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La Boca to La Stocka

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Voluntario Global

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Neil West ¹

La Boca to La Stocka

Abstract. In this short reflection piece, we hear from Neil West, who recently co-organised a project between artists in La Boca in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Stockport, near Manchester in the UK. The piece brings together anecdotes and personal photographs as documentation of collective, cultural political practice.

Resumen. En esta breve pieza de reflexión, Neil West, quien recientemente co-organizó un proyecto entre artistas en La Boca en Buenos Aires, Argentina, y Stockport, en las afueras de Manchester, Reino Unido. Este artículo reúne anécdotas y fotografías personales como documentación de la práctica cultural y política colectiva.

Introduction

When I was sitting in a café in Buenos Aires in September 2022, a guy suddenly walks in. A sun reddened face; as a Brit myself, I suspected he might be English. A coffee and a chat later, I'm setting up a meeting between Pato, a local anthropologist and muralist, and Malcolm, a board member of the so-called Grit studios, a Stockport-based organisation dedicated to the support of artists in the Greater Manchester area. Almost a year later, five artists who spent many years turning La Boca, one of Buenos Aires low-income areas into a place prized for its street art with murals, figures, sculptures and colour, are on their way to Manchester airport.

As a semi-retired mental health specialist working for a non-governmental organisation focused on social development, I've been living in South America on and off for the past five years, I discovered the incredible work undertaken by Voluntario Global, back in 2019 where I learned about the

¹ Neil West is a social worker and volunteer for Voluntario Global (voluntarioglobal.org) who spends his time between Essex (UK) and Buenos Aires (Argentina). He formed an integral part of the commissioning, fundraising and executing the mural "La Boca to La Stocka" in Stockport (UK).

intertwining of art and politics—for example through song, poetry and murals—to create powerful imagery.

One of La Boca’s major tourist spots is El Caminito, where the culture of the city is proudly emblazoned on every street corner, including the docks, football, poetry, folklore, music and dance. It is a place where the spirit of the people is shining out from the streets, with buildings traditionally painted with whatever “spare” paint was left over from the ships. I fell in love with this area on my first encounter. I am by far not the only one: La Boca attracts tourists from across the world. One of La Boca’s main industries has thus become tourism, with its many restaurants, gift shops and buzzing market trades lining the streets.

Malcolm, the fellow Brit I’d encountered in the café, was as taken by the art as I, and we drew parallels to British towns and cities, the decline of industry and its vast dockland areas. Malcolm noted how wonderful it would be to have something like the art of La Boca in Stockport, a rundown and neglected town in the northwest of England. Stockport has a proud history of industry, music, and folklore. Malcolm’s idea was to celebrate this cultural wealth in the same way as locals promoted it in La Boca, in the hope that some of the tourists from the more visited Manchester art trails would visit Stockport, which hitherto had remained in Manchester’s shadow.



Figure 1: Valeria, director of Voluntario Global, and the author, Neil West, in La Boca.

Excited at the idea of this intercultural project, I spoke with Valeria, a director of Voluntario Global, who'd arrange murals and art works in Los Pibes, a community and cultural centre in a reclaimed warehouse in La Boca (see figure 1). Los Pibes is a symbol of the struggle of working people and exploitation of Latin America. It provides a kitchen, health care, training, boxing and hip-hop workshops as well as a computer repair shop. Voluntario Global recruits volunteers from around the world to support community projects in and around Buenos Aires, such as community kitchens, Kindergartens, English language schools and, of course, Los Pibes.² Volunteers come on to share their experiences and learn from the projects in a mutual exchange. Valeria, Pato, her 6 month old

² See the Voluntario Global website here: <https://www.voluntarioglobal.org/en/> [last accessed 17/07/2024].

baby Cata, Malcolm and myself gathered to exchange ideas about the murals and images of political struggle and the power of collective action that surrounded us. How might we learn from this to inform a project?

... and a plan was born

The idea that quickly came to the fore was to bring and paint a mural from La Boca to Stockport, one that would reflect the essence of daily life in La Boca and to mirror similar accounts in Stockport. In terms of content, we envisioned La Boca's iconic bridge crossing the Riachuelo paired with the viaduct spanning the River Mersey in Stockport. This would exemplify the similarity of the two towns, and graphically bridge their distance across the Atlantic ocean in a spirit of solidarity and collaboration.

The Argentinian team consisted of Eva Maissa, an artist, teacher and muralists creating works in La Boca since 2010, Pato Salatino, an anthropologist, artist and muralist, Omar Gasparini, muralist, set designer, and teacher, Alejandra Fenochio, an award winning artist, who worked with the internationally renowned Luis Felipe Noe and Leon Ferrari, and Meli Lluvia, plastic artist, teacher and muralist (see illustration 2). Spanning three generations of artists (four including baby Cata), they came together to share food and wine and ideas while meeting with the team at Grit Studios online, 12000 km away in Cheshire. The ideas coalesced. Grit Studios proposed a 70 x15 metre concrete wall to become the canvas for the collective work in one of Stockport's many back roads. During that meeting, we also broadly agreed on a number of cultural themes: landmarks, such as Stockport's famous bridge, activities, such as tango, and symbols, such as the Argentine pot of mate tea. As a methodology, Grit Studios was to interview local Stockport residents to ask which symbols could represent their culture and history. The plan was that the mural's final design would incorporate cultural, political and historical images from La Boca coupled with those from the local Stockport community.



Figure 2: Mural detail: Heavy horses and industry



Figure 2: Mural detail: A woman sewing



Figure 4: The muralists: from left to right: Eva, Pato, Cata, Alejandra, Meli and Omar.

Financial Constraints

As a private initiative, covering the budget was a major concern. With just £20,000 for the whole project, flights alone would potentially take up a third of that sum. Then there was accommodation, materials, and, for any project like this, some level of payment to cover. The economic situation in Argentina has been extremely difficult; at the time, inflation was around 150% (at the time of writing, near 300%) so however important this intercultural collaboration was, the artists needed to compensate for loss of earnings back home.

Grit Studios applied for funding across a range of local government and charitable funds, and managed as best they could, taking the cheapest available routes – for three of them, this even meant a 45-hour flight via Addis Ababa!

From concrete to colour

Having arrived in one piece and greeted by unseasonal brilliant English sunshine, we weary travellers settled into our red brick terraced house, warmly greeted by neighbours with donations of food, wine, and beer in abundance. After a day of recuperation, including a local tour of the area, a Victorian folly on the moor, and the local brewery with its heavy horses to pull the drays, that were to feature in the mural.

The wall had been prepared by local volunteers in advance. Local artists and businesses threw themselves into the project, providing ladders, scaffolding buckets and paint. They were invaluable members of the team, providing friendship and practical help each day.

Throughout that week, every day, the ugly grey wall was besieged by local men, women and children, lending a hand, painting, cleaning, chatting, or just watching in admiration as the surface was first slowly, then rapidly transformed. The wall's transformation from an ugly smear of pollution-stained concrete to a canvas of beautiful images of two worlds was a huge undertaking by any stretch of imagination.

On the La Boca side, there is Tango, beautiful colourful buildings and characters, including someone drinking mate, for which I happily posed for the preliminary sketch! There was also some of the wildlife of Argentina. On the Stockport side, based on the research by Grit Studios, there are symbols from the factories and clothing industry, the palatial Victorian buildings as well as the incredible heavy horses that worked the land prior to the steam age. Beneath the bridges is a football game, beloved by both Argentinians and the English.

Intercultural Differences

Transnational encounters often bear surprising insight into cultural differences. In the case of our guests, this was dinner time. Having lived in Argentina on and off for the past five years, I'd acclimatised to eating very late, but coming to the UK, to a town as large as Stockport it seemed that the big difference was the opening hours of restaurants! While in Argentina, an early dinner would start around 10pm (but usually rather at 11pm), in England, this would typically be at 6 to 7pm. The

only place we could find open was a Greek restaurant. But we had to order before 8.30pm as they closed at 9. Although we arrived shortly before closing time, the staff – with backgrounds from across Europe – were accommodating, they put on Latin American music, and with song and laughter, we concluded the night together. It was now very late, approaching 10pm– a truly exceptional night in North East England (see figure 5).



Figure 5: Culture shock: an 8.30pm dinner in Stockport (the middle of an Argentinian day) Left to Right, Pato, Alejandra, Neil, Meli, Eva, Omar and Alfie, a local business owner that provided so much support in terms of materials, time and encouragement.

Other than different daily routines, the contentious past of the Falklands War between Great Britain and Argentina in 1982 preoccupied the Argentinian artists. There were no signs of tension in Stockport whatsoever; for most Britons it is long forgotten. Instead, the hundreds of everyday interactions resulted in a

joyous atmosphere. In Argentina, the war and resulting anti-English sentiment is still omnipresent, with references promoted almost daily in local media and emblazoned on the sides of city buses. There is a difference of course, the reality for Argentines is that the Malvinas were taken from them—as the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it “[s]eized in 1833, expelling the remaining Argentine occupants”. The subsequent attempt to reclaim them cost 255 British and 650 Argentinian lives. You may spot the islands “hidden in plain sight,” on the Argentine side of the bridge (see figure 6).

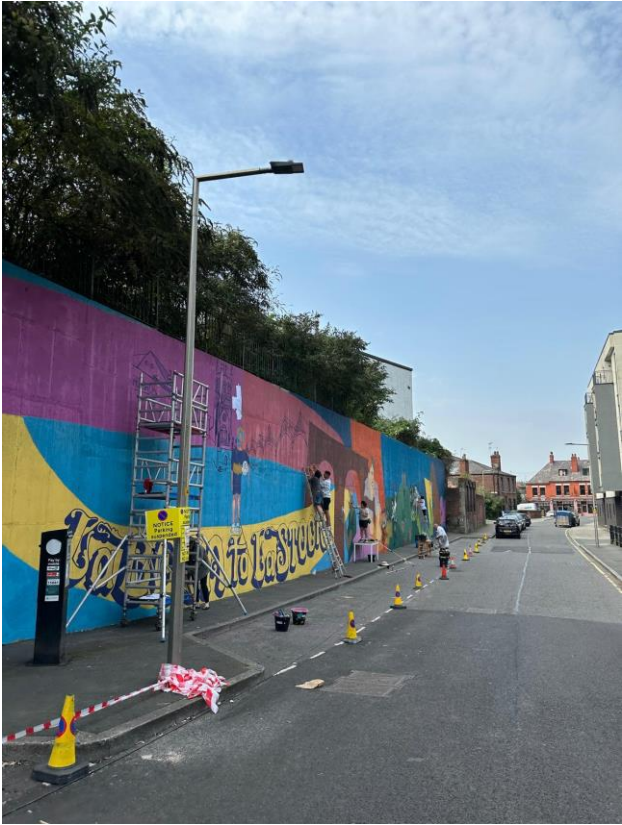


Figure 6: Slowly, the canvas comes alive



Figure 7: Almost done!

To conclude, a random conversation in a Buenos Aires coffee shop between two Englishmen thousands of miles from home, led to an idea, which led to a meeting, and over the course of only a year became a collaborative intercultural landmark on a quiet backroad in the heart of Stockport. We celebrated its inauguration with a performance of a local tango group (see figures 8 and 9). A mural depicting La Boca and La Stocka, the fruit of the hard labour of storytellers and muralists, local people and visitors – all of these took part to make this exchange a wonderful experience.³

³ Here I include the Instagram accounts of those involved: @Gasparini.gaspa, @Melina.lluvia, @Patopintura, @Floresdeluna.pintura, @Alejandraderrocha, @Peoplewithgrit.



Figure 8: Local tango dancers at the mural's inauguration

stockport.gov.uk

Stockport as Town of Culture

As Stockport celebrates being this year's Greater Manchester Town of Culture...



Figure 9: Screenshot of Stockport Council website