

Street Art for Urban Regeneration: Cultivating Community Identity, Social Cohesion & Economic Growth

Minjae Kang

Bergen County Technical School Teterboro, USA

ABSTRACT

Urban development is developing a community's cultural, economic, and physical aspects. Urban development can often deal with challenges such as neglect in specific regions, financial constraints, cultural identity tensions, and limited community engagement. This study examines how street art is a transformative tool for addressing these issues, exploring its historical evolution, theoretical frameworks, and impacts on urban spaces and communities. Tracing street art's roots from graffiti to its current role in urban regeneration, the study analyzes key case studies, including the Berlin Wall, Rotterdam's public art initiatives, and Naples' urban renewal efforts. These examples highlight street art's potential to reflect community identity, foster social cohesion, and catalyze economic growth. The study reveals that street art fosters community engagement by encouraging collaboration, dialogue, and inclusivity. It strengthens cultural identity by enabling residents to connect with their environment, promoting pride and place attachment. Furthermore, street art contributes to economic revitalization by enhancing tourism, boosting property values, and stimulating local businesses. From these theoretical insights and empirical data from past case studies, one can observe that street art plays a multifaceted role in sustainable urban development by encouraging the expression of the people in the community and building an identity around it. Policy and strategic planning are crucial for maximizing street art benefits. The paper explores the efficacy of policies such as the OrMe project and Philadelphia's mural projects to show the increase in community satisfaction through street art.

Introduction

Urban development is the process of improving and developing a city or urban area, which includes social, cultural, economic, and physical aspects. Urban planners, stakeholders, and policymakers often need help with similar challenges, including neglect in certain urban regions, insufficient community engagement, financial constraints, and cultural identity tensions. This paper examines the intricate relationships between street art, urban spaces, and community dynamics, highlighting how street art can serve as a valuable tool for urban planners to address these challenges.

Emerging from its humble origins, street art has evolved into a significant public expression, commanding recognition within the more fantastic art world. Since street art is intricately intertwined with the dynamics of the urban environment, it can capture the identity of the spaces it inhabits. Furthermore, street art serves as a medium for cities to adapt to the challenges of urbanization by providing a creative outlet for community members. It is, therefore, a powerful lever through which a city can express itself, ease some challenges, and, in the process, shape cultures and ideals within and around them. Street art creates a place by questioning social norms or provoking dialogue. By exploring the theoretical framework of street art and analyzing its role in urban spaces, this study aims to provide critical insights for urban planners, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Understanding how the integration of street art into urban context can change the course of urban development is crucial for those wanting to harness the positive yield that comes from street art.

Historical Context and Evolution of Street Art

Before the emergence of street art, its predecessor, graffiti, was a popular yet controversial form of artistic expression. Traced back to prehistoric cave drawings, graffiti served as a medium of self-expression and political commentary. In the late 1960s, graffiti became prominent as street writing in Philadelphia and New York. It was initially used by gangs to mark territory, a utilitarian purpose that contrasted with its later evolution into a creative outlet and form of expression. During New York's financial struggles in the 1970s, abandoned factories and buildings became blank canvases for young and innovative individuals to utilize. In 1971, The New York Times published an article associating graffiti with the burgeoning Hip Hop movement, propelling graffiti culture into the national spotlight. Over time, street art evolved from graffiti, becoming its more accepted and often legal counterparts. Consistent with the *broken windows theory*, tolerating petty misdemeanors may inspire more significant crime and result in the spiral notion of the city's decay, which is a rationale for superstitions regarding street art (Balarezo, M. L. G., & Karimi, K. (2017). However, street art is slowly becoming absorbed by society and is perceived as a useful tool for urban regeneration and other challenges.

Berlin Wall

A powerful historical example of street art's transformative potential is the Berlin Wall. Initially known for the ideological divide between East and West Germany during the Cold War, the Berlin Wall gradually became a concrete canvas for political expression. The "Wall of Shame" began to reflect the voices of German artists and thus, citizens, evolving into a public gallery of diverse sociological and political ideologies. Around the mid-1980s, West German artists started to decorate the West Wall in secrecy due to the surveillance. While German police frequently overlooked these activities, the art had to be created quickly, leading to the extensive use of graffiti techniques. The Berlin Wall thus became a symbol of resistance and unity, bridging the graffiti movement in New York with the political realities of Berlin. By 1989, the wall became a contrasting product of two opposing governance systems, culture and artistic expression, according to "The Art on the Berlin Wall: Sentiments of East and West Berlin." Not all paintings were done by random artists; instead, they were sometimes hired to paint on the wall. For example, Keith Haring was commissioned by the Checkpoint Charlie Museum to contribute to the growing scene of Berlin Wall art. His painting showed figures that "were interlaced with the colors of the German flag, representing the division of the German population (The Art on the Berlin Wall: Sentiments of East and West Berlin)." However, the mural was painted over by other unknown artists. This means nothing is permanent on the concrete canvas, like how it is meant to be as street art. The Berlin Wall is a collage of different ideas and artistic expressions from different backgrounds, reflecting the diverse views and ideas during that time. After the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the fragments were repurposed, and some sections were preserved as public art in cities worldwide.

Another historical example is Rotterdam in the Netherlands, as highlighted in the study *The Role of Public Art in Public Spaces*. After World War II, Rotterdam has been reconstructing itself and trying to regenerate it with public art. Physical aesthetics cannot be recorded as concrete data because it differs from person to person, and someone's taste can change over time. With the integration of street art, they were able to conclude that street art does influence people. (*Student Theses Faculty Spatial Sciences*. (n.d.) Public art helped create awareness of the ongoing changes in the area, and it also emphasized local awareness. Public art also seemed to connect locals and their living environment. Street art seems to create interaction between users and tension, fostering change. Although the study did not definitively conclude that public art is a universally effective tool for urban regeneration, it emphasized its potential to create meaningful interactions between people and their environments. Street art, in particular, emerged as a force capable of sparking dialogue, fostering change, and enhancing the value of public spaces.

Theoretical Framework of Street Art

Street art is more than just public art, it is a catalyst for urban regeneration, capable of revitalizing rural areas and bringing a wide range of benefits. Its unique properties foster community engagement, promoting neighborhood social interaction and cohesion. Furthermore, street art drives economic opportunities through tourism and creates a sense of integration and belonging within the community.

This theoretical framework highlights street art's capacity to leave a lasting impact on communities. For instance, the case study "How Can Street Art Have Economic Value?" integrates street art into urban renewal efforts to revitalize the city of Naples, leading to a terrific atmosphere that stands out in a city grappling with high unemployment and early school leaving (Forte, & De Paola, 2019). Another example is that neighborhoods enhanced by "street writers" in New York have shown an increase in property prices by 10 to 15%, depending on the artist involved. Here the unique properties of street art are displayed in different parts of the globe, highlighting the idea of widespread potential of street art's use.

Researchers, Boffi, Rainisio, and Inghilleri (2023) argue that street art fosters place attachment, as proven by a striking increase in neighborhood attention to street art, which grew from 1.48% in 2017 to 20.48% in 2022. This is evidence of how local artists—once granted visibility—can increase citizen participation, boost community identity, and contribute to improved wellness by reducing stress and increasing quality of life. In the long term, street art garners itself as a critical mechanism toward balancing aesthetic improvement with socio-economic revitalization, bearing much broader repercussions for sustainable urban development regarding the well-being of communities. In conclusion, street art establishes itself as an essential mechanism for sustainable urban development. Its influence extends beyond decoration, contributing to the social, economic, and emotional well-being of communities and its members.

Impact on Community Identity

Street art helps reflect and shine the culture of a community or helps form an identity for communities. The use of public art can make areas stand out in the community, attracting residents and tourists alike. This interaction with residents helps form an identity for the community and allows the residents to foster a sense of pride. The sense of pride and uniqueness ultimately reinforces the identity and promotes other various benefits. For example, the Bospoldervos sculpture in Rotterdam, standing 16 meters long and 10 meters high, was created with input from over 200 local residents and entrepreneurs. This large-scale art project not only revitalized the area, infamously known for being called a "concrete jungle," but it also became the focal point that shared everyone's point of reference, deepening the sense of belonging in the community (*Student Theses Faculty Spatial Sciences*, n.d.). Local residents' involvement in creating public art projects strengthens the community's sense of attachment and cultural identity.

This can also be seen in the study "Nurturing Cultural Heritages and Place Attachment through Street Art—A Longitudinal Psycho-Social Analysis of a Neighborhood Renewal Process," which employs a convention about art tied to a neighborhood's cultural heritage. The outcome is presented in the case study, where there is a fairly positive relationship between residents' attachment to the place and knowledge of the project, indicated by the fact that this relationship has strengthened from $r = 0.371$ in 2017 to $r = 0.575$ in 2022 ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the case study showed when controlled for years of residence, these results remained significant, with the coefficient being $r = 0.287$ in 2017 to $r = 0.409$ in 2022 ($p < 0.01$) (Boffi et al., 2023). This shows how street art can impact physically and cultivate social and physiological attachment with one's community.

The impact of street art can be likened to a domino effect. Its interpretive nature makes it unique to each viewer, fostering individual and collective pride while strengthening place attachment. This pride often leads to increased social engagement, transforming public spaces into vibrant landmarks where residents can gather. These landmarks, in turn, attract tourism, bringing economic benefits such as boosted property values and increased revenue for local businesses. Street art's versatility extends its impact further. Its medium—graffiti or large-scale murals—allows

artists to express diverse narratives. This characteristic enables street art to empower marginalized communities by helping them stand out and fostering a sense of representation and inclusion. The transformative power of street art applies across urban and rural areas, bridging cultural and social divides while fostering pride and identity for individuals and communities alike.

Social Cohesion and Public Engagement

Street art possesses many unique features that foster social cohesion and community engagement. According to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts, respondents reported a 60% increase in interaction with neighbors following public art projects. The presence of street art/public art acted as a catalyst for conversation and engagement, which were key factors in improving social cohesion within the neighborhood. In all, collaborative street art beautifies urban communities and involves the community in its creations.

In addition, some social benefits from collaborative street art include heightened community engagement and enhanced prosocial behaviors such as increased willingness to help neighbors and participate in communal upkeep. Various studies have shown that such engagement can increase property values and decrease vandalism by up to 20% (Holland, 2020). It does not end here with street art leading to empathy among participants, strengthening bonds between residents, and improving their emotional well-being. The community engagement seemed to impact the residents' perception of the neighborhoods as they started to form a feeling of identity/ownership. To go further in-depth, there are five essential stages to collaborative street art: assessing the community's needs, collaboratively generating ideas, creating art collectively, acknowledging and celebrating the art and community efforts, and expanding the project's reach and benefits. These stages demonstrate how the structure has a wide variety of benefits in the process and the aftermath of finishing the project. According to the case study, 87% of Victorians attended arts or cultural events in 2009-2010, and among those 87%, 95% were young people (15-24 years), and 71% were children (5-14 years) (McMahon, R. (2006) The collaborative project not only brought residents but also helped with the engagement of young people. This is significant because they are the future generations that will live on, and having a sense of belonging will help the community stay together in the long run.

Economics and Developmental Impacts

The economic and developmental impacts of arts and culture are profound and multifaceted. It shapes the aesthetic appeal of many urban areas, drives economic activity, and fosters community cohesion. According to the Victorian Government's report on the financial impact of the arts, the \$5,199 million spent on cultural goods and services underscores the deep integration of the arts within local economies. This heavy spending generates over 30,000 job opportunities and supports many local businesses.

The cross-town initiative in Memphis is another example of how art organizations can revitalize rural or rundown areas. Highlighted in the case study "The Crosstown Initiative: Art, Community, and Placemaking in Memphis," the Crosstown initiative acted as a platform for community engagement and help with inclusive community building, making everyone feel belong in the community among the residents. The organization helps attract visitors and new residents with cultural aspects of the community, such as lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs, becoming a hub for local entrepreneurs. This helped create jobs and stimulate local businesses, boosting the community's economy. The main impact of the organization was the transformation of the Crosstown Concourse, a repurposed historic building, into a vibrant mixed-medium art gallery. The local businesses experienced a 30% increase in sales after the transformation, significantly impacting the community. (McMahon, R. (2006) The increase in sales and participation was all due to the collaborative street art as it brought a sense of belonging and identity to the Vicotria community.

Furthermore, the research by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics showed that the engagement of community members in the artistic process led to household spending on cultural goods and services of \$5,199 million in 2009-2010. Here the transformation of the crosstown concourse not only improved the social well-being of Victoria but it also enhanced the economy of the community. Furthermore, the local businesses experienced a 30% increase in sales after the transformation, significantly impacting the community. (McMahon, R. (2006) The increase in sales and participation was all due to the collaborative street art as it brought a sense of belonging and identity to the Vicotria community. In addition, street art brought not only artistic aspects but cultural aspects of the community. The street art displayed its power as Vicotria fought off urban decay and beautified the public spaces, further instilling a sense of pride and ownership among the residents.

These examples show how street art and culture are essential to urban regeneration strategies and should not be treated as inconsequential. Shown in the previous examples, both art and culture are catalysts for economic growth, social engagement, and identity, underscoring the importance of these two to urban planners as they possess economic and developmental impacts. In essence, cities prioritizing street art and culture will tend to experience more benefits and improvement in the city's quality of life and more robust economic performance. These examples show that investing in the arts is about improving a city's aesthetics and building sturdier and resilient urban environments.

Comparative Analysis of Case Studies

A project called OrMe was conducted in Ortica neighborhood to observe the impact of street art directly on various neighborhoods. Over five years, starting in 2017, the results demonstrated positive outcomes. The general population significantly improved dynamism, sociability, innovation, and creativity. These findings indicate a high level of interest among residents, with knowledge scores increasing from 1.83% to 2.34% during this period. Additionally, the proportion of residents viewing the OrMe project as a significant local feature grew from 1.48% in 2017 to 20.48% in 2022. The project also contributed to environmental improvements, as green areas increased from 1.98% to 6.19%, suggesting a boost in outdoor activities and public engagement in public spaces. Despite limited impacts on non-residents, the findings highlighted the potential of street art to strengthen community cohesion and increase engagement in urban areas (Boffi, Rainisio, & Inghilleri, 2023).

The "Public Art as Generator for Creating the Desirable City" case study examines street art's impact in creating an ideal city. The study involves two projects located in Hong Kong and Indonesia, which are known for their vast urban cities, and how they will demonstrate how street art can enhance the quality of urban life by increasing the "desirability" in the surrounding areas. The study showed positive results, with both areas serving their intended purposes. Street art in Hong Kong attracts tourists and creates a positive ambiance within the city. It demonstrated street art's potential in urban planning. Similarly, Indonesia was able to reflect on historical and cultural aspects which enlivened public spaces with beautiful artwork and a piece of history of the country. In all, It drew many spectators with its grand design, making them the centers of creativity, social engagement, and cultural expression.

It is clear that throughout the multiple case studies, there have been recurring results/themes that show that the presence of street art in large communities can positively impact them. The OrMe project in Ortica was able to yield an increase in positive resident perceptions of neighborhood street art, fostering an increase in neighborhood dynamism and creativity. As for KAWS, it implemented a playful urban ambiance, enhancing the overall visuals and recreational quality of public spaces for both residents and visitors alike. Both studies showed that street art promoted mental well-being by transforming urban spaces into more visually engaging areas, involving neighborhood residents in their own communities, and enhancing their quality of life overall. To put it simply, street art can be comparable to cooking seasonings. Food without seasonings will undoubtedly come out "bland" and "basic", but a simple touch of a few spices can liven up the whole dish exponentially. Similarly, implementing regulated street art within the community can have various impacts within a community that will yield positive outcomes.

Challenges and Controversies

Various controversies and challenges surround street art. Among them, gentrification is the most concerning issue, as it can devastate a community. Gentrification is when previous residents are displaced due to the increase in property value, and wealthier residents move in. With this in mind, Street art can be a double-edged sword because it can attract and engage with residents, but it also draws in the wrong audience, causing gentrification. This can be seen in the case study “How Can Street Art Have Economic Value?” as Groadach et al study the conflict in creative-making policies. Street art is intended to promote positivity and well-being in neighborhoods through art. However, in the case study, street art seemed to correlate strongly with gentrification, which can be seen in New York where property value went up in price due to artists. In New York, neighborhoods enhanced by “street writers” have shown increased property prices by 10 to 15%, depending on the artist involved. (Forte, F., & De Paola, P. (2019) Here, the presence of an artist alone creates economic pressures, which are concerning because this can scare off and displace the previous residents. This is significant as the intended audience will be gone, making the street art lose its original purpose.

The threat of gentrification is also mentioned in “Remembering and Transforming: A Study of Art and Culture in Berlin Since 1989.” It is important to realize that gentrification, in general, is not a threat to a city; in fact, it is an important part of revitalizing communities. For example, with the help of gentrification, driven by community investments and governmental efforts, Berlin was revitalized from its rural state. With this in mind, gentrification can lead to over-gentrification, as stated in this quote, “The effect of gentrification is twofold. On the one hand, it statistically kick-starts economic improvement and development in an area...”

On the other hand, poorer pre-gentrification residents unable to pay commercial rent are priced out of their own homes” (Jones, P. (2024, September 3). Here lies the real issue at hand: Gentrification not only leads to the displacement of poorer residents but also creates social and cultural tensions. The quote also reinforces the idea of street art being a double-edged sword: while it acts as a catalyst, it also brings misfortune to the poorer residents as they can no longer afford the property value. With the rising property value, poorer residents started expressing their anger through a slogan, “Yuppies raus!” This further supports the rising tension that is happening with gentrification. From these, it can be concluded that gentrification must be controlled to keep the original characteristics.

Creating street art requires cooperation between stakeholders, communities, and artists. Conflicts often arise, as highlighted in the case study “Art as a Means of Urban Revitalization?” in Wichita, Kansas. Here, artists and investors clashed over creative control. Artists criticized the commercialization of their work, arguing that stakeholders prioritized profit over community values. One artist remarked, “A lot of times artists... when cities commission them... they're told... ‘we need this artwork, so we can make some more money and say that we did it’ (Nance, 2021). Such conflicts hinder artists’ potential and diminish the quality of the artwork. Additionally, some community members undervalue the labor of professional artists, perceiving their work as a hobby rather than a livelihood. This lack of respect undermines the artists’ motivation and the overall impact of the projects (Nance, 2021).

Policy and Planning Recommendations

Policies and planning are always required, no matter the context, and street art is no exception. In fact, street art policy and planning are essential to maximize its potential. One key policy recommendation is integrating street art into urban renewal programs. The findings of multiple case studies support this idea. For instance, in Ortica, the impact of street art led to an increase in green areas from 1.98% to 6.19% and fostered greater dynamism, sociability, innovation, and creativity (Boffi, M., Rainisio, N., & Inghilleri, P., 2023). Similarly, Philadelphia’s street art program, which created approximately 3,000 murals and employed 250 artists, contributed about \$3 million to the creative economy and attracted over 10,000 visitors (Forte, F., & De Paola, P., 2019). These examples underscore the undeniable benefits of integrating street art into urban policies, providing advantages for communities and economies.

Tourism and economic planning are other crucial areas impacted by the integration of street art. Using street art as a catalyst to create tours and events can significantly benefit urban areas. For example, the OrMe project led to an increase in visitation from 1.48% in 2017 to 20.48% in 2022, with recreational and social clubs being the most frequently visited landmarks (Boffi, M., Rainisio, N., & Inghilleri, P., 2023b). This demonstrates how street art can transform landmarks into major tourist attractions. Integrating tour guides and trails further enhances community engagement. In Naples, the media attention garnered by a street art park spurred increased tourist interest (Forte, F., & De Paola, P., 2019). Sustained tourism could necessitate tour-related planning, improving visitor experiences. Additionally, media-driven attention could support festivals and events, boosting the local economy and enhancing the city's reputation.

Surveys can play a pivotal role in addressing challenges like gentrification, which can lead to the displacement of existing residents. Daily surveys of urban areas can help track resident satisfaction and property values, serving as a GIS mapping tool to monitor changes. For example, rising property values can create tensions between social classes (Jones, P., 2024). Surveys can mitigate such issues by identifying problems early and allowing urban planners to address them effectively.

Conclusion

Street art in an urban context presents various solutions and benefits for urban planners. These benefits include revitalizing neglected areas, fostering community engagement and cohesion, and promoting economic growth. Policy and planning initiatives can amplify these benefits, such as integrating street art into urban renewal programs, tourism development, and financial planning. Additionally, tools like daily surveys can address challenges like gentrification, ensuring the sustainability of street art initiatives. However, the field has limitations. Challenges such as gentrification, conflicting community interests, and a lack of comprehensive research hinder the full potential of street art. These limitations reveal the importance of balancing creativity with its potential social and economic consequences. They also highlight the need for further research, enabling urban planners to develop strategies that maximize the benefits of street art while minimizing its drawbacks. Through thoughtful policies, planning, and ongoing research, street art can be a powerful tool for transforming urban landscapes and fostering vibrant communities.

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