

French visitors hope to copy mural program The Philadelphia Inquirer May 8, 2009 Friday

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"The sinking homes of Logan" does not translate well into French. Neither does "community leader."

So plenty of eyebrows arched and heads tilted as a group of perplexed French journalists and government representatives tried to make sense of what they were hearing this week at the Mural Arts Program offices.

"We do not have this in France," said Christine Lacour, assistant mayor of Bagnolet, a working-class suburb of Paris.

Lacour and the other visitors were here this week as part of a project to put up murals in three Paris suburbs, all of which have large immigrant populations and flare-ups of social unrest. The effort is sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Paris and the nonprofit Cultures Francais with encouragement from Philadelphia's tourism office and expertise from Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program.

For more than two hours, the conversation ricocheted from first-person accounts by former graffiti writers to philosophical disquisitions on bridging intergenerational gaps and how mural projects affect bank lending and mortgage rates in the improved neighborhoods.

"When people talk about the beginning of graffiti, it was you, wasn't it?" Regine Cavallaro, a journalist from Ulysse magazine, asked Darryl McCrary, the former wall writer known as Cornbread.

"Yes," said McCrary, who has worked with the Mural Arts Program on and off for decades. "I am the world's first modern-day graffiti artist."

If there was a tinge of reverence in Cavallaro's voice, it may be because in France, many see graffiti as less a problem than a legitimate form of art.

"We don't think about this project as fighting graffiti," said Lacour, "but about starting participation in creating a work of art."

The central problem that emerged is that Philadelphia's success in transforming blighted

neighborhoods with public-art projects will not be easy to replicate.

In an attempt to explain how communities work with artists to do mural projects in Philadelphia, community leaders from Logan, South Philadelphia, and Mantua spoke about the slow and often frustrating process.

They told the visitors about how their once-blighted neighborhoods had been transformed.

"The murals were the first good things to look at in our community," said Ruth Birchett of Mantua. "There are all these abandoned buildings and then, you walk around the corner and, pow! You see this three-story mural. And it's gorgeous."

Equally important, however, was that she and her neighbors felt they had helped create the art, Birchett said. "With the mural program, you meet with the artist. You have to tell them your story. Tell them your hopes and your dreams. It's a miracle how they really capture what you said and it's really in the sketch."

After the mural was complete, she said, their shared sense of pride helped them work to improve their neighborhood in other ways.

"It gave you a more positive outlook," Lacour said, nodding. "The mural is really the final product. It's everything that goes before that's interesting."

The problem, she said, is that residents in her Paris suburb are isolated from one another because they live in buildings separated by highways and canals. With little interaction among various ethnic, racial, and economic groups, the mural project's organizers say, they cannot persuade people to come to meetings with the artists.

Those meetings are the critical part of any mural project, said Jane Golden, because unless the community contributes to the design, it will not truly own the art. Golden directs Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, which began 25 years ago as an attempt to combat graffiti and which has grown into an internationally acclaimed model for producing public art.

The French situation, she said, presents a challenge.

"It's a puzzle," Golden said. "And we're just going to have to figure out how to solve it."

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