Alfombra Making: Collaboration, Art, and Place

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As we arrived in Guatemala for a study abroad program with students, our main focus was on building an alfombra, which is a sawdust carpet adorning a processional route (Figure 1). We created our alfombra with our Casa Herrera hosts during the Semana Santa or Holy Week celebrations and captured the narratives that reflected our experience. Casa Herrera, located in Antigua, Guatemala, is an extension of the University of Texas at Austin’s Mesoamerica Center. Our 10’ x 20’ alfombra took months of preplanning to design, which we accomplished through discussion, negotiation, problem solving, and collaboration (Figure 2).

ALFOMBRAS

(Alfombras) are ephemeral art forms that are typically assembled and destroyed on the same day during special occasions such as Semana Santa (Easter). The Spanish brought the custom of alfombra making to Latin America during the colonial period. It was adopted by Indigenous populations in parts of Guatemala because it was similar to their own traditions of leaving offerings in honor of the gods of the harvest. Alfombras are constructed in community locations, such as village streets or church floors. They are created from a wide range of natural materials such as dyed sawdust, wood shavings, pine straw, palm leaves, flowers, coffee, nuts, fruits, and other vegetation. The sizes, shapes, and designs of alfombras vary widely, but one common feature is that groups work together to produce them. Used regularly for religious ceremonies, alfombras serve both didactic and ritualistic purposes. The act of walking upon these carpets and destroying them symbolizes a dual purpose: paying homage to Christ’s journey and atoning for sins (Figure 3).

Today, alfombra making is used by Catholic, Indigenous, and artistic communities to celebrate religious beliefs and traditions, to share cosmologies, and to intervene in a public space.
BUILDING COMMUNITY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS at Austin’s Semana Santa Program began in 2013 in partnership with Casa Herrera. In addition to learning about Guatemalan history and culture through various hands-on activities, guest speakers, and excursions, this program was primarily designed to give students a field-based opportunity to participate in the community tradition of alfombra making in Antigua, Guatemala.

The students’ first task was to research the country, alfombra making, and cultural iconography in small groups. Each group then drafted a proposed alfombra design. Initially, we envisioned that students would vote on the final design. However, the students quickly realized that each group had something to offer, so they produced a collective design integrating elements from each of the four groups (Figure 4). The image reflected the places we were living in and places we intended to visit.

When we sent the final image of the design to Education Coordinator Milady Casco, she suggested changing the center Longhorn symbol. Although to us, it represents the mascot for the University of Texas, she informed us that this symbol could be understood by locals in Guatemala as an icon for the devil.

Likewise, after further discussion, our group also decided to remove the wagon wheels embedded in the design because some students expressed concern that this type of image might be associated with settling the West through the concept of Manifest Destiny. Culturally responsive teaching asks both teachers and learners to listen to the voices of other people and communities to understand and respect their perspectives. After all students weighed in and we received additional feedback from our hosts in Guatemala, students began creating full-scale Mylar stencils. These would be used to duplicate the design outdoors on the processional route and help build consistency in layout, needed when many hands are involved (Figure 5).

After our arrival, we had several days to prepare. Working alongside experienced alfombristas (alfombra experts), students learned to sift and color sawdust and build a wooden frame, and they worked to resolve problems with the stencils. We also observed how other groups in the city constructed their alfombras, which helped us understand how sawdust could be layered and manipulated. The alfombristas helped students translate their design to the final physical creation, which took 8 hours to produce (Figure 6).

EXPERIENCES FROM STUDYING ABROAD

WE USED NARRATIVE INQUIRY while researching the study abroad program and understand it as the social construction of meaning based on events. Furthermore, Seale (2000) acknowledges that narrative understandings are not things that only account for social action in retrospect. They are meaning-making devices within the context of telling. Storied narratives helped us and students experience new things and construct knowledge to shape and reshape who we are in relation to collaboration, art, and place. Stories told included discussions on...
ART PRODUCTION
STUDENTS BELIEVED THAT THE EXPERIENCE OF ALFOMBRA making helped them rethink major tendencies in Western art production. They felt art in public spaces functioned differently. Alfombra making promoted listening, engagement, dialogue, collaboration, and interdependence. Art production here was understood as a catalyst for experiences that embedded participants in the world, even if only for a short period of time, instead of something set apart from its environment to be protected for an eternity. As Serena Bheodari said, “It was much more [than] a large-scale studio project. It was a lesson in religion, self-sacrifice, and community building” (personal communication, April 2018). Elainy Lopez explains further,

Creating artwork is an isolating experience; the artist develops and works on their project alone. Even when surrounded by other artists in a studio or classroom, the process of development and creation is still a solitary one. This program gave the group the opportunity to truly collaborate and work together to create a beautiful alfombra. The collaboration happened throughout the entirety of the program. From the first design idea exchange to the eight hours spent assembling the alfombra… the design represented a conglomeration of ideas and thoughts brought together to create a cohesive and balanced piece. Every individual, whether they had a studio background or not, played an essential part in the art’s creation and everyone was able to take ownership of the work. (personal communication, April 2018)

COLLABORATION
THE PROGRAM WAS A SUCCESS because of collaboration. For most students, collaboration was understood as a “coming together,” through building consensus within community relations. They believed this required planning as well as processing and cross-cultural relationship building. To a lesser degree, some students also recognized collaboration as a participatory process that required the negotiation of diverse viewpoints which led to difficulties based on differences in understanding. As Karis Tillman noted,

I specifically experienced collaboration throughout the process of planning the alfombras, preparing the materials when we arrived, building it, and watching it get wiped away (in the same day). When coming up with the design for the alfombras, we were having to work together and make big decisions with people we barely knew. Through this challenging process we came up with a wonderful design through listening to one another, practicing patience, and enjoying one another’s ways of thinking. Once we got to Guatemala and began preparing the materials through sifting and [dyeing], relationships really began growing with one another and the men who were helping us. It really became apparent how strong we became as a group and in relation to the local community when we began constructing and making the alfombras…. There were many challenges that arose when collaborating with all of these different groups of people but through dialogue, negotiation, and actions, it became a joy. (personal communication, April 2018)

PLACE
MOST STUDENTS DESCRIBED THEIR UNDERSTANDING of place as a space that does not preexist but is made material in interactions and entanglements. According to the students, to be in place meant to be familiar with cultural matters, to co-construct through embodiments and creations, and to consider how the past shapes the present. Place also connects meanings and activities that fold into each other (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). For example, alfombras are artistic and social interventions in space, whereby making one together renews values and beliefs. The activity shapes social order and imposes meaning, creating a sense of communitas or emotional bond among participants and observers. People construct an
undifferentiated unity for a moment, and normal social barriers are broken to work together. As Elainy Lopez reflected,

> Even though we had many learning experiences, we were still experiencing the city as tourists. There were still many issues and happenings that we were unaware of and that we were still unable to comprehend completely. One of these subjects was that of the Guatemalan civil war and the lingering effects it is still having on the country. Even though we did not gain complete knowledge, the program still allowed us to “dip our toes into the water.” It exposed us to a history, culture, groups of people, and experiences we otherwise would have never encountered while sitting in a classroom. Stepping out into the world and treating it as the classroom allowed us to truly expand our minds. (personal communication, April 2018)

CONCLUSION

IF ART EDUCATION IS TO TAKE PART in the processes of cultural transformation that characterize our society, then its narratives must come to terms with how we conceive of ourselves and our relation to one another, as well as how we conceive of cultural artifacts and their role in society using culturally responsive teaching. Such teaching includes looking at different interpretations of art or cultural practices, and how they may relate to society today. Furthermore, it asks how people learn to consider complex narratives and conversations around conflictive forms of knowledge, identity, community, language, and social practices (Britzman et al., 1997). In the community project under study, learning was constructed through the lived contexts of people and showed that understanding was affected by cultural constructions made in narrative, social relationships, and social contexts. Students developed knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences outside a traditional academic setting and used observation and interaction, including touching, hearing, and negotiating. Moreover, they reflected on their relationships to spaces and objects through critical analysis, and they had opportunities to experiment, take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable to others. The act of making explicit the belief systems embodied by a work, the social role a work assumes, and how people interact with it draws attention to how images and objects find their meaning in social activity (Ballengee Morris & Staikidis, 2017; Van Laar & Diepeveen, 1998). We believe that this study helps to imagine such social activity in relationship to learning, the study of objects, and the activities surrounding them. Making here was a process and embodiment by which place was performed and shaped. The stories we tell about place also provide a framework by which to experience the world.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“Alfombras are artistic and social interventions in space, whereby making one together renews values and beliefs.”

Shelby Flowers

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

2. Latino Family Literacy Project. (2018). What does it mean to be culturally responsive? (See www.latinoliteracy.com/mean-culturally-responsive.)
REFERENCES


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Social justice is a broad topic that includes, but is not limited to, equity of access to and opportunity for quality visual arts education for all learners in school, museum, and community settings. In this context learners include diverse populations of students with regard to special needs, cultural identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, and socioeconomic status. Social justice issues also encompass a diversified teaching force and often focus on the development of ethics and appreciation for diversity in a global community.