An Impact of The Great Wall of Los Angeles: How Utilized Space Provided a Place for Cultural Representation

By Alė McGrew

Located in the San Fernando Valley, a mural empowers those who have been previously left out of the mainstream historical accounts and it is just as The Great Wall of Los Angeles was intended to do. Artist Judith F. Baca illuminates “When I first saw the wall, I envisioned a long narrative of another history of California; one which included ethnic peoples, women and minorities who were so invisible in conventional text book accounts. The discovery of the history of California’s multi cultured peoples was a revelation to me as well as to the members of my teams” (Baca, www.sparcmurals.org, “About The Great Wall of Los Angeles”). Baca’s vision was executed successfully to create a ‘place’ for these underrepresented groups in a variety of texts because the choice of utilizing the medium form of murals created a physical ‘space’ for the narrative to be recognized. The mural form commanded notation due to the appropriateness to the vision’s subject matter, the scale of the art work and the use of public space. One section of The Great Wall of Los Angeles, titled “Division of the Barrios/ Chavez Ravine” exemplifies why the use of ‘space’ contributed to the creation of a ‘place’ for the underrepresented Angelino Chicano narrative.

To perform this artistic vision, Baca chose a medium which was appropriate to the artistic practice of the underrepresented cultures that were to become the subject matter in the mural. Chicano culture in Los Angeles was to be highlighted in the mural and within this culture; there was a rich history of muralist who used the medium to raise awareness of social concerns (Stokstad, Art History, 1178 – 1179) (Schrank, Art in the City, 47-52). The little attention in conventional text books regarding the destruction of Chicano barrios in Los Angeles by the freeway system and the construction of Dodgers Stadium on top of the bulldozed remains of the Chicano barrio Chavez Ravine troubled Baca and her team (Villa, Barrio-Logos,81 – 82). This concern became the narrative for the section “Division of the Barrios/ Chavez Ravine”, where the imagery depicts a Chicano family being separated by a growing freeway system as the freeways crush through homes while an alien spaceship-like Dodger stadium descends upon the last few homes that remain intact (Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight,185). Since its completion in 1979, this illustrated narrative has become a powerful image to raise awareness of Angelino Chicano history and the success of the image is partially credited to the integration of a common Chicano artistic medium, murals (Baca, www.sparcmurals.org, “About The Great Wall of Los Angeles”).

The realized achievement of Baca’s vision can also be contributed to the physical size of the mural. The scale of The Great Wall of Los Angeles ensured
that the mural’s content would find its way into the text books. As the mural acts a physical reminder of this cultural narrative, the length of the mural draws additional attention for being one of the longest murals in the United States. The 2'754 feet of painted narration provided recognition in the record books (Baca, [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org), “About The Great Wall of Los Angeles”). This scale created a ‘place’ for the subject matter to be referenced to outside of art history texts, such as national magazines and media publications (Baca, [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org), “News Archive: Great Wall”). With the generated attention to the size of the mural, the interest grew towards the content of the mural and this expanded the fields of publications to include social science and cultural history text books (Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 90 – 91) (Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 185). The variety of publications displays how the great scale of the painted ‘space’ contributed to the development and growth of the ‘place’ for the historical accounts.

Consuming a half mile of the Tujunga Flood Control Channel, the mural has been noted for the scale, but in addition, the mural has been distinguished because it rests within the public realm (Baca, [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org), “News Archive: Great Wall”) (Stokstad, *Art History*, 1178 – 1179). The use of a public space has provided greater visibility while creating a ‘place’ for the public to reflect on the cultural history that has been depicted. The mural established a public validation of the contributions and struggles of the underrepresented Californians (Baca, [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org), “About The Great Wall of Los Angeles”). And as the mural has become a public object of a physical space, the highlighted underrepresented and the public were empowered to take ownership of this affirmation of cultural history. In particular, “The Division of the Barrios/Chavez Ravine” section provided the Chicano community a ‘place’ to remember the cultural destruction that took place in Los Angeles. This section has enabled recognition of the neighborhood eradication, the ensuing housing struggle and the livelihood oppression that was faced by hundreds of Chicano Californians. As the public continues to cross paths with *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, the interest in the mural continues because the work of art is constantly accessible and visible to the public.

Since the mural was begun in 1974, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* has gained global visibility while becoming an iconic public work of art. The mural has been presented in numerous newspaper articles, text books and other publicized media, including *Time* magazine (Baca, [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org), “News Archive: Great Wall”). This notoriety provides attention in the mural’s content of minority contributions and struggles in Los Angeles, which has become a new page marker in the conventional text books. New dialogues have been sparked by this recognition and they are supported by features of this mural. The use of ‘space’ reinforced the vision’s to create a ‘place’ for dialogues to raise awareness of the history, for becoming a physical reminder of the history and to provide validation of the history. By re-telling Los Angeles’ history in
“Division of the Barrios/ Chavez Ravine”, this section created a ‘place’ for Angelino Chicanos to gain affirmation and visibility for their plight in the physical space of the city. With the location being within public space, the mural is accessible to the public while empowering the public to take ownership of the content-created ‘place’. This is why ‘space’ utilization of The Great Wall of Los Angeles contributed to the designation of a ‘place’ for the representation of marginalized Californians, such as Angelinos Chicano who lost their homes in Chavez Ravine, to be sited in cultural history texts by providing validation of the history. This combined impact on the public’s cultural consciousness shows the successful execution of Baca and her team’s expression of a collective concern. Charged with the vision to represent the cultural heritage of underrepresented minority groups in California, Baca and her team demanded visibility and successfully changed the content in conventional text books.

The exhibition, re:present L.A. looks to continue this dialogue of the cultural impact made by underrepresented communities and challenge the history that one accepts of Los Angeles. Similar to The Great Wall of Los Angeles, re:present L.A. has utilized ‘space’ at the Vincent Price Art Museum to cultivate a ‘place’ for personal reflections of the city. To stimulate this dialogue, re:present L.A. is proud to feature Baca’s original drawings of the “Division of the Barrios/ Chavez Ravine” section of The Great Wall of Los Angeles.

Bio: Alē McGrew is pursuing a Masters of Arts Management at Claremont Graduate University. Inspired by Judith F. Baca, Alē plans to use her degree to open a community-focused organization that educates, engages and presents the artistic visual productions within the greater Los Angeles area.

Works Cited: