy their position as "outsiders" in the sites and contexts of encounter, which allowed them to be relatively independent. In *Playgrounds* CohStra was an outsider to both Restored Spaces as an institutional scaffold and Philadelphia as an American city, since CohStra's four members are foreigners and do not live in the city. I served as a translator between these distances.

Sometimes uncomfortable and difficult to "curate," CohStra's position is an important corrective to the overly simplified image of the social practitioner as an antidote to conflict. Their work complicates the image of the individual artist or collective who creates consensus in the place of far-reaching dissent and dysfunction and provides creative but quick solutions to persistent and systemic social problems. As Chantal Mouffe writes, "democracy cannot survive without certain forms of consensus, relating to adherence to the ethico-political values that constitute its principles of legitimacy, and to the institutions in which these are inscribed. But it must also enable the expression of conflict, which requires that citizens genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives" (Mouffe, 2010).

Playgrounds provides in-depth analysis of South Philadelphia's urban and political conditions when the area is currently poised at the knife's edge between becoming yet another gentrified neighborhood or being a haven for ethnic and economic diversity. As was my intention from the outset, this meticulous work is now in the hands of Restored Spaces and Mural Arts as they take the information and constituency CohStra gathered and move towards making precisely the "real alternatives" Mouffe describes by coalescing social process with policy initiatives as only Mural Arts can, speaking with and not for the varied and spirited communities that comprise South Philadelphia. This is an encouraging and remarkable step that suggests more appropriate and respectful uses of art and design as Mural Arts moves beyond making art in the city towards remaking the city.

What does it mean to curate institutions, social or political systems, and urban contexts? This project has given me some possible answers: It means to understand the competences of institutions, artists, places, and their communities in order to choreograph careful but significant changes, providing learning opportunities to expand the capacities of all involved. It means bringing together disparate stakeholders, asking them to listen and interact on behalf of each other and not only for their individual or institutional gain as they collectively redefine their environment. It means utilizing urban research as a tool for ground-up civic reinvention. It means addressing conflict and confusion, even welcoming it, to both acknowledge their presence in the social sphere but also their potential as harbingers and catalyst for personal growth, which subsequently has its echoes in institutional evolution and, if taken further, can also affect far-reaching cultural and political structures. For contemporary art curators, it also means a willingness to dissolve the familiar boundaries of our profession to develop new frameworks to position innovative extra or trans-disciplinary artworks that inherit the potential to create new imaginaries from art but now enter, with equal measures of negotiation and vision, into the hopeful uncertainty of social relations and everyday life.

"Sometimes uncomfortable and difficult to 'curate,' CohStra's position is an important corrective to the overly simplified image of the social practitioner as an antidote to conflict."

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CONVERGENCES BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHY AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

Beth Uzuiak, PhD

The observations in this essay are based on my involvement in *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* as an urban ethnographer (for four months) and later as a community organizer (for four months). The co-produced book *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge: An Action-Research Project on South Philadelphia* details the many successes of this complex collaboration between Restored Spaces, Cohabitation Strategies (CohStra), and curator Lucía Sanromán. In this essay, I intentionally discuss some “on the ground” challenges that emerged to reflect on processes of community engagement and to offer a few thoughts as this project continues to evolve. Two questions drive my reflection:

- 1) What can ethnography contribute to socially engaged public art projects?
- 2) How do we create ethical and transparent community relationships even when the outcomes of such projects are unknown?

ETHNOGRAPHIC BEGINNINGS

I jumped into the research process after CohStra completed its citywide assessment of Philadelphia and had selected South Philadelphia as the project site. During the first two weeks of research, I worked alongside CohStra member Lucía Babina during her Philadelphia residency and then continued interviews and participant observation for the next four months with the goal of identifying prominent neighborhood concerns and needs; current threats, fractures, and dissonances between residents; and places of convergence. Lucía and I regularly communicated via Skype as the project took shape and worked together when she was in Philadelphia.

The goal of this second phase of research was a better understanding of

who lived in South Philadelphia and the histories of how groups and individuals arrived there, but also a better understanding of how citywide policies on immigration, housing, development, and green space affected residents in different ways. CohStra also wanted to gain a sense of movement in the neighborhood. Research questions included: what organizations, community groups, and collaborations existed? Who was reacting to the recent increases in housing prices and taxes and in what ways? What were the existing relationships between different organizations, and between these organizations and various city entities? How did people in the area define and enact community? How were people articulating the most pressing local concerns? What did various people see as barriers and assets to community change?

I was positioned as both an outsider and insider in the early weeks of research. I am a long-term Philadelphia resident and had been living in South Philadelphia for six years. Over fifteen years, I have been involved in a range of research projects and artist residencies in the city addressing immigration, changing community relationships, poverty, and civic participation. As someone who lives in South Philadelphia, I was able to have candid conversations with some residents about histories of competition and cooperation between community groups. I was, however, unfamiliar with Cohabitation Strategies, and my knowledge of Mural Arts and the Restored Spaces Initiative was anecdotal.

As an anthropologist, I was drawn to CohStra’s open-ended process and the collective’s sensory and playful approaches to community engagement that can enhance qualitative research. As a research methodology, ethnography brings the everyday to critical light and positions it as a place of potential transformation. It relies on long-term immersion in a “field site” as a way to understand everyday life systematically from the ground up. Ethnography can reveal local concerns and contribute to community organizing and policy interventions (Biella, 2008).

CohStra positioned its use of ethnography as one component of its “action-research” plan. For decades, different iterations of action research have existed as an effort to

decolonize the research process. Ideally, participatory action research integrates community members in the process of staking out a research agenda, conducting fieldwork, interpreting data, and communicating and applying research findings.

CohStra’s research methodology may be best understood as “strategic” or “tactical” action research, a time-limited intervention whose main results (holistic knowledge of community concerns) were meant to inform *Playgrounds* collaborative interventions in the neighborhood and had less emphasis on community ownership of the research process.

UPSIDE-DOWN ETHNOGRAPHY

During the citywide phase of research, Mural Arts had facilitated CohStra’s access to key stakeholders in the city. Mural Arts also arranged a few of the very early interviews in the second phase of research, including conversations with leaders of local organizations, school principals, and professionals involved in housing and city development. Leveraging leadership in this way provided access to key institutions more quickly, but it was a different process than that of typical ethnography, which tends to approach those with more institutional power after gaining a broad sense of the research site.

This method was also used to address the limitations posed by language barriers, and in this respect it was successful most of the time. Many participants whom I approached for interviews were actively involved in local projects through employment, community associations, ethnic or religious-based organizations, or citywide campaigns. Leaders and staff members of local agencies as well as artists and organizers shared their sophisticated understandings of local power structures.

Some leaders selected others within their agencies to attend meetings when they could not and spread word about the project through their networks. Other early participants were generous in sharing contacts and suggesting other community members for us to approach. Over time, we were able to engage multiple people within different groups and to gain a better

sense of the diversity and difference within groups. However, by working in this way, a few key stakeholders became gatekeepers, which made it more difficult for us to engage people with less power and/or less linguistic access to English in the same community.

Furthermore, some constituencies’ previous interactions with Mural Arts influenced their response to the project. As the research process progressed, I listened to a wide variety of opinions about Mural Arts and its various programs and initiatives in the area. Some participants were very candid about their desire to be involved with Mural Arts, as they perceived the organization as well positioned to influence future interventions in the neighborhood. A few organizations refused to become involved in the project because they were already committed to other ongoing Mural Arts projects. Still another neighborhood group verbalized the ways in which they felt previous Mural Arts projects had prioritized certain groups over other groups. The fluid aspects of the *Playgrounds* project exacerbated this constituency’s suspicion towards the project. Without a clear idea of the project’s outcomes, this group was reluctant to commit time and resources to it or to ask others to be involved.

A top-down research strategy can create an oversimplification of power within and between groups that are themselves complex and diverse. We augmented this approach through participant observation—for example, attending community events and meetings and approaching residents who were not institutionally affiliated. Overall, responses to the project were both positive and generous, and a core group of residents consistently attended meetings and participated in the actions. This core group was a diverse one, comprised of community leaders, activists, artists, organizers, local residents, and business owners. However, limited time and resources were available to create targeted outreach strategies for community members and organizations reluctant to participate.



“...ethnography brings the everyday to critical light and positions it as a place of potential transformation.”

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

When learning how to discuss this project's collaborative and experimental aspects with residents, I described myself as someone curious about an evolving process. I was learning about the *Playgrounds* project, its conception, and its aspirations at the same as community members. In some ways, the lack of preconceived outcomes for the project allowed me to connect with some residents: we were going to see what happened together. Some residents were curious when I explained that one of the project's intentions was for Cohabitation Strategies to help Restored Spaces explore co-production and to test new ways of collaborating with community members as part of its project design. Residents were enthusiastic, and they wanted to be involved in the feedback process and to share opinions.

Others participants were hesitant. One concern that arises in ethnographic research as well as socially engaged art projects is how to engender credibility and buy-in, especially without presenting participants with tangible pre-determined outcomes. How can participants come to value the process of collaboration without fixed goals when daily life presents myriad competing needs? How can this process engage residents equally—including residents with long histories of disenfranchisement, newer residents adjusting to life after living in refugee camps, or residents who have recently moved into the area because adjacent areas have gentrified? Is equal participation ever possible or even desirable?

Some select leaders and community organizers I approached were understandably leery of yet another project in a neighborhood ripe with "initiatives." How would this project be different, they asked? One participant remarked that he or she could not risk participating if the project might fail, as failure could further demoralize the community. A few participants spent weeks attending events and watching interactions before opening up during discussions or bringing colleagues and friends to meetings. Participants continued to ask questions and initiate discussions

about trust during these meetings. A few community organizers with excellent ties to ongoing citywide campaigns were reticent about becoming involved unless the project could clearly articulate shared goals or ways it would contribute to ongoing campaigns. Some participants expressed discomfort with the fact that the written language used to describe the project—terms such as "spatial imaginaries" and "collective inhabiting"—were too academic and inaccessible, especially to limited English language users.

This hesitation may also be due to the rise of "community participation" as a hallmark of neoliberal practice, meaning that projects intended to engage civic participation in actuality call for individuals and organizations to step forward and provide services that the state is unwilling or unable to provide, such as clean streets. For example, research reveals that beautification and other projects that rely on volunteerism without attempting to change discriminatory policies can instill a classist, white, normative idea of home ownership and what "community" looks like (Harrison, Hyatt). When not tethered to action, feel-good palliatives such as "civic responsibility" and "community participation" threaten to depoliticize, ignoring what caused local disinvestment in the first place as well as the reasons why social inequalities have deepened in recent years.

The divergent community responses to participation may also indicate the complexity of initiating "play" in the midst of social fractures and state abandonment. How do we insist on time for imagination in the same moment that public education is eroding? Or when residents lack access to health care? The fact that some residents nevertheless did and continue to respond to open-ended and experimental tactics indicates a hunger for convergence, a willingness to find connections with others, and, for some, a desire to tie this convergence to social change efforts. It is this hunger that allowed *Playgrounds* to succeed.

The reactions to CohStra's open-engagement tactics may also reflect what Restored Spaces is up against in transforming ideas of what public art can be, in this case moving beyond the perception of Mural Arts as an organization that simply creates murals. Residents may expect public art to

improve a neighborhood's aesthetics or to transform disused public spaces into ones that increase the neighborhood's resources and health. Challenges emerge when public art's emphasis shifts from production to the process of engagement itself, especially when potential participants find the written language used to describe the project esoteric.

COMPLEX COMMUNICATIONS

During my research, I spent most of my time independently in the community and had little exposure to the evolving relationships between Restored Spaces, Cohstra, and the curator, Lucía Sanromán. I mainly communicated the results of my research and organizing to Lucia Babina via Skype and not to the Restored Spaces team. Later in the project, Lee Wolf, an intern, assisted with on the ground organizing. Together, Lucia Babina and I created the research and outreach plans, culled stories from the community that would later be used during the actions' performative aspects, and pursued ways to activate the broadest possible participation. My understanding was that CohStra wanted to manage the research and outreach in order to mitigate community conceptions of clientalism presumed to be part of other Mural Arts projects.

This overall communication structure may have been strategic and may have created the productive tension necessary to challenge entrenched methods. It certainly allowed Lucia Babina and me to direct the research and organizing and for these aspects of the project to evolve as organically as they could given the overarching project framework. Unintentionally, the research, and thus the community relationships, became divorced from the "on the ground" management necessary to make the actions happen. While research/community organizing and project management were in a co-dependent relationship, it was ironic that those of us in Philadelphia (the Restored Spaces team and I) rarely communicated directly with each other. The introduction of the hub space and the workshops, events, meetings, and actions held there as well as de-briefing meetings after the actions facilitated some communication later in the project.

The tight time frame between

actions also required each project member to make independent decisions or work in smaller teams. The sheer amount of work necessary for the actions' success (as well as the writing and production of the *Playgrounds* research report, which happened at the same time) coupled with the distance built into the communication structure meant that each project member's extensive "behind the scenes" work was at times invisible to other members.

Perhaps this communication structure allowed the actions to succeed; I am not sure. I do know that the three large actions would not have happened without the expertise and wizardry of the Restored Spaces team—Shari Hersh, Julius Ferraro, and Margaret Kearney—including but not limited to obtaining city permits, sourcing materials and food, setting up and breaking down structures, communicating with contractors, and providing door-to-door outreach. Furthermore, Lucía Sanromán provided feedback in collaboration with CohStra when I faced specific challenges.

Despite and perhaps because of the "siloing" in some of our work, *Playgrounds* covered an immense amount of ground in the very short time period between conception and execution. Because of the project's communication structure, however, transferring ethnographic knowledge about the project from me to Mural Arts has been challenging, mitigated to some extent by Restored Space's commitment to continuing the relationships created through the *Playgrounds* project. Ethnographic relationships, similar to community relationships formed through socially engaged art practices, are difficult to measure and can engender a vulnerability that is often overlooked because it is difficult to quantify. Knowledge is not simply documentation (passing on field notes or contact information, for example) but is embedded in personal relationships and shared experiences.

LOOKING FORWARD

In my opinion, the ethnographic research was successful in providing *Playgrounds* with a foundational understanding of citywide and neighborhood concerns and in creating a blueprint from which to grow more nuanced local information over time. As with many applied research

"The fact that some residents nevertheless did and continue to respond to open-ended and experimental tactics indicates a hunger for convergence, a willingness to find connections with others."



projects, CohStra’s “action research” was influenced by a time-sensitive grant framework and institutional expectations. CohStra’s playful methodology, perhaps the *Playgrounds* project’s most unique and magical quality, was at odds with these constraints at times. The project’s open-ended aspects created tension for some community members who remained hesitant or suspicious about the project’s goals. Unsurprisingly, play is also what created an opening, a place of convergence, and a place of future potential. Even after the final action, new participants were coming forward, eager to see where the project might go.

There are also ways in which open-ended processes clash with the more directed goals of community organizing. While there are positive outcomes when communities take on shared responsibilities, there is a risk that, when not tied to campaigns for social change, “participation” can become a handmaiden to the very policies that have increased social fracture and disenfranchisement, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Because of time constraints and the fluid engagement tactics at the core of CohStra’s process, *Playgrounds* attracted people who really wanted to be involved, those who were already engaged in similar initiatives, those who were looking for new ways to connect with others, or those who viewed the engagement as strategic way to leverage power in the community via the resources of a well-positioned city agency.

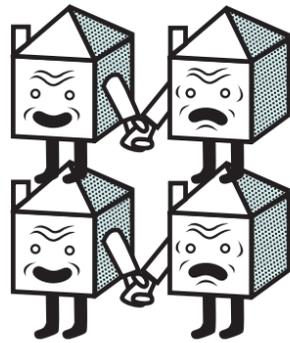
Looking forward, it is worth questioning whether this is a sufficient engagement tactic in a neighborhood where racialized marginalization and competition for resources continue to drive wedges between residents. In an obvious way, extending an invitation (or in some instances many, many invitations) alone does not make people feel safe in their participation, nor does it change the reasons that some residents refuse to be at the same table as other residents. At the same time, approaching communities as discrete entities carries its own troubling assumptions. In the case of *Playgrounds*, there simply was not time for a more nuanced exploration of these complexities, despite recognizing them as ongoing concerns. How can future outreach/engagement balance the desire for “equal representation” with the

concern that such representation can become tokenism?

One way to do so is to consider a robust enactment of ethnography, an enactment that places community organizing as part of an ongoing action-research process rather than a discrete part of the project and is rooted in ethical transparency. Even if an open-ended socially engaged art practice’s outcomes are unknown, it is important to develop clear and concise explanations of projects (even to explain that the project is an experimental pilot) that are accessible to the widest possible swath of community members. Such efforts should include basic language translation in emails, website content, invitations, and promotional material.

In addition, without an open-ended and playful engagement that intentionally attempts to address power relationships inherent in working with a large institution, project participants may continue to rely on Mural Arts not as a collaborator but as the entity with resources, access to key stakeholders, and the power of final decision-making. The difference between a socially engaged practice that creates opportunities to listen to community voices on one side and community members working together to co-create ways to vocalize their concerns on the other is a slight but important distinction.

Both ethnography and socially engaged public art practices need space to grow organically, to change shape in response to everyday encounters, and to be challenged through community feedback. The process of gaining a sophisticated understanding of a community requires a tireless and, in the case of a large institution with multiple projects in the same area, coordinated presence in the community. When ethnography is part of a social engaged art practice, it can provide us with a better understanding of the pluralities, contradictions, and differences within communities and help address the complexities of shared community-based work. It is both exciting and challenging to imagine the future and envision possible ways this convergence can be tied to community-initiated actions in South Philadelphia.



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FROM THE LENS OF COMMUNITY ARTS

Phari Hersh

The *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* project, structured by curator Lucía Sanromán, was designed to help the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program’s Restored Spaces Initiative as well as Mural Arts as a whole to grow our community engagement practice. This endeavor allows Mural Arts (not just Restored Spaces) to undertake a series of ground up projects over an entire area and over several years. However, in order to achieve this growth, Sanromán and CohStra positioned the project as a critique of MAP’s community process, creating a working dynamic that, perhaps inevitably, included conflict. Conflict is not always productive, but it seems clear to me that the significant learnings of *Playgrounds* are largely a product of the challenges posed to the Restored Spaces structure and to frictions and fusions between the project’s authorial, “avant-garde” processes and the processes of a community arts organization.

MURAL ARTS, RESTORED SPACES, AND COMMUNITY PRACTICE

Through Mural Arts’ emphasis on the larger good of a community, we are able to garner significant partnership and trust. Curator Aimee Chang says (paraphrasing Transforma artist Rick Lowe), “an ability to focus on a larger project rather than solely on an artist’s vision is critical to winning the confidence of others working to create positive change” (Chang, 21-22). I believe such an ability is at the source of our relationship to the citizens of Philadelphia when it is at its most positive: when they embrace our presence.

In her insightful evaluation of the Mural Arts Program, produced as a conclusion of her curatorial residency with MAP, curator Elizabeth Thomas remarked, “Within the landscape of public arts agencies in general, in my estimation Mural Arts’ greatest strengths are its long term commitment to the city of Philadelphia, its institutional belief in art as a vehicle of change, its networks of collaborators and facilitators, its desire to engage a wide range of citizens in its work, and

RIGHT:
(L-R) Beth Uzwiak, Carlos Pascual Sanchez, Sovannary Heang, Rebecca Wanner, and Leela Kuikel at the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge Neighborhood Convening*.

“[R]estraint of the individual artist’s voice is an inherent outcome of community practice. Through the lens of a shared value of a community (whether defined by affinity or proximity), the authorial prerogative is transformed into something new. This sublimation of the artist’s authorial voice can be a source of productive creative tension and is present in many Mural Arts projects. The interests of the community, artists, and other stakeholders intersect and influence the outcome.

This dispersion of creative power is a source of investigation for social practice artists. Such practice is infused with dynamic feedback; artists have been experimenting with dialogue, with durational process, and with infrastructural work as methods to develop comprehensive and systemic change and to create a context for the activation of their collaborators. These works typically have an element of shared labor central to co-production and aspire to shared power.

RESTORED SPACES METHODOLOGY

The Restored Spaces Initiative operates at the learning edge of Mural Arts practice in the exploration of co-production. Communities, artists, stakeholders, and partners act as co-collaborators to strategize, plan, and execute physical projects. We have employed a flat (non-hierarchical) planning process that includes interdisciplinary professionals and transparent planning and decision-making in nearly all of our projects. The projects move from a master plan into specific project planning, collecting partners and collaborators as synergies develop.

For example, at Bodine High School for International Affairs, youth, faculty, staff, and the neighborhood association worked alongside artists, landscape architects, architects, a water department engineer, and Philadelphia School District representatives from the departments of the Office of Capital Programs and Facilities and Operations. High level school district officials were involved as needed for technical decisions. Approximately 50% of the project’s resources went to wages for

over 130 youth, reentry workers, and artists who designed and fabricated the project. They were compensated for over 100 hours each and often more. The project was integrated into an English class, two science classes, an art class, and two afterschool clubs. It was the focus of one Temple University class and included young apprentice artists from Tyler School of Art and Saint Joseph’s University. The project was the focus of two Mural Corps groups (art education classes at Mural Arts) for two years.

Restored Spaces sites have been selected in various ways, but their boundaries and goals are defined through collaborative planning. From the beginning, one desired outcome of our work with CohStra was to push the work of Mural Arts and Restored Spaces in a more foundational direction.

In practical terms, this project, initiated by Lucía Sanromán, is built on the assertion that Restored Spaces in particular and Mural Arts in general can leverage our considerable resources in a more holistic way by inquiring about the preoccupations of a community and the individuals within it before initiating projects.

COHSTRA’S PROMISE

In *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*, CohStra’s promise was to build on the model of Restored Spaces and to create a “community-led process-based approach” that would result in “an evolution in forms of participation and co-production” (Cohabitation Strategies, 5). They offered an “opportunity to deepen our ability to work from within the community,” to work from the ground up, and “to generate new models of inclusion and social participation” (Sanromán, 2). By beginning a research and community process before a site or action is determined, CohStra works to build a context for longer-lasting and greater impact on a city and its residents.

The friction arose from the way the project’s production radically departed from Restored Spaces’ familiar role, where we typically couple production with a supportive, collaborative infrastructure in which we discuss an artist’s goals and aspirations with him or her and offer support, expertise, and ideas based on our considerable experience and relationships. Most often there is

shared responsibility for community engagement that we consciously divide, share, or distribute according to the affinities, strengths, and knowledge of a given artist and team. Production responsibilities and division of labor vary on an individual project basis. There is always some form of collaborative decision making with the “beneficiary” of the project (community). Meaningful impacts on the community are created as much through the project’s methodology as the project’s physical products.

It is important to clarify what we mean by collaboration as a counterpoint to a more autonomous process, especially since CohStra’s work is informed by community needs, desires, and preoccupations from its very outset. One example would be the design of the third action, the *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival*. CohStra autonomously determined a festival layout. They decided to break the festival up into four parts (‘powerhouse’ or performance area, ‘workshops,’ ‘kids’ union,’ and a ‘picnic area’). They mapped out the park, they decided to disseminate information through program stations, and they designed a structure of decorative lanterns that framed the ‘powerhouse.’ Local organizations certainly contributed to the program, providing performances, information-sharing workshops, and kids’ activities, but they did it through a predetermined format and a physical platform that the artists designed. This is an example of authorial practice.

What Lucía Sanromán sought to cultivate between Mural Arts and CohStra was a project in the tradition of the avant-garde, or exhibition model. It was not important for Sanromán that the project be based on collaboration between CohStra and Mural Arts. Rather, what was most important was that the artists broke certain expectations. Grant Kester explains the avant-garde model like this:

Beginning in the early twentieth century the consensus among advanced artists and critics was that, far from communicating with viewers, the avant-garde work of art should radically challenge their faith in the very possibility of rational discourse. [...] Art’s role is to shock us out of this perceptual complacency, to force us to see the world anew. (Kester, 12)

The “perceptual complacency,” which is key to Sanromán’s critique

of Mural Arts’ practice, and which this model and CohStra’s work are meant to address, is Mural Arts’ “client relationship” with the communities where we work. She, and others, have noted that communities expect this particular relationship when we arrive, making it difficult to form any other type of relationship, including collaboration, and leaving the communities as “beneficiaries” without real agency or stake in the work.

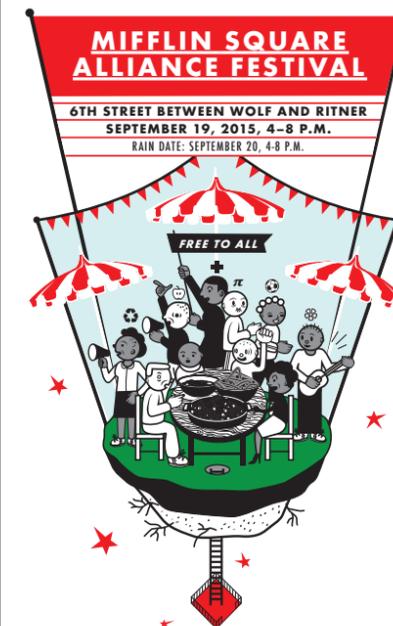
In order to break down expectations of both the community and Mural Arts, CohStra was given almost unilateral authority over the project’s direction. Sanromán, in order to cultivate and protect this model so foreign to us, acted as curators do in the exhibition model. As the sole or primary communicator with the artists, she was mediator, connector, and partition, creating at times a complex and indirect relationship with CohStra that was often both mediated and puzzling to negotiate, particularly in the instances of production and community interface.

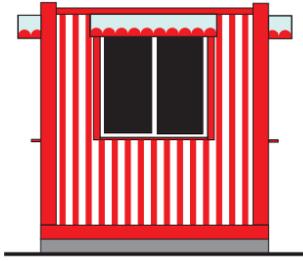
What we gained was a break with our traditional role that prohibits a more organic, bottom-up interaction. We are able to retain this transformed role in the form of a thorough report produced by CohStra, our own experiences in the project, and most importantly, a series of relationships that community organizer Beth Uzwiak, along with CohStra (and at times the Restored Spaces team), fostered in the community.

The engagement they engendered among the South Philadelphia community is greater than the sum of its parts. With Uzwiak’s considerable labor, expertise, and ethical commitment, CohStra was able to activate something much larger than itself, the Restored Spaces team, or the local organizations and individuals that participated. CohStra was able to catalyze many talented people who contributed to the community’s further activation and who remain committed agents of the future of Restored Spaces projects in South Philadelphia.

FRICITION

To realize the unique vision of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* locally, the project included from its origin the establishment of a hub. The hub concept, introduced by Mural Arts





into CohStra's practice, is an example of the evolution of community practice, in which a "third space" is created, a "public space" that is a commons or a neutral place, a platform for the discourse or activity defined by the participants themselves. The use of a hub space has evolved over time among artists and other practitioners (including Mural Arts) who experiment to generate durational and infrastructural tools and to challenge norms of power.

What distinguishes the hub from much of the rest of the project is that it is a point where Mural Arts' community practice and CohStra's conceptual, avant-garde authorial practice combined to create new possibilities. The concept of a local hub was included in the original grant application at the insistence of Mural Arts and is a continuation of Mural Arts' investigation into new tools of community practice. Specifically, it is an element that I have used in the past, in Restored Spaces projects and others, to increasing effect.

Traditionally, CohStra prefers a "tactical" approach, appropriating public space where they can find it and moving without the burden of permanent real estate. The power of many of their previous projects has hinged on the expertise with which they do this. Though some CohStra members viewed the hub as a burden, in contrast, other CohStra members viewed it as a prototype of their visionary and utopian proposal of a "playground for useful knowledge." All of Mural Arts' community engagement skills were needed to make the hub a reality. We searched for and selected public space (in constant contact and collaboration with CohStra), and we partnered with outside experts (the LandHealth Institute) to envision a cleaning process and debris reuse with low environmental impact. The Restored Spaces team worked alongside the LandHealth Institute team and reentry workers to clean out and improve the lot, which had been an eyesore for the community. We met with neighbors and built relationships. As Rick Lowe said of cleaning at a recent talk, "it's a quotidian everyday process of making right."

CohStra utilized the lot to great effect in its own actions. As the collective wrote in its report:

In a neighborhood that suffers a great deficiency of public space, this

small plot became a "relational device" that allowed us to start investigating what should or could be done with available space. Opening up space for exchange and collaboration with local residents and stakeholders made clear how rare this opportunity is in a neighborhood where most resources are focused on achieving basic means of survival. The first Playground for useful knowledge was intended to be a prototype, as a space where everyone could exchange ideas and strategies for improving the neighborhood. (Cohabitation Strategies, 93)

Their actions in South Philadelphia formed around the concept of the third space, necessarily or not. Two of their three major actions occurred there, taking the form of curated conversations between leaders and, later, a wider group of residents. Between these actions, the hub hosted a series of meetings. The hub was not necessary to hold meetings, but it became both an accessible and comfortable host area in a neighborhood in which space is contentious—particularly public space—and a physical embodiment of the conceptual "playground" CohStra planned from the beginning.

Beth Uzwiak, the ethnographer and community organizer whom CohStra hired for this project, described the hub as a tangible thing people could grab onto to understand CohStra's often difficult-to-grasp methodologies and specialized language. The hub remained without the traditional Mural Arts branding, was loosely defined, and became a vehicle for CohStra's practice of creating a context for interaction.

This lack of branding would have likely been impossible without CohStra's authorial practice. Spurred constantly by CohStra's desire for anonymity and nonpartisan presence, we all actively fought against the branding which is reflexive within Mural Arts. This certainly helped CohStra operate outside of the client relationship often felt in Mural Arts projects and which is key to Sanromán's critique of Mural Arts.

FUSION

The project's strengths and weaknesses, which lay in both CohStra's work and our own, highlighted for me the complexity of working in an expanded platform of

production. The project's larger goal remains shared by Sanromán, CohStra, and Restored Spaces/Mural Arts. This endeavor positions Mural Arts (not just Restored Spaces) to undertake a series of long term, ground up projects over an entire area. The project is an enormous leap in our practice and underscores our commitment to the role of culture in "the rights to the city." I am immensely grateful to both Sanromán and CohStra for *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*. Regardless of its difficulties, it has been groundbreaking work for us.

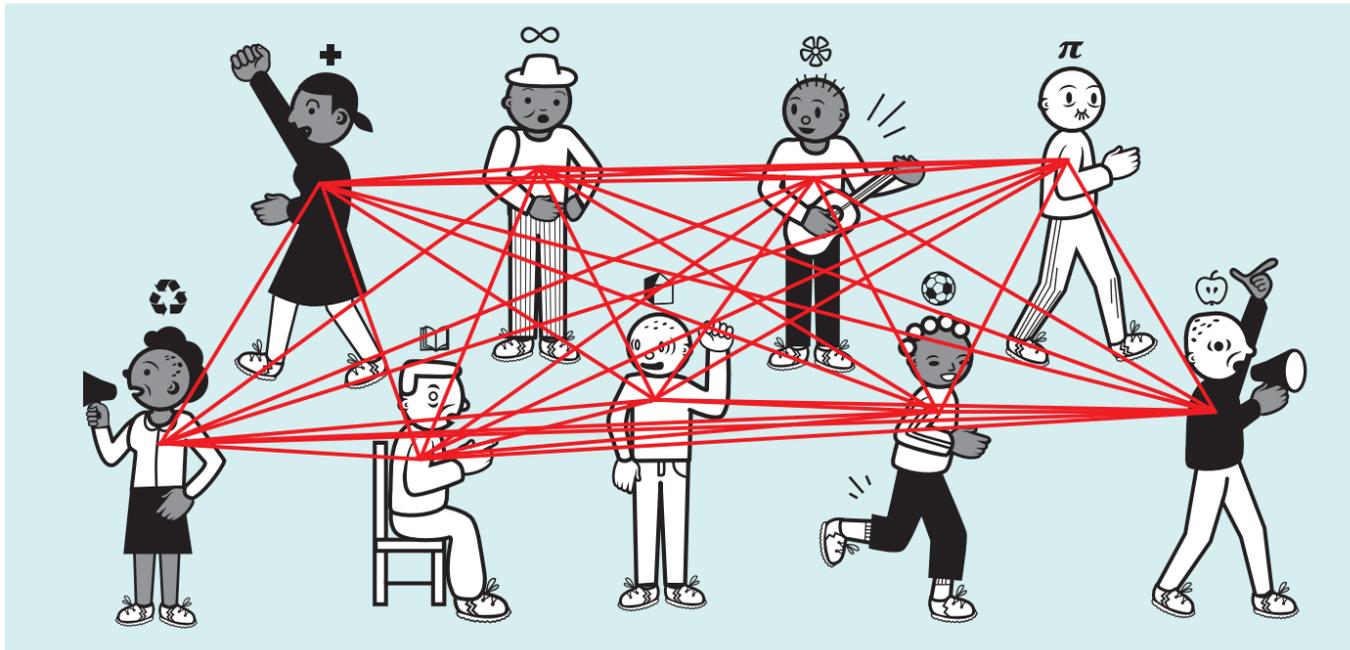
In conclusion, the different approach a curator brings to a project, the specific methodology of an artist or collective, and our methodology should be more openly discussed and articulated at a project's onset. Through identifying the values and non-negotiables of each party, an infrastructure reflective of such factors could be determined and agreed on as we build an expanded platform of production.



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STRETCHING PLANNING AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

*Maria Rosario Jackson,
PhD*

In 2015, the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program invited me to observe, interpret, and reflect on *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*, an experimental project involving an unlikely assembly of players committed to helping improve socio-economic, environmental, and physical conditions in low-income neighborhoods. As a researcher with urban planning roots and a career-long focus on the role of arts and culture in low-income communities, I observed the project to extract what could be instructive for people interested in collaborative, neighborhood-focused, arts-based strategies for community improvement and social justice. The opportunity to examine this work is especially timely in light of evidence that arts-based strategies intended to help address the challenges of low-income urban communities are of increasing interest to urban planners and community developers, select policymakers, funders, community leaders, and artists alike. This essay examines elements of

the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* project with the intention of rendering insights and recommendations helpful for both Mural Arts/Restored Spaces as well as Cohabitation Strategies.

PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE: GENESIS AND INHERENT CHALLENGES.

Instigated by Lucía Sanromán, a curator pushing the edges of curatorial practice in avant-garde and social practice art forms, *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* involved the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program's Restored Spaces Initiative; Cohabitation Strategies (CohStra), a collective comprising European and Mexican urbanists, designers, and artists; and ultimately some residents and organizational leaders of an economically challenged and ethnically complex South Philadelphia area—a nexus of several neighborhoods that CohStra dubbed the “South Seven” anchored by Mifflin Square.

Both the Restored Spaces Initiative led by Shari Hersh and Cohabitation Strategies began operations in 2008. The Restored Spaces Initiative works to transform often neglected or abandoned spaces into meaningful, environmentally sound, and sustainable cultural assets through the efforts of community stakeholders

and artists. CohStra seeks to create artful projects—part research and part creative community action—that address and critique capitalism's effects on low-income, often marginalized communities and that encourage play and imagination as a central tactic for community change.

By pairing CohStra and Mural Arts Program's Restored Spaces, Lucía Sanromán specifically intended to help Mural Arts interrogate and deepen both its approach to community engagement and its project execution in low-income neighborhoods. Such a project was attractive to Mural Arts in general, given the organization's intention to keep going beyond its dominant reputation as an organization that makes murals. The opportunity to work with CohStra was attractive to the Restored Spaces Initiative in particular, given Shari Hersh's openness to exploring creative and beneficial ways to work in Philadelphia neighborhoods. My primary interests in observing the project were to examine how Restored Spaces would be challenged by the collaboration with CohStra, to observe how CohStra would be stretched to better understand the likely benefits of this particular kind of work for low-income neighborhood residents, and to extract insights and questions to advance this field of work.

Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge is described in detail in an earlier essay, so I will not repeat that description here. However, I would like to highlight some characteristics of the work and key players that I think are significant. Both CohStra and Restored Spaces have been at their respective practices for about seven years without a formal, critical assessment of their approach. Through this engagement with CohStra, Restored Spaces made an intentional attempt to interrogate, assess, and expand its practice in communities. Shari Hersh and her team sought to better understand the implications of working differently in a neighborhood. What does it mean to focus more holistically on a neighborhood, rather than on a project? What does it look like to pursue community engagement in a different manner? What does an open-ended project with a less tangible focus look like? How does it work?

While the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* project was not specifically, primarily, or officially intended to test

CohStra's practice, the trials associated with the project's execution in fact did lead CohStra to become more reflective and conscious of the values, beliefs, inclinations, and logistical requirements inherent in its work.

All parties involved in the project experienced significant “firsts,” which could be seen as the project's inherent challenges. This project was CohStra's first time working in a US urban context (the collective has worked in other contexts foreign to its members in the past, but never in the US). It was also the first time CohStra worked with a quasi-governmental entity like Mural Arts and the first time the group executed a project within a significantly truncated time frame. It was the first time the curator, Lucía Sanromán, mediated between CohStra and Restored Spaces or similar entities. She found herself challenged to define and invent her role on the fly, acting sometimes as a bridge, translator, and buffer between the two. It was the first time Beth Uzwiak, the ethnographer, community organizer, and South Seven resident who worked with CohStra to execute the project, had been involved in such a collaboration; she too was challenged by the short time frame as well as the need to modify her own practices as an ethnographer. This project was the first time Restored Spaces worked with a curator in residence and also the urban planning-and-arts-fused method espoused by CohStra. Finally, many community members would be challenged for the first time to accept (or decline) an invitation by foreigners and strangers to engage in open-ended play and imagination in the face of serious community issues and urgent needs.

Another challenge inherent to the project's design revolved around the nature of CohStra's residencies over the course of the work and the role of the curator. CohStra's members were in Philadelphia for only periodic stays. As such, sustaining the project in the interim periods fell to the project's constants: Beth Uzwiak and the Restored Spaces team. While a constant presence and ultimately responsible for the work on the ground, the Restored Spaces team was purposefully kept at a distance from the project by Lucía Sanromán so as not to unduly influence CohStra's process. The Restored Spaces team's simultaneous distance from and ultimate responsibility for the work (and its reputation) emerged as a significant source of tension. On the

“All parties involved in the project experienced significant ‘firsts,’ which could be seen as the project's inherent challenges.”





one hand, one could argue that Restored Spaces' involvement could have facilitated and expedited some elements of CohStra's work. On the other hand, one could argue that Restored Spaces' deeper involvement could have resulted in processes too similar to the very practices that it sought to challenge.

EIGHT ELEMENTS OF PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

From my perspective, the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* project is best understood as having eight key elements:

- (a) city-wide quantitative and qualitative research and analysis
- (b) site selection
- (c) exploration of the selected site's needs, assets, agency, practices, current issues, and threats
- (d) selection and development of a physical hub
- (e) cultivation of community relationships and core community participants
- (f) planning and execution of art-based community actions and creation of a community agenda
- (g) delivery of methodology, new knowledge, and community connections in the South Seven to Restored Spaces
- (h) reflection

CITYWIDE RESEARCH: TOWARDS DELIBERATE, RECURRENT ANALYSIS OF CONTEXT

CohStra began its work by delving deeply into the city through quantitative and qualitative research, producing a series of insightful maps and observations about ongoing community plans and city initiatives as well as insights into community organization and agency in various neighborhoods. The research was conducted to familiarize CohStra with Philadelphia in general and to inform the selection of the area where they would ultimately work in particular. The depth and breadth of the research

produced and compiled—the interplay of maps, extant community plans and initiatives, together with insights about community agency—are impressive.

Given its decades of work and deep political connections, Mural Arts is without a doubt an informed player in the Philadelphia context. That said, the quantitative and qualitative research CohStra delivered provides a level of detail and analysis potentially useful to help guide more strategic Mural Arts engagements. Contextual information, perhaps on an annual basis, can help Mural Arts/Restored Spaces assess the plausible impacts of its engagements more critically, especially as the organization seeks to deepen and diversify its contributions in service of a more just and equitable city. Integrating a periodic social science-based city-wide analysis of Philadelphia into Mural Arts' already considerable practical and intuitive understanding of the city seems like a valuable feature to consider. This capacity could be provided by designated Mural Arts staff (if staff have the skill set for this kind of analysis) and/or through relationships with local quantitative and qualitative researchers with mapping capabilities.

SITE SELECTION: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PLANNING RESEARCH VS. EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

CohStra went to great lengths to identify candidate sites for their work and strongly emphasized the socio-economic and socio-spatial characteristics of the places they considered. Conducting social science-based research to arrive at a selection certainly is important. However, in written accounts of how the site selection played out, I think that CohStra underplayed the fact that its ability or inability to socially penetrate a community is a key selection factor. While deliberation over findings from traditional research methods was emphasized, CohStra conducted other types of inquiry as well. Members of CohStra visited neighborhoods and engaged community members and leaders to test and consider the extent to which they could establish a viable connection in the time allotted. With seven years of community engagements under its belt, CohStra has an experience-based

awareness of what types of communities best lend themselves to the kinds of projects it pursues. Such communities are frequently composed of immigrants or migrants (also foreigners) and tend to have a high level of fragmentation. Consequently, they are porous and more amenable to exogenous influence. While the socio-economic statistics, related maps, and notes on key initiatives matter, the site selection ultimately comes down to whether CohStra's members can actually work with community leaders and residents within the available timeframe.

Given the characteristics of CohStra's members, the time constraints, and other features of the project, the area eventually called South Seven proved to be a smart choice.

EXPLORATION OF SITE CHARACTERISTICS: GENERAL VS. PROJECT-DRIVEN

In its usual practice, Restored Spaces engages in deep exploration of site characteristics. However, the main difference between Restored Spaces and CohStra's methods has to do with point of entry and reliance on an intentional, ethnographic approach. Restored Spaces engages in site-specific research, but this research is typically tied to a particular project or opportunity; in contrast, CohStra's approach is more open-ended and considers a community's general and specific material needs, configuration of community services, local cultural practices and cultural values, religious practices and considerations, formal and informal land use patterns, socio-economic conditions including housing affordability, and conditions for small businesses and retail, among other issues. CohStra's comprehensive approach and the extensive contributions of Beth Uzwiak as ethnographer rendered insights about the community that certainly have implications for how Restored Spaces envisions its role going forward.

Shari Hersh has already recognized the value of this approach and is beginning to explore the practical implications of focusing on a neighborhood in a more holistic fashion, deploying the skills of ethnographers to inform the work.

In my opinion, this pivot from project-driven, site-specific research to a more general, open-ended approach

to understanding a neighborhood has immense value. A general approach lets specific project opportunities be interpreted more thoughtfully within the larger context of the neighborhood (and city), thus making more meaningful and strategic projects possible. A greater general understanding of neighborhood context also enables appropriately calibrating expectations about a given project's plausible impacts given other community issues and dynamics.

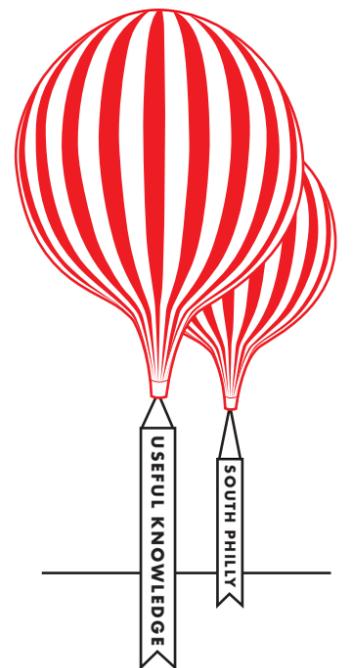
SELECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PHYSICAL HUB

While there was some tension around the timing and approach for creating the project's physical hub on Jackson Street, both Restored Spaces and CohStra shared the inclination that a designated physical space where community connections could be fostered and strengthened was crucial. A physical hub for the work is part of both CohStra and Restored Spaces' usual method. Both parties also seemed to share the belief that the creation of the physical hub and the transformation of the space that it would ultimately occupy are important indications of the possibility for change. Both entities also seemed to agree that at its best, a hub space is created through resident involvement, although the way in which resident involvement should be pursued appeared to be a point of tension with CohStra desiring a more intuitive, time-intensive, less explicitly pre-determined approach. CohStra was also interested in identifying a place that ultimately could be meaningful and permanent rather than time-limited and project focused. Given the particular time parameters of this project, it is difficult to assess the trade-offs inherent in pursuing one approach over the other in creating a physical hub for the project.

CULTIVATION OF COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS AND CORE COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS: OPEN-ENDED AND PLAYFUL VS. FOCUSED

Defining characteristics of CohStra's method of community engagement are the creation of relationships with and among

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community members and an open-ended invitation to play and imagine. This approach is a departure from most urban planning and even public art practices, which tend to be more focused and pragmatic. Urban planners often seek input on a particular project, plan, or specific proposal for land-use. Artists and administrators in the public art field typically seek participation tied to the execution or creation of a specific artwork. In contrast, CohStra's approach does not include any specific pre-determined objective or goal other than reference to positive change. Their belief is that the most important and opportune priorities will emerge from the process of play and imagination. Moreover, the relationships, social fabric, and collective efficacy created through imagination and play are themselves an important outcome of the work.

When working in economically challenged communities in particular, the invitation to play and imagine in the face of crisis can be risky. In non-arts fields, there would surely be tension around taking an approach to urban distress that could be interpreted as frivolous and unfocused. My own assessment of this approach is that it represents one path for community engagement. For some community members, the invitation to play and be imaginative in an open-ended fashion was attractive. For other community members, the invitation proved to be too unfocused and diffuse. This was especially the case for people with demands on their time and/or those who had been already involved in other community improvement initiatives.

As I observed this project, I had mixed feelings about this approach. On the one hand, as a planner, despite my penchant for encouraging imagination and creativity, I could feel myself becoming impatient with a prolonged open-ended approach, especially when some areas of need are obvious. On the other hand, I can appreciate the idea that we don't sufficiently prioritize or encourage opportunities to exercise imagination and creativity freely, perhaps especially in challenged communities. And I do believe that such engagement can contribute positively to a community's social fabric. The idea that relationships and social cohesion are worthy outcomes of play and imagination is consistent with more and more emerging research that elevates

social cohesion and collective efficacy as an important pre-condition for other kinds of social change.

PLANNING AND EXECUTION OF ART-BASED COMMUNITY ACTIONS AND CREATION OF COMMUNITY AGENDA

The planning and execution of art-based strategies flowed from CohStra's deliberate efforts to create relationships with and among community members. Each of the three actions had art-based elements including theater, visual art, and other forms. To the extent possible, community engagement was encouraged in all facets of the event from planning to execution. Each of the actions was itself evidence of the community's power to imagine, conceive, and execute. With each action, longer-term goals came more clearly into focus. One may argue that the eventual foci on eradicating litter in the neighborhood and the improvement of Mifflin Square could have been determined more quickly given obvious needs related to both neighborhood litter and the park. But would the same social cohesion to address the park issues have developed? Would the possible solutions to clean up the neighborhood and refurbish the park have been as imaginative as the ones participants ultimately proposed?

While the plans proposed through the project provide a good basis for possible continued work with Restored Spaces, CohStra had more ambitious hopes for the community agenda. They conducted research on land banks and developed ideas about how the community might exercise more dominion over available neighborhood land, but time did not permit pursuing that line of action further. This line of action did not seem to emerge from the residents themselves; rather, CohStra's urbanist members proposed it as a tactic to address some of the concerns residents did express about real estate affordability.

Community empowerment anchored in imagination and play is an interesting and important approach to social change and, for some people, an optimal way to get engaged in social change. This approach has merit, but it

can be at odds with more conventional ways of planning and enlisting resident involvement in art-based community improvement strategies. In addition to its issues discussed earlier, this approach requires flexibility that often does not align with timelines and processes dictated by government entities and many foundations. Not surprisingly, this required flexibility became a source of tension between CohStra and Restored Spaces. While Restored Spaces was prepared to try to be patient and nimble, it is ultimately accountable to larger forces that are not so elastic.

DELIVERY OF METHODS, KNOWLEDGE, AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CohStra and Lucía Sanromán have provided Restored Spaces with CohStra's working methods and knowledge about the South Seven area through the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* publication they prepared prior to the project's last public event. Important information and insights were also shared through a series of informal, sometimes difficult de-briefing sessions and conversations.

Community connections and relationships, an outcome of the project that CohStra is very proud of, cannot be "delivered" in the same way that a book or oral exchange can transpire. The transfer of community connections is considerably more tenuous and fragile. As CohStra exits, community expectations as well as the Mural Arts/Restored Spaces team's capacity to continue the work have to be considered, negotiated, and calibrated as next steps are crafted. At its best, it seems that this transition would be gradual and organic, but given the structure of the project and its inherent tensions, the transition requires intense attention. Residents who have been part of the project are excited and eager to see things that they have imagined come to fruition, and Mural Arts/Restored Spaces is willingly on the hook to help with the work, but figuring out how the work can sustainably continue is essential. Supported by Mural Arts, Beth Uzwiak has been key to this transition through her continued role in the community as an organizer and touch point for the

project. Shari Hersh and her team have made clear their commitment to help keep the community momentum going, continuing to meet with community members and setting the wheels in motion to address some of the concerns that emerged during the project.

What will ultimately come to fruition—ways to address the litter problem in the neighborhood, the refurbishing of Mifflin Square—is not yet fully determined. The issues related to possible gentrification and loss of affordable real estate are still looming without a clear response, although the strategies to address litter and the park are intended to help strengthen the community and deter unwanted displacement. While the kind of work that Restored Spaces does with communities is without a doubt positive and beneficial, addressing issues such as loss of affordable real estate requires a strategic concerted effort among multiple well-placed partners.

REFLECTION

Beyond having a positive impact on the South Seven community, this project's main goal has really been reflection. Its chief purpose has been to help Restored Spaces refine and extend its practice, and I think the project has been successful in catalyzing that. Ideally, there would be more time to digest the project and observe impacts on the ground beyond its duration. This could inform the articulation of CohStra's methods and ultimately result in a more nuanced set of recommendations and insights for all parties involved, but the parameters of the project dictate a different calendar. Still, the documentation delivered is thoughtful and useful.

As noted earlier in this essay, while Restored Spaces intentionally set out to be challenged and stretched, a less expected outcome of the project was CohStra's recognition that the collective is at a point in its trajectory where it must interrogate its practice and more consciously and explicitly claim its method of working. While CohStra justly describes itself as organic, nimble, and responsive in terms of its approach to community, to some extent such claims also obscure a well-established method of working that CohStra has developed over eight years of passionate practice but has yet to fully articulate and examine. There is much for CohStra to explore and

"In a case like this project, what is the obligation to the host agency? What is the obligation to the artist/cooperative? What specifically is the curator helping to birth/manifest, and when will he/she know that it has been born and delivered?"

share with the field in this regard. For example:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of being foreigners and outsiders as they execute their projects? In the case of this particular project, for example, they could, as foreigners, empathize with some of South Philadelphia's immigrants and refugees who are actively trying to make sense of a new environment and make a life and living in that new context. As outsiders, they may also be in a position to address thorny issues that insiders have intentionally avoided or may not even be aware of.
- What characterizes communities where entry is most facile for CohStra? As discussed previously, I believe site selection is greatly informed by the extent to which CohStra's members feel they can connect with local residents and penetrate key networks and community dynamics. How can clear articulation of that process facilitate, expedite, or inform future work?
- What has CohStra learned about enticing people to play and imagine? What tends to work, and what doesn't? What is the time frame in which progress towards genuine play and imagination emerges?
- Given the intention of pursuing an open-ended process, what are indications that a project is moving in the right direction? Knowing this, how might CohStra help partners better understand the work's trajectory?
- Given the characteristics and responsibilities of CohStra's host organization, in this case Mural Arts, what is required to remain nimble and responsive to community in a way that is simultaneously consistent with CohStra's values as well as respectful of Mural Arts' conditions?
- What are the inherent tensions within CohStra itself, comprising as it does urbanists and artists? Historically, what have been points of tension and disagreement within the collective? How have they been addressed? How can full recognition of these tensions inform how the cooperative presents itself and designs its projects in the future?
- How does CohStra transfer durable social outcomes to another entity for stewardship given the nature of their work (not permanent in a

given community)? What are the characteristics of instances when that transfer has been successful?

Another, perhaps less expected outcome of the project has to do with the necessity of exploring and re-defining the role of the curator. Lucía Sanromán bravely and boldly inserted herself between Mural Arts and CohStra with the intention of guarding the integrity of CohStra's work as well as honoring the project's initial intention, which was to help Restored Spaces interrogate, improve, and expand its practice. Several important questions have yet to be fully explored in this realm as well.

- What is the role of the curator in a project that does not result in an exhibition or similar format? What is the role of the curator in social practice work?
- In a case like this project, what is the obligation to the host agency? What is the obligation to the artist/cooperative?
- What specifically is the curator helping to birth/manifest, and when will he/she know that it has been born and delivered?

CONCLUSION

In a moment when recognition is growing that strategies to improve low income communities that don't include arts-based approaches are woefully inadequate, reckoning with this difficult and challenging work by Restored Spaces/Mural Arts, CohStra, Lucía Sanromán, and the participating community organizations and individuals is crucial. As some policymakers, funders, artists, and community leaders embrace concepts like Creative Placemaking, Social Practice Arts, Public Practice Arts, and similar, there is a need to go beyond merely making the case for art and culture's inclusion in the strategies to advance social justice and change. There is a need to examine the work itself, to become more knowledgeable and articulate about what works and what does not, and respectful of the various interests and perspectives implicated. There is also a crucial need to remain continuously aware that the work does not happen in an insulated laboratory. It happens in neighborhoods where people live, struggle, and aspire—places where the stakes can be high.

AUTHOR BIOS

LUCÍA SANROMÁN is a curator and writer and the Director of Visual Arts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, CA. Her work investigates aesthetics in relation to efficacy in social, participatory, and process-based art practice, focusing on the correlation between art history and theory with disciplines outside of the arts. Sanromán was awarded the 2012 Warhol Foundation Curatorial Fellowship and a 2013 Warhol Exhibition Grant for Citizen Culture: Art and Architecture Shape Policy at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2014.

BETH UZWIAK, PHD is an artist and researcher. She has been involved in a range of projects addressing civic engagement and urban change in Philadelphia. Her current art project investigates the impact of racial discrimination and state violence on social movement mobilization. Uzwiak has held full-time faculty positions at American University and Bryn Mawr College. She is co-founder of Envision Imprint, a collective of artistic researchers who use sensory ethnography and participatory art methods to address social inequities. Her art and research have been exhibited and published internationally. She holds a PhD in anthropology from Temple University. In addition to writing an essay for this publication, Uzwiak co-wrote the research report (this book's partner publication), was fieldwork researcher and community organizer for *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*, and continues to work in South Philadelphia with the Restored Spaces Initiative.

SHARI HERSH is the Senior Project Manager at Mural Arts and founder of the Restored Spaces Initiative. Hersh researches and develops innovative projects in the public sphere that mobilize leaders, youth, communities, and funders to generate social change and community transformation. Hersh facilitates a collaborative model of practice that emphasizes dialogue and interaction as critical to youth and community voices and the reknitting of social fabric. Her recent efforts focus on socially engaged projects that rely on intense youth and community involvement

and interdisciplinary collaborations to address issues such as housing, literacy, and sustainability. Of particular interest are issues of youth representation, participation, and collaboration with artists toward discernible impact. Hersh managed *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* and continues to work in South Philadelphia with the Restored Spaces team.

DR. MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON'S expertise is in comprehensive community revitalization, systems change, the dynamics of race and ethnicity, and the roles of the arts and culture in communities. She is Senior Advisor to the Kresge Foundation and consults with national and regional foundations and government agencies on strategic planning and research. In 2013, with US Senate confirmation, President Obama appointed Dr. Jackson to the National Council on the Arts. She is on the advisory board of the Lambent Foundation and on the boards of directors of the Alliance for California Traditional Arts and LA Commons. Dr. Jackson has taught courses in urban planning and cultural policy at Claremont Graduate University, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California. Previously, for almost 20 years, Dr. Jackson was based at the Urban Institute, where she led pioneering research on arts and culture indicators, measuring cultural vitality, the role of arts and culture in community revitalization, development of art spaces, and support systems for artists. Dr. Jackson is project assessor for *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*.



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PARTICIPATORY NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY

Teresa Engst and Wei Chen - Asian Americans United
High School Students - AAU Summer Program 2015

STRUCTURE DESIGN FOR MIFFLIN PARK ALLIANCE FESTIVAL

Alex Gilliam - Public Workshop

LANTERNS FOR MIFFLIN PARK ALLIANCE FESTIVAL

Luca Bokulich

