

EASTSIDE EZINE

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URBAN ART

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THE POWER OF MURALS AND BRIGHTNESS IN THE DTES

By Jasmin Senghera



Figure 1. Resilience Nest Community Mural by Jenny Hawkinson and Cate Wikelund, from Michelle Heshka; SpacingVancouver; 12 Oct. 2017; Web; 18 February 2019.

The Downtown Eastside is commonly known for its poverty, homelessness, and drug use. People that pass through might be blindsided by the adversity they see and consider the Eastside to be inhospitable and gloomy. Yet, this could not be further from the truth. In fact, during the 1970's, in the peak of the neon era the DTES along East Hastings was a beacon of brightness (Nair). While this street is no longer as visually appealing, this brightness remains. For the residents of the DTES, it is a community filled with love and support and so this brightness lives on in the souls of these individuals. In recent years, with the growing Fentanyl crisis, there has been a need for positivity in this community. The implementation of vibrant murals has facilitated this need and has created a new version of brightness in the Eastside.

Upon close inspection of the murals in the DTES, it appears there is a pattern of chromatically vivid displays with a purpose of uplifting people. Within this larger context, there are different aspects of these murals.

The variety of imagery seen in them include symbols of nature, First Nations heritage, and historical aspects of the DTES. An example of nature can be found in the resilience mural north of Hastings Street that includes visuals of salmon, representative of resilience and an old growth forest depicting longevity as seen in Figure 1 (Ritchie).

This mural was created based on struggles voiced by residents of the Eastside. Often times, nature and First Nations Heritage are interwoven in these murals as they mutually foster positivity. This can be exemplified by hummingbirds found in an alleyway on Columbia street, that symbolize peace and healing in the First Nations community (Hummingbird). Additionally, there are murals that connect the history and culture of the Eastside. The L'arrivée Guitar Mural on Cordova Street displays the historical musical aspect of the Eastside including images of musical instruments and the bustling nightlife (Vancouver Mural Tour). This mural unites the residents in pride for their home and depicts the Eastside as more than its issues.

Within the last few years, mural art has taken over by storm in Vancouver. This can be attributable to Vancouver's mural program that supplies paint for mural ideas proposed by artists (City of Vancouver). In planning too, there has been a shift towards creative thinking or rather an open collaboration with artists. Mural artists take on the role of the planner in this context by determining how they can transform these communities (Kullmann and Bouhaddou). In the case of the resilience mural, the artist Jenny Hawkinson asked DTES residents what kept them strong in times of struggle. Using these responses through the planning paradigm of communicator to communicative action, she relayed the resident's problems through art. This connectedness of arts and planning highlights that murals can be visually stimulating and can empower communities. But, on the other hand planning enables art because it can ward off social disorder and embellish a neighborhood (Greaney 38). Thus, these murals can be seen as gentrifying as money is being devoted to aesthetics rather than inherent issues (Lanks). However, for many in the Eastside, these colourful murals represent a connection throughout their community and brighten their spirits (Gilpin).

URBAN GRAFFITI: A DISCOURSE MARKED BY DISPARITY IN THE DTES

By Jasmin Senghera



Figure 1. Mural about the fentanyl and opioid overdose crisis by street artist Smokey D, from Darryl Dyck; CBC News; 26 Feb. 2017; Web; 18 February 2019.

In the early 1970's, the stretch of East Hastings near Main Street was a hustle and bustle of activity owing to the presence of clubs, retail outlets, restaurants, and theatres (Carnegie Centre Community Association). Today, in place of this vibrancy remains a row of decrepit dull-coloured buildings. What stands out most amidst this temporal contrast is the emergence of something that is vigorously contested in the urban sphere: graffiti. From scribbles upon utility poles, to alleyways with extensive imagery adorning the walls; graffiti is seemingly everywhere in the Downtown Eastside. Yet, it is not welcomed by business owners or the city and Vancouver's bylaws state that graffiti is vandalism when painted on private or public property without permission (City of Vancouver). But, the patterns of graffiti in the DTES are indicative of more than just vandalism, rather they represent moments of self-expression and self-identification for the residents.

In terms of planning, there has always been discussion surrounding the need for art in the urban context as planners realized that to attract people to the city, they must make it visually appealing. This is demonstrated by how planners used street art to renew Paris after WWII (Ursic 2). In the DTES, this concept of revitalization has been implemented through murals radiating positivity and comprehensive planning to increase art facilities. Yet, graffiti does not fit into this picture. City planning thus disenables graffiti not just due to the law but because it disrupts the visual order and promotes ongoing urban decay. There is this theory that the increase of broken windows and graffiti in an area is directly correlated with criminal activity (Herbert and Brown 755-777). This is understandable in the context of graffiti being illegal, but it should be noted that graffiti isn't necessarily associated with delinquency in the DTES. Rather the patterns of graffiti embody the identities of the residents and the hardships they face as seen in Figure 1.

The predominant patterns of graffiti in the Eastside consist of tags, pieces, and messages (Haworth et al. 53) Tags are most visible in the DTES as they are found on storefronts, garbage cans, and trucks. They are essentially the names of the individuals who graffiti. This form is more widely considered as vandalism due to its presence on private properties (Griffen). While tagging may have a negative connotation, it is often executed by marginalized individuals who want to make their mark on the city (Rowe and Brown 67). It is their way of identifying themselves in society, where usually they are ignored. Pieces and messages are less visible to a passerby as they are often found in alleyways. They are a lot more artistic and vibrant, yet they can encompass a dark tone. Pieces of the Eastside consist of caricatures of residents alongside messages about the Fentanyl crisis as well as other images including bald eagles, skulls, and flowers. The alleyways are also inscribed with messages including tributes to those gone, street names for easier communication during emergencies, and words of hope for those suffering (Woodward). Thus, in the DTES, graffiti isn't emblematic of intentional mischief or degradation of the city's aesthetics, it is a form of expression for the residents that struggle with their voices being heard.

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