

How embracing graffiti stopped one Spanish village going to the wall

Scheme to invite street artists to Fanzara, home to 323 people, has turned it from a potential addition to Spain's dying villages list into a cultural triumph

By Ashifa Kassam, 14 April 2015

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The village of **Fanzara**, home to 323 people, counts two bars, one butcher and a shop.

But over the past year, this small village 50 miles north of Valencia has quietly transformed itself into the street art capital of Spain, with more than 40 murals by some of the country's top street artists tucked among its beige and grey walls.

Javier López, one of those behind the citizen-led transformation, said: *"We've converted the village into a huge open-air gallery. We thought that putting together a museum like this would be impossible – but we're doing it."*

A lifelong fan of art, **López**, 48, launched MIAU, the Unfinished Museum of Urban Art, with his friend **Rafa Gascó**, 50, last summer. He said: *"We wanted to build a museum where anyone who wanted to create art in our village could come and do it."* There's just one condition: the artists must involve the residents of Fanzara in the creative process in some way. Suggested examples include workshops or talking through ideas with residents.

The project's first challenge was winning the backing of the villagers – many of whom are in their 70s and 80s – and convincing them of the merits of handing over wall space to visiting street artists. *"It was tough to make people understand what we wanted to do – most older people don't know much about street art,"* he said. *"Eventually they told us, even though we don't like it, you can go ahead."*

Their trust was surprising, given that nobody was quite sure what would come out of the project, laughed López. The project began timidly, inviting 15 of Spain's leading street artists to spend four days in the village last September and paint one mural in exchange for room and board. He said: *"When people came, they slept at our house. The food, we cooked it ourselves. It was that kind of budget event."*

The artists were shown where they could paint, but no limits were put on the content of their art. Instead organisers took a leap of faith, simply asking them to keep in mind the people who would see the art every day. *"It's a small village, made up mostly of senior citizens,"* López added.

For many in Fanzara, the project was a crash course in street art, something that they had never seen before. López said: *"It's amazing to see a street artist painting a mural while a group of grandparents stand around, asking him questions about what he's painting and why."*

This unexpected success has put Fanzara on the map, attracting the curiosity of neighbouring universities while a growing number of people stop by to see the murals.

Best of all, the residents – who were initially wary of the idea – have embraced it, said Salisa Castillo. *"Neighbours who didn't know anything about street art now will tell you all about graffiti."*

Those behind the museum say this is just the beginning. The project, which includes a monthly roster of events, has been expanded to include other art forms, be they theatre, performance art or music, while the village is gearing up to host another group of street artists in July.

With enthusiasm for the project far outstripping wall space, murals will be painted over regularly, said López, once residents deem that the artwork has run its course. He added: *"That's why it's called the unfinished museum, because it's always going to be in constant evolution. It's a museum that echoes the story of our village."*

How a tiny Castellón village became Spain's street art capital

The 320 inhabitants of Fanzara have invited graffiti artists to decorate the entire town

By Lorena Ortega, 13 April 2015

elpais.com



Around a decade ago, the children of **Fanzara**, a village of 320 inhabitants in the mountainous interior of Castellón province in eastern Spain, used to play at staging protests. This was back when residents were mounting frequent demonstrations against a project to install a toxic waste incinerator here. *“That experience taught us that when we put our minds to something, we can bring people round,”* say **Javier López** and **Rafa Gascó**, who led the marches against the waste plant, and have now channeled their energies into a new initiative that has changed the face of this remote community.

The pair have convinced the mainly elderly residents of Fanzara to allow graffiti artists to cover the walls of the village with street art. *“We thought that with a bit of luck, one or two urban artists would come and paint a mural, but we never imagined it would reach the point where we’re living in a huge open-air art gallery,”* says Javier.

Last September, 23 leading Spanish street artists, including names such as Deih, Hombrelópez, Susie Hammer, and Julieta Xlf, descended on Fanzara for four days, leaving behind 44 murals in what they have dubbed the MIAU, or Museo Inacabado de Arte Urbano (Unfinished Museum of Urban Art).

“They’re probably not really aware of how important what they’ve done is,” says Belén García, a specialist in street art at the University of Valencia, about the residents of Fanzara. *“This is unique, because it comes out of a social movement that has nothing to do with other forms of street art or post-graffiti, as these kind of murals are called.”*

“This is different to what is going on in cities like Valencia, where artists paint in public spaces without permission,” she adds. It is also different to when municipal authorities decide to pay artists to decorate the walls of a run-down area: *“This was born out of a residents’ movement and with no funding.”*

Word of the event soon spread internationally through the social networks, and a group of Italian artists traveled to Fanzara, contributing three more works to this ongoing project. *“In a couple of years, Fanzara will be known internationally, in fact I think it already is,”* says Joan Feliu, an art historian at Jaume I University in Castellón. Belen García says the village is already the subject of study in academic circles.

Fanzara is now preparing for a second sitting, which will take place over four days starting on July 16. *“And if we run out of walls, we’ll just paint over and start again,”* says Javier.