

Crossroads participatory urban art projects - Worldwide

Organisation implementing the project

[Boa Mistura](#) is an eight-person multidisciplinary team with roots in graffiti art. The group of architects, artists, designers and engineers first met and began painting the walls of their own neighbourhood, La Preriferia in Madrid, Spain in 2001. They adopted the name Boa Mistura in 2002 and opened their first studio in Madrid in 2010.

They started the [Crossroads](#) project in South Africa in 2011.

Project Description

Crossroads is a series of participatory urban art projects that aim to uplift and inspire communities by bringing art, mainly large-scale murals, to public spaces. Crossroads involves the community in the process of aesthetically improving their neighbourhood to change perceptions as well as strengthen relations with their neighbours.

Boa Mistura begin by immersing themselves in the community and gathering design ideas through discussions with residents. They draw up two proposals which they share with residents, who then vote for the final design.

The residents, with a specific focus on unemployed groups, are given basic training so they can participate in the painting. To encourage interaction with others and facilitate integration of the community, volunteers from universities and other organisations outside the neighbourhoods are engaged to participate in the project.

Since 2011, 19 projects in 13 different countries have been completed as part of the Crossroads series (South Africa, Brazil, Spain, Algeria, Panama, Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua, Kenya, Dominican Republic, Chile, Paraguay and Mexico).

Aims and Objectives

Crossroads aims to improve disadvantaged neighbourhoods by aesthetically improving urban spaces. The participatory approach aims to enrich community relations, create a sense of belonging and ownership over their local spaces and change people's perceptions of their own neighbourhoods and capabilities.

The projects are carried out in marginalised vulnerable communities, which are often characterised by stigmas relating to poverty and drugs. Over 100,000 people live in the communities that have benefitted from the projects.

The main goals are to use art as a tool to:

- Respectfully enhance urban space, relevant to local context and culture.
- Encourage neighbours to work together by involving them as active participants.
- Foster a sense of belonging and community identity.

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- Build and enrich relationships between residents.

Boa Mistura's future ambition is to transform a whole neighbourhood, or even a city.

Context

Before starting the Crossroads series, Boa Mistura's aim was to beautify public spaces but not with a particular focus on social change. In 2011, the team visited Velokhaya, a cycling school that has become a refuge, sports and cultural centre in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. This is one of South Africa's largest informal settlements for 'non-white' people. Hearing residents continually speak about 'community', Boa Mistura invited them to participate in the painting of a mural to improve their own spaces.

After this, Boa Mistura's focus and aims changed, leading to the birth of the Crossroads project. They see art as a tool to transform the physical environment and create bonds between people, strengthening community relations and becoming the catalyst for social change.

Key Features

Boa Mistura follows a four-step strategy. This is modified project-by-project, as it is adapted to each specific context:

1. Immersion into the community

Boa Mistura immerse themselves in the community, building rapport with neighbours and mapping out agents who can help carry out the project (including neighbourhood and cultural associations, NGOs and community leaders).

2. Study of the place

To understand the community, Boa Mistura carries out activities with community members to collect qualitative data on their perspectives of the community.

3. Conceptualisation and validation

The Boa Mistura team draw up designs based on the discussions with residents. Identity and context are central to designs. Residents review the project plans and decide on the final design.

4. Collaborative paint

All community members are invited to participate in the painting of the mural. This is an informal process and there is no obligation to participate, residents do so as they wish. Children and young people are often particularly involved in the process.

Funding

Each Crossroads project costs a different amount, depending on its location and scale. Costs are worked out according to pre-intervention visits, size of the area to be painted, materials required, and preparation, design and execution time.

Crossroads projects usually cost between €25,000-75,000 (USD\$29,000 – USD\$87,000). For example:

- ‘La Piramide’ in Segovia, Spain, transformed a public space of 1200m² and cost €55,000 (USD\$64,000).
- ‘Nierika’ in Guadalajara, Mexico, transformed a public space and adjacent façades of approximately 4500m² and cost €75,000 (USD\$87,000).

Funding comes from a variety of sources, depending on each project. Usually, certain entities or organisations (e.g. city council, universities) approach Boa Mistura and fund them to get involved in tackling a specific area and social problem. For Boa Mistura it is important that funders do not influence the design of the project, which should develop at community level.

In the case of ‘Nierika’, Boa Mistura collaborated with the City Council of Guadalajara. Madrid City Council funded €75,000 (USD\$87,000) to cover materials, tools, design fees, maintenance and travel expenses of Boa Mistura. Pinturas Prisa contributed the 300 litres of paint needed for the façades of the buildings in the square.

Boa Mistura partially or completely fund some projects. These include: [‘Diamond Inside’](#), South Africa 2011; [‘Luz Nas Viejas’](#), Brazil 2012 - 2017; [‘Mi Raiz Es’](#), Cuba 2015; [‘Peinados de Libertad’](#), Colombia 2016; [‘Sisi Ni Mashujaa’](#), Kenya 2016; [‘Un Oasis para Ritsona’](#), Ritsona Refugee Camp, Greece 2018.

Innovation

This project celebrates art as a tool for change. Residents are engaged in all aspects of the process, which provides them with the means to improve their environment and develop a sense of ownership and pride over public spaces in their neighbourhood.

The immediate result is the simple aesthetic improvement, but the process also encourages dialogue and collaboration between residents. This results in a more united community and sense of empowerment long-term.

Because of the appeal of their artwork to a wide audience, Boa Mistura is helping to raise awareness about the potential for positive community action in supporting social change.

Environmental Impact

Water-based paint is the main material used. This is the most commonly-used type of paint for exteriors, making it accessible in all locations.

Paint and any other materials are usually bought locally.

Boa Mistura are in the process of negotiating with companies, such as Airlite and Graphenstone, to test paints that decrease their carbon footprint.

Residents are educated on environmental awareness. Most projects begin with a community clean-up of the area. This means residents generate a sense of responsibility towards the place where they live and are actively involved in its improvement. These simple procedures, together with the aesthetic impact, make residents see the importance of maintaining the environment. The neighbourhoods where Crossroads have worked show significant improvement in people’s behaviour towards their city once the project is finished.

Financial Sustainability

There is no stable funding stream for the Crossroads project. Funding is secured for each project individually as it is planned.

The project is about encouraging local residents to participate in improving the urban public spaces in their community, which helps to build capacity and a sense of self-esteem and identity. Boa Mistura believes that this empowers people to understand and believe in their own impact and the possibilities available to them.

In some cases, there has been a specific focus on training unemployed people in the community. For example, hundreds of houses in Chile were painted in four different neighbourhoods, giving work to more than 50 unemployed residents.

Social Impact

The participatory approach empowers residents and, in some cases, has raised the profile and visibility of the neighbourhood with the local authorities. The projects also help to raise community awareness about their environment and the need to clean and maintain community facilities and public spaces. Pleasant and inviting public spaces are key to creating cities that offer everyone the chance to enjoy and be proud of their community.

For example, following the Crossroads project in Guadalajara, Mexico, a neighbourhood square has been recovered as a social space for meeting. The square is no longer known as a place to sell drugs and instead it is used for concerts, conferences, markets and street meals.

Residents learn and develop skills through taking part in the artwork, which can be useful for future employment opportunities. For example, in Guadalajara, more than 250 neighbours took part.

Communities are strengthened through participation in a fun activity, expanding ties and establishing links with their neighbours.

Barriers

The main challenge is ensuring financial viability and securing adequate funding for each individual project.

Integrating into a community can potentially be a challenge but so far, this has been achieved.

Lessons learned

The project would like to improve inclusion of a wider range of age groups, training levels, interests and abilities. It would be valuable to have the support of a sociologist within the team to help expand the phase of the project where they analyse the community to help achieve this.

Evaluation

For each project, Boa Mistura gather as much information as possible regarding the type of housing, the origin of residents, their culture, the social problems faced, and the history of the community. This data is used to make comparisons between the different communities in which projects are carried out.

Impact is not formally evaluated, although Boa Mistura would like to incorporate this. In some cases, local partners have carried out follow-up reports after the project (unfortunately we have not been able to review these).

In the future Boa Mistura intend to combine ways of analysing the social, environmental and urban impact of their work. They also aim to develop comparative statistics, allowing them to draw global conclusions from their different projects carried out in diverse locations around the world.

Recognition

Boa Mistura have shown their work at the Biennale of Urbanism in Shen Zhen 2017, the Bienal de Muralismo de Cali 2016, the Bienal of the Arts in La Habana 2015, the Triennale di design in Milano 2015, the Bienal Iberoamericana of Architectural and Urbanism 2013, the Biennial of South of Panamá 2013 and the Biennale di architecture in Venice in 2012.

Their work has been exhibited in the Reina Sofía Museum, MAXXI Contemporary Art Museum in Rome, Casa Encendida, DA2 Museum, CAC Málaga, Alcobendas Art Centre, Weltmuseum in Wien and Caixa Forum.

They have worked in partnership with the UN, ONCE (National Organisation of the Blind in Spain), Oxfam Intermón, Acción contra el Hambre, Greenpeace and the Red Cross.

Other foundations have acquired their artworks such as Telefónica Foundation, DKV Insurances, Fundación Antonio Gala, CCE Juan de Salazar, Instituto Cervantes in Algiers and New York, Cris contra el Cáncer Foundation, Gregorio Marañón Hospital and 12 de Octubre Hospital.

They have given lectures at TEDxMadrid and Universities such as Complutense de Madrid, TEC de Monterrey, Menéndez Pelayo, Politécnica de Madrid, Veritas University in Costa Rica, Universidad Nacional in Asunción and Universidad de Sevilla.

They have also been invited to the Art and Social Transformation Symposium and developed workshops in universities such as Universidad Isthmus from Panamá, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, the Máster de Espaços Efímeros - Pós DAEE del IESP da Paraíba, Universidad UIMP in Santander, Casa de los Picos in Segovia and ETSAM School of Architecture in Madrid, where they are also teachers.

Transfer

The first Crossroads project was in South Africa in 2011, and since then Boa Mistura have completed 19 projects in 13 countries around the world (primarily in Latin America). The simple approach makes it easily replicable.

In a number of cases, local participants have continued to expand the project. For example, in Guadalajara, Mexico, an ex-gang member and local graffiti artist was initially feared, and residents did not want him to paint their houses. Today, he collaborates with the local authority, painting more murals in the neighbourhood in the same style and colours as the Crossroads piece.

In Antofagasta, Chile, teams taking part in the painting included young people, artists, unemployed people, architects and designers. After participating, five young people joined an initiative called 'Color Habitante', who are now carrying out similar projects in other neighbourhoods. In some cases, this is with the support of CREO, a public-private council aiming to provide an integrated response to the city's growth, and in others with the local authority. Crossroads is now being considered as a pilot for the design of a nationwide initiative in the country.