

ART FOR LIFE IN ACTION

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Can Art Transform Urban Blight?

Over three years ago, I started picking up garbage, including drug paraphernalia, in the alley directly behind my art studio building along Gaines Street in Tallahassee, Florida (see Figure 1). I was tired of the alleys in the neighborhood looking like typical neglected “right of way” public alleys found in most urban areas in the United States. As I continued to pick up debris nearly every day, I became more aware and frustrated that my tax dollars supported a blighted and unfriendly public space. To combat this, I decided to offer a workshop in the alleys through the Art Department at Florida State University, where I am a professor, for the 2008 spring semester.

Get Green was the name of the workshop, and the students called themselves the “Alley Sprouts.” A very motivated and ambitious team of Alley Sprouts cleaned and cleared out all the underbrush of

invasive plants and began planning for a springtime alley art event (see Figure 2). With help from Native Nurseries, a local nursery business in Tallahassee, students and community volunteers put in mostly native plants and set up a schedule for watering and weeding. The first Art Alley event was installed and open to the public on April 18, 2008. Many attended and the small alley at times was overflowing with people. Everyone enjoyed viewing pen and ink drawings of flowering plants on recycled animal cracker boxes and receiving free aloe plants, seed bags, and the first publication about the Art Alley project (see Figure 3).

Since the first alley event was a success, the next challenge was to maintain the momentum. There was no funding for a summer Get Green workshop, so I had to rely on volunteers. Both volunteers and visitors helped spread the word about our efforts to clean and green



Figure 1. *The alley along Gaines Street before the project began, January 2008.*



Figure 2. *The Alley Sprouts clear out the invasive plants and begin planting for a springtime alley event, 2008.*

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Figure 3. *April 18, 2008 - First Art Alley event (after alley clean up).*



Figure 4. *Linda Hall and her workshop students rescued discarded clothes from the alley and incorporated other materials completing an installation along the chain link fence.*

a blighted alley. In the fall of 2008, volunteers suggested we clean up the second and much larger alley. Alley 2 is approximately three times the size of “alley 1.” Ten volunteers showed up, ranging in age from five years old to the assistant director of AARP. Once most of the larger “alley 2” was cleared of major invasive bushes and smaller plants, we routinely picked up garbage, not allowing it to accumulate. Alley 2 was ready for a new Alley Sprouts team to transform it into another friendly green and inviting urban space.

The larger alley has a decades long history of being a respite for transients. Not only were there piles of garbage in the alley but also years of clothing layered into the pathway. The Alley Sprouts pulled up several layers of clothing, removed the piles of debris, installed two large garbage pails, and poured cement steps at a dangerous slippery slope entrance to the long alley in order to make the space more inviting for all citizens, including the transients. During that time, small events were organized by other artists and art students. Native Nurseries owners, Donna Legare and Jody Walthall, visited the alleys and recommended plants that would work best for that environment.

As the large alley clean-up activities continued, I was in constant

contact with city officials about the discovery of an underground storage tank in the smaller alley. Since the alleys are in a designated “public brownfield,” which is a land mass that contains low to high levels of toxic industrial waste, the city removed the tank with the assistance of a grant from the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). Soil samples from twenty to thirty feet below the surface were taken from the alley. There was fear that the soil was contaminated with oil or toxic dry cleaning fluids because the building adjacent to the tank had been a dry cleaning business for decades. The results from the soil samples detected only low levels of oil contamination— a welcome outcome.

Students and volunteers worked hard to prepare the long alley (2) for the next event, which also included local artist Linda Hall’s Eco-Art workshop incorporating the decades old clothing found in the larger longer alley into a woven installation. The event on April 24, 2009, was the first activity in the large alley after removal of the oil tank in alley 1 (see Figures 4 and 5). The Alley Sprouts created a diverse group of artworks that related to the neighboring environment and its history of neglect. The following summer there was no funding once again for the Get Green

workshop, so I relied on motivated volunteers, who organized an exhibit during a very hot July afternoon.

During the fall of 2009 the alley students toured the FSU Master Craftsman Studio, where outdoor benches and signs for the university are created, and started working with artist Ira Hill on large cement planters for the alley. These were sturdy and vandal-proof all weather planters that allowed us to include flowering plants as well as organically grown vegetables that were safe to eat as part of the revitalization project. Because of the urban transformation work I initiated, I was invited to give a presentation about the Art Alleys project to the Florida Brownfields Association's annual conference in Tampa in November 2009. It was an enlightening experience to present the Art Alleys project to engineers and government officials, because the alleys project was small in relation to most multimillion dollar brownfield panel presentations. I believe my PowerPoint presentation was perceived as a curious "sidebar artsy" effort and was not seen as a serious intervention.

Also that fall we had our largest turnout ever in October for the Hal-
lowGreen event. I wore a 95% pure Garbage Jacket and thanked everyone for coming out on a homecom-

ing traffic jammed day (see Figure 6). It was also the first time several transient visitors, who lived in or near to the alley, remained in the alley for the entire event. A student-initiated project included several photographs taken by men who lived in makeshift shelters not far from the alleys. Men and women without permanent housing have used the alleys for decades. Their presence is a continuing challenge because many believe the homeless are a threat. However, I think that this points out the need for more communication and coordination between our activities in the alleys and the greater All Saints District, which includes many locally-owned small businesses.

We must be more proactive in the neighborhood and try to coordinate our efforts and possibly hold a "town hall style" meeting every few months or so to foster more communication between the businesses and the Art Alley volunteers and students. Alley rumors spread quickly and are usually exaggerated or totally incorrect. As a result, I've become a de facto mascot and am characterized as an enabler of the transients, who often reside in the area.

WinterGreen Festivus was the final extraordinary effort by the fall 2009 Alley Sprouts. It was also



Figure 5. *Linda Hall's group; April 2009.*

the first ever rained-out alley event and had to be moved into my Gaines Street building. This group of alley workers was truly motivated and pushed the project to new levels. This group of Alley Sprouts created and organized the most successful Art Alley event to date – HollowGreen.

Spring 2010 started off with an incident of vandalism as a vehicle destroyed plants and planters and left behind parts of an automobile. The police said that whatever drove into the alley was moving at a fast rate and could have seriously injured anyone in its path. Luckily no one was in the alley, and

several days later the city installed a steel bollard at the entrance. We all dodged a serious disaster.

In February Nathan Ballentine, a local master gardener often called “The Man in Overalls,” visited the alley and gave us suggestions about the best locations to install raised beds for vegetables. Also in February the city and its Landscape Architect planted five Crepe Myrtle and three Sabal Palms in the smaller alley only to remove them nine months later. Although we appreciated the services of the city, there was little communication between the utilities department and landscaping department. According to

the Utilities Forester, the Crepe Myrtles posed a future problem by growing into the power lines. At the same time a student design team from the College of Engineering visited the alleys and met with art students and volunteers and surveyed the terrain in and around both alleys. The resulting "Master Plan" was comprehensive and included detailed CAD (computer aided design) drawings that addressed a chronic problem – flooding and erosion. The Spring Into Green alley event took place March 19 and was our first big attempt to raise funds for the Get Green magazine. The event proved that we could raise money for a full color 32-page magazine. Not an easy task, even with some financial assistance from the Art Department at FSU.

The first large format edition of the Get Green magazine was published and distributed just before our EarthDay BirthDay event that celebrated the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. There was major local publicity for the event that included a front page article in the Tallahassee Democrat. This was the first event we sponsored that attracted younger children and their families. Also included in the alley exhibit were drawings by Keith, a frequent visitor to the alleys and an extremely talented artist with alcohol and drug related problems.

The fall 2010 semester included a whirlwind of activities, some of which illustrated the progress we were making and others that impeded our progress or taking the proverbial two steps forward and a step or two backward. Landscape architecture students from the Department of Architecture at Florida A & M University met with the Alley Sprouts early in the semester to consider possible landscaping additions to the long alley that would help alleviate the flooding problems (one large step forward). The five Crepe Myrtles and three Sabal Palms were removed from the smaller alley and put on the corner of Railroad Avenue and Gaines Street -- a step backward for the alley but a beautiful addition to the street corner. I wrote two small grants for alley improvements that have been pending with the city's Community Redevelopment Authority for two years. After speaking with the mayor's office several times to get a yes or no answer for funding of these grants, I've heard nothing – one big step backward with continued inertia. Graduate students in the Studio Art program at FSU installed several artworks that related to the alleys in a strong social awareness and aesthetic sense – one step forward. The city engineer continues to vet the FAMU/FSU engineering



Figure 6. Author in his garbage jacket

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students' master plan proposal – can't figure this one out – no steps?

The Magazine Release Party was the final alley event of 2010, which celebrated the publication of issue number five of the Get Green magazine. We had a good turnout for an evening event, and with the participation of FSU art professor George Blakely's students, the alley was lively with more "site specific" art works than any prior event.

During spring semester 2011, I collaborated with architect Chris

Robinson. We're team teaching in a Get Green and an Urban Scape drawing workshop. The struggle continues to keep the alleys as clean and green as possible. However many improvements have been made (See figure 7). The question remains: do the Art Alleys (a simple, straightforward ongoing project) deserve the support of the neighboring community and the city, or is it just a vision not ready for Tallahassee? ***Only time will tell.***



Figure 7. *Progress in the alleys*