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Profile - Not-for-Profit as Urban Neighbor: Groundswell

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photo Credit: Randy Duchaine



Profiles

Not-for-Profit as Urban Neighbor: Groundswell

Few not-for-profit organizations can claim to have made a dramatic, permanent, outdoor visual impact on more than 450 city blocks throughout the five boroughs of New York City. **Groundswell** has done just that. As part of a continuing series looking at not-for-profits as urban neighbors, The Rooftops Project's Scott Haggmark and Professor James Hagy visit with **Amy Sananman** and **Sharon Polli** at Groundswell's Brooklyn headquarters.

For Groundswell, each project unites artists and students, property owners, and the community in transforming exterior sites into works of art that tell compelling stories and effect social change. From its beginnings in 1996, Groundswell has been led by Amy Sananman, its executive director and founder. Previously a tenant organizer in the affordable housing community, Amy saw an opportunity to use outdoor art to achieve social goals.

"I was impressed by the incredible activism that was going on that was invisible to the outside world," Amy remembers. "I had always been interested in how public art shared stories and changed cultures. It is an intersection between politics, social justice, and art. I saw an opportunity to do a project with a group of tenants that were organizing, were taking over their dilapidated city-owned property and turning it into a low-income co-op. They were real local heroes. I worked with some of the resident kids to create and design a mural that told the story of the twenty families that lived in that apartment building. Essentially, Groundswell's mission has remained the same, which is to use art as a tool for social change and to create a more just and equitable world." That initial project became a lifetime project and passion for Amy and the organization she created.

"Groundswell grew out of the tradition of community murals," Amy recalls. "There was no organization like this in New York City. It seemed to fill a niche

that I think is very important. People had a hunger for not just doing organizing around solving a problem where, once it was solved, there was no reason for people to have a connection anymore. Our goal was to have something that was an energizing opportunity, a short-term win, but that was also going to support, empower, and excite people as they continued on their own, as individuals working to improve their world or as community partners and organizations."

Groundswell's combination of social service, community activism, and social justice is an unusual model in that it serves three different constituencies simultaneously: the students who conceive, design, and install the art with training and guidance from artist facilitators; the community or cause the story of which is being represented in the artwork itself; and the property and community that is refreshed and enriched by the finished art installation as a visual and decorative piece.

Amy elaborates: "We look at our impact in each of these three different areas: the youth we work with, our community partners, and the actual art, the artifact that we create that remains living in the neighborhood. The community partner might be a community of people like an LGBT center and its constituents, for example, or it might be the Department of Probation. In each of those three areas we have outcomes that we are looking to achieve. It's very unusual. I think a lot of organizations are focusing on youth, or community development, or technical assistance to community groups, or serve as an arts organization. What we have found and what we believe in is that the collective impact across sectors, across disciplines and silos, is what builds connective tissue and enables community change to happen."

While the finished art itself can be transformative of a property or a cityscape, Groundswell projects grow from the social message being communicated. The opportunities appear endless. Even today, after 18 years of operation, Groundswell does not need actively to seek new projects. It juggles multiple new projects with a full-time staff of eight and an average of 15 artists at any time.



"The 450 murals out there are great billboards to our work," Amy points out. "An organization may reach out to us because it is inspired by seeing other projects of ours or their impact. We are always in a community by invitation at some level, and usually, almost always, folks are coming to us. Generally our projects start from an opportunity to use art as a tool for change, a problem to solve. That might mean a bodega owner saying, 'This wall is a mess, we want to fix it.' Or it might be an environmental education program saying, 'We want to recruit more teens, and they are not interested in environmental education. How do we use the artistic process to recruit those kids?' Or it might be, 'We're trying to raise awareness about gun violence for New Yorkers Against Gun Violence. How do we use the process and the final product as ways to increase our audience and raise awareness around this issue?' So, it could come from any number of sectors. The key point is how the process and the product move the dial in some way towards a more just and equitable city."

Professional staff and talented facilitating artists use a thoughtful and deliberate, effectively proprietary, design process, built on Groundswell's many years of experience, to tell the story of its community partner. Hundreds of artists submit letters of interest in a rigorous application process. Selected artists then go through a structured in-house Groundswell training program. Even then, they begin as assistants to a lead artist and apprentice in studio sessions. It is far from the approach of just showing up to (let others) paint that Tom Sawyer imagined.

"We don't teach the artists how to paint. They come knowing how to paint. You could have a great studio painter who has no ability to facilitate teenagers. But the ability to facilitate the program takes a lot of skill."

Artists experienced in the Groundswell process lead the community mural projects. "The first stage is a pre-development phase, sitting with our partners, who might include a wall owner and our community partners, city agencies, or community-based organizations, to define the goals of the project, what the outcomes and objective are," Amy says. "What is the problem? What would success look like? Structuring a theme comes out of that. If the goal is changing how people feel about a local community, we might then choose to feature the hidden assets of that community with the ultimate goal of reframing the narrative of what the neighborhood is all about."

"Then it's about putting the right team together and identifying the right wall." Groundswell has seldom experienced opposition to the idea of installing a mural in concept. Amy does most of what she terms the "detective work" on building ownership. Then Groundswell has support from pro bono legal counsel to secure a contractual agreement from the property owner for the approval and installation of the mural that is to emerge from the process. "Then we have a project," Amy underscores.

Documenting consent for the installation is not always simple. Amy recalls a complex example of this stage of the process. "We did a very complicated wall under the BQE [the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway] going down to Brooklyn Bridge Park. We looked at the pilings that hold up the BQE. We started to ask ourselves, 'Who signs off on this?' It was the State Department of Transportation. But because the City Department of Transportation is responsible for the maintenance of the sidewalk, it also required approval by the New York City Department of Transportation." Later permitting, such as for scaffolding, is handled by outside contractors.

Amy outlines the typical next steps after the property owner's agreement is secured. "Our artists work with a team of young people, who go through a very specific process of research, design, and fabrication. To begin the research phase, they meet directly with the community partners and hear from them the objectives of the project. That defines the design team's mission.

"They might read studies. Then they may conduct interviews. If the topic is reducing gun violence, they might go interview the executive director of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, or clergy who have been active around gun violence, or members of the police department, or parents of kids who have been killed through gun violence.

"For our Sandy recovery murals, we worked with community partners in five of the Sandy-affected communities. The Rockaways team said our partner wanted to make sure we interviewed at least 30 members of the community. The youth and artists had to develop a survey tool, then go out and survey the community. From there they came up with a concept.

"In the design phase, they generate a sketch that gets approved. They present that concept back to our community partners, get feedback, and do a final revision. They share the design, and the message behind the design, publicly. For example, when the team presented the Rockaways Sandy mural, they could say this mural articulates a sense of challenge and healing for the Rockaways and point to quotes that really moved them, tying the research to the design."

Through this process, the students gain skills in participating actively in consensus-building with community partners and the public. "Each team will hear feedback, which they may or may not incorporate. That feedback can help the team know if they got something wrong. Somebody in the audience might say, 'You should really use Jane Doe's face, because she was a symbol, and we may make the changes. But sometimes people may say that they hate the color pink, or that they don't like a section of the design, and it is really up to the team. Sometimes they hear really conflicting messages. The artists work afterward with the student team to debrief. I have been very impressed watching the young people. As an adult, if you hear someone critique you, you want to start defending. But they sit down and ask themselves: 'What do we agree with? What don't we agree with? What do we want to keep?'"



Photo Credit: Nina Weinberg Dora





While the general public does not have final control over the final design, Amy emphasizes how important members of the public are to achieving the purposes of the mural project once it is installed. "They're the ones that are going to keep the stories alive."

Ultimately, the mural needs approval from whoever owns the wall and whoever the formal community partners are. "And then we go ahead. It is only then that the team paints."

As with any facilities project, Amy says that the physical installation is a key to an attractive and durable result. The design is transferred by hand onto the surface, using a grid pattern. This is Amy's personally favorite part of the process, which for the students she feels is an exciting type of large-scale drawing exercise. Then the walls are primed and painted, using artist-grade exterior acrylic.

Groundswell has also experimented with projects that are fabricated off-site in the Groundswell studio and are then installed on-site. "We started a few years ago painting on a Tyvek-like, nonwoven fabric material. It is affixed with a gel medium, like wallpapering. You really need a smooth surface to install it," Amy explains. While this method has worked, Amy still prefers traditional methods.

"Personally, I like just painting on-site. The performance experience of it is so powerful. We do community painting days. At every site we have in the

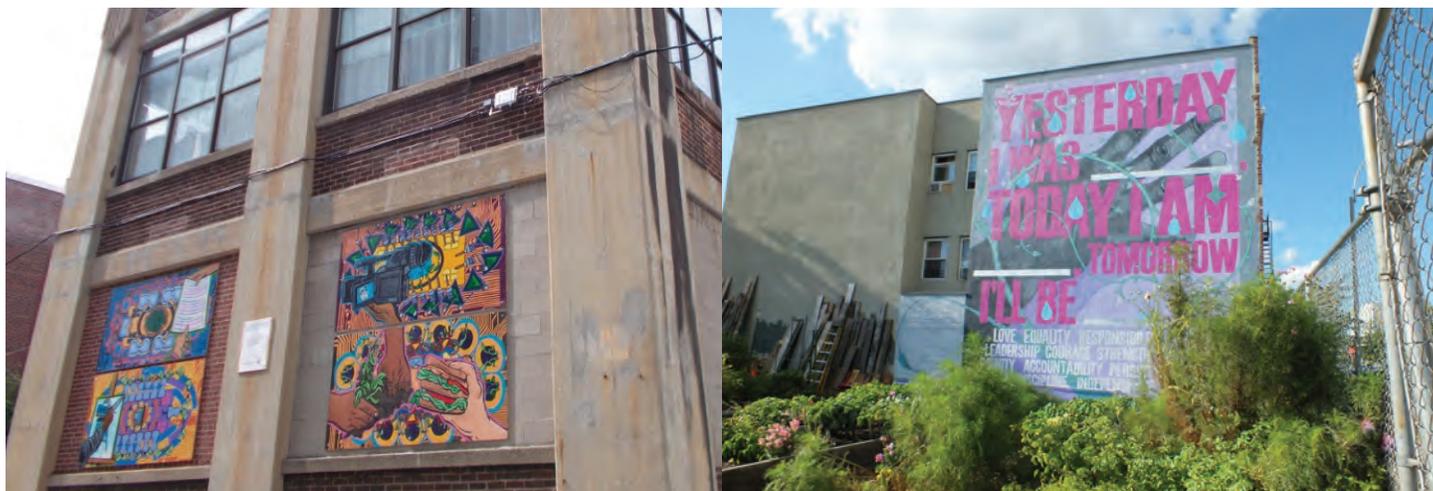
summer, we invite the community to come and paint on a day early in the process."

The installation often remains a spectator event throughout the Groundswell on-site artist and student collaboration. "That's the magic to me, the inspiration. Throughout the process, the community is watching it go up. There's nothing for kids like getting all this positive feedback, with people walking by and saying 'it's amazing,' especially for teenagers who may not otherwise be getting positive feedback."

The entire process from design to completion can take several months. Success very much relates back to experience and preparation in the design phase. "The artists' responsibility is to design a mural that can be done in the amount of time given at the site. A huge wall may need to have huge sections that are flat colors. They shouldn't plan to do tiny portraits on a very rough surface like bricks. What weird architectural details should they play up or play down? They need to be designing for the site conditions. They also need to think about the viewer. Is this for pedestrians? Or is this for drivers? Where's the sun coming from? The scale should be based on that target audience."

The Groundswell summer program is seven weeks long, allowing students to see a project from research and design through approval and fabrication. Amy points out that this 200-hour commitment may be more than the same student spends in English class in an entire school year.





Funding for the materials to fabricate and install the approved mural most often comes from the sponsoring community partners, rather than Groundswell itself. This evolved as a pleasant surprise to Amy in the early days.

"I started the organization thinking we would bring resources into communities that were under-resourced to do this kind of work," Amy explains. "But the reality was there was such a strong ecosystem of nonprofit organizations that most of the groups with which we partner are much bigger than we are, have access to more funding, and have access to sources of funding that we couldn't. A group that does environmental justice work can go to its funders wanting to add a public art component to one of its campaigns. We can go to arts funding sources in ways they couldn't. We realized a better way to access resources was to fundraise collaboratively for our projects."

In that sense, like any visual artist, Groundswell regards the project as a commissioned work from the community partner as client. Amy feels that this may be one of the secrets of the project's successful formula, and not only from a practical financial perspective. "It's not like a pretend commission. If you look at our budget, the income lines reflect our stakeholder groups. So when we say, 'This is valuable to community organizations,' it's not just us saying it's valuable because we think we did a good job. Our community partners took money out of their coffers and they paid for the project. I think that is a really important component to a partnership."

Community investment in the funding can also promote timely and effective collaboration. "If a principal of a school or an executive director of an organization approves paying for something, it's much more likely that they are going to attend the design-sharing meeting and take the project seriously because they have real outcomes that they want to see from it. That level of investment is critical as a core component to the model."

Sharon Polli joined Groundswell in 2011 as Director of Development and Communication. Prior to Groundswell, Sharon was Director of Development at BRIC, a Brooklyn-based arts organization, and brought with her over 10 years of art administration experience. Sharon sees the Groundswell funding model as delivering an important message to the student artists as well. "It is very valuable to the youth participants to know that they are acting

as commissioned artists and being treated with that level of respect by community organizations and the adults in the room who they are meeting. The partners are their clients, and I think the youth rise to that occasion."

The mix of funders for single projects means that different funders may be measuring outcomes differently, Sharon notes. "It is specific to the funder. We are lucky. We are nimble and can get funding for youth development, art as a tool for social change, art itself. For each funder we may create a customized report based on what the specific metric was."

Students who have, or may gain, an ambition to continue in the visual arts get the added benefit of this experience becoming part of their portfolio when applying to schools for future study and training. But Groundswell seeks to provide valuable lessons with broader application for every student, whether or not they seek a career in art.

As Amy sees it, "We have a number of different programs that range from a summer job, to portfolio prep classes, to alternative sentencing programs. They may not come thinking they want those things, but they stay aspiring to those things. So a kid may be sentenced to us, or a school may hire us to come and do a project, or he or she might just be looking for a summer job and we are in their community. There are a lot of different points of entry. But once they're in our program, we work with them building a variety of skills. Young people essentially come here for one of two main reasons. They want to develop their art mastery skills or their leadership skills."

With the large scale of the murals its teams install, it is fitting that Groundswell depicts the skill-building process through a metaphor taken from the project installation sites. "We think of it as a big scaffold," Amy illustrates, visualizing a chart on the wall of the Groundswell training center room in which we are meeting. "There's the art master tower, and there's the leadership tower. Imagine our leadership scaffold as a tower. There are different platforms, and all the platforms are held together by pins. Each of those pins is a skill that they can learn, an achievement they can earn."

Amy uses the communication skills unit as an important example. "We have a workshop and activities to allow students to learn, develop, and demonstrate their communication skills, along with accountability, critical



thinking, integrity, and humility. They have to demonstrate that they've learned these skills and to reflect how they're going to integrate that skill into their lives. The students making the community partnership presentation have usually been through the process more than once. But there are a lot of opportunities, particularly in the summer, for them to speak publicly. It's not just the design sharing. They have to speak publicly about the project from the beginning. I'm always bringing funders around. We have a lot of news coverage coming out at the drop of a hat, when they're not expecting it. They practice and practice talking with visitors about articulating what they are working on. You can teach someone the basics of public speaking, but you really learn by doing it over and over again."

Sharon sees the students' progress as often dramatic. "What we find is that when the kids start and they take the workshop, they are all incredibly shy and they could never imagine themselves presenting. By the time they've gone through the incredibly rigorous research process around the mural topic, they're overflowing with language about it and a willingness to share. It's quite empowering to see that happen."

The art master tower can be particularly helpful to students who aspire to continue formal art study after high school, Amy confirms. "They go up our art master tower. We have had really excellent success getting those young people into incredible art schools from Cooper Union to Pratt and beyond." Some of those students even return to Groundswell as artists or assistant artists on staff.

Other students become interested in pursuing careers in community development. "They get exposed to different careers in education and in community issues. Young persons might be inspired to begin working with us or may have to work with us because they are sentenced to work with us. But then they may have that moment of inspiration where they see a possibility for themselves. They can get connected to their own potential."

While occasionally Groundswell creates a temporary installation, most of the projects are intended to have a permanent life of indefinite duration. "Ultimately we also look at the impact of the artwork we create because the kids may move, the community organization may be there or not, yet these pieces have a 20- to 25-year life span. Now we have a collection of what will be, in the next year, around 500 murals all over New York City. They are all billboards, capturing and preserving stories that people walk by and can get inspired by every day."

The murals not only can act to communicate a message, but can build an image for the sponsoring organization, Amy adds. "I think a lot of the community-based organizations with which we work want visual identity. They say, 'We have space, but our building doesn't feel like anything. We want it to feel like what we do.' Once a place feels like 'something,' it can tell a story." Amy recalls, for example, the mural Groundswell designed and installed at the Red Hook Community Justice Center. The Center has become a model of community courts and attracts national and international visitors. "They go and stand in front of the mural that we did and they talk about the work."

Groundswell has also become one of the first private organizations to create and design traffic safety signs. "Five years ago a group called Transportation Alternatives reached out to us to do a mural that would memorialize a little boy who was killed in a traffic accident." Amy saw the mural as a catalyst for

further change. "We were able to interest the Department of Transportation into doing street sign projects, focusing on fifth grade classes around the city where there had been high traffic accidents around their schools."

One informal metric used by Groundswell to assess its long-term success has been the absence of vandalism of its installed projects. The organization does not have an anti-graffiti stance, but Amy sees the absence of graffiti or tagging as "a quantitative way we can assess neighborhood stewardship over the mural, a good quick proxy to the positive end message." Time and age alone can affect murals, however, and for that purpose Groundswell insightfully assembles a repair kit that it leaves with the owner, with touch-up paints in the colors incorporated in the original artwork.

Many in the art world think of art as a constant, a unique piece that never changes. Amy agrees that some people become attached to the artwork Groundswell creates, but there are also occasions when her team is called back to adapt a mural installation. Amy discusses one such situation, involving a new, second not-for-profit moving into a building that bears an existing Groundswell mural. "An organization is now subleasing a section of the building and wants the mural redesigned to reflect its mission, too. The executive director of the organization that owns the building is very emotionally attached to this mural as part of the visual identity of the organization. We plan to preserve the existing mural while redesigning one section to reflect the second organization."

Mural images are often featured in formats beyond the city block of their physical presence, too. Each project bears a Groundswell logo and credits the artist team and the community partners that produced, commissioned,



or supported it. Groundswell is mindful to preserve its copyright in the finished works. And, happily, while casual passersby might not think of intellectual property rights to the works, professional organizations often come to Groundswell for the necessary permissions. One mural recently appeared in a segment of the long-running NBC-TV series *Saturday Night Live*. Another was incorporated in the educational materials for a clean water campaign. Others decorated gift bags at a New York City not-for-profit organization's gala event and served as the illustrations for a 2013 calendar for another organization.

"These are living billboards that continue to do the work about education and encouraging activism," Amy notes. The projects are curated on the Groundswell website. "Each of our projects has a corresponding page on our website that has photographs of the process and the final product, any press hits that it's succeeded in achieving, fun facts about the project, and links to our partners. You can search by geographic area, so you can plan out your own walking tour. You can search by artist, so you can find a young artist who was involved. You can search by topic, so you could pull up all of our women's issues murals or all of our livable streets murals."

Groundswell also organizes both public and private bus tours in the summer, as well as offering biking tours including one highlighting its livable streets theme. Participants in the tours have ranged from school groups and departments of state government to foreign visitors.

Groundswell incorporates new technology to relate to its public audience, too. "We are interested in how we can digitally activate all of these projects," Amy notes. "We have experimented with QR codes, which got a substantial

amount of traffic. But we are looking at ways to pilot something that feels a little more contemporary. QR code already feels a little dated."

Although the original Groundswell concept has remained and thrived over the years, Amy and her team are exploring new channels for their work, too. Artists are trained to look to the horizon, and for Groundswell there are new horizons ahead. In addition to the vertical surfaces presented by New York's buildings, Groundswell is thinking creatively about other outdoor horizontal surfaces that might someday be canvasses as well.

"We've been trying to find ways to do street painting. The federal and state regulation around that is really complicated. We've been trying to work with government to see if we can do that. We also just talked to the USA Olympic Swim Team and were talking about doing pools."



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