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The Painted City: Public Art, Placemaking, and Communities in the Twin Cities

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The Painted City:
Mural Painting, Placemaking, and Community Building in the Twin Cities

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“The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people.”

José Clemente Orozco

Muralist
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Abstract

Over the last century, mural painting has become an increasingly prominent fixture within the urban landscape. Decorating the walls of urban streets throughout American cities, mural paintings can be considered powerful tools within urban communities because of their ability to create place through inspiring meaningful relationships between populations and space, represent marginalized populations and provide a means for expression for communities. Using the case studies of Northeast Minneapolis, the West Side of Saint Paul, and Lake Street, this paper examines the purpose of mural artwork within urban communities, focusing on spatial and contextual analysis to determine the impact of this highly accessible form of public art on varying types of communities.
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Introduction

Over the course of the last several decades, mural artwork has emerged in major cities worldwide, allowing artists to imprint colorful images and ideas upon urban walls. What was once a rarity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has slowly become a prominent element of the urban landscape. Today, it is uncommon to encounter a major city whose landscape remains untouched by the mural art form. Appearing in neighborhoods and communities of all types and origins, the mural painting serves as an interesting and attention-drawing mark upon the urban landscape.

Mural painting has the ability to change the way we think about cities and communities. As works of art created directly on the urban landscape, they have the ability to influence how we regard space and place. Murals are highly visible elements of the urban landscape because they demand attention and provoke thought amongst those who encounter them. Mural artwork is a fairly accessible art form; there are few barriers to entry, as they are inexpensive to create and do not require the skill of a classically trained artist. Aside from the ease of access to the art form, communities are also attracted to the art form because of its ability to define a community through means of expression and aestheticism. The act of painting a work of art on a building involves the community as a whole, and the result is a mural that beautifies the community. Thus, mural artwork has become increasingly more prominent in contemporary urban settings.

While the reasons for mural artwork’s popularity are evident, the question remains: what is their role within the urban framework? Although they have become an increasingly common facet of the urban landscape in the last several decades, their role within the communities they appear in is still unclear. How do communities use these colorful wall
paintings within their neighborhoods? Are there any evident spatial patterns to the locations of murals? These are all questions that this thesis aims to address through an extensive review of mural artwork in three communities in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis—St. Paul, Minnesota: Northeast, the West Side, and Lake Street. Through means of fieldwork, interviews, and GIS mapping, this thesis seeks to illustrate the position of mural artwork within urban communities.

In Chapter I, I will present a review of relevant literature to this topic. The literature review will incorporate the themes of mural history, creative placemaking, and public art in urban space as a means of contextualizing my own research. Chapter II will introduce the methodological approach used to examine the role of murals in urban communities. This section will detail the process of selecting the case studies, as well as provide an overview of the field work techniques used to conduct the research. In Chapters III through V, I will present the three separate case studies in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Chapter III will revolve around the community of Northeast Minneapolis, a neighborhood renowned for its creative culture. Chapter IV will present the case of Saint Paul’s West Side community, which is one of the Twin Cities’ largest Hispanic enclaves. Chapter V will discuss Lake Street, debatably Minneapolis’s most culturally and economically diverse corridor. The conclusions of this study are found in Chapter VI.
Chapter I: Literature Review

At the beginning of the twentieth century, mural painting was a virtually unheard of public art, appearing sporadically in the streets of American cities. Today, it is nearly impossible to travel the streets of an American metropolis without seeing a mural. Over the course of the last hundred years, there has been an exponential increase in mural painting within urban areas. Cities like Philadelphia and Los Angeles are renowned for their extensive mural programs, and many other American cities such as Atlanta and San Francisco have become burgeoning capitals of the art form as well. Mural artwork, which is defined as any piece of sanctioned or commissioned exterior wall art, appears on the sides of businesses, homes, and other exterior surfaces throughout American cities, asserting its dominance within the urban framework.

Despite the prominence of the art form in American cities, geographic research on the topic is extremely limited. Few academics have examined the implications of mural artwork on the community level, and even fewer have explored the spatial patterns associated with murals in urban settings. These gaps in the research lead to a number of questions. How are these highly visible paintings reflecting the behavior, ideas, and sentiments of the people who interact with them? And furthermore, how do they relate to these communities that they appear in?

In order to answer these questions, I have conducted research in separate themes of literature: mural painting in a historical context, public art theory, and creative placemaking. These three themes provide insight into urban dwellers’ experiences with art and creativity. By conducting research on the history of murals, public art, and creative placemaking, I hope to provide a comprehensive examination of the social, economic, and cultural impacts of
murals in urban communities. Through the study of mural painting as an art form and its history, I hope to gain insight into the factors that have allowed the art form to persist and grow. Examining the history of mural painting also has the potential to shed light on the reasons why communities choose to employ mural painting in their neighborhoods as opposed to other means of landscape beautification. Similarly, a study of public art theory will inform my discussion of mural art as a form of public art. Through a close examination of the literature of public art, I believe that I will be able to assert mural art’s status as a form of public art. Consequently, a discussion of public art will also provide insight into how art and the city interact. Additionally, while there is a great deal of literature on mural paintings, very little of it has an urban focus. By researching public art and the similarities it shares with mural painting, I venture to provide a more detailed explanation of mural artwork’s relationship with the city. Discussing creative placemaking is also an essential part of this research. Public art and mural art both have the opportunity to create interest in a place or inform opinions of a space because of their visibility on the urban landscape. As this research aims to explore the relationships between communities and mural artwork, examining how these communities associate themselves with place is incredibly important. Exploring the relationship between community and space can give way to further discussion to the ways in which communities and murals (a highly place-based art form) interact themselves.

**Mural Painting And Purpose In A Historical Context**

Mural painting as an art form has existed for thousands of years. Beginning with the forty thousand year-old cave paintings of Altamira, Spain, mankind has always been drawn to decorating walls. The ancient Egyptian tradition of wall painting has been celebrated and emulated for thousands of years, and has inspired the creation of numerous similar works
throughout history. Mural painting has not been limited to any one culture or geographical region, but has developed over the course of thousands of years in a manner that has enabled societies to develop their own style of mural artwork. In his book entitled *Mural Painting*, painter and author F. Hamilton Jackson provides a very detailed history of mural painting, tracing the practice from the Minoans to the Greeks and through the Middle Ages, all the way up to their use in eighteenth century Venice. Jackson also gives a substantial overview of mural painting technique, having spoken with numerous experts in the field. In order for a mural to be successful, Jackson’s research has shown that artists must keep two things in mind: that painting upon walls and easels is a vastly different experience that requires a certain framework of thought, and that their work is supplementary to that of the architect (1905). While Jackson’s research is dated, it provides insight into the past motivations for mural paintings, and although it was written over one hundred years ago, other practitioners have echoed his evaluations of mural painting. In a piece he wrote for *The American Scholar*, artist Jean Charlot emphasized the relationship between mural painting and architecture:

Sensitive to the architectural blueprint that has become his world the born mural painter, following a kind of mimetic logic, bids to complete in illusion what the architect has begun in truth; taking naturally to rule, square and compass, he will add painted perspectives to the built construction, open or stop the vistas and culs-de-sac that doors, windows and wall initiate. (Charlot 1941)

Thus, we are led to believe that within the historical context of the early twentieth century, the creation of many murals was motivated by a desire to embellish the work of architects. This seemingly simple purpose for mural creation during that time period could explain why the medium was not more popular until later in the twentieth century.
During the mid-twentieth century, there was a large boom in mural creation spurred by the implementation of the Works Progress Administration by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Created in 1935 as a part of the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was intended to provide economic relief for those who were suffering during the Great Depression. WPA programs employed mostly low-skilled workers to carry out public works projects, such as parks, bridges, or schools. One faction of the WPA, however, was dedicated specifically to creative projects. This division of the WPA, called the Federal Art Program, was arguably the most successful of all the WPA, employing over 6,000 artists and creating nearly 200,000 artworks (Wolf, 2012). Appearing mainly in government buildings, schools, and post offices, the murals created by the WPA during this period of time were amongst the first examples of the emergence of the mural art form in the United States. Politicians envisioned the Federal Art Program to represent a fusion between art and patriotic values, and as a result, numerous murals display scenes of hard-working men and women and the American landscape. While this program inspired many of today’s public art programs, many of the works created by the Federal Art Project have since been destroyed.

Today, the definition of mural painting takes on greater life than more antiquated ones. Asphalt Green’s Director of Development and activist Maura Greaney (2002) defined mural artwork as simply any public outdoor painting. However, this definition includes all types of wall paintings—including graffiti and street art. While forms of public wall painting, graffiti and street art vary greatly from mural art. The difference between mural paintings and graffiti/street art is that mural art occurs within the public sphere and requires consensus, while graffiti and street art does not. Mural art is a sanctioned form of wall painting; it requires approval from various groups and consultation with the community in order to come
to fruition. On the other hand, graffiti is a largely illegal practice that involves the defacement of private or public property without the permission of the owners. Additionally, graffiti and street art do not require any sort of consensus amongst the community, and are largely individual works created by individual artists. Another difference presents itself in the form of how a piece of mural art or street art is created. Graffiti is typically applied to the landscape outside the vision of city dwellers, but mural making occurs out in the open, for all the public to see (Lohman 2001).

While the American tradition of mural painting began with the Works Progress Administration in the early twentieth century, it gained major momentum during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, a major mural movement occurred that coincided with the Civil Rights Era. Historians and artists Eva Cockcroft, James Cockcroft, and John Pitman Weber cite the beginning of the movement stemming from the creation of the “Wall of Respect,” a work done by black artists in the predominantly black neighborhood of Chicago’s South Side in 1967. This work, they state, used art to publicly express the experience of a group of people, which gave new meaning to the medium (Cockcroft & Weber 1998). Much like the murals of the WPA and FAP, these murals had the ability to serve as a means of expression within urban communities. Soon after, cities such as Detroit, Boston, St. Louis, and Philadelphia were creating their own “Walls,” igniting the movement that would soon sweep the entire nation (Harris 1987). Communities, especially those with large concentrations of black or Chicano residents, began painting more and more murals, using the inexpensive art form as a means to make their mark on the built environment. This movement produced a number of important works of mural art in cities across the United States, but, much like the murals of the WPA, many have been forgotten or destroyed.
Minnesota was not exempt from this movement, and in 1987, historian Moira F. Harris set out to discover the murals that had appeared during the height of the mural movement. Harris classified the murals she discovered into three different categories based on content: community murals, superrealist murals, and landscape murals (1987). Community murals stem from the tradition of pieces like Chicago’s “Wall of Respect;” they involve the participation of the community to express the experience of a certain group of people within a space (Harris 1987; Cockcroft & Weber 1998). They are typically easy to identify and are some of the most commonly found murals in American cities. Superrealist murals are usually abstract and non-representational, created by artists and graphic designers specifically for the purpose of creating art (Harris 1987). Landscape murals are commonly found on the side of restaurants and other businesses, and showcase scenes of wildlife and other nature themes.

Harris’s separation of murals into three distinct categories inspires a discussion of the aesthetics of mural painting. She is not the only historian to separate murals into groups; Cockcroft, Cockcroft and Weber also divide these paintings into their own categories. However, Cockcroft, Cockcroft and Weber separate murals into two groupings based upon the philosophies behind their creation: the community-based orientation and an urban-environmental one. The urban-environmentalist approach emphasizes making art available to the general public, improving the looks of the city, and supporting artists (Cockcroft & Weber 1998). Community-based murals, however, are more concerned with working for the local audience around issues that concern the community, and use art as a means of expression (Cockcroft & Weber 1998). The authors maintain that while murals typically fit one of these two general definitions, finding “pure” examples of each is difficult.
Cockcroft, Cockcroft, and Weber’s philosophy-based classifications inspire a discussion of mural purpose. Why exactly do communities and individuals decide to create mural artwork as opposed to other forms of public art? Previously mentioned was Charlot’s proposition that mural painting’s purpose was to accentuate the architecture of urban buildings. Mural purpose, however, is not so simple. Instead, the motivations for mural painting are incredibly complex and depend upon a variety of cultural, sociological, and economic factors.

Perhaps the most-often cited reason for mural creation is the art form’s proclivity for expression. Many contemporary street murals have moved beyond the original decorative form to make a social or political statement (Anderson 1988). They provide communities with the means to express their ideas on what is occurring within their own spaces, and to articulate their concerns through artistic expression. When a mural is created, consensus is oftentimes the most important element of the process. Without the agreement of the community as a whole, a mural cannot exist. This means that community murals often display themes that are agreeable to all: ethnic solidarity and cultural pride, pride of place and neighborhood history, heroes and icons, and the joys and value of learning (Braun-Reinitz & Weissman 2005).

Not only are murals used as a tool for expression in urban communities, but they also serve as a visual history, both of the community as a whole but also of the collaboration between the community and the artist (Fleming 2007). Murals cannot exist in the absence of consensus; some sort of agreement must exist between the people of a community and the artist who is creating the mural. Additionally, many communities have used murals as a method of preserving their own cultural heritage. This is especially true of immigrant and
minority communities, who feel marginalized within their own spaces. Mural artwork gives these populations a public voice through which to voice their concerns and inspire social change (Greaney 2002).

There has been a great deal of academic work surrounding the audience of the mural art form and their relationship with the artworks themselves. Mural painting is a unique medium in that its audience varies greatly from that of many other art forms. Instead of appealing to an audience of museum goers and art connoisseurs, mural artwork caters to a public busy with practical pursuits (Charlot 1941). Mural painting is an art form that is entirely reliant on the urban encounter for an audience. Every mural is a piece of art appearing within the museum that is the city, and thus, urbanites automatically become patrons of the medium. While interaction with these art forms is not as formal as one that would occur within the confines of a museum, it does not mean that its audience is any less affected. In fact, mural painting creates a community-wide sense of proprietorship as the people take to calling the mural their own. Neighborhood people speak of murals as “theirs” rather than just the artists, indicating a sense of pride that is reinforced by outside interest in the mural. Mural artwork allows communities to ‘stake a claim’ in their neighborhoods, allowing them to claim possession of a space (Greaney 2002). On a similar note, Fleming (2007) declares that the mural-making process can create interest in place and a sense of community proprietorship by turning the actual walls of the community into valued works of art (p. 96). As evidenced by these authors, mural artwork possesses the power to create a sense of ownership in space.

American mural painting has developed rapidly over the course of the last century. This public art form has transformed from a medium used primarily for advertising purposes
to a method of economic development to a means of expression. The Works Progress Administration was largely responsible for the art form’s initial growth, as it proved that murals could affect a population by providing both economic relief and symbols of patriotism. This served as a jumping off point for the mural movement that would take place in the latter half of the twentieth century, which largely used the mural art form as a means of expression for poorer neighborhoods of color. By examining the long and illustrious history of mural painting, we can gain insight into how the medium will continue to grow in the coming years.

Creative Placemaking

Over the course of the last decade, creative placemaking has emerged as a desirable form of making more meaningful places, especially within urban areas. This type of placemaking emphasizes the role of art and artists in creating more cohesive communities. In her work *Creative Placemaking*, economist Ann Markusen defines creative placemaking as a situation in which partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired (2010). Art and culture are at the core of these development initiatives, making for more vibrant, diverse, and cohesive communities. There has been a significant boom in creative placemaking in the last decade or so, and more agencies have opted to adopt this approach to making meaningful places.
The increased practice of creative placemaking is based in the numerous benefits that can be garnered from art-centric development. Creative placemaking has a number of advantages, according to authors from numerous fields of study. Kaid Benfield, the Director of Sustainable Communities at the Natural Resources Dense Council in Washington, D.C., wrote about the merits of creative placemaking in an early 2013 article. According to Benfield (2013), creative placemaking can contribute to the sustainability of communities. Strengthening community by strengthening sense of place is critical to sustainability because if we do not have places that are worth caring about, they will not be sustained (Benfield 2013).

Another benefit of creative placemaking is a stronger local economy. Instead of traveling elsewhere for entertainment and culture, residents of creative placemaking communities spend more on local talent and venues, money that re-circulates at a higher rate in the local economy (Markusen 2010). Additionally, creative placemaking has the ability to create jobs, as these communities oftentimes see an expanded population of residents and visitors. Finally, creative placemaking has the power to spawn, attract, and retain creative businesses, making for an overall more successful local community.

Opportunities for creative jobs are often stressed by advocates of creative placemaking. Markusen argues that cultural industries flourish in creative places, and that these landscapes promote entrepreneurship. An estimated 4.9 million jobs, or 3.5% of the American workforce, are within cultural industries such as the performing arts, advertising, publishing, and similar others (Markusen 2010). These industries are experiencing high levels of growth, and are expected to grow further in the coming years. Thus, communities
can only benefit from the use of creative placemaking; the creative places that they will make will spur job creation and economic growth.

Not all are advocates of creative placemaking. Many critics of the philosophy are concerned that creative placemaking is not an equitable practice in the increasingly diverse communities of American urban centers. Mehta (2012) points out that while creative placemakers have the best intent, they oftentimes forget who they are designing communities for. It is a widely accepted fact that not all communities are alike, and thus they respond to these types of initiatives differently. The problem that Mehta cites with many creative placemaking programs is that their goals, while concerned with improving the quality of life and revitalizing local economies, oftentimes do not specify who will benefit from their success. “Who are we improving the quality of life for? Who is the community for which there is identity and a sense of place? Who benefits from a revitalized economy?” Mehta asks (2012). These types of initiatives, he suggests, do not benefit communities of color or poverty because their goals were never preoccupied with the “who” in the first place. In order for creative placemaking initiatives to be successful, they must pay close attention to the communities they are working in.

Although her paper advocates for creative placemaking, Markusen notes that there are a number of challenges facing creative placemaking. Forging and sustaining partnerships, countering community skepticism, financing, regulations, sustainability, and gentrification are all hurdles that must be cleared by creative placemakers (Markusen 2010). Convincing communities to implement creative placemaking initiatives is an arduous task, and oftentimes the most difficult part of any creative placemaking project. Here, Markusen agrees with Mehta on the possible inequalities of creative placemaking. Oftentimes skepticism and
hesitation originates from a neighborhood or group that has felt left out, and thus they oppose public support (Markusen 2010).

Creative placemaking is a concept that has gained momentum with urban planners and designers in the last few decades, and shows no indication of slowing down. While there are both positives and negatives to creative placemaking, it is becoming increasingly apparent that cities are moving towards funding creative placemaking projects because of the aesthetically pleasing environments that they generate. Despite the negatives of creative placemaking, more and more urban communities are implementing initiatives that further the creative placemaking agenda. As American society continues to value beautiful and appealing place, the concept will continue to grow.

**Public Art**

Definitions of public are oftentimes contested in academic literature. Public art as a genre grows and evolves at a rapid pace, making the development of a fixed definition difficult (Becker 2004). However, formulating some sort of definition is necessary for the development of public art, as these definitions are essential in the establishment of ordinances, development of permits, and the education of a broader audience (Becker 2004). Thus, most public agencies define public art as work created by artists for places accessible to and used by the public (Becker 2004; Miles 1997; Fisher 1996). But as Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison state, this definition is too simplistic; public art is not simply art placed outside. Instead, they propose that public art is art that has as its goal a desire to engage its audiences and to create spaces—whether material, virtual or imagined—within which people can identify themselves (Sharp et al 2005). This definition provides a much more specific realm in which public art can exist.
Fisher (1996) delves further into defining public art, stating that it is a creative product resulting from the collaboration between artists and a community (p. 43). This sentiment is echoed by other authors in the field, who go so far as to say that public art, regardless of theme or content, represents this collaboration simply by existing (Fleming 2007). And thus one of the many purposes of public art is revealed: to transform and beautify stark and blighted landscapes through means of expression, representation, and collaboration. From Roosevelt’s Federal Art Program to the mural programs of today, it is clear that those who create public art are concerned with changing the ways in which people experience the places where they live.

Minnesota-based non-profit FORECAST Public Art has been facilitating the creation and discussion of public art in the Twin Cities for over twenty years. The organization is responsible for the bi-annual publishing of Public Art Review, an internationally distributed journal that is devoted to the discussion of contemporary public art. Over the course of its existence, FORECAST Public Art has produced numerous materials pertaining to public art and its use in urban environments. In 1994, the organization published Public Art in Minnesota, a pamphlet detailing the role of public art in the state of Minnesota. This piece, which is still widely cited as a resource on Minnesotan public art, offers a great deal of information as to the goals of public art as a medium.

Some of the most pertinent information in FORECAST Public Art’s publication is their definition of the various characteristics of public art. While the organization agrees that a piece of public art must exist within a publicly accessible space, it also dictates that the subject of public art must adhere to certain guidelines as well. Public art occupies space that is not up for sale and puts forth images and stories that are not trying to sell anything (Weber
Thus, artwork whose purpose is to advertise a product or service cannot be considered public art, as it promotes private interests.

There are many arguments to be made on the power of public art to create and enhance communities. Weber (1994) states that the storytelling and symbol-making components of public art communicates our vision of what matters, or ought to matter, in our social and personal relationships. By definition, public art showcases the values and ideas of the public that it appeals to. Thus, it is only fitting that communities embrace public art as a means of identifying themselves. Other authors cite public art’s ability to change space and place as a means of developing communities. Some communities see public art as a way of enhancing or personalizing otherwise impersonal spaces (Becker 2004). This is an increasingly important point when discussing public art within the city. In the absence of natural green space, the city can become a boring and monotonous landscape, and thus unattractive to those who inhabit it. Public art contributes to the visual attractiveness of the city and has the ability to aestheticize urban spaces (Sharp et al 2005). Therefore public art becomes a means through which communities can make their own imprint upon the urban landscape, personalizing space the space they inhabit and claiming the city for their own. Additionally, public art can promote a sense of community as well as an awareness of local or civic identity, promote social network development and sense of place, educate, and provoke social change (McCarthy 2006). These elements are all essential when considering community development, as social interactions are at the heart of community.

Some authors, however, critique public art’s intentions, citing that much of contemporary public art has moved towards serving private interests (Miles 1997). As there is increasing competition amongst various entities for visibility within the city, private
interests can oftentimes dominate the landscape. Public art can be lost behind corporate signage, graffiti, and neon lights of the city (Fleming 2007). However, public art, because of its difference from the rest of the city, remains a highly visible portion of urban landscape.

As indicated in the above paragraphs, public art has the power to foster community within urban landscapes. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many of today’s urban regeneration initiatives include some sort form of public art creation. Many cities have funds directed towards public art initiatives, and the federal government has offered grants for the creation of public art in the past. Over the last few decades however, there has been a push towards funding public art project that has coincided with the growth in creative placemaking initiatives. It has become clear that fostering creative communities has become an increasingly more desirable option than in past years.

If we are to discuss the merits of mural painting as a form of community development and empowerment, we must first consider the medium as a form of public art. While it would appear that mural painting’s artistic qualities and existence in the public realm would dictate its status as a form of public art, there has been much debate over whether or not it can truly be considered in the same manner as other forms of public art. This debate typically stems from the oftentimes difficult process of distinguishing mural art from street art. While these two art forms are often grouped together, they are in fact very different in their political motivations, processes of creation, and legality. Mural art is a completely sanctioned form of wall painting; it requires the participation and consensus of a community in order to come to fruition. Mural art is typically funded by community organizations and non-profits, and is also sometimes able to solicit funding from government organizations. Creating a piece of mural art is therefore an arduous process that involves the participation and approval of
numerous groups and individuals. Street art, on the other hand, does not operate under the same pretenses as mural art. Typically the product of individual artists, street art is an unsanctioned and oftentimes illegal form of wall painting. Graffiti is the most well-known form of street art, and is the work of guerilla artists upon an urban canvas.

**Summary**

A number of things can be learned from a review of academic literature on the topics of mural history, creative placemaking, and public art. Academics debate over the definitions of all three of these topics, but for the purposes of this project, concrete definitions must be decided upon. After a review of the history of mural artwork, it can be determined that the term “mural” refers to any piece of sanctioned wall painting on the exterior wall of a commercial or public building within the context of this project. This definition omits the unsanctioned forms of wall painting, graffiti and street art. Murals are also defined as a form of public art. While definitions of public art vary, this project will define public art as work created by an artist for places accessible to and used by the public (Becker 2004; Miles 1997; Fisher 1996). These two definitions will be useful in this project’s exploration of mural artwork’s role within urban communities.

As my research aims to discover the ways in which mural artwork can impact communities and their development, it is my hope that this research will contribute to these fields of mural art, creative placemaking, and public art. As our world continues to urbanize at a rapid pace, it is increasingly crucial that we as geographers, urbanists, and designers understand how people interact with cities and relate to the built environment. The wants and desires of urbanites are constantly changing, and as the shift to a more aesthetically pleasing city occurs, we must consider possibly strategies for creating more attractive places in a
socially responsible manner. My examination of the murals of Minneapolis and Saint Paul will build upon these ideas of creative placemaking and public art in community building. Through spatial and qualitative analysis, I will examine the role of community-based murals in the Twin Cities. Specifically, I will examine clusters of murals in relation to various community characteristics such as average income and race. In Chapter III, I will discuss the methods I will use to approach these research questions.
Chapter II: Methodology

The “Twin Cities” of Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota are amongst some of the most diverse populations in the Midwest region. A cultural and economic hub for the Midwest, the Twin Cities is home to a variety of populations and works of public art, making it an ideal location for a study of mural artwork within urban settings. This thesis involves a series of case studies in three urban communities in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota with high concentrations of mural artwork. They represent three very different types of communities that can be found in most American cities. Northeast is a predominantly white and middle-class neighborhood and is situated on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River. The community prides itself on its creative culture, and markets itself as a destination for artists and other creative types. Saint Paul’s West Side is representative of the minority enclaves that are often found in American urban centers. Home to one of the largest Hispanic concentrations in the Twin Cities, the West Side possesses a long history of immigrant tradition. Finally, Minneapolis’s Lake Street is one of the most diverse thoroughfares in all of the Twin Cities. Home to a number of different racial and socioeconomic groups, Lake Street represents a spectrum of people living within the Twin Cities, including another large concentration of racial minorities as well as the younger demographic inhabiting the Uptown district. Because these three communities are representative of the varying kinds of communities that are often found in urban centers, they are able to provide information on the impact of mural painting in American communities.

In order to examine these three communities, I employed three different methodologies: an examination of murals in the field, mapping each community, and interviewing people involved in the creation and maintenance of murals. These methods
enable me to conduct a spatial analysis of Twin Cities murals as well as a contextual analysis of mural content and themes.

**Selection of Case Studies**

After a preliminary survey of the numerous communities within the Twin Cities, three communities were selected to serve as the case studies for this project: Northeast (Minneapolis), West Side (St. Paul), and Lake Street (Minneapolis). Selected for their diversity and relatively comparable size, these three neighborhoods represent the various types of communities that are often found in American cities; respectively a working-class community undergoing gentrification, an ethnic enclave, and a commercial corridor rich with socioeconomic diversity. The three communities are also of comparable size; they all encompass fairly large portions of the cities they are a part of. The Lake Street community, which for the purposes of this study is about 6 square miles, is the smallest of the three communities. Northeast is a working class neighborhood that is currently experiencing gentrification, but has a long history of industry and development. The community is now home to a number of thriving art programs, and is becoming a hotspot for mural artwork. The city of Minneapolis divides its territory into both neighborhoods and communities; the Northeast community holds eleven smaller neighborhoods within it. The West Side has a similar geographic situation to Northeast, as it is located directly across the Mississippi River from Saint Paul’s downtown. The West Side has been a longtime destination for immigrant populations, specifically Hispanic and Latino groups. Today, its thriving commercial area, aptly named ‘District del Sol,’ or ‘District of the Sun,’ draws numerous visitors to the area. While Saint Paul does not have delineated “communities,” the West Side is one of the city’s many planning districts. Lake Street is not a governmentally defined community. However,
there are numerous organizations that serve local businesses and foster economic growth along Lake Street. Visit Lake Street and Lake Street Council are only two of these organizations, and their goals of economic development and community building are similar to those of other community organizations in the Twin Cities. An unofficial Lake Street community was thus created by placing a half-mile buffer around Lake Street itself. This created a mile-wide strip across south Minneapolis (approximately eight city blocks) that would serve as the Lake Street case study for the purposes of this research project.

*Methodological Approaches*

In order to examine the impact of mural artwork in urban communities, I used three different methodological approaches: an examination of murals in the field, mapping mural locations in comparison to community characteristics, and interviewing persons involved in the creation and maintenance of mural artwork. Through an examination of murals in the field, I was able to both record the locations of murals in each community as well as describe the content of each painting. The field research also serves as a means to examine the built environment of each community and the numerous murals within them. Field work also provided the coordinates of mural artwork, which would make way for a spatial analysis of mural locations. Each mural was recorded using a handheld global positioning system (GPS) unit, and these waypoints were uploaded into geographic information systems (GIS) software. GIS software was then used to map out the locations of mural artwork in relation to common socioeconomic characteristics of each community, specifically race and average income. The product was a series of maps that revealed a number of spatial patterns related to mural locations. Finally, interviewing provided qualitative data, which was useful in determining the ways in which murals impact individuals within a community. Ultimately, I
used these three different methods to answer my research question – does mural artwork have any foreseeable impact on urban communities aside from being aesthetically pleasing?

**Field Research**

Fieldwork encompassed a sizable portion of this research project. As there are no current formal databases for mural paintings in the Twin Cities, their locations could only be determined by searching each community on my own. During the summer and early fall of 2012, I traveled each of the three selected communities by foot, bicycle, and car in order to find examples of mural artwork. For the purposes of this project, I included only bus routes and main roads in my route because of their high visibility within a community. Using a handheld GPS unit, I recorded the coordinates of each mural that I encountered. After, I took notes on the area surrounding area. What kind of business was the mural painted on? Is the business open? Does the mural appear to be in good condition? Are there other murals nearby? By asking these questions, I hoped to get a better understanding of the mural’s visibility within the community. Each mural was then photographed and assigned a number in order to create a catalogue of mural paintings in the area.

**Mapping**

In order to understand the spatial relationships between murals and the communities that they appear in, a series of maps was created. The purpose of these maps was primarily to identify where the clusters of murals were located, but also to determine if any other relevant spatial patterns could be found in each community. Using the GPS waypoints collected during the field research portion of this project, I created maps of each respective community and where the murals were located within them. To further my spatial analysis of these murals, I proceed to compare the locations of these murals to various community
characteristics. These included average annual income, proximity to parks, and racial
distribution. The maps that were created from this process were very telling of the
socioeconomic situation of each respective community. As a result, I was able to draw
conclusions about murals and the types of communities they tend to appear in, which I will
discuss in further detail during the following chapters.

**Interviewing**

During the original manifestations of this research project, I intended to carry out an
extensive interviewing process designed to gather information on the ways in which mural
painting has impacted individual members of the community. However, I found it difficult to
find participants who were willing to take a survey. This was especially difficult in the Lake
Street and West Side communities. Because these two communities are largely composed of
non-native English speakers, I faced a language barrier when trying to communicate with
many potential participants. Additionally, many were reluctant to participate in my surveys
because they were either busy or disinterested in the research I was conducting.

Consequently, I abandoned the idea of interviewing individuals on the street in favor
of speaking to people who were directly involved in the mural-making process. Using email
and phone calls, I reached out to members of various non-profits and art groups, requesting
short interviews. While I contacted around five people in each community, only two
responded to my requests. Gary Schiff, a Minneapolis city councilman representing Ward 9,
mayoral candidate, and advocate of Minneapolis murals, was interviewed on the topic of
Northeast. Chicano artist and co-founder of the non-profit Mentoring Peace Through Art
served as my informant on mural culture along Lake Street. Overall, the interviews with
these two individuals provided me with interesting and useful data on the perceived impact of mural painting.

Through the use of these different methodological approaches, I aim to answer the following questions: where are murals found within the urban landscape, why are they found in certain places as opposed to others, and how do they reflect the character of the communities they appear in? In the following chapters, I will discuss the three case studies that will aid in my answering of these questions. Chapter III will provide an overview of the Northeast community, its industrial beginnings, and a discussion of some of the murals that can be found within the community. In Chapter IV, I will move on to discuss the West Side of Saint Paul, its long tradition of Hispanic heritage, and the murals that can be found lining the buildings of Cesar Chavez Street, amongst others. Finally, Chapter V will include a brief history of Lake Street and its development, as well as an examination of several of the thirty-seven murals that appear along its six-mile stretch.
Chapter III: Northeast Minneapolis

Located in the northeast quadrant of the city of Minneapolis, the Northeast community is home to approximately 36,255 people as of 2010. Widely known for its thriving arts community, Northeast has experienced steady population growth over the last several decades, and it is expected to continue to grow in the coming years. A largely working-class neighborhood, Northeast has a long history of industrial development, but the community is slowly shifting to a more creative aesthetic, and gentrifying in the process.

Settlers were first attracted to the area by Saint Anthony Falls, which lie to the west of the community. The strategic location of the settlement transformed it into an industrial hub during the 19th and 20th centuries and it was the numerous milling operations that influenced the region’s nickname as the “Mill City”. The east bank settlement thrived, and
became the home to numerous economic assets such as factories, warehouses, and the like. However, it also drew in a number of immigrants into the area. During the early years, most of these immigrants came from mostly European nations, and were drawn to community by the promise of work. As more and more people began to move to the area, the community of Northeast developed rapidly. Street networks were built and many were named after United States presidents and historical figures; it is said that the street naming system helped many immigrants pass their citizenship exams (Northeast Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce 2003).

In recent history, Northeast has become a destination for alternative culture and younger populations; while there are still a fair number of immigrants inhabiting the area, the community has seen an influx of young adults moving to the area for its amenities and creative culture. The community is a center of the Minneapolis visual arts scene, with nearly four hundred artists either living or working in the area (Northeast Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce 2003). Inevitably, the presence of such a large number of artists has greatly shaped the built environment of area, as Northeast is home to numerous works of public art. Murals are an especially prominent art form in this area.

Northeast Minneapolis prides itself on having one of the strongest arts communities in all of the Twin Cities. With numerous non-profits and community organizations related to the arts, Northeast Minneapolis has people constantly working to create a thriving arts community. These associations host numerous art-related events annually, including the Northeast Minneapolis Arts Association’s Art-A-Whirl, which invites the public into the working spaces of Northeast artists. What originally started as a small-scale art crawl
involving only forty or so artists has expanded to include almost five hundred artists, making it the largest open studio tour in the United States (NEMAA 2013).

**Contextual Analysis of Mural Artwork**

Murals in Northeast Minneapolis are mainly concentrated in the commercial district across the river from downtown Minneapolis. The area around the intersection of Broadway and University Avenues is especially dense with mural artwork, with ten murals within a half-mile radius. Other murals in this neighborhood can be found along Central Avenue, a north-south thoroughfare that bisects the neighborhood, and Lowry Avenue, which is another crossing from downtown Minneapolis to Northeast. Central Avenue is home to two murals while Lowry Avenue has only one. Overall, there are a total of thirteen examples of mural artwork within the Northeast community’s boundaries.

Many of the murals found in Northeast Minneapolis are the work of a Twin Cities-based group called Broken Crow. Composed of stencilists John Grider and Mike Fitzsimmons, Broken Crow is responsible for a number of murals throughout Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The group is internationally renowned for their unique style of stenciling images directly upon buildings. They have worked in cities across the United States and overseas. Broken Crow’s work often features motifs of animal life; their “Bigger Picture Project,” which is located along University Avenue in Saint Paul, strongly features these themes of wildlife, displaying life-size images of creatures often found on the African plains.

Four of the thirteen murals found in Northeast are the work of Grider and Fitzsimmons. Perhaps the most famous and contested of these works is the piece that appears on the side of the 1029 Bar on Marshall Avenue NE (see Figure 1). This piece, which depicts two squirrels canoeing in a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, is one of the best-known
pieces in Northeast, not only because of its artistic merit, but also because it has been the focal point of a battle between Minneapolis mural artists and the city government. In 2001, the city of Minneapolis placed a ban on murals that advertise or promote any business, product, activity, service, interest, or entertainment, as it can be considered signage. This dictates that no business may sell any product or service that appears in a mural on its premises. If a business was found in violation of this law, the mural was painted over. While this policy was intended to level the advertising playing field, it also resulted in the destruction of many pieces of mural artwork. Currently, the regulations are under review by the city, and there has been suspended enforcement of the regulations until city leaders can come to a consensus regarding murals and advertising. City councilman and mayoral
candidate Gary Schiff has spent a substantial amount of time attempting to rewrite the law regarding murals in Minneapolis. According to Schiff, current laws are too stringent, stating that even a picture of a banana on the side of a grocery store could be considered advertising (G. Schiff, personal communication, October 9, 2012). He recommends that the regulations on mural size and content be loosened, promoting more use of the art form in Minneapolis communities. The battle of art versus advertising in Minneapolis has brought the Broken Crow mural on the side of the 1029 Bar into the spotlight. As the mural features a can of beer and is located on the exterior wall of a bar, it is in violation of the city’s regulations and constitutes as advertising. Many oppose the city’s desire to paint over the mural, citing that it was not an intentional plug for Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, but instead social commentary on the “hip twenty-something” demographic that has come to populate the Northeast community in recent years. In any case, because of the freeze on enforcement, the mural remains intact.

While Broken Crow’s 1029 Bar mural has risen to prominence because of the legal battle surrounding it, the painting also represents a much more lighthearted trend of quirky and unique mural artwork within the Northeast community. Broken Crow’s other murals follow a similar aesthetic of bold colors and abstract stenciling. Located in the rear parking lot of the Modern Café and the 331 Club is the duo’s collaboration with internationally known graffiti artist OverUnder. The image, which features a scene of two houses with arms intertwined, is somewhat surrealist in style, but fits within Northeast’s motif of quirky public wall art (See Figure 2). Another Broken Crow mural can be found on the large north wall of the Hive Salon, and depicts a young pink sheep against a background of geometric shapes and stars. While Broken Crow’s artwork dominates the landscape of Northeast Minneapolis, it does not define the community as a whole. The motifs in each piece add to the unique and
alternative persona of the neighborhood, but none of Broken Crow’s paintings explicitly represent the residents of the community. What the murals have done, however, is spur a conversation about the community’s creative character, and revealed the power that the city has over it.

The majority of murals found in the Northeast community do not directly depict who is living in the neighborhood. Most murals have a more abstract nature to them, showing shapes, animals, and nameless figures. While it is apparent that these murals are symbolic of some sort of theme or motif, it is not obvious to the viewer without some prior knowledge of the artist or their work. Instead, these pieces serve as interesting points of conversation across the neighborhood. Because of the unknown nature of their symbology, residents and visitors alike are left to contemplate the meanings of these paintings. One Northeast artist, SKUdvig,
cites in their artist statement that they “use the process of art to shape spaces, experience or groups of moments, in a way that initiates meaningful conversation, encourages unique connections and create stronger bonds within communities” (2013). This philosophy resonates with many other artists in Northeast who use their pieces as a means of bringing their community together through beautifying the built environment.

**Spatial Analysis**

![Map 2: Mural Locations, Northeast Community, Minneapolis, Minn.](image)

In addition to the apparent trends in mural content throughout Northeast Minneapolis, there are also evident spatial patterns. One of the most prominent spatial trends in Northeast is the tendency for murals to be concentrated in one area. Ten murals out of the total thirteen murals are clustered in a small area about a half-mile in diameter, located in the middle of
Northeast’s busiest commercial sector (See Map 2). This area has the greatest access and highest levels of traffic, allowing it the greatest visibility within the community. The remaining three murals are all located along major roads and bus routes, so while they are not nearly as visible as their counterparts to the southwest, they still are seen by a fair amount of people.

Map 3: Average Annual Income (By Household), Northeast Community, Minneapolis, Minn.

One surprising pattern that emerged from this mapping process was the lack of correlation between mural locations and public space, specifically parks. While mural artwork is considered a form of public art, almost no murals were located in designated public space like parks or reserve. Most of these murals were not even within a one block radius of these governmentally-defined public spaces. All of the murals, however, were
Painted upon the facades of commercial buildings within the community. Although these spaces are technically privately-owned, they are considered publicly-accessible space. None of the murals found in the Northeast community were located on residential lots.

More spatial patterns emerged when comparing the locations of murals to commonly researched community characteristics. A comparison of mural locations to various community characteristics revealed a great deal about how the Northeast community is affected by mural artwork and why it has adopted the medium. First, the locations of murals in the Northeast community were compared to the mean annual income of households in the community (see Map 3). These data were mapped on the census tract level using data from the United States Census Bureau’s 2011 American Community Survey 5-Year estimates. The map revealed a number of interesting facts about the spatial organization of wealth in the Northeast community. The majority of households in the neighborhood earn between $46,338 and $67,100 annually. The median household income in Minnesota between the years 2007-2011 was $58,476, making the Northeast community fairly on par with the rest of the state. Higher earners in the neighborhood cluster to the southeast and northeast boundaries of the community, with average household incomes peaking in census tract 1036, the southeastern-most tract within the community.

Murals in Northeast are located almost exclusively in census tracts with an average annual household income of $54,190 to $67,100. The only exception is the Broken Crow mural on Lowry Avenue, which exists in a census tract with an average household income of between $40,993 and $46,337. What we can discern from this map is that murals, at least in the case of Northeast Minneapolis, tend to be located in more affluent areas. However, these areas have higher average incomes due to their proximity to goods and services within the
The locations of murals in Northeast were also compared to the racial composition of the neighborhood, specifically the Hispanic and Latino populations. Mural artwork was largely made popular by Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, and Chicano artwork in the southwest United States emphasized the medium’s use as a tool for social change and expression. A correlation between mural artwork and Hispanic populations has been found by previous authors (Arreola 1995; Donahue 2011; LeWare 1998), and thus served as the basis of this comparison in Northeast Minneapolis. Using data from the 2011 American Community Survey 5-Year estimates, I mapped the distribution of Hispanic and Latino populations across the Northeast community (See Map 4).
However, the results of this map were not as expected. While I anticipated there to be a correlation between high concentrations of Hispanic or Latino residents, the maps proved just the opposite. The cluster of murals found in the southwestern part of the community is located in Northeast’s least Hispanic or Latino census tract, with only between 1.52% and 1.86% of respondents identifying as Hispanic or Latino. This disproved the theory that murals strictly cluster in areas dominated by Hispanic or Latino populations.

What can be discerned from a spatial and contextual analysis of murals in the Northeast community of Minneapolis is that there is an obvious emphasis on beautifying the landscape and perpetuating this idea of a creative place. The content of Northeast’s murals is abstract and rather stylized, indicating a proclivity for aestheticism as opposed to a need for social commentary. Additionally, the artwork in Northeast does not directly represent the population as a whole. It does not explicitly tell the history of the place, but instead serve as points of conversation amongst the community. Overall, the impact of these murals can be construed in two ways. One, they serve as a way of beautifying the once-industrial landscape of the community, and two, they create neighborhood cohesion through promoting a creative culture and conversation.
Chapter V: Saint Paul’s West Side

One of the Twin Cities most diverse communities is the West Side, located just south of Saint Paul’s downtown. Interestingly enough, the West Side is not the western portion of the city of Saint Paul; the neighborhood’s name refers to its geographic relation to the Mississippi River, or its location on the western bank of the river. The Mississippi also serves as the main bounding element of the community’s borders, as it encloses the community on three sides. The southern border of the community is a series of limestone cliffs. These borders create a triangle-shaped flatland that has been a settling ground for many over the course of the last few centuries.
Although it is known for its large Hispanic population, the West Side of Saint Paul has a long history of immigration and settlement by a variety of ethnic and racial groups. During the mid-1800s, the area began welcoming arrivals from nearly every nationality or ethnic group, earning it the nickname the “Ellis Island of St. Paul” (Roethke 2007). By 1910, the flats were home to immigrants hailing from Eastern Europe, Italy, and Italy, but the area was predominantly inhabited by ethnic Jews (Roethke 2007). Immigrant groups were drawn to the area for promise of work and cheap housing; however, the area’s susceptibility to flooding made it hard to truly “settle” in the area, since one big flood was capable of destroying the entire community.

Mexican immigrants did not arrive in St. Paul until about 1912. Many were migrant workers, earning their wages by working on the farms in the rural parts of Minnesota. The largest influx of immigrants came in 1923, when the American Beet Sugar Company began directing its Mexican migrant workers to St. Paul as a wintering locale. By 1930, 628 Mexicans of the 3,636 counted in the state were living in St. Paul (Roethke 2007). It was during this era that the West Side quickly grew into a space where the language, religion, music, and culture of Mexico were preserved and cherished. Because of this cultural concentration on the West Side, many more Mexican immigrants were drawn to the area, and by the 1940s they had established themselves as a community in the Twin Cities.

Like many other neighborhoods in the Twin Cities, the West Side underwent numerous periods of rebuilding and renewal. In 1952, a flood destroyed a sizable portion of the community, and by the 1960s, government officials were targeting the area for urban renewal. Many homes and businesses were leveled to make way for new industrial parks, dislocating nearly 70 percent of the Mexican-American families that had spent the last
several decades making the West Side their home (Roethke 2007). Although at the time it seem as if the Mexican-American community had lost their foothold on the West Side, by the late 1960s, a new project was initiated that would create affordable housing for those who were displaced. This community, Torre de San Miguel Homes, became an identifying place for Mexican-Americans on the West Side upon its completion.

Development continued through the 1960s, and surprisingly, supported the return of Mexican-Americans to the area. Some businesses, like El Burrito Mercado and Boca Chica Restaurant, have prospered long enough to become city landmarks, and have paved the way for other small businesses in the area (Nelson 2006).

Today, the West Side continues to thrive. In 1983, the Riverview Economic Development Association, or REDA, was formed, and subsequently began efforts to develop the “District Del Sol,” or the West Side’s commercial corridor. Today, businesses work alongside one another to ensure the preservation of the neighborhood’s culture and revitalize the area through small planning efforts.

**Contextual Analysis of Mural Artwork**

One of the most noticeable elements of the West Side is the collection of mural art that lines the streets of the neighborhood. There has been a long tradition of mural painting in Mexican culture, and henceforth it is not surprising that there is such a large concentration of murals located on the West Side of Saint Paul. These murals began to appear during the 1970s, when Chicano muralists would use their wall art to educate and empower the Mexican-American community. “When we first began painting murals on these buildings, we wanted to show our abilities. Instead, we told the story of a community,” said muralist John Acosta, who is responsible for a number of murals on Saint Paul’s West Side (Roethke
2007). While many of the early West Side murals depicted images relating to the cultural heritage of the community’s Mexican-American immigrants specifically, the 1980s and 1990s brought about change. It was during this time that the focus of West Side murals shifted from emphasizing Mexican-American history to including all cultures. *The Heroes of Freedom, Justice, and Peace* mural on the exterior wall of El Burrito Mercado restaurant is a prime example of this, as it honors local and national heroes of all races.

The West Side of Saint Paul possesses one of the most vibrant mural scenes in all of the Twin Cities. Nineteen murals can be found within the community, and many of them are concentrated in the West Side’s “District Del Sol,” the busiest commercial district within the community. The majority of murals can be found along Cesar Chavez Street, the main thoroughfare in the West Side community. All murals within the community are located within a half-mile radius of one another, marking the densest concentration of mural artwork of any of this research project’s case studies.

Unlike in Northeast Minneapolis, no one artist or group dominates the mural scene on Saint Paul’s West Side. Many of the works have been left unsigned, leaving no evidence of who created the piece. However, there are numerous pieces in the community that have been signed by multiple individuals, indicating that they were group projects as opposed to the work of a solitary artist. One example of this is the work
“Midwest Canto al Pueblo,” which is located at the intersection of Cesar Chavez Street, George Street, and State Street (See Figure 3). This piece, which was originally created as a mural in 1979, is now a large glass mosaic encompassing the entire rear side of the building. An inscription on the tiles states that the piece is the work of numerous individuals within the neighborhood. The artists, Pablo Basques and Greta McLain, are clearly cited, but underneath their names are the names of the various artist’s assistants, community partners, and funder of the project. It is apparent through the multiple efforts that this project brought together numerous people within the community, and the resultant piece of mural artwork stands as a symbol of that teamwork.

Figure 4: “The Heroes of Freedom, Justice, Peace,” West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.

This notion of a community coming together to install a piece of mural artwork is also apparent in the mural “The Heroes of Freedom, Justice, Peace,” which appears on the
side of El Burrito Mercado (See Figure 4). This piece, which was created by the group Teens Networking Together, features inspirational figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. alongside images of teenagers interacting in positive ways. From working together to learning together, the imagery featured in this mural calls the viewer’s attention to the diversity of the neighborhood, and promotes a more cohesive community. The colorful wall painting is one of the West Side’s better-known murals, and stands as a symbol of pride for the neighborhood.

Murals on the West Side also declare the residents’ pride in their own community. One key example of this is the mural found on the corner of Robert and State Street to the south of the neighborhood (See Figure 5). This unsigned work is dominated by colorful graffiti-like text declaring “West Side Pride” alongside positive imagery of silhouettes.
jumping for joy, receiving their diploma, and giving high fives. This mural appears to appeal directly to the youth of the West Side, as the opposite side of the mural depicts more motifs that are specific to the problems facing many urban youth (See Figure 6). The mural depicts images of the tall fences and towers of jail, money, rifle targets, likely representing the gang culture that is so prevalent amongst inner-city youths. But the mural also proclaims “Stop the Violence,” calling viewers to become more engaged with the problems facing their neighborhood. This mural represents a cry for social change by addressing the issues present within the community, but also through its pride in place and hope for a better future.

Figure 6: Robert & State Street Mural, West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.

The majority of West Side murals continue in this tradition of representation and advocacy through the display of imagery related to their own cultural heritage. Numerous murals around the West Side include Aztec and Chicano motifs: a mural on the side of an
auto garage on Cesar Chavez Street features an image of a globe centered on the South American continent; a mural on Boca Chica Taco House show a scene of a group of singers in traditional Mexican dress singing around a fire; and a mural on Robert Street displays a winged bird against a background of cacti and an Aztec sun. One mural of particular interest can be found at the intersection of Robert Street and Cesar Chavez Street (See Figure 7). This mural features a map of both Latin America and North America, with each country represented by their flag. The surrounding imagery shows the symbols of Mount Rushmore and a bald eagle alongside that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. As the West Side community has a long history of Latino immigration to the area, this mural stands as a testament of the cultures that have inhabited the neighborhood and the bond they have formed with their new

Figure 7: Robert & Cesar Chavez Street Mural, West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.
home. The mural thus speaks to the larger idea of the intersection of multiple cultures that occurs on a daily basis within the West Side community.

**Spatial Analysis**

![Map of Mural Locations in the West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.](image)

Map 6: Mural Locations, West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.

While there is a great deal to be said about the content of West Side murals, there is also much to be said about the spatial organization of these wall paintings. A number of spatial patterns have been revealed through the mapping of mural locations across the community. First, the murals of the West Side are highly concentrated in one specific area. All nineteen murals exist within a one mile distance of one another, making the West Side home to the densest concentration of mural artwork in all of the case studies. Additionally, the murals of the West Side are mostly located in the District Del Sol, the West Side’s
commercial district. Of the nineteen murals on the West Side, nine are located on Cesar Chavez Street, the neighborhood’s main commercial corridor. While some murals are located within a close proximity to public parks and recreation space, none are located directly within one. Most murals are located on the facades of businesses, although one mural is painted on a freestanding wall on a vacant lot.

A comparison of mural locations to average annual income reveals that mural artwork is located in predominantly low-income areas within the community. Using the data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 5 Year estimates, I mapped the locations of mural paintings in relation to the average annual income by household on the census tract scale (See Map 7).
Ten of the nineteen murals are located in the West Side’s lowest-earning census tract, where the average income is $28,712. This is substantially below the Minnesota state average, which is currently $58,476. Seven murals can be found in a higher-earning area of the West Side, where the average income is between $60,699 and $62,173. The West Side, however, earns substantially less on average than Northeast, with the maximum average income per household being approximately $67,205. Thus, most murals on the West Side are actually in lower-income areas when compared to Northeast, where murals are predominately situated in high-income areas of the community.

Map 8: Percent Hispanic or Latino, West Side Community, St. Paul, Minn.

Next, a comparison of mural locations and racial composition was done. Using census data, the locations of murals on the West Side were compared to percent Latino or Hispanic
data. These data were found by taking the number of people who identified as Hispanic or Latino during the 2011 American Community survey and dividing that number by the total population of the census tract. The map shows that nine of the nineteen murals are located in a predominately Hispanic or Latino census tract (see Map 8). This census tract, which encompasses the eastern half of the West Side neighborhood, is composed of between 37.65 and 45.30 percent self-identifying Hispanic or Latino residents. This upholds the theories of several authors that mural artwork has a particular hold in communities with large Latino or Hispanic concentrations (Arreola 1995; Donahue 2011; LeWare 1998). This is supported also by a contextual analysis of mural artwork, which shows that murals on the West Side showcase predominately Latino or Hispanic themes.

A spatial and contextual analysis of West Side murals has revealed a number of things. One, murals on the West Side appear to serve a different purpose than those of Northeast Minneapolis. West Side murals are very obviously representative of the community that lives within them in the sense that they showcase the cultural heritage and history of the residents that inhabit it. The use of Latino and Hispanic imagery in West Side murals makes it clear to the viewer that the community they are currently in has a vibrant and diverse culture. Additionally, murals on the West Side are used to communicate ideas with the rest of the community. Imagery that displays the issues facing the community as well as paintings that dictate a pride in place allow artists and groups to communicate with the rest of the community, making for greater social cohesion and awareness. A spatial analysis of West Side murals reveals that they tend to be located on public buildings and businesses, and are clustered near the commercial district of the neighborhood. Spatial analysis also reveals that murals on the West Side are primarily located in areas with lower income and higher
Hispanic or Latino populations. Overall, this examination of West Side murals show the medium’s ability to communicate with a community that may feel marginalized in the urban system.
Chapter VI: Mural Purpose and the Spectrum of Lake Street

One of the better-known thoroughfares in the Twin Cities is the illustrious Lake Street. Spanning a stretch of nearly six miles from the Mississippi River to Lake Calhoun, Lake Street is one of the most diverse and vibrant arteries in the city of Minneapolis. With nearly fourteen different neighborhoods lining Lake Street, it is no secret that the corridor serves some of the most diverse populations in the Twin Cities. Home to a number of immigrant communities and noted for their large concentration of Latino culture, Lake Street has developed over the course of the last century into retail and entertainment destinations for locals and visitors alike.
As mentioned previously in the methodology portion of this paper, the researcher defined the boundaries of Lake Street for the purposes of this paper. For this reason, this paper will refer to Lake Street not as a community, but as a case study. Because Lake Street is built up of such diverse populations, it would be irresponsible to call the area as a whole a community; instead, it is made up of several smaller communities that all possess a collective identity inspired by their connection to Lake Street.

The thoroughfare of Lake Street stems from rather humble origins. Only a country road in 1885, Lake Street developed rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century into a bustling commercial corridor. The construction of the Selby-Lake interurban line in 1905 solidified the thoroughfare’s prominence within the urban structure by transporting thousands of residents along Lake Street per year. From this point on, Lake Street continued to develop rapidly, with numerous transportation improvements fueling the growth. Today, MetroTransit’s 21 bus line continues to be one of the busiest routes in all of the system.

Automobiles were incredibly important factor in Lake Street’s development. During the mid-twentieth century, Lake Street was a center of automobile culture in the Twin Cities. Home to numerous used car dealerships, Lake Street was the place to go if one was in the market for a new car. Additionally, the thoroughfare was a well-traveled route for automobile owner, both young and old. In an interview with Visit Lake Street, long-time resident Bill Nelson recounted the days of his youth when he would participate in cruising down lake street with his friends, an activity they called “dragging Lake Street” (2010). While this love for the automobile was also a product of the era, the emphasis on auto travel still persists along Lake Street. The remnants of the once thriving used auto industry mark the landscape in the form of deserted dealerships and aged signs, but although the sales have moved from
the area, the use of autos is stronger than ever. Now a four-lane street, Lake Street sees high levels of auto traffic on a daily basis.

Lake Street is also well known specifically for its large immigrant population. Since the early years of the corridor, Lake Street has been a destination for immigrant communities. Initially, Lake Street attracted a number of Scandinavian immigrants. Ingebretsen’s Scandinavian Gifts remains as a testament to the large population of Norwegians and Swedes that inhabited the area in the early twentieth century. While these Scandinavian populations have since moved elsewhere in the Twin Cities, Lake Street is still a haven for immigrant populations. Today, Lake Street is well known for its Latino population, which is concentrated at the Bloomington-Lake Street intersection. Many of the businesses along Lake Street cater to the Latino population living in the surrounding area. Businesses like El Mercado Central are well-known throughout the area to provide assistance to non-English speakers, aiding in their assimilation to life in the United States. Not all of the community’s population is composed of recent immigrants, however; many families have made a home on Lake Street and have chosen to stay because of access to cultural activities and businesses. There is also a fairly large concentration of African immigrants hailing from all over the continent, with a large portion of them having origins in Somalia. The presence of this ethnic group is evidenced by 120 African-owned businesses along the Lake Street corridor (Minneapolis Foundation 2004).

Today, there are numerous initiatives for the improvement and development of Lake Street. One of the leaders in these initiatives is the Lake Street Council, which “engages, serves and advocates for the Lake Street business community in Minneapolis to ensure the vitality and prosperity of the commercial corridor” (Lake Street Council 2013). The council
has been involved in a number of projects along Lake Street, including “Museum in the Streets: Lake Street,” a project that involved the creation of three bilingual heritage-discovery walking tours along Lake Street. This urban renewal project encouraged the historic preservation of many sites along Lake Street through rememberance, and drew a number of visitors into the neighborhood. Lake Street Council also is involved in the physical preservation of these sites, as they provide “Façade Improvement Grants” of up to $5,000 to Lake Street businesses. With $50,000 annually available to Lake Street businesses, these grants have the potential to impact numerous businesses within the community.

**Contextual Analysis of Mural Artwork**

Lake Street possesses the largest quantity of murals of any study area in this research project. Thirty-seven murals can be found within a half-mile radius of Lake Street, with the majority of murals being located directly on the thoroughfare. Murals are not concentrated in any one particular area along Lake Street. Instead, they are distributed relatively evenly along the thoroughfare and the surrounding area. However, as you move westward on Lake Street and towards the Uptown district, there is a considerable drop in the number of murals.

Lake Street serves as a spectrum of sorts for the purposes of this research project. Its racial and socioeconomic diversity make it a key site for examining urban trends, but also results in large variances in mural themes and motifs. There is no considerable pattern amongst murals along Lake Street. Different groups inhabit different sections of the thoroughfare, and as a result, each section of Lake Street has murals with a different contextual theme.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable murals along all of Lake Street appears on the side of Falconer’s Cleaners, located at the intersection of East Lake Street and 13th Avenue South.
This intersection is a hot spot for mural artwork, with three of the four buildings displaying some sort of wall painting. Falconer’s Cleaners, however, is unique in that its mural is not just a painting covering a wall, but a series of paintings covering the entirety of the building. If one were to walk all the way around the building, they would be greeted by a variety of images, both abstract and representational. While the majority of the building is covered with colorful flourishes and eye-catching patterns (See Figure 8), the building also possesses images of people of a diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds working together (see Figure 9).

Figure 8: Falconer’s Cleaner’s mural, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.

The mural on the Falconer’s Cleaners building is only one of many done by the same organization. Mentoring Peace Through Art, a non-profit founded by Chicano artist Jimmy Longoria and Connie Fullmer. The organization aims to educate Minneapolis’s youth in the art of working together, and at the same time combat gang territoriality. The Falconer’s
Cleaners building is only one of the many buildings that Longoria and Mentoring Peace Through Art has worked on along Lake Street, but is perhaps the most visible due to the sheer magnitude of the piece.

Longoria’s piece on the Falconer’s Cleaners building is not the sole example of Chicano artwork along Lake Street; in fact, there are numerous pieces in the community that reflect Latino and Hispanic heritage. One such example of this is the mural on the eastern wall of the Gorditas El Gordo building near Lake Street’s intersection with 35W (See Figure 10). This mural depicts a traditional Hispanic celebration with a group of musicians, dancers, and food. What is most striking about this mural is the apparent cohesion between those featured in the mural. The people in the scene all seem to be in conversation with one another; there is not a single person who is not engaged in some sort of interaction with another person. This emphasis on togetherness is an incredibly powerful theme in Chicano art; through the power of imagery, the artist promotes a sense of unity and belonging within a certain place.

While Hispanics and Latinos are the most prominent immigrant populations along Lake Street, there is also a sizable African population. Evidence of their presence can be seen in only a few murals along Lake Street, the most visible being the mural appearing on Safari Restaurant (see Figure 11). The mural, which depicts images of the animals of the African
savannah, has strong themes of cultural heritage. The restaurant, which is of Somali origin, states on its website that its mission is to share the culture of Somalia and Africa. The paintings on the exterior of the building clearly indicate this sentiment, as well as inform the public of the presence of Somali and African populations along Lake Street.

Figure 10: Gorditas El Gordo mural, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.

Figure 11: Safari Restaurant mural, Lake Street Case Study Minneapolis, Minn.
Themes of social cohesion and collaboration are common along Lake Street. There are numerous murals depicting this idea, including the piece on the side of the Women, Infants, Children office (See Figure 12). The mural depicts families of all races and ethnic backgrounds interacting. While the dominant image is that of a mother with her child, there are also images of fathers and sons and a variety of landscapes. This prominent mural promotes the notion of family through the community, and also reflects the goals and purposes of the organization that inhabits the building.

![Figure 12: Women, Infants, Children mural, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.](image)

Images of children and youth are another dominant theme along Lake Street. There are numerous pieces along the Lake Street corridor that have been completed by school groups or youth groups. One such piece is located directly across the street from the WIC mural on the façade of the Post Early Childhood Development Center (See Figure 13). This
painting, which covers a wide expanse of the building, features fairly simple imagery that appears to be the work of children. Text on the piece declares “Life without EDUCATION is like a punch in the mouth.” This is not the only statement that emphasizes the importance of education in children’s lives. “The entrance to your classroom can be like the door between two different worlds,” is also scrawled across the wall, citing how crucial an education is to growth and development. Murals like this one do many things. They call to attention the role of children within the community, provide inspiration for viewers, and empower children through the use of public art. They become a point of pride for the community, especially to those children that aided in their creation. These small artists are able to say that they feel a sense of belonging and ownership to a place because of the artwork that they helped create.

Figure 13: Post Early Childhood Development Center mural, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.
Murals along Lake Street indicate two things. First off, that there is a highly diverse population living along the corridor, as evidenced by the numerous murals depicting people of various cultures and traditions. Secondly, the large concentration of murals that appear along Lake Street are evidence that the population of Lake Street find murals to be an effective means of communication and beautification. What can also be discerned from these murals is that they can be classified into three types: cultural heritage, community cohesion, and youth development. Of the thirty-seven murals found along Lake Street, these three themes are present in the content of twenty-two of them, further evidencing the importance of these themes to the community.
**Spatial Analysis**

There is no apparent pattern in the distribution of murals within the Lake Street community. The vast majority of the murals are located along Lake Street itself, where commercial businesses are typically found (See **Map 10**). While most of the murals tend to be located along Lake Street itself, there are still many murals to be found in the surrounding residential areas. One interesting characteristic of these murals is that unlike their Northeast and West Side counterparts, Lake Street murals are not confined to solely commercial properties; there were a few murals that appeared on private residential property, a trend that was not present in the other study areas. However, similarly to Northeast and the West Side, there were no murals found in public park or recreation space, although there were some

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**Map 10: Mural Locations, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.**

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murals visible from the Midtown Greenway.

As in the other research sites, I also compared the locations of Lake Street murals to average annual household income. Using 2011 American Community Survey 5 Year estimates, I found that murals along Lake Street had a similar correlation to income as was found on the West Side (See Figure). Mural artwork appeared to be concentrated mostly in areas concentrated with lower-income households. Most murals are located in census tracts with an average household income of between $26,000 and $53,979, which is below the state average ($58,476) by several thousand dollars. Only one mural was found in a high-
earning census tract.

Map 12: Percent Hispanic or Latino, Lake Street Case Study, Minneapolis, Minn.

Mural locations were also compared to the racial composition of Lake Street. Using the same 2011 ACS 5 Year estimates, I calculated the percent Hispanic or Latino for each census tract by dividing the total population identifying as Hispanic or Latino by the total population of the census tract. This resulted in a map of the distribution of Percent Hispanic map for Lake Street (See Map 12). Like on the West Side, Lake Street murals tend to cluster in areas with high Hispanic or Latino populations. Thirty of the thirty-seven murals found within the Lake Street community are either located entirely within or are bordering census tracts with a Hispanic or Latino population of over 20.71 percent, upholding the theory that mural artwork tends to be found in predominantly Hispanic or Latino areas.
A contextual and spatial analysis of Lake Street murals results in a number of conclusions. The diversity of the area has resulted in a number of variances in terms of spatial organization and mural content. While there is no specific concentration of murals along Lake Street, mural artwork does tend to be found in areas with higher Hispanic populations and lower-income households. This is most likely indicative of the art form’s power to serve as a means of communication between those who are marginalized in the urban system and their communities. Mural artwork gives these populations an inexpensive way to claim agency within the urban system by making their own cultures and histories known while staking claim in a specific place. While this notion is most apparent in regards to the sizable Hispanic population inhabiting the Lake Street area, it is true of number of different races and ethnic groups.

Another benefit to mural artwork along Lake Street is the creation of a more aesthetically pleasing urban environment. Many areas along Lake Street face urban blight; empty storefronts, vacant lots, and unmaintained buildings are commonplace in the Lake Street community. However, mural art gives the community the opportunity to beautify the places in which they live. The colorful paintings bring beauty to areas that may have once been dirty and disheveled.

Overall, the conclusions drawn about the Lake Street case study are similar to those of the West Side community. Mural artwork is found in predominantly low-income, Hispanic or Latino areas. They are clustered in commercial areas, but are not limited to them; some murals can be found on private residential property. One theme that is prevalent in the Lake Street community is images of cultural heritage; Hispanic and Latino related imagery is especially common along the thoroughfare. There are also numerous images promoting
community cohesion found within the Lake Street area; these images lead by example by displaying groups having positive interactions. Finally, there is a noticeable emphasis on the theme of youth development in mural artwork along Lake Street.
Chapter VII: Conclusions

This examination of mural artwork in the Twin Cities has revealed a number of things about the ways in which communities use mural artwork and how these paintings impact those communities. By examining three communities of different socioeconomic and racial compositions, I have discovered that the purpose of mural artwork varies depending on what type of communities they appear in. The case studies represented a working-class and predominantly white neighborhood (Northeast), a lower-income Hispanic enclave (West Side), and a low-income multiracial community (Lake Street). By using spatial and contextual analysis of the murals within each community, I found that each neighborhood employs mural artwork for different reasons: Northeast Minneapolis for its aesthetic qualities, the West Side as a method of social change and representation, and Lake Street for both of these reasons.

Northeast Minneapolis’s focus on creating a creative community has driven the creation of mural artwork within the neighborhood. Murals within this neighborhood do not appear to attempt to represent the local population, and instead serve as a point of conversation within the community. These murals are mostly symbolic of the community’s push to market itself as a destination for creative types in the Twin Cities. Northeast’s post-industrial landscape also inspires residents and artists alike to create works of art in order to further beautify the area.

On Saint Paul’s West Side, murals have a much deeper purpose. In a community comprised of Hispanic and Latino residents, mural artwork is viewed more as a symbol of culture. The paintings dominate the neighborhood not solely because they provide a colorful addition to the built landscape, but also because mural painting is an element of Chicano
tradition. Mural painting is thus seen as a means of claiming space and defining meaningful places. The imagery that appears in the West Side neighborhood also indicates that these mural paintings serve as a means of communication for those marginalized within the urban structure. Themes of oppression are common in some murals, calling viewers to take action against the problems facing their community. Paintings displaying the cultural heritage and history of Hispanic residents are also prevalent within the neighborhood, again demonstrating their claim over the space in which they live. Overall, mural artwork on the West Side of Saint Paul is instrumental in the creating of a Hispanic landscape and place.

Lake Street serves as a middle ground within this study, as there are examples of murals being used for both aesthetic purposes as well as for social commentary. While there are murals towards the higher-income areas of the western and eastern boundaries of the community that showcase an abstract style and desire for a more aesthetically pleasing place, murals in the center of the community tend to lean towards painting for the purpose of agency. These paintings showcase imagery that promotes community cohesion, cultural heritage, as well as youth development. They give the community the opportunity to communicate with one another through the means of art while beautifying the blighted urban landscape in the process.

What these three case studies share in common is a desire to define place. In Northeast Minneapolis, the community wants to market itself to others as a creative place, and thus uses quirky and thought-provoking murals to demonstrate this desire to the public. On the West Side, mural tradition began with the immigrants that came to Saint Paul from Mexico and other Latin American countries, and thus serves as a means to claim the neighborhood as their own. Through the depiction of numerous scenes of cultural heritage
and other related imagery, the community demonstrates that the West Side in theirs; in a sense, they are staking a claim in a place through the use of art. Lake Street shares this same sentiment. Home to numerous immigrants and minority populations, mural artwork is used throughout the Lake Street community as a means of representation and agency. Visitors to the area become aware of the people living in it simply by observing these works of art. All in all, mural artwork in these three study areas aims to foster a relationship between people and place.

Mural artwork’s value within the urban landscape is undeniable. While paintings are not permanent, the impacts that they have on the communities they appear in are. Through representation and beautification, mural artwork causes communities to feel a more significant relationship to the places in which they live and work. Communities can feel a greater sense of belonging to a place when they see themselves reflected in the murals that decorate their neighborhoods. Mural artwork can thus be seen as a method of creating more cohesive communities, and creating greater pride in place. Their significance to the identities of residents in the case studies of Lake Street and the West Side are evident; through an artistic representation of a minority culture and the communication of prominent community issues, these wall paintings have found a way to integrate themselves into the greater dialogue of the community. However, this is not to trivialize the importance of mural artwork in more affluent neighborhoods, which serve as a means of establishing community identity and creating a more artistic landscape. The results of this study prove that mural artwork is an accessible and practical way to create more livable and desirable places within urban settings.
While the purposes of mural artwork differ from community to community, its impact on communities are clear. Murals serve as a means to create more attractive and livable spaces within the urban landscape. They aid in the building of communities by connecting people to the place in which they live. As Benfield (2013) put it, communities cannot be sustained in places that the people do not care about. By creating more attractive places and allowing people to see themselves reflected in the landscape, mural artwork as the ability to make communities care about the places in which they live. Through the creation of this relationship and concern for a place, mural artwork thus proves itself to be an incredibly useful tool in the urban system.
Works Cited


