

MARCH 20, 2019

Murals and Public Art are Putting Florida Cities on the Cultural Map

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I recently stopped by the Tampa Bay Fresh Fest – Mural Festival, in which over a dozen artists worked over a several day period to transform three Tampa locations with colorful wall paintings. Outdoor murals have become an increasingly common feature of Florida cities from Miami to St. Petersburg to Jacksonville. Even smaller places like **Haines City** are supporting murals in their downtown areas. These projects are of great interest to those who study art, of course, but they are also fascinating to people like me who study cities.

I had previously written about arts as part of the urban redevelopment scene, but my focus has always been on the construction of those big ticket projects like performing arts centers. I hadn't given as much thought to public art.

I had an "aha!" moment, however, while participating in a bike tour of the **St. Petersburg SHINE Mural Festival** back in 2016. While riding through the city's core, stopping to admire eye-catching art works that had transformed blank walls and empty lots, I realized the power of this medium. Previously drab buildings suddenly stood out; the vibrant colors and provocative images compelled people to get out of their cars and walk around. We even saw a bridal party, adorned in formalwear with a professional photographer in tow, posing for photos in a vacant lot with one of the murals as backdrop.



In recent decades, outdoor murals have become increasingly popular. In US industrial cities, the blank walls left by the demolition of tenement housing or the abandonment of factories were tempting canvases for local graffiti artists, whose efforts were either applauded or bemoaned, depending on the viewpoint of the observer and the quality of the artist. In 1984, the city of Philadelphia began funding a mural program that engaged professional artists, youth and neighborhood residents, painting blank walls with artwork deemed meaningful to the community. The hope, which has been largely if not entirely realized, was that residents would refrain from 'tagging' this community-generated art works, thus discouraging graffiti and at the same time adding aesthetic and social value to the neighborhood.

In some cities these wall paintings have decidedly political purposes. Artists covered the west-facing side of the Berlin wall with paintings (a portion has been preserved and is now dubbed the "Eastside Gallery"). Murals in Belfast spoke to decades of political tension.

Florida cities have seen a proliferation of mural art. In Miami, developer Tony Goldman created Wynwood Walls, a by now famous outdoor mural gallery, with the intent of rebranding a largely derelict warehouse area in which he had bought several properties. These murals have since become emblematic of this neighborhood and more generally of Miami's new image as a cultural hub. Other developers and commercial interests have hired artists to paint murals intended to further commercial goals in that city, especially around the weeks of Art Basel.



There are some concerns that arts initiatives like these can be *too* successful – that is, they can create new interest in and demand for spaces that lead to real estate price increases and mobs of tourists, pushing out working artists and other long-time residents. A recent trip to a Wynwood where tour buses clogged the streets suggested how a robust mural scene could destabilize a community even while providing a great deal of economic stimulus. Indeed I read of one mural artist who painted over his work in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin. The murals had quickly gained attention, becoming fodder for marketing campaigns to attract tourists and make the once edgy Kreuzberg seem safe to new upper middle class residents. **In the words of the artist**, explaining why he'd destroyed his own work, "The murals took their involuntary place in this reality as a pilgrimage site of guided street art tours, as a photo opportunity for

countless greeting cards, book covers and record sleeve."

In Florida, several dozen cities now feature prominent mural displays; Visit Florida, the state's tourism promotion website, has identified a "mural trail" across the state. While some smaller places feature low-key works celebrating historic milestones, others are more ambitious arts initiatives that have become part of the "brand" of industrial areas-turned-arts districts. For some – most notably Miami but with places like Ft. Lauderdale, Gainesville, West Palm Beach and St.

Petersburg moving ahead – murals are a way to change perceptions about cities that are seeking to improve their appeal to younger residents and looking to broaden their tourist base. Wynwood Walls, St. Pete's Shine Festival, and perhaps one day Tampa Bay Fresh Fest – Mural Festival, show that a creative vision and a few cans of spray paint can catalyze a city's revitalization.