



Public Art as an Interactive Medium in Urban Space: Community Engagement and Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT: Public art has become an essential component of contemporary urban development, functioning as a medium that integrates artistic expression, public space, and social interaction. Beyond its aesthetic value, public art contributes to shaping urban identity, fostering community engagement, and reinforcing cultural memory. With the acceleration of globalization and urbanization, public art has evolved from static monuments to interactive and participatory forms that actively involve the public. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review on public art as an interactive medium in urban space, with particular emphasis on its relationship with the urban environment and its role in community engagement and cultural identity formation. By synthesizing existing research, this study highlights the multidimensional impact of public art on urban culture and social interaction, identifies current challenges in public art practice, and proposes future research directions. The findings provide theoretical support for the sustainable development of public art in contemporary cities.

KEYWORDS: Public Art; Urban Environment; Community Engagement; Cultural Identity; Interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

Public art has increasingly become a defining element of contemporary urban spaces, shaping not only the visual appearance of cities but also the ways in which urban environments are experienced, interpreted, and remembered [1]. Traditionally, public art was primarily understood as permanent sculptures, monuments, and murals placed in public areas to commemorate historical events, political figures, or collective achievements [2]. These works often served symbolic and representational functions, reinforcing dominant

narratives and official cultural values.

However, with rapid social transformation, technological advancement, and shifts in public aesthetics, the role and form of public art have undergone significant changes [3]. In contemporary cities, public art has expanded beyond static, commemorative objects to include installation art, interactive media, performance-based practices, and participatory projects that actively involve the public [4]. This transformation reflects broader changes in urban culture, where citizens increasingly seek meaningful engagement with their environments rather than passive consumption of visual symbols.

In modern urban contexts, public art is no longer limited to visual appreciation but functions as a medium that connects people, space, and culture [5]. It intervenes in everyday life by shaping emotional responses, social interactions, and spatial perceptions. Through its presence in streets, squares, parks, and transportation hubs, public art becomes embedded in daily routines and social practices, contributing to place-making and urban identity [6].

Moreover, public art increasingly serves as a platform for addressing social issues and reflecting collective concerns. Many contemporary public artworks engage with themes such as identity, memory, environmental sustainability, and social justice, thereby extending beyond decorative functions and participating in public discourse [7]. These characteristics highlight the potential of public art to operate as an interactive medium through which urban residents negotiate meaning, values, and belonging.

Despite the growing prominence of public art in urban development, scholarly research has often treated it as a peripheral element within broader discussions of architecture, urban planning, or cultural policy [3][8]. While existing studies have examined the aesthetic qualities and symbolic meanings of public art, less attention has been paid to its interactive dimensions and its role in shaping social relationships and cultural identities.

This paper addresses this gap by reviewing



and synthesizing existing literature on public art as an interactive medium in urban space. Focusing on the interrelated dimensions of urban environment, community engagement, and cultural identity, the study aims to clarify the social and cultural significance of public art in contemporary cities.

II. Concept and Evolution of Public Art

The concept of public art has evolved alongside broader transformations in social structure, urban development, and cultural production. Although artistic practices in public space can be traced back to ancient civilizations, modern public art discourse emphasizes accessibility, publicness, and social relevance as defining characteristics [9].

In its early modern form, public art was closely associated with state power and ideological representation. Monuments and memorials were commissioned to convey official narratives and reinforce collective memory through permanence and scale [2]. These works typically positioned the public as passive recipients of meaning.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, public art began to shift toward more experimental and critical forms. Influenced by conceptual art and social movements, artists increasingly questioned the role of art in public space and sought to engage audiences through participation and dialogue [10]. This transition marked a movement from object-oriented public art toward process-oriented practices that emphasized experience over permanence.

Contemporary public art encompasses a wide range of forms, including installations, performances, digital works, and participatory projects. Many of these practices prioritize interaction and engagement, positioning the public as active contributors rather than passive observers [4][11]. This shift reflects broader cultural changes in which publics demand greater involvement in cultural production and interpretation.

Theoretical debates on public art have increasingly foregrounded questions of publicness, power, and representation. Scholars have examined who defines the “public” in public art, whose voices are represented, and how institutional frameworks shape artistic production [12]. These discussions underscore the political dimensions of public art and its role in negotiating cultural meaning within shared spaces.

In rapidly urbanizing contexts such as China, public art has become an important component of urban cultural construction. Contemporary public art practices often integrate traditional cultural

elements with modern forms and technologies, reflecting negotiations between heritage and innovation [13]. This hybridization illustrates how public art functions as a medium for articulating cultural identity amid social transformation.

III. Public Art and the Urban Environment

The urban environment provides the primary spatial and social context in which public art operates. Rather than functioning as isolated aesthetic objects, public artworks are embedded within complex urban systems shaped by architecture, infrastructure, social practices, and cultural narratives [3][14]. Understanding public art as an interactive medium therefore requires situating it within broader urban environmental frameworks.

Urban space is not a neutral container but a socially produced environment that reflects power relations, cultural values, and patterns of everyday life [9]. Public art intervenes in this environment by introducing symbolic forms and experiential elements that reshape how spaces are perceived and used. Through visual presence and spatial positioning, public art contributes to the construction of place identity and influences patterns of movement and interaction [6].

Public Art and Spatial Experience

Spatial experience constitutes a core dimension of public art interaction. Public artworks engage audiences not only visually but also bodily, as individuals move through, around, and sometimes within artworks situated in public space [5]. These embodied encounters distinguish public art from gallery-based experiences and enhance its interactive potential.

Large-scale public artworks often function as landmarks that organize spatial perception and orientation within the city [3]. By contrast, small-scale or site-specific interventions activate overlooked or transitional spaces, inviting closer engagement and reflection [15]. In both cases, public art mediates between built form and lived experience, transforming functional environments into meaningful places.

Public art also influences temporal experience by interrupting routines and introducing moments of pause within the flow of urban life. Such moments encourage reflection and social interaction, contributing to the experiential richness of public space [6]. Through repeated encounters, artworks become integrated into everyday spatial memory and collective perception.



Environmental Psychology and Human Perception

Insights from environmental psychology help explain how public art shapes perception, emotion, and behavior within urban environments. Environmental psychology emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their surroundings, highlighting how physical settings influence psychological responses [16].

Public art enhances environmental quality by introducing visual diversity, symbolic meaning, and aesthetic stimulation into urban space. These elements contribute to place attachment and emotional well-being, counteracting the monotony often associated with large-scale urban development [14]. Interactive and immersive artworks, in particular, intensify sensory engagement and foster emotional connection.

Furthermore, public art supports cognitive mapping by providing recognizable reference points within complex urban environments [3]. Such spatial cues enhance orientation and reinforce a sense of familiarity and belonging. Through these mechanisms, public art contributes to the psychological legibility and livability of cities.

Public Art and Urban Vitality

Public art plays a significant role in enhancing urban vitality by activating public spaces and encouraging social interaction. Spaces that incorporate public art often attract diverse users and support informal social encounters, contributing to the vibrancy of urban life [6][17].

Interactive public artworks encourage participation and dialogue, temporarily transforming public spaces into sites of shared experience. These interactions may be spontaneous or facilitated through events and programs, but in all cases they strengthen the social dimension of urban environments [11]. Over time, such engagement supports social cohesion and reinforces the public character of urban space.

However, the relationship between public art and urban vitality is not automatic. Without careful integration into urban design and community context, public art may fail to resonate with users or remain underutilized [18]. This highlights the importance of context-sensitive design and community engagement in public art practice.

Public Art, Urban Regeneration, and Sustainability

Public art has become an increasingly prominent tool in urban regeneration and place-making initiatives. Cities often employ public art to

revitalize declining areas, enhance imageability, and attract cultural tourism [19]. In such contexts, public art functions as both a symbolic marker of transformation and a catalyst for social activity.

At the same time, public art contributes to discussions of sustainability by addressing environmental themes and promoting ecological awareness. Contemporary public artworks may incorporate sustainable materials, renewable energy, or site-responsive design, aligning artistic practice with environmental responsibility [20]. These approaches position public art as a medium through which environmental values are communicated in accessible and experiential ways.

Nevertheless, the use of public art in regeneration processes also raises critical concerns. When driven primarily by branding or economic objectives, public art risks prioritizing spectacle over social engagement and may contribute to gentrification [21]. Critical perspectives emphasize the need for inclusive and ethical approaches that balance economic development with social equity.

Micro-Scale Interaction and Everyday Urban Life

While landmark public artworks often dominate scholarly attention, micro-scale interventions play an equally important role in shaping everyday urban experience. Small installations, interactive details, and temporary artworks intersect directly with daily routines, influencing how people pause, observe, and interact within public space [15].

These micro-scale interactions accumulate over time, gradually shaping collective memory and place identity. By embedding art within ordinary environments, public art becomes part of everyday life rather than an exceptional event [5]. This integration enhances accessibility and supports sustained engagement across diverse audiences.

IV. Community Engagement through Public Art

Community engagement has become a central concern in contemporary public art practice. As cities increasingly emphasize participatory governance and social inclusion, public art is expected to move beyond aesthetic enhancement and actively contribute to social interaction and community development [10][12]. Within this context, public art functions as a social platform that enables dialogue, collaboration, and shared experience among diverse publics.

Public art encourages community engagement by creating situations in which



individuals encounter one another through shared spatial and cultural experiences. Interactive installations, participatory projects, and community-based artworks invite the public to engage physically, emotionally, and intellectually, transforming public space into a site of collective activity [4][11]. These forms of engagement foster a sense of belonging and strengthen social ties within urban communities.

Participation and Social Interaction

Participation is widely regarded as a defining feature of contemporary public art. Participatory practices reposition the public from passive observers to active contributors, allowing individuals to influence the meaning and outcome of artistic projects [12]. This shift aligns with broader cultural trends that emphasize collaboration, co-creation, and democratic cultural production.

Community-oriented public art projects often involve residents in multiple stages of the creative process, including planning, design, implementation, and interpretation. Such involvement enhances a sense of ownership and responsibility toward public space [22]. Through participation, individuals not only engage with art but also negotiate social relationships and shared values.

However, participation in public art is not inherently inclusive. Differences in social capital, cultural background, and access may influence who participates and whose voices are represented [23]. Meaningful community engagement therefore requires careful consideration of power relations and the implementation of inclusive strategies.

Public Art as a Social Platform

Public art operates as a social platform that facilitates interaction and communication in public space. By occupying shared environments, public artworks become focal points around which social encounters occur [5]. These encounters may be spontaneous or organized, but collectively they contribute to the communicative dimension of urban space.

As a social platform, public art supports encounters among individuals who might not otherwise interact. Temporary installations and performance-based works, in particular, create time-bound communities centered on shared experiences [11]. Such encounters foster empathy and mutual understanding, reinforcing the social function of public space.

At the same time, public art may also generate contestation and debate. Diverse

interpretations and responses reflect the plurality of urban life and the multiplicity of public voices [12]. Rather than seeking consensus, effective public art accommodates ambiguity and difference, encouraging dialogue across social boundaries.

Social Capital and Community Networks

Public art contributes to the formation of social capital by providing opportunities for repeated interaction and shared experience. Through collaborative art-making and public engagement, individuals develop trust, reciprocity, and a sense of collective identity [24]. These social networks enhance community resilience and support long-term engagement with public space.

From a governance perspective, public art is increasingly integrated into community development strategies that emphasize participation and collaboration [25]. When supported by appropriate institutional frameworks, public art can strengthen relationships between communities, artists, and public authorities.

V. Public Art and Cultural Identity

Cultural identity represents a fundamental dimension of public art discourse. In multicultural and rapidly transforming cities, public art plays a crucial role in articulating, negotiating, and contesting cultural identities within public space [9][26]. Through symbolic representation and narrative construction, public art connects individual experience with collective cultural memory.

Cultural Memory and Place Identity

Public art contributes to cultural memory by embedding historical references, local narratives, and shared symbols within urban environments. These artistic interventions transform ordinary spaces into sites of remembrance and meaning [7]. By engaging with cultural memory, public art supports continuity amid social change.

Place identity emerges through the interaction between physical space and cultural meaning. Public art distinguishes places through unique aesthetic and symbolic characteristics, reinforcing emotional attachment and sense of belonging [6]. Repeated encounters with public artworks integrate them into everyday spatial memory.

Importantly, cultural memory conveyed through public art is not static. Contemporary practices increasingly acknowledge contested histories and multiple perspectives, encouraging critical reflection rather than singular narratives



[12]. This approach supports more inclusive representations of identity.

Globalization and Local Cultural Expression

Globalization has intensified the circulation of artistic forms and cultural symbols, reshaping urban cultural landscapes. While global influences expand creative possibilities, they also raise concerns about cultural homogenization [27]. Public art occupies a critical position in mediating global and local dynamics.

Site-specific public art that engages with local history, material culture, and social context resists generic aesthetics and reinforces cultural specificity [13]. By contrast, artworks that neglect local context risk appearing disconnected and alienating.

Balancing global and local dimensions requires sensitivity to place and engagement with local stakeholders. When successfully integrated, public art can foster cultural confidence and support sustainable cultural development [26].

Representation, Power, and Cultural Narratives

Public art participates in the construction of cultural narratives and symbolic power. Decisions regarding commissioning, placement, and interpretation influence whose histories are represented and whose voices are amplified [9]. Monumental public artworks often reinforce dominant narratives, while participatory and community-based projects seek to challenge hegemonic representations.

In pluralistic societies, public art becomes a site of negotiation over identity and belonging. By accommodating diverse narratives, public art contributes to cultural democracy and expands the expressive capacity of public space [12][28].

VI. Challenges and Future Directions of Public Art Interaction

Despite the growing recognition of public art as an interactive medium, several challenges continue to limit its social and cultural potential. One persistent issue is the prevalence of one-directional communication, in which public artworks transmit predetermined meanings without enabling meaningful dialogue or participation [12][18]. Such approaches reduce public engagement and undermine the interactive capacity of public art.

Another challenge concerns the integration of public art within urban planning and design processes. Public art is often treated as an auxiliary aesthetic element rather than an integral component

of spatial and social infrastructure [3][9]. As a result, some public artworks lack contextual sensitivity and fail to resonate with local communities.

Institutional and managerial constraints also affect the sustainability of public art interaction. Limited funding, inadequate maintenance, and the absence of long-term evaluation mechanisms may diminish the effectiveness of interactive artworks, particularly those relying on digital technologies [20]. These issues highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and sustained policy support.

Future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to examine how public art interaction evolves over time and across cultural contexts. Integrating perspectives from urban studies, sociology, and cultural policy can enhance theoretical coherence and methodological rigor [10][24]. Moreover, participatory research methods that involve communities as co-researchers may generate more inclusive and socially relevant knowledge.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has examined public art as an interactive medium in urban space, emphasizing its relationship with the urban environment, community engagement, and cultural identity. Through a comprehensive review of interdisciplinary literature, the study has demonstrated that public art functions not merely as a visual or decorative element but as a dynamic cultural system embedded in everyday urban life.

Public art shapes spatial experience by mediating relationships between people and place, enhancing environmental perception, and contributing to urban vitality [3][6]. Through participatory and interactive practices, public art fosters social interaction and community engagement, strengthening social capital and reinforcing the public character of urban space [11][22].

The analysis of cultural identity highlights the role of public art in articulating collective memory, negotiating representation, and mediating global-local dynamics [9][26]. By accommodating diverse narratives and contested meanings, public art contributes to cultural democracy and inclusive urban development.

At the same time, the paper has identified critical challenges related to participation, governance, and sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires integrated planning strategies, inclusive engagement mechanisms, and continued theoretical and methodological innovation.



In conclusion, recognizing public art as an interactive medium provides valuable insights for urban development, cultural policy, and artistic practice. As cities continue to evolve under conditions of globalization and social complexity, public art offers flexible and responsive means of shaping shared experience and cultural meaning within public space.

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