

Made Corrections:

A prison-based street art intervention for young offenders

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Abstract

This paper describes a prison-based street art intervention that took place at a Lithuanian institution for young offenders. During the first stage of the project, existing historical graffiti and murals on the prison walls were uncovered and documented. The second stage of the project involved working with the young offenders to co-produce a series of collaborative large-scale works within the prison walls, some of which incorporated elements of these earlier murals as a form of living heritage. The final stage of the project reproduced a selection of this work outside on the walls of the local city. Future work will involve a more formal evaluation of the impact of the intervention on the young offenders, the prison staff, and the local community.

1. Introduction

The Made Corrections project had a dual focus on identifying and documenting existing historical prison-based graffiti and promoting young offenders' participation in contemporary street art, within the Kaunas Youth Correctional Facility, a Lithuanian prison for juvenile male offenders.¹ Lithuania was the first Soviet Republic to declare independence from the Soviet Union, in 1990. While Kaunas' current inmates were all born after this significant socio-political transition, the walls of the prison still bear visible traces of the lives of the young offenders who spent time in this correctional facility during the Soviet-era. The existing graffiti and murals within the prison were thus considered to have cultural significance as heritage and were identified and documented as part of this project. Figure 1, below, shows the faded remnants of an aspirational Soviet-era mural featuring pictograms from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. This was painted on the interior wall of the prison's recreation yard.

In contrast, Figure 2 shows an example of a mural produced after Lithuanian independence. Here we can see a change in the aspirational imagery offered to the inmates, from Soviet-endorsed sport and recreational activities, to newly available objects for consumption (here, Adidas, Snickers, Mars and Nike).

Juvenile offenders in Lithuania, like young offenders internationally, face particular challenges to their mental health and wellbeing, especially during periods of incarceration when they exhibit higher rates of depression, self harm, and suicide attempts than their non-incarcerated peers (Bradley, 2009). Diržytė et al's (2006) study of the mental health of juvenile offenders in Lithuania found that, compared to non-offending secondary school students, young offenders held more negative beliefs about themselves, their relationships with others, and the world at large. Male offenders' wellbeing was particularly influenced by their assessment of their personal skills, abilities and achievements, whereas female offenders appeared to be more influenced by the subjective evaluations of others.

In working with young male offenders it may then be particularly important to engage in interventions that have some practical basis, with an aim of enhancing their skill set,

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Fig. 1. Soviet-era mural featuring sporting pictograms



Fig. 2. Post Soviet-era mural showing newly available brands

abilities and achievements, and consequently their sense of self-worth and confidence. Accordingly, this project sought to collaboratively engage young offenders in the process of design, layout and production of works of street art, such that they might acquire a sense of competence with this new creative skill set.

1.1 Street art, graffiti, creativity, and criminality

An association is commonly made between graffiti and criminality:

Graffiti writers [are claimed to] engage in a broad range of crimes (such as theft, interpersonal violence, and drug possession and dealing) (Young, 2013: 100).

However it was not until the end of the 19th century that graffiti was first considered as a symptom of social deviance. “Secret hieroglyphs” or coded visual messages only intelligible to insiders were then described as “a form of social protection used by outcast classes as a weapon against society” (Ellis, 1901: 210). The graffiti of prisoners was seen both as a degenerate compulsion, and more positively as the product of a universal creative human instinct: that when isolated from society, one will experience “the need of embodying some artistic expression” that is “scarcely distinguishable from the instinct which leads to the production of heroic works of art” (Ellis, 1901: 211). These contrasting historical discourses continue to inform the ways that we understand the creative expressions of prisoners – in that offenders’ unsanctioned graffiti tends still to be perceived as vandalism that is symptomatic of criminality and disorder (Hansen, 2016). Conversely, the art of prisoners is now an established art brut – or outsider art – sub-genre, and art therapy programs are widely regarded as therapeutic in releasing the latent universal creative drive of offenders.

Art-based activities and creative practice have been long argued to be therapeutic for at risk youth and young offenders. Prescott et al (2008: 156) assert that creativity is a “critical component of resiliency in the lives of [at risk] youth.” They suggest that there are clear links between young people’s participation in creative activities and their life achievement and ‘healthy’ lifestyle choices. However, most art therapy programs are based on a traditional approach to creativity, and encourage individual expression through drawing and

painting with traditional media, under the close direction of an art therapist.

The majority of existing art-based interventions tend to be designed to operate at an individual or small group level, and do not often encompass the opportunities for creativity in the wider prison environment, nor do they take account of the impact of the often bleak and threatening environment on the well-being of prisoners, and the potential for inmates’ creativity to collectively augment this detrimental environment. While mural programs are sometimes employed in an attempt to ‘brighten up’ prison environments, these tend to be imposed on the prisoners, with scant opportunity for consultation, collaboration, or involvement in the creative process of their design and production.

Outwith the prison environment, there is a parallel tradition of community-based mural programs for at risk youth and young offenders (Venable, 2005). Murals have often been used in attempts to connect with at risk youth in deprived environments. Judith Baca’s Great Wall of Los Angeles is an early monumental instance of such an endeavor. This ambitious program successfully engaged a large group of minority ethnic and underprivileged youth over the seven-year period of the mural’s production from 1976 to 1983 (SPARC, 2017). Notably, this period coincides with the emergence of graffiti as an apparent social problem in North America.

Several years later, in 1986, Jane Golden founded the City of Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program (Golden, Rice & Kinney, 2002). This was originally conceived as part of the city’s Anti-Graffiti Network, which sought to engage young people who had been prosecuted as graffiti vandals to work in collaboration with professional artists to produce murals in the city. Although the program is no longer focused exclusively on engaging young offenders, it retains a focus on youth through its engagement with local high schools in mural making, and employs over 300 artists per year, including more than 100 young people who had been prosecuted as graffiti vandals.

Mural programs are an effective way to engage at risk youth and young offenders, especially when they involve a level of collaboration. However, these murals are most often articulated on community walls, rather than in the correctional institutions occupied by young offenders. Street



Fig. 3. Internal door of isolation unit



Fig. 4. Earlier inspirational murals in an isolation unit

art increasingly intersects with contemporary muralism in the form of large-scale permissioned public murals. However, street art has a co-lineage with unauthorized forms of public image making and youth subcultures, such as graffiti – and may, as such, have a particular appeal to young people. Despite street art's collaborative democratic ethic and capacity to produce site-specific commentary in environments otherwise regarded as deprived or threatening, this contemporary urban art form has yet to be utilized within correctional facilities for young offenders.

2. A prison-based street art project for young offenders

The Made Corrections project sought to a) identify and document existing historical prison-based graffiti; and b) engage young offenders in the co-production of a series of collaborative large-scale street artworks within the Kaunas Youth Correctional Facility, a Lithuanian correctional facility for juvenile male offenders. Some of these works were also reproduced outside the prison, on the walls of the local city. The latter aim is the focus of the current paper.

Prior to this intervention, the only opportunity for the young men to make marks on the walls was in the isolation units, or 'holding pens', that they pass through when being admitted to the larger correctional facility. Figure 3, below shows existing tags and messages gouged into the door of an isolation unit. Prison officials reported that the young offenders experienced the atmosphere of the isolation units as threatening and intimidating and specifically requested that the isolation units be included in the areas of the prison addressed by the project. In the interior environment of the prison, some of the isolation units displayed fading 'enforced'

inspirational murals, reflecting earlier attempts by the prison officials to brighten the atmosphere of these environments. Figure 4 (above) shows a figurative mural that also features an inspirational message/poem. Translated, this reads:

*That! On the top of trees the hope would land
That winds would blow all the good from the home
That rain would wash away the pain and the guilt
That the snow wouldn't fall on the souls and the hearts.
That everything would begin from the new
That everything is good and everything is beautiful
(trans. Laima Nomeikaite)*

The young offenders assisted in the repainting of the isolation units with murals designed by the artists Tadas Symcas and Zygimantas Amelynas. The young men who volunteered to work with the artists in this area were pre-trial, and had first hand experience of this (formerly) threatening and intimidating environment.

The other sites within the prison encompassed by the project included the outdoor recreation areas (seen earlier in Figures 1 and 2) that bore the remnants of dilapidated murals from both the pre- and post-Soviet era. The first of the recreation areas was co-produced as part of an Inside Out Project Group Action. Photographs were taken (by local photographer Donatas Stankevicius) of the 39 young offenders who agreed to participate in this project. The young men then chose the photograph that they wished to represent them.

The initial plan for Recreation Area 1 is presented in Figure 5, below.



Fig. 5. The isolation unit during and post intervention

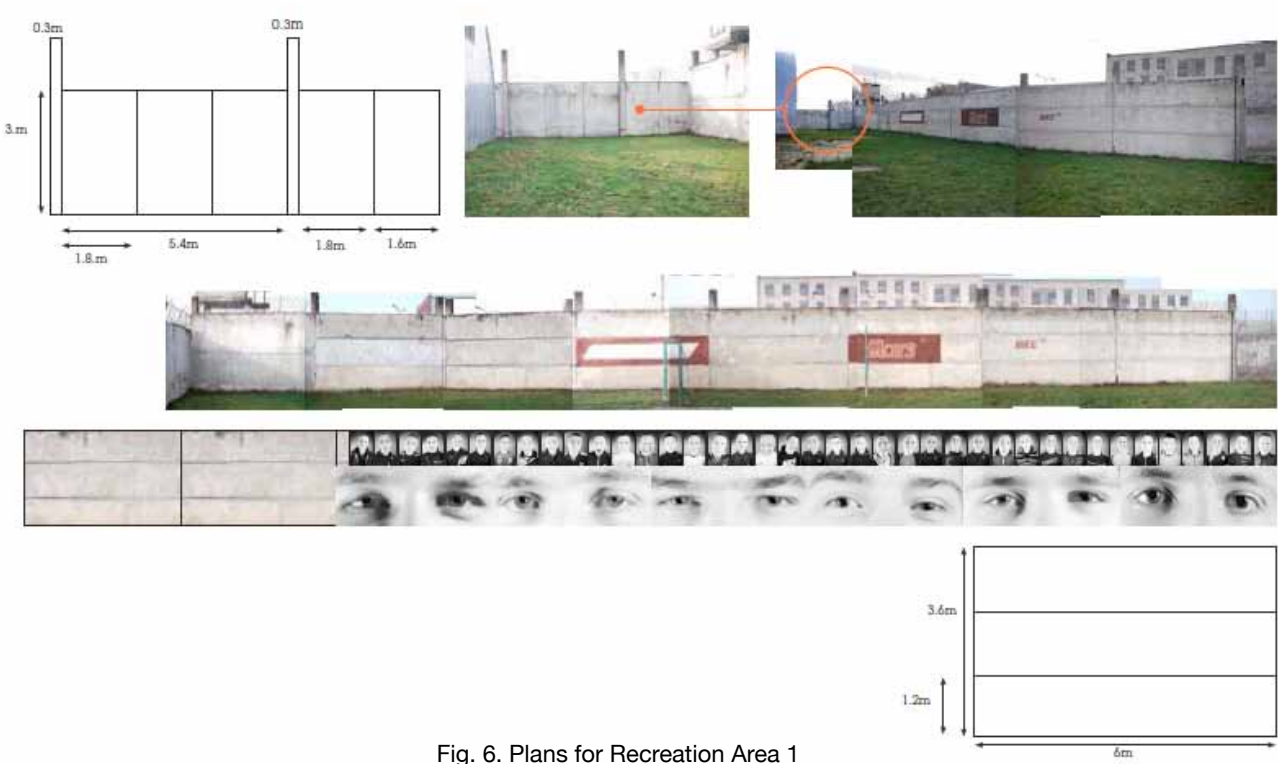


Fig. 6. Plans for Recreation Area 1

The systematic layout of the photographs on the walls of the recreation area was designed in advance by the project team. However, when it came to installing the work, the young offenders intervened and took control of the arrangement of their photographs on the wall.

The order of the groupings in which the photographs appear reflects the young men's own acknowledgement of both friendships and hierarchical social networks within the correctional facility (see Figure 7, below).



Fig. 7. Co-producing the wall in Recreation Area 1



Fig. 8. Young offenders learning stenciling techniques with Zacharevic

The second recreational area was co-produced with the artist Ernest Zacharevic. The young offenders engaged with the production of this work assisted the artist and learned stenciling techniques in the process.

This intervention involved working with the existing Soviet-era murals on the walls. Zacharevic incorporated these earlier sporting pictograms into his design, thus acknowledging and retaining a sense of the heritage of the correctional facility and the lived experience of its prior occupants. The reworked mural featured young men and boys with wire cutters engaged in an apparent attempt to escape from the prison – emphasizing the contrast between the youth of the inmates and the reality of their isolation and incarceration.

The final stage of the project within the prison allowed the young offenders free wall space and creative license to produce their own autonomous stenciled and free hand works. Outside the prison, in the city center of Kaunas, the photographs from the recreation area wall were reproduced on the former Police Headquarters, mirroring the prison walls on the outside. Although some residents objected to the placement of the young men's photographs in public space – a few people even attempted to pull down the paste-ups immediately after they were posted – many others were positive about the humanizing impact of the project.



Fig. 9. The reworked mural in Recreation Area 2



Fig. 10. The Recreation Area 1 wall mirrored on Kaunas Former Police Headquarters

3. Conclusion

The Made Corrections project was successful in engaging young offenders in the process of design, layout and production of works of street art – giving them a sense of mastery with a new creative skill set. The project also documented and incorporated existing murals, as a form of living heritage, within the prison walls. Informal feedback from both the young offenders and from the prison authorities was uniformly positive, and the project received an award from the Head of Lithuanian Prisons.

In future work, we seek to develop a version of the Made Corrections project that incorporates a more rigorous evaluation process, so that we may formally assess the impact of this project on the mental health and wellbeing of young offenders and staff within the prison, and on community attitudes towards young offenders.

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