

From Vision to Reality

Working with volunteers on a large public project requires thoughtful planning, careful coordination, and skillful direction. by Yulia Hanansen

Take 47 volunteers contributing 535 hours of intense work, and the result is one of the most successful community mosaic projects in the U.S.—a stunning eight-panel mosaic mural for the University of Michigan’s Matthaei Botanical Gardens. Titled *Great Lakes Ecosystem*, the mural consists of eight 3.5-foot square panels, each depicting plants and surroundings common to a specific ecological subsystem in the region. Materials include stained glass, vitreous glass tiles, smalti, and gold.

The client’s message to me was, “We are interested in a mosaic that will involve you and the community volunteers.” Very soon I was on-site with my camera, a sketchbook, and a measuring tape. The project location was ideal—a long passageway leading from the parking lot to a side entrance, shielded from the elements, and definitely in need of a mosaic. At that moment I realized that I had just acquired several roles at once: consultant, project artist/designer, volunteer organizer, manager and, as always, teacher.

Planning with Volunteers in Mind

Public projects of this size require a lot of planning, and anticipating a large group of volunteers requires planning with much greater precision. Questions such as *How many people can I comfortably fit into my studio?* and *What type of design should I choose?* came to mind. I realized that I could use a complicated design if I gave explicit working instructions to my volunteers.

Next came *What is the timeline for this project?* That would depend on how often the group met, how many people came to each session, and how quickly everyone worked. As it turned out, kids worked about four times more quickly than adults.



Photos courtesy of Yulia Hanansen

Yulia (left) directs volunteers during the development of the mural *Great Lakes Ecosystem*.

Faithful Support

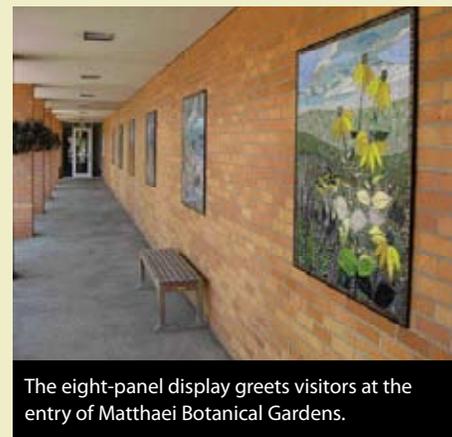
Many of my dedicated mosaic students (some are SAMA members) agreed to work on this project. “We’ll help! We’ll be here from the beginning to the end,” they said collectively. They kept their promise. For three and a half months each Tuesday afternoon and evening, from 12 to 18 of us gathered at my studio and worked on this project. My most experienced students and I laid out the complex parts of the mosaic; the rest of the volunteers followed the color-coded scheme that I determined in advance. The panels gained an interesting vibrancy and diversity without compromising the project’s unity because students were free to choose additional colors and to make their own decisions about andamento.

The project was grouted at the Botanical Gardens, installed, and opened to the public in the fall of 2008. In the summer of

2009, *Great Lakes Ecosystem* won a Golden Paintbrush Award from the Ann Arbor City Council for an outstanding public project in the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

To see more photos, go to www.mosaicsphere.com/public_community/mbg.html.

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The eight-panel display greets visitors at the entry of Matthaei Botanical Gardens.