

**Research Final for**

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## **Urban Art and Creative Equity in America**

Urban Art, a term that refers to all styles of street art (images) and graffiti art (text), is a medium that empowers communities to experience public art and encourages cultural representation. Changes in societal acceptance, awareness, and promotion of urban arts provide opportunities for vulnerable communities to access public art. This research will review the definitions, benefits, and existing inequities in community planning and arts access to give strategies for equitable solutions that enable Urban Artists whose work promotes community connectivity. Local municipalities embracing collaborative, equitable, creative placemaking strategies that reclaim unutilized spaces for Urban Arts can preserve and enhance community identity, diversity, and belonging. The existing funding and advocacy institutions, programs, and project solutions in major U.S. metropolitan areas are leading examples of creative placemaking that improve residents' quality of life by providing ongoing access to arts and culture. Through municipalities via community partnership and arts advocacy, Urban Arts can flourish in equitable plans by sanctioning public spaces for artistic and cultural expression.

### **Urban Arts Defined**

Art can ignite change and provide cultural representation, and viewing it is transformative for the places where it exists and the people who encounter it regularly. Urban Arts can encompass many visual expression styles, including murals, stickers, stencils, graffiti, and tags (i.e., signatures) (The Street Buddha 2023). Commonly, these combine words and images to convey rich ideas representing the artist and neighborhood ideals. Urban arts are primarily produced with vibrant colors of spray paint. Imagine walking down an alleyway in New York City; you turn a corner and are greeted by a building covered in ground-to-top-floor

swirling blues, greens, purples, and oranges with the caricature of Jimmy Hendrix playing a white guitar. The words “Music is my Religion” are placed on top, and going down the wall are various symbolic images of paint spray cans and the artist's names in multiple styles of complex graffiti (typography), giving praise for an African American and Native American icon of music in this Urban Art installment by Jermz and Topaz (Street Art NYC 2013). Celebrating this well-known advocate for the people of Harlem and beyond, this example of Urban Art represents the importance of music and art as a fundamental right to access, as important as religion is to those with faith.

This can be unauthorized artwork on public property or commissioned and placed with permission from the building owner and city permits on designated walls. For example, Mural Arts Philadelphia is an organization that transforms the city’s public spaces with fifty to one hundred Urban Art projects a year and focuses on restorative justice through education and access (Mural Arts Philadelphia n.d.). Through a collaboration with the municipality leaders and local Urban Artists, an ongoing partnership for reformation provides education, equitable creative place-keeping, and civic engagement, proving that Urban Arts provide positive value and individual and societal impacts. A product of that work is a large mural installment, *Portraits of Justice* by Russell Craig and Jesse Krimes, which showcases seventeen towering portraits of young black, indigenous, and other people of color and other people marginalized by systems of white supremacy culture (BIPOC+) residents covering the interior brick surfaces of the Philadelphia Municipal Services Building (Mural Arts Philadelphia n.d., Mac 2023). These portraits remind viewers that previously incarcerated individuals can change even in a societal

system that hinders reentry, evoking their value and reminding them of their rich and complex lives (Mural Arts Philadelphia n.d.).

### Urban Arts Impacts and Access

How an individual or community experiences their environment is directly impacted by the presence of artwork and its messages. These glimpses of visual arts and messages can evoke interaction and engagement to encourage a more profound sense of connectivity and change the viewer's perceptions of that area (The Street Buddha 2023). Urban Art is an essential connectivity aspect for the residents who experience cultural representation when artwork represents the area's current social or political issues (Glickman and Kneip, 2023).

The criminalization of Urban Arts requires more sanctioned creative public spaces in lower-income neighborhoods to protect this expression from legal prosecution. Due to racial segregation resulting in a lack of investment in BIPOC+ minority neighborhoods, creative places, and public spaces rarely exist as community resources (Glickman and Kneip, 2023). The Urban Artists in these vulnerable neighborhoods seek to balance the scales of representation at the risk of prosecution, further widening their daily inequalities. To change the dialogue in the U.S., marginalized communities need reclaimed sanctioned spaces dedicated to public art to embrace access, education, cultural diversity, and freedom of speech.

### Benefits of Urban Arts

Since the 1970s, when Urban Art began to rise, it has been considered a blemish in major U.S. cities, and millions of taxes have been dedicated to artist persecution and eradicating artwork (Ehrenhalt, 2018). However, Urban Art has also evolved its applications and fundamental messages, becoming a popular form of activism and evoking civic pride in the

public arena (Altschuler 2020). There have been famous works of Urban Art and artists who are recognized for their social and political messaging (Artlife 2023). Urban Arts displayed in large cities have become tourist attractions, generating foot traffic and revenue (Ehrenhalt, 2018). While visiting major metropolitan cities like New York, Miami, Chicago, or Los Angeles, you can often find walking tours exploring various art installations around the city (d'Agier de Rufosse 2022)

These changing attitudes toward certain styles of Urban Art, such as murals, are now welcomed by city planners and building owners alike. Annual arts festivals, dedicated creative spaces, and commissioned artworks are rising in popularity in hopes that these designated spaces will help reduce forms of vandalism and increase access to art (Ehrenhalt, 2018). Altschuler comments that tourists seeking street murals will find insight into “social, cultural, or political dynamics” and that murals can contribute to the success of communities and businesses (Altschuler 2020). This exposure to neighborhood stories helps viewers absorb the unique perspectives, challenges, and diversity and perhaps aids in combating antiquated sentiments regarding minority experiences.

### The Importance of Representation and Diversity

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AMACAD) explains that art provides opportunities to “challenge our perspectives, giving us new ways to see and experience the world, cultivating the values of diversity, tolerance, and empathy” (AMACAD n.d). Due to the reliance on property taxes to fund student access to arts education, lower-income neighborhoods often only have access to Urban Art expressions to influence and enrich their lives (AMACAD n.d). The Knight Foundation surveyed Americans from 26 metro areas and

found that local arts and culture access invest more time and resources into their communities (The Knight Foundation 2020). The study also notes, “Racial and income inequality is reflected in who has access to arts and cultural amenities. People in low-income and minority households report lower access to arts and cultural activities than higher-income or white residents” (The Knight Foundation 2020). With the understanding that minority groups lack access to the arts, Urban Art in public spaces may be the only exposure to art and the identity of their community.

### Creative Placemaking and Social Change

Today, several nonprofit organizations are dedicated to partnering with local communities to enable partnership and change. LISC is an example of a nonprofit organization that consciously nurtures underserved communities by providing project guidance and equitable collaboration frameworks to execute various services, including creative placemaking (LISC n.d.) Since 1979, the social impact of this organization in partnership with communities has resulted in numerous positive outcomes, including the creation of thirty-three theatres and performance spaces promoting equitable creative placemaking (LISC n.d.) As the research dives deeper into the power and benefits of equitable creative placemaking and urban arts, these existing programs and methodologies help achieve enduring positive social impacts.

### Public Art and Creative Equity

Public art can improve the quality of life, value, and perception of the community from residents and visitors. Community leaders, arts administrators, artists, and municipalities can partner with neighborhood residents on strategies for equitable development projects and promote self-expression and participation in the arts. A collaborative project, such as a community arts center, may include areas to socialize, perform music, create and display

artwork, and empower the community to value spaces for cultural expression and advance equity. Public art participation has individual mental and physical health benefits. Young highlights that public art is more accessible and inclusive than art in museums and galleries due to underrepresentation and prioritization of the needs of minority races and ethnicities (Young 2022).

Sanctioned public art areas repair disparities and access issues while developing placemaking strategies that address structural racism in housing and neighborhood development. Young explains, “When places experiencing blight or disinvestment are activated by art installations, they can become more frequented and valued...Although low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color are often deprioritized for built-environment enhancements, thoughtful placemaking interventions [that are community lead]—like public art initiatives—can revitalize these communities” (Young 2022). Creative equity is established through the neighborhood's stories and messages, benefiting all visitors who experience them.

#### Equitable Placemaking

Equitable placemaking needs to be a collaborative process and aware of the negative impacts that might occur (Kresge Foundation. n.d.) Some creative placemaking strategies have resulted in gentrification, displacing the current residents with higher property taxes and rental rates (Kahne 2015). More negative impacts can occur when city planners have commissioned murals and do not invite local artists and residents to participate, resulting in a lack of cultural connectedness. To avoid creating inequitable public spaces, each project should survey the community's needs and ideals and gather feedback from its residents and local artists. They should facilitate growth and partnership while maintaining the culture and values of the

neighborhoods it will impact (Kahne 2015). By enabling neighborhoods to create their own public spaces, one removes private developers from the project and reduces the risk of gentrification (Kahne 2015). The municipalities encouraged to fund their own public spaces and lead conversations with their neighbors on what solutions best represent them can provide an increased quality of life and representative accessible art that educates visitors and reduces unconscious bias through exposure to diverse cultural identities.

### Equitable Placemaking Solutions

Americans for the Arts - Public Art Resources Center (PARC) expands knowledge around public art and aids in educating Urban artists and administrators to develop projects and programs in their communities (Walsh et al. 2020). In the *Cultural Equity in Public Spaces* report, the authors define cultural equity, gentrification, and barriers to artist and resident participation to provide solutions for improving public art spaces (Walsh et al. 2020). A large part of reducing inequities is understanding where they originate and then changing the approach to tactics that are not resulting in the desired outcome. For example, primarily white art administrators may not yet understand how to create equitable representation for underserved BIPOC+ neighborhoods. These art administrators must actively gain an understanding of potential unconscious biases that occur to ensure cultural equity. When public art projects are conducted with cultural equity at the center, they represent “race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion” within their arts policies and community planning (Walsh et al. 2020). Awareness of inherent bias, prejudice, and stereotypes will help arts administrators remove barriers affecting local artists' and neighborhoods' selection and



engagement with planning and projects. Interacting with different cultures requires art administrators to develop a deep awareness and willingness to educate themselves, learn about the local histories, invest in cultural competency training, and attend cultural events different from their own (Walsh et al. 2020). The right leadership will usher in equity by focusing on the individuals they are working with and combatting their personal biases to break down the barriers in public art and creative placemaking.

### Equitable Creative Placemaking Strategies

Art administrators must carefully navigate processes when they cultivate projects, being aware of cultural appropriation mitigation and engaging the local community in all aspects of the planning to ensure the project reflects the sentiments of the neighborhood culture (Walsh et al. 2020). For example, Artplace America (Artplace) is a \$150 million investment from numerous foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions to fund arts and culture projects and establish creative placemaking until 2020 (Artplace America 2020). This program is a resource that outlines the various mistakes and triumphs through the hundreds of creative placemaking projects conducted over ten years (Artplace America 2020). Artplace published a book about the outcomes, methodology, and partnerships to provide strategies for art administrators and local officials for future programs dedicated to equitable creative placemaking.

### Furthering Opportunities for Urban Artists

The First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution protects the Urban Artist's right to free speech and expression (HG.org n.d.). Federal Copyright laws and the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) also protect the Urban Artwork created in sanctioned spaces. Copyright laws state that

if the artwork is permissible and can be linked to an artist, it can be copyrighted and benefit the artist who created it (Elias and Ghajar, 2017). VARA goes beyond copyright protection to offer attribution and integrity protections to prevent the destruction of Urban Arts (Elias and Ghajar 2017). Urban Artwork created in a sanctioned creative place can be copyrighted for the artist's benefit and retained by VARA laws, even if the subject matter is controversial. This could incentivize Urban Artists to express authentic stories in collaboration with creative placemaking spaces versus finding alternative illegal locations and risking legal persecution and fines.

#### Local Arts Advocacy

Advocacy will require residents' impact areas and concerns to be reported before approaching a municipality or local government with equitable community revision plans. The support needed for the program funding and execution will include estimated impacts on jobs, safety, land or building use, education, and housing (Philanthropy Massachusetts 2015).

In Massachusetts, 40,000 residents were interviewed, and the top three responses to why someone lives in a place were “social offerings, openness, and aesthetics” (Philanthropy Massachusetts 2015). This survey data further supports the need to include creative spaces within a community plan. When advocating for creative placemaking to a local community council, reimagine the use of existing “vacant and blighted” spaces reclaimed to help promote connection and opportunities (Philanthropy Massachusetts 2015). If those unclaimed spaces do not exist or are limited use or the concept of sanctioned creative placemaking for Urban Arts needs to be vetted. A solution to present could include temporary public art installations in collaboration with local Urban Artists with outcomes that can inform more long-term projects.

Advocacy must be a flexible feedback process enriched with complex communication efforts, organizing community members, and resourcing partnerships with municipal officials and arts advocacy organizations. Collecting social impact data by estimating the potential job creation and revenue impacts further supports this dialog with community leaders and residents. Conscientious community advocacy will support any equitable creative placemaking plan. Placemaking will grow art accessibility and Urban Arts opportunities in the most vulnerable neighborhoods in America.

#### Grant Funding and Advocacy Partnerships

Partnerships with organizations like LSIC and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) will provide funding sources and guidance on executing creative placemaking programs. LSIC provides program support and education on navigating community council meetings, surveying residents, and organizing program imperatives like technology solutions (LSIC n.d). The NEA offers annual grants for promoting creativity and public access to the arts and is a U.S. government funding resource for applicants (Americans for the Arts n.d.). Some key facts recently published by the NEA are that of the 2,300 grants awarded, 35% of those take place in high-poverty neighborhoods and reach lower-income audiences such as people with disabilities and Veterans (Americans for the Arts Action Fund 2023). The NEA estimates that 4,000 communities are served annually through small to medium-sized grants (Americans for the Arts Action Fund 2023). Americans for the Arts has partnered with the NEA to advocate for expanding the U.S. federal budget and increasing access to “cultural, educational, and economic benefits of the arts that advance creativity and innovation in communities across the United States” (Americans for the Arts Action Fund 2023). The existing funding resources,

combined with government and nonprofit support and local municipality partnerships, advocating for creative placemaking is more than an idea; it is a vetted solution that needs only to expand to include sanctioned spaces for Urban Arts.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout America, societal inequalities will require fundamental change, and access to Urban Arts, when included in equitable creative placemaking, can aid in fostering that dialog between municipalities and minority neighborhoods. Urban Art, with dynamic social and political statements, provides cultural representation and access to public art. Local governments and communities can provide decriminalized sanctioned areas for Urban Arts to benefit from its creation instead of paying for its destruction. Equitable creative placemaking can provide a viable solution for creating sanctioned spaces for Urban Arts and artists. If conducted consciously, creative placemaking helps the surrounding businesses, residents, and the neighborhood's cultural identity and economy. Funding and advocating for these equitable creative spaces in the past have proven to be an excellent guide for future initiatives. Continuous funding of equitable creative programs at local and national levels in partnership with equity-versed arts administrators and engaged residents should be a priority in the United States. Revitalizing marginalized neighborhoods needs to include encouraging Urban Arts and creative placemaking. Advocacy will help citizens understand these systemic inequities and the negative impacts on all U.S. neighborhoods and provide opportunities for equitable solutions that promote creative placemaking for Urban Arts.

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