

### *The Betances Mural: A Success Story in Boston's South End*

“The public art that has most moved me in the last three decades is that which attempts to draw together a community and to participate with an audience in the definition and expression of the whole physical and social body in its unity and diversity.”<sup>1</sup>



Public art can be defined in general terms as sculpture or installations sited in public spaces. The new genre public art, however, is defined as visual art that uses traditional and nontraditional media to interact with a broad, diverse audience about issues relevant to their lives; and is largely based on the engagement of that audience.<sup>2</sup> I believe that for public art to be truly successful it must meet four very basic criteria: it must involve the community where it is to reside, portray an accurate representation of that community, instill pride, and retain the respect of the members of the community over an extended period of time.

Community involvement is vital to the success of public art. As with most anything, community involvement is relative. While one community may be content to view a scale model of a proposed work of art and approve of its placement, another more active community may need to be engaged in every step the artwork's production. Communities with histories of activism most likely would require active engagement. Such was the case with the *Betances Mural* located in the main plaza of the Villa Victoria housing project in Boston's South End.

To give a brief history, the Villa was the vision of a small group of very vocal residents in the South End in the mid-to-late 1960's. The homes in the Hispanic section of the South End lay dilapidated and ruined, and the city was preparing to tear them down as part of an urban renewal project. But the 200 residents living in them refused to move. In fact, they marched on City Hall chanting "No nos mudaremos de la parcel 19!" (We shall not be moved from the parcel 19!) They conducted rent strikes and embarked on a multi-year program that eventually convinced the city to call off the demolition; and wherein the residents won the right to control the redevelopment process of their community.<sup>3</sup> The result was the creation of Villa Victoria (Victory Town), an 895 unit low-to-moderate-income neighborhood which today houses more than 3,000 (mostly Puerto Rican) tenants.

Along with the development of the Villa came the creation of a non-profit organization called IBA, an acronym which in English means Puerto Rican Tenants in Action, whose mission is to develop and empower the Villa Victoria community in the South End by "fostering the human, social and economic well-being of the Villa Victoria residents, promoting and advocating for Latinos city wide, and perpetuating the rich Latino cultural and artistic heritage."<sup>4</sup>



IBA is a multifaceted non-profit with departments that include a Human Services Department, Community Planning and Organizing Department, and Arte y Cultura, a cultural department which weaves the traditional arts of Puerto Rico and Latin America into all of its other divisions. IBA holds a strong belief that promoting cultural awareness aids in combating racism and other social ills.

Arte y Cultura strives to educate about Latin American culture through the arts. They aim to enrich the community with their own culture and expose them to the outside world while exposing the outside world to their culture through a series of concerts, theatrical events, and festivals. IBA views the arts, economic and social issues in a very holistic way and according to David Cortiella, the current transitional Managing Director of IBA, its mission is not only to develop the community and provide social services but also to instill pride through cultural awareness - visual and performing arts - into the community. He says, the pride must not be simply in being Puerto Rican but in living in a beautiful environment; a well preserved community that is rich in history, has a love of the arts, and plays an active role in its neighborhood and in the

city of Boston.

It then becomes apparent that the residents of Villa Victoria would be actively involved in the making of public art in their community. And they were. In speaking with Luz Cuadrado, IBA's Managing Director during the mid-1970's, by telephone in her home in Puerto Rico, I learned that the idea of the *Betances Mural* grew out of the desire to disguise a power station belonging to Boston Edison that was right in the middle of the centerpiece of the development of the Villa, the Plaza Betances. The Plaza was designed in the fashion of a Spanish plaza and was intended to be a large common area where residents could meet and hold festivals. In fact, the naming of the Plaza itself became a project of the community wherein the residents were asked to submit ideas and a vote of the whole community was cast and the name 'Plaza Betances' selected. Ms. Cuadrado explained that nothing in the Villa occurred by chance. Every single new development was intended to involve the community and, therefore, instill a greater pride.

And so, after several years of pondering how to mask the power station, it was decided that a mural would be placed on the wall facing the center of the Plaza. At first, a nun working for a local adult education center, Casa del Sol, suggested using college art students to design and implement a mural. The students that she enlisted were excited by the project but were not members of the community. They were not able to properly express the interests of the community. Unwavered by this, Sister Carol Putnam began her search for an artist that would work with the community to build the mural. The artist, Lilli Ann K. Rosenberg was teaching at the Children's Art Center at the South End Settlement House and learned of the Villa's desire to erect a mural. Having done similar work with public housing projects in New York City, together with the nuns at Casa del Sol, Rosenberg wrote a grant to Boston Edison to retain funds for the project. They received a gift of \$15,000 and the project was launched. The combination of her

talent for creating large mosaics and history of working with activist communities, Rosenberg seemed a perfect fit for the plan that the Villa had for the power station. Of her work in New York, she was quoted as saying “Most of these children were from large families and lived in small crowded apartments. They couldn’t take artwork home, so we incorporated their art into public housing projects - art that was alive, in the neighborhood, and gave kids a feeling of place.”<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg understood what the community wanted to do and she perfectly complemented IBA’s mission of meshing art and culture into the social workings of the community.

Rosenberg traveled to Puerto Rico to get a feel for the culture and traditional art and came back with a vision for the mural. Because it was to reside in the Plaza Betances, she would design a mural to be made by the community with a portrait of Dr. Ramon E. Betances at its center. Betances is known as the emancipator of Puerto Rico and his image is rich in symbolism to the Puerto Rican community. He was a humanitarian and philanthropist who bought slaves and set them free.



Ms. Cuadrado told me of the story of Puerto Rico's independence in our telephone conversation. She spoke of "El Grito de Lares" (The Shout of the Townspeople); an event led by Betances that resulted in Puerto Rico's independence from Spain. With a small laugh, she said "It happened overnight, you see. Puerto Rico was free from Spain after just one night!" She also pointed out the connection between the Hispanic residents of the South End who fought for their own place in the landscape of Boston. "A Little Puerto Rico...just like most places have a Little Italy or a Chinatown. We had our own Little Puerto Rico and we had fought hard and made incredible sacrifices to get it, too!", she exclaimed. The emotion in her voice in remembering the early days of the Villa is evident even over the telephone and I have no doubt that the mural not only fit the mission of IBA, but that it made the Plaza Betances a real *place* for the residents to meet and celebrate their culture. It had succeeded in accurately representing the members of the community in which it would reside.

Walking towards the mural with David Cortiella the other day, he explained to me the literal meaning of the piece itself. Made from hundreds of tiles created by over 300 children and elderly residents of the Villa and students from the surrounding schools, it has a section on the right that represents the island of Puerto Rico including traditional icons of the Native Indian or Taino cultures well as images of Spanish Conquistadors. The island is surrounded by a large blue area representing the ocean surrounding Puerto Rico. The center of the mural contains a large portrait of Betances and a Puerto Rican flag. To the left of the portrait is a section of musical instruments, paint brushes, and other artist's implements that represent the community's love of music and the arts. And, finally, there is a large bright yellow circle which represents the fact that the residents are now members of a new place, with a new future, and includes images of popular culture in America. It is a "celebration of color and movement...that makes powerful use of bright

elderly residents, local high school students, and even elderly women from a nearby Asian housing project spent Thursday afternoons designing and painting the tiles. Students at Boston Technical High School, the Cathedral Elementary School, and Casa del Sol also made tiles as part of school art projects. The tiles were then gathered by Rosenberg and a general design was laid out.

Though the tiles took over a year to make, the mural itself had to be constructed in a very short time. “The portrait of Betances was sculpted in cement...a process calling for speed and a sure hand. In the wet concrete she mixed additives including iron oxide, which gives the work its reddish color plus greater plasticity; nevertheless, she had to complete the sculpture in less than three hours.”<sup>7</sup>

I also had the opportunity to speak with Gwendolyn Rivera, a young woman who lives in the Villa, works at the Escuelita, and who made a few of the tiles as a six year old. She can remember working with the nuns, and learning traditional Puerto Rican songs while painting the tiles. She also remembers the pride that she felt when the mural was unveiled and how later as a teenager she and her friends would exchange memories of making the tiles. When I asked her if she still feels the same pride in the mural or whether being involved has made her want to share the experience with her own children and teach them about the importance of Betances and the history of the mural she says, “You know, I hadn’t thought about it in a long time. I never imagined that (the mural) would be such an important part of our community. But, I’m sure that I will tell my son now.”

When I first asked Antonio Molina, a friend of mine, and lifelong tenant of the Villa how the mural makes him feel, he described it as “...something like a blender. It’s there all the time, and you sort of see it, but you only really see it when you need to use it.” Surprised to hear that one might “use” the mural, I asked him to explain. He told me that it is the focal point of the

Festival Betances that is held every year in July in the Plaza Betances. Later when discussing the mural further with Tony, he told me that he had changed his view of the mural since we first started discussing it; and that he now glances at it each day and is filled with pride in his community.

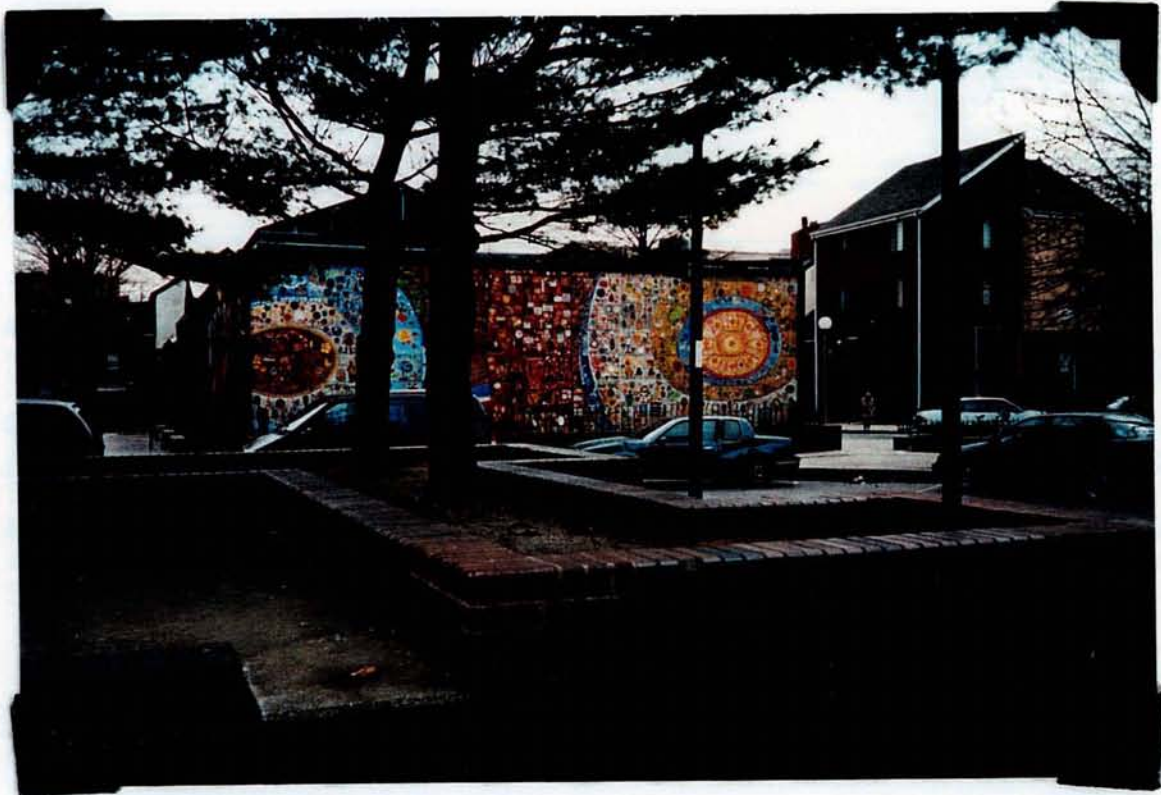


Tony explained the Festival Betances as a time of year when Puerto Rican's celebrate their independence from Spain, much like our Fourth of July celebrations. It is a week-long festival that is kicked off by a parade through the South End. The festival itself takes place in the Plaza Betances and includes Latin music and dance, traditional foods of Puerto Rico, games for the children, and general neighborhood camaraderie. The Plaza is filled with a large circle of vendors and stages, the centerpiece of which is the *Betances Mural*. With its festive colors and rich memories, it provides a perfect backdrop for the annual celebration of Puerto Rican pride and



heritage. The community continues to feel an immense ownership of the mural that they took part in erecting twenty years ago.

In a city rich in culture and the arts, you can see that the mural is a true success story in the realm of public art. Its creation actively involved residents of the Villa Victoria neighborhood as well as members of the surrounding community. It accurately portrays the community that it was intended to represent. It has instilled a deep and long-lasting pride. And, it has retained the respect of the entire community and will continue to do so for years to come.



## Endnotes

1 Suzanne Lacy, Editor., Mapping the Terrain: New Genre in Public Art, Arlene Raven, " Word of Honor," (Bay Press, Seattle, 1995.), 162.

2 Suzanne Lacy, 19.

3 "Hispanic Bostonians Mark a Rebirth," New York Times, (May 10, 1987), 36.

4 Inquilinos Boriquas en Accion/ETC Fact Sheet, 1998

5 "Painting in the City," The Boston Globe, (October 16, 1997), Calendar, 8.

6 Ronald Lee Fleming and Renata von Tscharnier, Place Makers, (Hasting House, New York, 1981), 77.

7 Marty Carlock, A guide to Public Art in Boston, (Harvard Common Press, Boston, 1993), 87-88.