

Post-Production Journal

The original pitch of “For Mitchell Street” was centered on the theme of transformation, specifically on the transformation of a person (Rew) and a space (The Mitchell Street Arts Collaborative). Our treatment also included a three act structure with a much heavier focus on Rew. During my research phase, I remember being struck by a quote from a Shepherd Express news article that read, “the community should be a lot more involved in what is happening here in their neighborhoods, especially when it is being run by someone who is not from the neighborhood.” I expected our documentary to take on the form of a pseudo-investigative film that asked, how is Mitchell Street Arts Collaborative (MSAC) *truly* For Mitchell Street? This colored the meaning of the title in a way that no longer resonates.

For Mitchell Street is a love letter to Mitchell Street. Our approach transformed from hot-seat journalism that addressed the threat of gentrification into an essential question that was more open-hearted: “What does MSAC mean for Mitchell Street?” This especially came into focus when I asked Rew: “Why you?” Rew’s candid answer put everything into focus for me when they responded by saying, “I don’t really have a good answer to that question other than I kicked it off and let the ball keep rolling, all I did was kind of kick it; and also I work a lot, and something like this requires a lot of passion and a lot of work to make it actually happen; and no one else seemed to be doing it.” From past conversations, I could tell that Rew did not want this story to be about them, and I wanted to honor that.

While transformation is a key idea in our final cut, the community of Mitchell Street came to the forefront and became the heartbeat of our film. My team did an activity that I learned in a directing class I took many moons ago called “50 Layers of Thought.” You write down 50 ideas of what the story is about and then narrow that list of 50 into 5. After completing the

activity, our most agreed upon ideas became: 1) Community, 2) Transformation, 3) What is filled versus what is empty, 4) Showing up for each other, and 5) Potential (in motion).

I'm happy to now see these 5 ideas shine through in our documentary. While I hoped that we would also address more of the history of Mitchell Street and capture more footage of artists making art, I've learned that it's sometimes important to work with what you have and what you were given. Each gift is a blessing.

New characters emerged spontaneously and reinforced our main theme of community. For Mitchell Street would not have become what it is without: Abdu Altayeb (the enthusiastic smooth-talking co-owner of Up N' Smoke); Ralph Jones (our favorite basement dwelling artist); Yesi Pérez (whose poetic words and strong statements about art imbue our story with soul); and Rew Gordon (the quirky, determined bohemian who wants to open a community arts center on Mitchell Street). The beauty of the process was that two of those characters were almost entirely unplanned for. Who knew that Abdu or Ralph would play important roles in our film? I've learned that that is the beauty of documentary filmmaking – the story emerges in unexpected ways and new protagonists can walk in at any moment.

The structure of our film was something that I was confident in. I spent a lot of time thinking about it, discussing it, and mapping out key dramatic structure points – points that largely remained consistent as we continued to edit our documentary. However, the big “aha moment” came when I realized that the post-event empty space sequence was the climax of our film. This empowered us to go further with layering different voices during the sequence - voices that communicated poignant statements about the importance of art funding, community art spaces, and community revitalization.

Over the course of the editing process, we were able to figure out how to incorporate our “walking shot,” which we initially envisioned as the common thread throughout our film – a

narrative device that we could always return to. Saving the walking sequence for the end helped to reestablish the world of Mitchell Street in a new light. Through it, we convey that Mitchell Street is not about place as much as it is about people - “people showing up for people.” This serves as a nice contrast to our opening montage of Mitchell Street, which is more focused on place and establishing that this is a community in transformation.

Stylistically, our film changed from what we initially imagined. In our lookbook we described long takes of primarily static shots with slow pans and tilts. Yet, our strongest cinematography moments that emerged were shots that were tripod-free, fluid, and reactive. Our approach became more observational and less focused on “taking heads.” Examples of some of my favorite moments include the MSAC makerspace tour, a basement nerf gun shootout, an impromptu dark room interview, the Ralph sequence, the street interactions that comprised our ending montage, the Dia De Los Muertos event at Silver City, and the event at MSAC. I am also proud that we stylistically delved into the poetic and magical realms with our sound design. The audio of singing and snapping added new life to our intro montage and Rew’s instrumental music created an almost dreamlike outro.

After reviewing my manifesto, I would like to add the following points:

- Sometimes do the opposite of the feedback you’re receiving and try something new. For instance, doing the opposite of the advice to have “fewer and longer” shots in our intro montage proved to be one of the keys to unlock our opening. After all, our long shots were shaky, and our strength was the variety of businesses that we captured.
- This is a related point: Play to your strengths. Review the footage you have and use what is done well.
- Be flexible and willing to shoot at any point. There is no time like the present.
- Film more than what you think you need! Think about shots that can help with transitions, which are so important. Personally, I wish we had more atmospheric/environmental shots that could be used for transitions.
- Ask: what is essential? This was key when ironing out Yesi’s section. It was difficult getting the right balance of the poetry of Yesi’s language. The paradox is understanding the need to “trim the fat” yet recognizing that fat is what makes food succulent. Just don’t go overboard.
- Free your darlings and then see if you can live without them. :)