

The Cesar Chavez Plaza Mural By Susan Shelton

The Cesar Chavez Plaza mural celebrates and honors the legacy of Cesar Chavez, and connects it to the innovation and success of this important housing project. The design incorporates the concepts of hope, vision, co-operation, social justice, and community.

The outer border of the mural determines the overall style of the piece, and is made up of individual tiles that were painted by the residents and staff of Cesar Chavez Plaza. The colorfully painted images of these tiles, including chickens, rainbows, flowers and birds, are inspired by the song "De Colores", whose lyrics joyfully describe the rural landscape in springtime. Because of the simple, rural imagery featured in the border, the general feel of the artwork is rooted in the Folk Art style. This style is a very appropriate choice for this mural because, by definition, Folk Art is art by the people and for the people. And the resident artists of Cesar Chavez did a fantastic job on their tiles!

At the center of the mural is a seed, which has germinated and is well on its way to becoming an established plant; this image represents hope and optimism for the future. Surrounding the central image are the words, "¡Sí Se Puede!" "Yes, We Can!" This was the slogan for the United Farm Worker movement, and it is a very apt slogan to include in this housing development. All of those who have worked together for this project—Neighborhood Partners LLC, public entities, businesses, organizations, elected officials, private citizens, and the residents and staff of Cesar Chavez Plaza--have shown that "Yes, We Can" create innovative, beautiful, and successful affordable housing for people.

Placed around these central elements of the mural design, are five "windows", or individual murals. These small murals depict the five rights that Cesar Chavez believed should belong to everyone: Shelter, Health Care, Work, Education, and Food (which is inextricably linked to agriculture, a prominent feature of the local landscape and history.) Cesar Chavez Plaza is a shining example of what can be done to help provide some of these rights to members of our community.

The four corners of the mural feature images which symbolize some of the tools that were used by the farm worker movement to achieve its goals—tools which, arguably, are necessary for any successful struggle--the Twin Pines represent cooperation; the Oak Tree represents strength and perseverance; the Olive Branch represents non-violence, and the Grapes refer to the enormous success of the grape boycott, and, more generally, represent strategy.

Returning to the border of "De Colores" tiles painted by the residents, it merits more attention to its significance. "De Colores", was originally simply a happy children's song, but it became an anthem for a powerful movement, somehow managing to inspire and unite a large group of people struggling to reach a seemingly unattainable goal. Even now, it conveys a feeling of hope and optimism, and it is still sung during political gatherings and demonstrations. Therefore, the song provides more than the imagery for a decorative border that frames this art feature. In the overall conceptual design for this mural, this border is meant to represent community. This representation goes beyond the symbolic. Anyone who spends any time at all at Cesar Chavez Plaza will come to know that Cesar Chavez Plaza is, indeed, a very special community.