

Urban art centres play a valuable role in finding alternatives to the existing socio-political situation in South Africa. In centres like the Katlehong Art Centre, Funda, FUBA (Federated Union of Black Artists), CAP (Community Arts Project) and the Community Arts Workshop, people participate in artistic activities which often directly reflect their social experiences.

Their origin and purpose may be explained in terms of a number of levels. On the one hand, the processes of urbanisation and alienation during the past 80 years have caused a form of vacuum in which social relationships have changed drastically and the traditional context has been lost. On the other hand, traditional artists have been exposed to western culture with its emphasis on the market, gallery systems and the commodity side of art through the mass media. People's culture thus becomes entangled with market and elitist systems.

To equate the cultural development of Black Communities with improvements in education and housing would be oversimplistic.

Community art provides an outlet for self-expression, an opportunity to develop an alternative culture and to create new symbols as well as to provide educational and economic networks. Centres allow people to participate at a grass-root level, with an emphasis on workshop processes rather than end-products. Ordinary people can become participants in efforts to redefine culture and bridge the gap between First and Third Worlds. Participation in the arts breaks down barriers, thus making the art centre an important means of intercommunity communication.

Different approaches can be recognised in art centres which are influenced by factors such as the user group, the measure of community involvement, the sponsors' intentions and the dominating artists. In such a framework, art serves the people and aims to uplift or mobilise the entire community. Examples of such an approach are CAP and Community Arts Workshop.

Centres such as FUBA and FUNDA on the other hand accept the notion that the community at large will be uplifted more effectively through the development of vocational skills in individuals. The emphasis is therefore on training and the gaining of qualifications.

Other art centres such as Katlehong may be viewed as "art-production" centres in that they provide artists with a stimulating working environment. Senior artists guide younger ones and a strong link with the art market or theatre is maintained.

Although the situation in Great Britain with its hundreds of local art centres indicates the possible success of such various types of art centres, many factors limit their effectiveness in South Africa. Some of the obstacles in the local situation are those related to material factors. In addition, however, the centre's effectiveness depends on its acceptance within the societal context as a whole.

Some of the problems identified locally include a lack of adequate funding, space, management, public relations, trained staff and equipment. More important is the support from local communities in order to gain credibility. Problems are also encountered when the aims of the individuals within the centres are in conflict with the aims of the community or when the functions of the centre are not viewed as important in education.

All these practical or organisational obstacles are entrenched in a political and ideological struggle, which is strongest in the art world, as the latter functions as a channel for community frustrations. This struggle is not limited to the one between the government and alternative groups, but also to alternative cultural groups themselves, preventing a co-ordinated frontline. Added to this are the general social problems of an impoverished society.

In the future attention will have to be given to management, co-ordination, staff training and better marketing. Art centres should be made valid educational institutions and their role on a political as well as a vocational level should be acknowledged.

It is the task of the art centre to ensure its own continuation. This requires training of all the staff members in all sorts of skills, from technical, managerial to advocational. Only through the training of new, better equipped cultural facilitators, will the essential function of the art centre be made effectively available to future generations.

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ADA
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Mural in Community House Cape Town, painted by the students from CAP.

