

Street Art as a Form of Urban Cultural Expression

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Abstract

Street art has become an im/portant form of urban cultural expression through which artists and communities transform public spaces into sites of creativity, communication, identity, and social commentary. Murals, graffiti, stencils, posters, installations, stickers, and other public artistic practices can reflect local histories, cultural identities, political concerns, social inequalities, and everyday experiences. This paper examines street art as a form of urban cultural expression, focusing on public space, community identity, political communication, local culture, social participation, urban aesthetics, tourism, commercialization, digital media, and challenges related to regulation and ownership. Unlike art confined to galleries, street art is encountered within everyday urban environments and can reach diverse audiences without requiring formal cultural participation. It can make neglected spaces visually meaningful, strengthen place identity, and provide opportunities for communities to express concerns and memories. At the same time, street art may be contested because of property rights, unauthorized production, commercialization, or conflicts over public-space use. The growth of social media has further expanded the visibility of street art, allowing local works to circulate globally and influencing how artists and cities understand public creativity. The paper argues that street art should be understood as a dynamic cultural practice shaped by artists, residents, institutions, urban policies, and audiences. When supported through inclusive and context-sensitive approaches, street art can contribute to cultural vitality, public dialogue, and the social identity of cities.

Keywords

Street Art; Urban Culture; Public Space; Graffiti; Murals; Cultural Identity; Urban Expression; Community Art; Social Commentary

Introduction

Cities are not shaped only by buildings, roads, and infrastructure. Their cultural character is also produced through images, performances, memories, signs, festivals, and artistic practices that occupy public spaces. Street art is one of the most visible forms of this cultural expression.

Street art includes a wide range of practices, including graffiti, murals, stencils, posters, stickers, installations, and temporary interventions. Some forms are commissioned, while others emerge independently from artists or community groups.

Because street art appears in everyday environments, it can communicate directly with residents, workers, visitors, and passers-by. It can represent local identities, respond to political and social issues, or simply add visual character to urban environments.

Scholarship on street art and urban culture has examined its relationships with public space, identity, resistance, cultural economies, and urban regeneration. Public and participatory art also demonstrates how creative practices can influence the experience and meaning of shared spaces.

This paper examines street art as a form of urban cultural expression through nine dimensions, including public space, identity, social commentary, community participation, aesthetics, tourism, commercialization, digital media, and future urban policy.

1. Concept and Characteristics of Street Art

Street art is a broad category of artistic practices created or displayed in public urban environments. It can include large-scale murals, graffiti lettering, stencils, wheat-pasted posters, stickers, sculptures, installations, and temporary interventions. Street art varies in purpose. Some works are personal expressions, some communicate political or social messages, and others are commissioned to enhance public environments. Its defining characteristic is the relationship between artwork and public space. Meaning is shaped not only by the artwork itself but also by its location, surrounding architecture, history, and audience.

2. Street Art and Urban Public Space

Public space provides the physical and social setting in which street art is encountered. Walls, underpasses, railway areas, markets, streets, and public buildings can become surfaces for cultural expression. Street art can alter how people perceive familiar environments. A previously neglected wall may become a landmark, meeting point, or visual representation of neighbourhood identity. The placement of street art also creates questions about who has the right to use public space. Debates over authorization, property, regulation, and public access are therefore closely connected with the practice.

3. Cultural Identity and Place-Making

Street art can contribute to place-making by representing local stories, cultural symbols, languages, historical figures, and community experiences. Murals may communicate aspects of neighbourhood identity that are absent from formal architecture or official signage. Local artistic expression can strengthen residents' attachment to place by making their histories and experiences visible. It can also create distinctive visual identities for neighbourhoods and cities. However, place identity should be developed with community participation. External artists or commercial projects may unintentionally replace local narratives with images that do not reflect residents' experiences.

4. Street Art as Social and Political Commentary

Street art has frequently been used to communicate political ideas and social concerns. Artists may address inequality, migration, conflict, environmental issues, human rights, discrimination, or government policies. Public visibility allows such messages to reach audiences beyond formal cultural institutions. A short visual message can attract attention and encourage discussion among people who encounter it during everyday activities. Political street art may also be temporary. It can be removed, painted over, or altered as political circumstances and urban regulations change, making the city itself part of an ongoing cultural conversation.

5. Community Participation and Collective Expression

Community-based street art projects can involve residents in planning, designing, painting, and interpreting artworks. Collaborative murals can create opportunities for different age groups and social groups to work together. Participation can strengthen communication and collective ownership of public environments. It can also help identify stories and cultural symbols that matter to residents. Meaningful participation requires more than inviting people to paint. Communities should have genuine opportunities to influence themes, design, location, and interpretation.

6. Street Art and Urban Aesthetics

Street art contributes to the visual character of cities by introducing colour, imagery, typography, patterns, and unexpected artistic interventions. It can create contrasts with conventional architectural surfaces and make ordinary spaces more visually engaging. Urban aesthetics are subjective, and not every resident will appreciate the same form of street art. What one person considers creative may be viewed by another as visual disorder or vandalism. These differences demonstrate that street art is part of a broader discussion about who defines urban beauty and how public environments should be represented.

7. Street Art, Tourism, and Urban Regeneration

Street art can attract visitors and contribute to the cultural identity of neighbourhoods. Murals and graffiti districts may become destinations for walking tours, photography, cultural festivals, and creative tourism. Cities sometimes incorporate street art into urban regeneration strategies by commissioning murals or developing cultural districts. Such projects can improve the appearance of neglected areas and support local creative economies. However, regeneration can also contribute to rising property values and displacement. Cultural branding should therefore be accompanied by attention to local residents and equitable urban development.

8. Commercialization, Regulation, and Digital Media

Street art can move between independent expression and commercial culture. Brands, developers, tourism agencies, and local governments may commission artists to create murals or public installations. Commercial support can provide income and visibility for

artists, but excessive commercialization may reduce the critical or community-based character associated with some street-art practices. Social media has further changed the field. Photographs and videos can make local works globally visible, while artists can build audiences online. Digital circulation can increase recognition but may also separate artworks from their original urban context.

9. Future Directions for Street Art and Urban Culture

Future urban policies should recognize street art as a diverse cultural practice rather than treating all forms as either vandalism or decoration. Clear regulations, artist support, community consultation, and appropriate public-art programs can create more balanced approaches. Cities can provide legal spaces, cultural grants, workshops, and participatory projects while protecting property rights and public safety. Documentation and digital archives can also preserve temporary works that would otherwise disappear. Further research should examine the long-term effects of street art on neighbourhood identity, social cohesion, tourism, urban regeneration, and residents' perceptions of public space.

Conceptual Framework

The following framework presents a simplified relationship between street-art practices, urban space and social issues, and wider outcomes such as cultural expression, public dialogue, and place identity. Community participation, urban policy, tourism, commercialization, and digital media can influence these relationships.

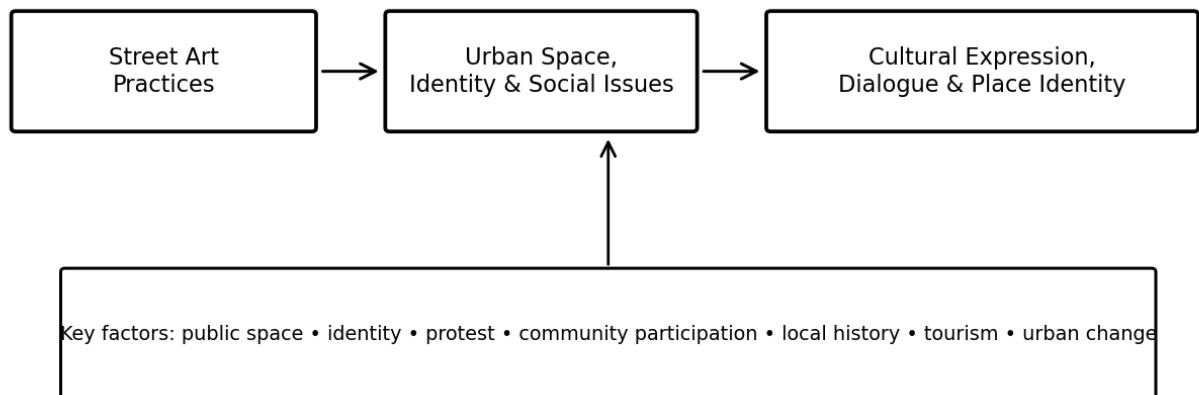


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing street art as a form of urban cultural expression.

Conclusion

Street art is an important form of urban cultural expression because it connects artistic practice with everyday public space. Murals, graffiti, stencils, posters, and installations

can communicate local identities, social concerns, political messages, and cultural memories while transforming how people experience their surroundings.

Its influence extends beyond visual decoration. Street art can support place-making, community participation, public dialogue, cultural tourism, and urban regeneration. At the same time, questions about authorization, property rights, commercialization, cultural representation, and displacement require careful consideration.

A balanced approach should recognize the cultural value of street art while respecting communities, property, and public-space regulations. When artists and residents are meaningfully involved, street art can contribute to distinctive, inclusive, and culturally vibrant urban environments.

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