Maypole Garden Project, USA, Brendan Hudson, b. Canada, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, (SAIC)

The grant from the Davis Foundation enabled the Lot(s) Maypole Garden and Mural Project to continue during summer of 2007. Artist/designer/educators Brendan Hudson and Kirsten Larson designed programming involving local high school students in Mayor Daley’s Summer Jobs Program, community members, artists, and local nonprofit groups in the installation of a community-designed garden and the design process for a community history mural to be painted on a wall adjoining the garden site at the corner of Maypole Street and California Avenue. Community members are ecstatic that an underutilized, debris filled vacant lot that marks the entrance to their neighborhood is now beautiful space full of living plants. They are also enthusiastic and happy to see that their under-recognized personal histories are being commemorated, enabling them to have public acknowledgement.

The Lot(s) initiative is a program that works to turn vacant lots into community spaces authored by people in the neighborhood. Lot(s) involves residents, students and artists in an exploration and active use of knowledge imbedded within the community. Creating places that facilitate and commemorate local history while looking towards social and ecological goals of the future. Empowering youth through their participation in designing community based art and green spaces that beautify their neighborhoods, creating a sense of ownership among residents who participated in the design processes and creating spaces for community and conversation. Collaboration between community members and artists in the creation of neighborhood spaces and democratic community based art brings together local knowledge and a diverse resource base to address several of the desires and challenges concerning the creation of a neighborhood space and democratically conveying a community and its history through a Mural. This program activates a network of overlapping interests in the same physical and ideological spaces by making connections between existing resources and organizations.

The Maypole Garden/Mural Project continued this summer through Mayor Daley’s Summer Jobs Program: a youth job/college training program for high school aged students. SAIC Alumna Kirsten Larson and I created curriculum that included: mural design work, garden installation, art projects, community research and formal presentations. During this six-week program students worked with the Maypole residents and artists to design a mural commemorating the community’s history while looking to the hopes and desires for the future. The students spent time in the community, working on the garden, talking to residents, presenting design work, painting and barbequing. Students were introduced to mural work through books, discussions and a historical tour of Chicago’s South Side murals. The students utilized a combination of their personal experiences and local research to inform their work on the mural design. I feel the process of facilitating the creation of the design for the mural and garden was truly a democratic process in which we were able to engage youth and elders in the democratic representation of the community, community’s history and their hopes for the future.

The garden and mural design will rely on ongoing relationships with the community for physical maintenance by the community. Community leaders, elders, and the Maypole Block club are essential collaborators in this process. The most important element to long-term care and survival of this space is the support and ownership on behalf of the Maypole Block Club and neighborhood residents.

The essence of the Maypole Garden is the cultivation of relationships; relationships between people of all ages, backgrounds and histories, between people and organizations, between people and the natural environment, between people, art and living culture. It is the ongoing collaboration and relationship building within the community that actualized this neighborhood project, and it will be these ongoing relationships that will maintain the garden and mural which symbolize to others, the essence of the community by formalizing a public place for ongoing interactions.

Important Collaborators:
Kirsten Larson SAIC Alumna continues to be my equal and partner in collaboration in creating and facilitating the garden/mural project.

Dee Dee Carson: a community leader, an elder who has live on Maypole her whole life is one of our most important collaborators in this project. She was our initial contact in the area, and has been helping with the project since we began. Dee Dee organized community history meetings with students and elders, gave talks to students about the community and its history, helped to distribute surveys, flyers, posters, gathered photos from elders that show the past and history of the community, informed us who wants/doesn’t want to be portrayed in the mural, cared for the garden, cleaned up the space and has provided us with guidance and support in so much of this project.
Openlands: a non-profit dedicated to securing green spaces in Illinois. Jamie Zapletosch and Openlands enabled the Maypole Garden Project to be realized by working with the community and the City of Chicago’s Neighborspace program to use and secure a vacant lot for the garden. Openlands was awarded funding for the rod iron fence and received a donation of soil and plants for the garden. We were able to concentrate more of our budget toward the painting of a community mural because of the funding received by Openlands. The Education to Careers program worked hand in hand with Openlands and Neighborhood Youth Garden Corps to install the garden. Residents and volunteers from Chicago Cares also came out to help with the planting of the garden. Khalia Poole, is the Maypole Block Club leader who has been very helpful in the progress of the project.

Revival Fellowship Church reached out to their parish to help recruit student designers for the project. The church also hosted the community design charrette where the students presented their work to local residents and others who are interested in the project. The Pastor, Reverend Jackson, has made announcements regarding the project at several Sunday services.

Drea Hownstien: professor in Art Education/Sculputure/Design at The School of the Art Institute continued her support with professional advice and direction for the project. The conception of this project happened in collaboration with Drea, SAIC alumni Kirsten Larson, Yamani Hernandez from Chicago Public Schools’ Education to Careers, Jamie Zapletosch from Openlands and myself Brendan Hudson.

Mayor Daley’s Summer Jobs Program: a CPS summer job-training program for high school students. Working with ETC, specifically Yamani Hernandez (Career Clusters Manager), allowed us to hire and pay students for their design work. Ms. Hernandez has given continued support to the program and students.

Stephen Saunders: Artist and Social Worker. Mr. Saunders talked with students about the community, taking both SAIC and Education to Careers students on tours of south side murals and talking about the history of mural painting in Chicago. Mr. Saunders is currently working with SAIC alumni Kirsten Larson to display student designs in a local venue.

Laurie Palmer: Chair of the Sculpture Department at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago has been another professional advisor and advocate for this project.

SAIC students, alumni and alumna have collaborated and volunteered over the past year and a half including: Becky Pflueger, Michelle Corpus, Ryan Griffin, Ben Neotzel, Carrie Crumbaugh, Mark Brown, and others.

Z Construction: gave permission to paint the selected wall. The building for the future Maypole Mural is owned by the CEO of Z construction.

Nancy Gildart, was my proposal advisor from SAIC Career Development, she worked with me in crafting and editing my proposal for the 100 Projects for Peace grant providing professional advice through the process of the grant writing and through to the implementation of the project. Documentation of the Maypole Garden and Mural project is being continuously blogged at www.maypolelots.blogspot.com.

We are currently awaiting a permit to erect scaffolding in the public way and negotiating liability insurance. Dealing with liability insurance and permit applications has proved to be a time consuming and frustrating process which has delayed the timeline for execution of the mural. While this delay may seem to be a major inconvenience, we have realized that engaging in a mural design process that is truly owned and expresses the community’s vision is a lengthy process. Another on the ground problem was with student paychecks from Chicago public schools, a majority of the students had major delays with their paychecks the attitude and spirits of the students was not always at a high point, especially as delays continued.

This project has engulfed my life for the past year and a half. My personal time commitment has exceeded any project I have ever worked on. I have spent my time designing curriculum, cultivating relationships with community members and professionals, teaching, curriculum development, landscaping, research, design work, event planning and MCing, painting, gathering supplies, blogging, writing. I continue to be very invested in this project for the real, on the ground change which it creates as well as for the social and political meaning of this project. The mural will be finished October 31st. We are in the process of obtaining pictures of past and present residents of the neighborhood for the mural. Dee Dee Carson is talking to residents to determine who wants to be in the mural, this process will be wrapped up in three weeks and the painting of the mural will begin.

This project would not be possible with out the support from the Davis Projects for Peace Grant.