URBANO PROJECT

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empowering urban teens & professional artists to effect social change through visionary works of art & performance

WWW.URBANOPROJECT.ORG
“BRINGING TOGETHER URBAN TEENS AND PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS TO IGNITE SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PLACE-BASED PARTICIPATORY ART AND PERFORMANCE.”

Urbano Project was founded in 2009 by artist and cultural worker, Stella McGregor, as a non-profit incubator that supports urban youth and professional artists in exploring how art sparks social change based upon collaboration, risk-taking, border crossing and social justice.

Located in Jamaica Plains, Urbano’s studio and exhibition space is the home base for the classes and programs that “offer youth high-quality contemporary arts education experiences, facilitates creative youth development, develop a corps of positively engaged youth who serve as leaders in their communities, and promote civic engagement through public, participatory art that addresses the social justice issues of our times”. Urbano implements their mission through offering two after-school art programs for Boston public high school students- this year’s classes are Flip and Public Art Takeback, that explore a variety of artistic expressions including, lyrical writing, theater production, meditation and martial arts. For students who have worked with Urbano for more than two semesters, they have the opportunity to join the Urbano Fellows program and collaborate with lead artist Susannah Lawrence and Stella Mcgregor to host events and produce artwork that explores Boston’s contemporary art scene.

The philosophy behind their teaching and art-making is the idea of “Place / Space / Participatory.” The place-based education model focuses on physically, historically, and culturally re-claiming space by individuals through experiential projects. By taking up issuing from student’s own local communities to develop projects, this method “increase comprehensive value of educational programs because students are learning from what they are familiar with, but are departing from that.” In turn, the community re-defines itself, and shapes their own culture from within. Furthermore, the participatory education model recognizes the youth as artists, and enables the students and the teaching artists to take ownership of the work.

**Quotation and data from Urbano Annual Report, RFP, website, exhibition wall text, and interview with Diego Gomez-Aristizabal, Education Programs Manager.**
PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Palas Por Pistolas (Shovels for Guns) [Summer 2011]

“In partnership with acclaimed contemporary Mexican artist Pedro Reyes, teen art student from the Urbano project will plant a tree in Jamaica Plains Stony Brook Park during the Wake Up the Earth Festival, in memory of local young people killed by gun violence in Jamaica Plain. Palas Por Pistolas is an international public art piece designed to draw attention to a devastating effects of gun violence, and to unite communities in peaceful response. This project was initially conceived for the Botanical Garden in Culiacán, a city in western Mexico with the highest rate of handgun deaths in the country. Aided by a campaign organized by the Culiacán city government, Reyes collected 1,527 guns from civilians which were melted down to create shovels that, in turn, were used to plant trees in urban areas affected by violence.”

Peace Line [Summer 2013]

In collaboration with Nick Hakim, Neil Horsky and Susannah Lawrence, Urbano students worked on the Peace Line project that works to envision a re-imagined Boston and provide the space to consider and discuss about issues regarding environmental racism, ecological issues, and issues of urban planning. “PEACE LINE DO CROSS” is silkscreened on silk scarves as an inversion of the police tape. The scarves are hung as a continuous line to mark off space for public art interventions and performances, and invites the public to join in the effort of re-imagining Boston. This project is part of the year-long theme on The Emancipated City, which invites artists, youth and the public to “ignite imaginations and to challenge our conceptions of what the “city” has come to mean.”

The Commons: Space, Place & Public [Summer 2015-Spring 2016]

The first phase of Urbano’s exploration of the commons seeks to develop and define the common spaces that characterize the Egleston/Jackson Square areas. Urbano students and artists investigates issues of gentrification, environmental justice and cultural/economic equity through asking the following three questions: “What are the commons of Egleston Square? Who authors, activates, or owns those spaces? What is the role of the commons for both transformation and preservation?”

Two approaches within this exploration of The Commons are urban-mapping and City Journalist. On the wall of the Urbano gallery space, the urban map of Egleston Square is visualized, and fundamental spaces within the community are identified on the map, such as green spaces, community centers, and local businesses. For City Journalist, art teens and lead artist Lina Maria Giraldo interviewed the Egleston community, and especially the local businesses in the square. They visited barber shops, furniture stores, accessories shops and restaurants among others. The documentary highlighted the family’s different backgrounds, challenges and hopes they had encountered when facing gentrification and rent increase. The videos are projected and publicly displayed on the store fronts of the local businesses.

**Quotation and data from Urbano Annual Report, RFP, website, exhibition wall text, and interview with Diego Gomez-Aristizabal, Education Programs Manager.**
Above: Urbano’s entrance.

Right: Quotation on office wall.
Top: Office space in Urbano. Bottom: Gallery space in Urbano.
Top: Palas Por Pistolas (Shovels for Guns) exhibition in Urbano gallery.
Bottom: Collaborative memorial at 2011 tree planting in Stony Brook Park. (urbanoproject.org)
The Common: Space, Place & Public
Top: City Journalist installation.  (http://egleston.us/)

Bottom: City Journalist installation.
Urbano idea board in workshop space
URBANO'S 2012-2013 STUDENTS COME FROM...

28 Public schools
15 Neighborhoods

*6% of students came from Mission Hill
*1% of students came from outside the greater Boston area.

Source: Urbano Project 2013 Annual Report
REFLECTIVE STATEMENT

To understand Urbano Project, is to understand Stella McGregor’s passions and commitment to social justice, youth education and how art can be used for social transformation. Her understanding of the arts is the driving force behind Urbano’s core mission of social justice, pushing Urbano beyond a traditional art educational program, and driving it to become an active response to social issues.

The Urbano project’s artistic interventions are not only a catalyst for social change, but also bridges the gap for the need of art programs and the lack of resources in Boston Public Schools. One of the main services that Urbano offers are their after-school classes, which is driven by their hope to ameliorate a lack of arts in Boston Public schools. According to the 2009 Boston Public School Arts Report, only 26% of high schools report offering any arts education to more than a quarter of their students. Therefore, through partnership with Boston Public Schools arts expansion programs, Urbano is able to provide Boston public high school students between the ages of 14-21 with quality art education and credits towards graduations. This social discrepancy of art resources seems to be linked with racial and economic inequality as well. In reviewing Urbano’s constituents, the racial, social, and economic characteristics of the students are evident, as seen from the statistics below. These numbers and graphs give light to a bigger issue of the segregation of Boston’s neighborhoods based on income and race, which is then reflected in the public school system and art resources available to the community. Urbano’s ability to bridge this gap, identify needs within communities, and provide the necessary resources, are reasons that we think lead to the success the programs have currently.

Urbano Student Demographics
“100% from Public School”
“80% are first generation immigrants”
“38% born outside of the United States”
“67% at-least 1 parent born outside of the United States”
“40% speak a language other than English”
“55% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of socioeconomic status”

Not only providing the lacking art resources, Urbano project also changes the students through their ownership in public art projects. By facilitating the urban youth in finding their voice and learning methods of expression, the students established a sense of self-esteem and agency, which were often lacking in low-income immigrant communities. This change in attitude towards self, future and community could be seen from the survey in Urbano’s annual report: 94% of students told us that they consider themselves to be confident people; 98% say their life has a purpose; 97% say they are excited about the future; and 97% of students say they have important things to contribute to their community. Providing urban youth with a sense a self-esteem and agency empowers them to become civic leaders for positive social changes, and prevents youth violence in at-risk communities.

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Furthermore, the three projects we highlighted in this report exemplify the work that Urbano does and how they have successfully initiated social change and dialogue and impacted the community through the prevention of violence. The Peace Line creates an open space for the artists, students and community members to have a dialogue about what they think is important in re-imagining Boston. Transforming a symbol often related to violence, such as crime scene or police brutality, to a symbol for peace and welcoming conversations, the Peace Line became a visual reminder of the promising future of Boston. As a community member stated, “What makes it a beautiful thing cause it’s like now you gonna see things gonna change, things gonna change, things gonna be a lot different.”

The Palas Por Pistolas (Shovels for Guns) project brings the students, families and community members together in the creation of a personalized art installation. While the project might have started out as Pedro Reyes’ vision, Bart Uchida worked alongside the students and created an interactive workspace to continue the conversation and artistic response to young victims of gun violence. In response to the tree that the young artists planted in Stony Brook Park, Uchida describes, “These families can come and add some word, text, name of the victim onto the painted stone that will be part of the spiral around the tree. So that we see that as the tree is a living organism so too will be this process of memorializing the people who have been unfortunate victims.” This project not only opens up communication, but is a way for the community to personally reconcile with the impact and loss from gun violence, and provides a peaceful transformation from guns to trees, a symbol of life.

Exemplifying Urbano’s place-making mission, The Commons project gives value to the community, celebrates individual oral histories and builds a stronger relationship between the community members. The project strives to facilitate collaboration between community partners in creating culturally and sustainable common spaces around the neighborhood. Evenmore, the artwork was able to be presented back into the society by reclaiming closed and alienated storefronts at night, making the community more vibrant, and in a way, literally and figuratively, look beyond the facade of the community.

Not unlike other non-profits, the challenges that Urbano faces comes mainly from the lack of funding and resources in order to expand. The organization seeks to reach a wider student population within the Boston area, and has been actively reaching out to different public schools to introduce the program. However, the limitation on resources is preventing the program to expand as much as they might wish. In addition, with limited spots, currently the application process to enroll is quite competitive. Therefore, with more funding and resources, the program will be able to accept more interested students.

Another major challenge Urbano project is facing is student retention rate. Although almost all of the students evaluated the program and experience positively, since the majority of students are at-risk youths, many other social factors impact the student’s availability to continue with the program, for example family issues and work commitment. Through the initiation of the Urbano Fellows program, Urbano provides further motivation for students to return, through more specialized projects and taking leadership roles in hosting events and producing community art pieces.

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Furthermore, Urbano incentivizes participation through providing a stipend to all students and fellows, which is around $350 per semester. However, the financial support does not guarantee students to return the following year.

Ultimately, Urbano creates an empowering space for urban youth to become artists and tackle complex issues in society. Their public art projects, in turn, bring about social change within Boston’s communities.

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