Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:
Responses to Gang Violence in East Boston Design Lab

April 19th, 2016
2:00pm - 4:50pm
Brandeis University
Rose Art Museum

Summary Report

Introduction:

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. This design lab was a collaboration between CAST students, faculty, staff and members of the Greater Boston area whose experiences and careers offered vital perspectives for addressing the complex issue of gang violence in East Boston.

East Boston and the surrounding neighborhoods near the Maverick T station have suffered from a spike of violent crime in recent months. The growing tensions between two Latin American gangs, MS-13 and MS-18, have been linked to a number of homicides of young men in the last six months. These gangs are extensions of highly recognized criminal organizations in El Salvador and Mexico. The M-18 was formed in the 1960s by Mexican immigrants, while MS-13 was created in the 1980s by El Salvadorian immigrants escaping civil war. MS-13 is a designated transnational criminal organization with more than 6,000 members in the U.S., and 30,000 members globally. These gangs target middle and high school students for initiation, especially in Chelsea and East Boston high schools. To achieve membership, or “homeboy status”, members must engage in “significant criminal activity,” which includes the murder of a rival gang member. The September 2015 murder of a 15 year old, Irvin de Paz, led to one such initiation of a MS-13 member. At least three other young men under 20 years of age have been found dead in East Boston as a result of feuds between these two gangs in the last 6 months. The rise in homicides has alarmed the East Boston community who recently had a vigil for the victims and called for the end of violence in their community.

The purpose of this design lab was to consider the unique possibilities that the arts and cultural work can bring to address this problem and to critically assess how such possibilities might be strengthened. Organizations such as Centro Presente, Harbor Arts, Zumix, and Teens Against Gang Violence are incorporating art and cultural elements in their approaches to mitigating gang violence. The main discussion explored what other arts and cultural initiatives could be created and what challenges they could face. Our exploration benefited greatly from a City of Boston employee working in the Youth Services Unit, Mayan, whose perspective as a former gang member helped to ground the discussion.

Key Questions:

1. What is the overall context of gang violence in East Boston? What are the underlying conditions that give rise to gang violence and what are the current manifestations?

2. What contributions are being made by artists, cultural workers, cultural institutions, to the prevention of gang violence in East Boston?
3. What should arts organizations keep in mind as they do their work with youth in East Boston?

4. What can we learn from successful examples of the art's contribution to building trust and ending conflict between two groups?

5. What types of programs or creative spaces are needed to address this issue?

6. How can this issue be reframed in order to account for the sources of resilience found in gangs and within communities and how can arts organizations work to tap into those resources?

7. Very little is known about the inner workings of gangs or criminal groups, what tools can the arts contribute to our understanding of these groups? (Perhaps, different creative forms of expression made by former gang members could be a way for us to learn more about the root causes of gang violence).

Explanation of CAST 150b:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

Explanation of CAST Minor:

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played:

Prior to the design lab, the students in the Spring 2016 CAST 150b course were assigned to research different organizations in Boston that use art and/or cultural expressions to address or facilitate social change. Students were asked to compile information about the organization’s mission, practices, challenges, and solutions. This information was consolidated in a session prior to the design lab in an effort to expose students to the similarities and differences between Boston-based organizations doing socially engaged work through art. During the design lab, students were able to draw upon this knowledge and offer relevant examples from these other organizations in order to describe how the arts and cultural work more generally could strengthen community efforts to address the rise in youth gang violence in East Boston.

Additionally, students were assigned with different roles during the discussion. The notetaker was tasked with keeping detailed notes, and the rapporteurs was tasked to summarize and report the discussion to fellow students and participants, who engaged in different design labs.
Participants:

- Mads Palihapitiya (UMass Boston, Associate Director of Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration; Presenter)
- Mayan (City of Boston, Youth Services Unit—South End; Presenter)
- Maria Pachon (Brandeis undergraduate; Presenter)
- Jennifer Llargaespada (Brandeis undergraduate; Facilitator)
- Daniel Lagenthal (Brandeis; Experiential Learning and Teaching)
- Thomas King (Brandeis; English, Women and Gender Studies)
- Ali Santana (Brandeis undergraduate; Rapporteur)
- Linda Ferrer (Brandeis undergraduate; Notetaker)
- Angel Ramirez (Brandeis undergraduate)
- Koon How Goh (Brandeis undergraduate)

Key Learnings:

In the 1990s, Boston achieved dramatic success in reducing its level of gang-related gun violence—in particular, youth homicides. That success has brought widespread recognition and attention to what has now become known as The Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence. Other cities have begun to experiment with some of its key programs, in particular Operation Night Light and Operation Cease Fire (more information about those programs can be found at this website: [http://www.sasnet.com/bostonstrategy/story/07_boston.html](http://www.sasnet.com/bostonstrategy/story/07_boston.html)). While these projects were effective, a major criticism has been that they did not include attempts to address long-term structural issues within the community. For instance, the programs did not include the public school system as an active partner despite requiring school police officers to participate in the programs.

Throughout our discussion this failure to include other school personnel in the program kept recurring as a potential way to improve the city's response to the recent rise in gang related violence. It is known that a main reason that young people, especially immigrant youths, find themselves drawn to gangs is that they often have difficulties assimilating to their new surroundings and the gangs provide them with a space to build community and earn social status. To counteract this, school personnel could be provided with resources to provide alternative spaces for community building for young people—especially spaces that encourage artistic and cultural expression as this could be a way to strengthen cultural pride while removing its association with the international gangs. Lack of public funding and teacher's time was cited as a major obstacle to this approach.

The economic opportunities presented by the gangs were also cited as a challenge. Young immigrants, looking for ways to support themselves and their families, are drawn in by the opportunities to make money that the gangs provide. If arts and cultural organizations devoted resources to developing the skills of potential artists (both artistic and managerial) in the area, young people might be persuaded to invest their time and energy in those activities. These opportunities would need to offer concrete entryways into the advanced schooling or career tracks in order for them to be viable alternatives to gang membership. Partnerships with local colleges and universities could...
facilitate these types of opportunities.

A final consideration was that restorative justice models for rivaling gangs have precedent in cities such as Chicago. It was noted that in order for such efforts to be effective in Boston, neutral spaces must be made available for such discussions. Arts and cultural institutions, as well as colleges and universities, could serve as these neutral spaces for rivaling gang members to meet to discuss their grievances so long as these institutions were not perceived to favor one group over the other. These efforts would have to be coupled with the efforts of city and social workers on the ground who would be most likely to convince the two groups to come together.

Reference:

http://www.cpresente.org/what-we-do/youth-program
http://www.harborarts.org/
http://www.zumix.org
http://www.tagv.org
http://www.zumix.org