



Manifiesto 68, mural at the UNAM Tlatelolco University Cultural Center.

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Laboratories for Peace: Cultural Experimentation for Peace Building

The Tlatelolco University Cultural Center (ccut) is a multidisciplinary complex where young people from different backgrounds meet to create innovative forms of public advocacy for peace, human rights,

and the exercise of citizenship through memory, empathy, critical thinking, and different cultural expressions.

We began the Laboratories for Peace cultural program at the ccut in 2019. Its aim is the development, peace building, and social transformation of Mexico City areas plagued by insecurity and violence. We recognize the urgency of imagining, dialoguing and creating other ways of relating to each other as well as to the space we occupy and share, prioritizing life and peace when faced with any type of conflict.

The Laboratories for Peace are a response to the challenges faced by communities adjacent to the ccut, which borders on neighborhoods with high crime levels, like the downtown area and Buenavista, Guerrero, Morelos, and

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The Laboratories for Peace follow three lines of action: inclusive educational mediation, art education, and public meetings called “Who’s Got the Neighborhood’s Back?”

Peralvillo neighborhoods. At the same time, we have identified problems in the area such as economic inequality—in 2020, the Gini coefficient in the Cuauhtémoc mayoralty was 0.402—,¹ the vulnerability of youth at risk for crime, violence used to resolve conflicts, prejudices that stigmatize local residents, and the gap separating specialists—academics—from the vulnerable population.

As a result, between 2020 and 2022, the Laboratories for Peace have worked following three lines of action: inclusive educational mediation, offering art education to vulnerable populations, and public meetings called “Who’s Got the Neighborhood’s Back?” The latter bring together collectives, civic organizations, artists, activists, and cultural promoters to work with youths in violent contexts.

Inclusive Mediation

In the area of educational mediation, we have developed proposals not only to link up different audiences with the contents of CCUT expositions, but also designed specific experiences for marginal populations neglected by public policies that have failed to guarantee equal enjoyment of cultural rights. The premise is that any person, regardless of context, has the right to share his/her vision of the world in exposition spaces and, by doing so, participate in the exploration of ideas for building scenarios for peace and the eradication of violence.

Approaching our target populations has required flexibility and adaptation, not only of the content for mediation, but also of our objectives and methodologies for collaborating as an institution with groups that we hadn’t reached until now. One example is the work with children living on the street, which has required changes in our strategies to adapt to that population’s reality: they deal with challenges such as attention deficit due to the consumption of psychoactive substances, habits and forms of learning different from the usual way school groups are handled, as well as the heterogeneity of the group, made up of per-

sons of different ages, genders, cognitive development, and schooling levels. These results and lessons are now being systematized in a document that we will share with other institutions and cultural organizations, inviting them to replicate exercises adapted to their contexts.

Art Education for Vulnerable Populations

The Artistic Outreach Unit is a non-formal school that has included students with different profiles in its workshops since 2010. Its work in the Laboratories for Peace has been crucial for implementing an art education model aimed at building peace, inclusion, and the active exercise of citizenship. This model, which aims for the knowledge gained to be replicated among peers, targets mainly persons in vulnerable situations, at risk for crime, and migrant returnees or with irregular migratory status, who receive educational scholarships.

The First “Who’s Got the Neighborhood’s Back?” Event

Held in April and May 2021, the event’s objective was to promote the study and exchange of experiences and wisdom about processes of pacification, as well as the factors that give rise to violence and crime. Our aim was to generate and share diagnostic analyses, methodologies, and cultural incursions in our spaces to contribute to crime prevention and lowering insecurity.

Over the four weeks of the event, we kept our virtual doors open—amidst a pandemic that required physical distancing—so we cultural promoters, artists, activists, and people working in areas with high violence levels could communicate with agents in different neighborhoods in Mexico City as well as the rest of the country, to find out how to work together to encourage peace building on a community level. With the collaboration of thirteen workshop leaders, we sparked conversations that made it possible to explore disciplines and fields of knowledge through which we sought to share learning and good practices in order to build peace and strengthen communities, making young men and women the main agents of change.

Each week was dedicated to a thematic clinic, starting with hip hop, a cultural movement that is well received in

Mexico and has found in graffiti, rap, and, above all, words forms of resistance that make visible other ways of being and existing in the world. CCUT workshop leader and mediator Tael Valdez used aspects of hip hop culture and philosophy, based on peace, love, unity, and fun, as tools for the communities of at-risk children and young people to express and reflect about their own interests, desires, memories, and aspirations. In a workshop given by Audry Funk, we watched the use of elements of that music to critique the patriarchal system of sexist violence.

The power of images, the spaces they occupy, and the reflections they spark in the communities were the main themes during the clinic of visual production workshops. On the one hand, painting murals in Mexico City neighborhoods has allowed the Museum of Old Mexican Toys to begin an open, inclusive conversation among the communities using the unwritten rules of the street itself. researcher and activist Sergio Beltrán-García has also emphasized the need to create spaces for memory —not monuments built from positions of power— that provide a place for dialogue among communities about the present and how to change it. Quetzli Nichte Ha spoke from the viewpoint of photojournalism about the power of the sexist gaze in constructing images and the need to create other visual narratives to make possible the generation of forms of representing reality and the construction of memory to bring violent, unfinished, or mourning processes to a close.

The workshops about bodies and movement analyzed the different kinds of violence that directly impact bodies, exploring three cultural practices that seek to recognize new corporal limits, freedom, and resistance through movement. Miguel Rojas, Funky Maya, demonstrated that breakdance allows for self-discovery, using one's body's energy to transgress norms that condition self-determination. In the political twerking workshop, Joana Núñez invited participants to discuss the oppression of their bodies due to colonization. The week ended with a workshop on skateboarding and its potential for transforming young people's lives in contexts of vulnerability thanks to its ability to promote their appropriation of public spaces, strengthening emotional ties, and developing creativity.

The last week focused on cultural promotion for peace. Here, participants were made aware of with different strategies for carrying out diagnostic analyses, recognizing territories, focusing on target populations, designing advocacy projects, and evaluating their results. Jovany Avilés

Activist Sergio Beltrán-García emphasizes the need to create spaces for memory not built from positions of power.

underlined the importance of doing research before any project of community advocacy. Jimena Jaso dealt with some of the work strategies that the CCUT has implemented among the children of the Tepito neighborhood to develop skills for building memory and strengthening identities. Finally, Lisa Sánchez and Grecia González covered other issues, like the dynamics of drug consumption and distribution in the neighborhoods and community work with migrant populations through the arts.

The Second "Who's Got the Neighborhood's Back?"

This event continues to open up spaces for dialogue and exchange that allow communities and institutions to imagine through culture and art, processes of pacification and social prevention of violence in communities located in Mexico City's Cuauhtémoc mayoralty. This time, we wanted to use listening, reflection, imagination, and collective action to create sociocultural projects that would foster the culture of peace, contribute to creating new narratives about violence, and build safe spaces for developing community members.

With the aim of creating the Cultural Corridor for Peace, we established interinstitutional alliances with the El Chopo University Museum, the Old San Ildefonso College, and the Cultural Center of Spain in Mexico, very important cultural centers in Mexico City's downtown area and the country's cultural life. To do this, we invited people committed to improving their surroundings who lived in the Historic Downtown Area, the Guerrero neighborhood, others near Tlatelolco, Santa María la Ribera, and the northern part of the Valley of Mexico Metropolitan Area.

In the reflection stage, the participants dialogued with each other and exchanged experiences about four cross-cutting themes: consciousness, with the aim of situating social problems that cause violence and identifying the collective potential to reverse them; territory and com-

munity, to identify the opportunities for cultural promotion and getting to know the different notions of community; community proposal, with the aim of exploring concepts like territory and its link to art and culture; and artistic creation and dissemination, which reviewed different methodologies for cultural promotion, implementing projects, and effective forms of communication and group work.

In the second phase, each institution offers mentoring sessions in design and the formulation and structuring of a multidisciplinary team. The aim of this stage is to provide participants with a guide that would help them carry out projects that foster culture and peace and community building, encourage the creation of spaces characterized by respect for life, human dignity, and pacification, which would strengthen collaborative networks and generate strategies that would ensure continuity over time. The issues being worked on are childhood and adult-centered existence, memory and identity, gender violence and feminism, and public space and the defense of territory.

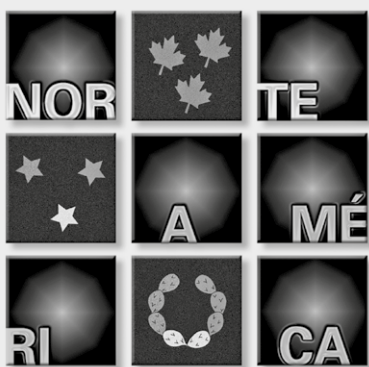
The four teams will implement their projects in November in the places they have chosen. Their activities will include making a diagnostic analysis of the area and reconnoitering and approaching the communities that live in the target areas. In this stage, they will carry out cultural activities, among them a concert on International Human Rights Day, that will allow them to publicize the Cultural Corridor for Peace that has been coming together for all these months.

Lastly, the project evaluation and follow-up will take place in early 2023, with the opening of a space for reflection to identify successes, weaknesses, and opportunities so the projects that were part of this “Who’s Got the Neighborhood’s Back?” can be sustainable and have an effective impact in their communities. Participants will also define strategies that allow the cultural institutions to build projects together with communities.

We hope the projects developed on this occasion, built on the basis of empathy and imagination, will be safe spaces, free from violence, that will make participation and the exercise of citizenship possible, and that they become an inspiration for other territories in order to lessen—even if only to a small extent—the effects of the social inequalities that create violent contexts and hinder human development. Our aim for 2023 is not only that the projects developed in this space continue and adapt to each community’s specific needs, but that they also promote other similar initiatives and that they use cultural and artistic processes to impact the public agenda. That would hopefully generate truly effective policies to prevent violence and foster free, safe spaces for all of us living in this city. ■■■

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Notes

1 Gobierno de México, “Cuauhtémoc: economía, empleo, equidad, calidad de vida, educación, salud y seguridad pública,” Data México, 2020, <https://datamexico.org/es/profile/geo/cuauhtemoc-9015>.



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