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Empowering communities through art: Unleashing the potential of public art in urban micro-renewal

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Abstract: As urban space available for new construction continues to diminish, urban renewal strategies have increasingly shifted toward micro-renewal approaches. Within this framework, public art serves as a vital medium for urban cultural development and has been effectively integrated into community spaces under the paradigm of human-centered urban micro-renewal. This study systematically explores the forms, principles, and mechanisms of community public art. First, it establishes the synergistic relationship between urban micro-renewal and community public art. It then identifies six distinct artistic forms: spatial transformation, sculptural installations, murals and wall paintings, public facilities, digital media, and artistic events. Building upon this classification, the study delineates four core principles that community public art should adhere to: the participatory principle of human-centered engagement, the principle of locality emphasizing cultural distinctiveness, the principle of gradual progression ensuring sustainable development, and the social principle of art education. Through comparative case analysis, the study reveals the multidimensional role of community public art in restructuring power dynamics, driving community transformation, and reshaping cultural identity. The findings demonstrate that community public art not only enhances the spatial environment and improves community quality but also fosters social integration and strengthens cultural identity, providing an innovative pathway for urban governance. Finally, the study acknowledges its limitations and outlines future research directions, aiming to contribute to both theoretical discourse and practical applications in community public art.

Keywords: urban micro-updating; community public art; power advocacy; community transformation; cultural reshaping

1. Introduction

With the rapid expansion of urban economies and increasing urban populations, the built environment has undergone significant development [1]. However, the fundamental structure of urban spaces has largely remained stable, leading to a sharp reduction in available land for new public space construction [2]. Concurrently, the demand for high-quality urban living environments has intensified, positioning urban renewal as a crucial contemporary development issue. While large-scale demolition and reconstruction projects have been widely implemented, they often encounter significant challenges and controversies, including spatial justice imbalances, the erasure of cultural memory, and the disruption of community networks [3–5]. These issues underscore the inadequacy of large-scale redevelopment models in addressing the needs of cities that have reached or are approaching spatial saturation, as well as the growing preference for more sustainable and inclusive urban renewal approaches

[6]. To address these issues, urban micro-renewal has emerged as an alternative paradigm for spatial reproduction, offering a bottom-up, participatory approach to optimizing urban spaces [7,8]. Unlike traditional large-scale renewal, micro-renewal is not only characterized by its fine-grained physical interventions but also by its governance shift toward social capital activation and the reconstruction of local knowledge, fostering a sense of community identity. This paradigm shift aligns closely with the practices of urban public art, which serve as a key instrument for both urban governance and the formation of local and regional identities [9]. Public art initiatives are increasingly incorporated into public squares, parks, and other communal spaces, becoming integral to urban revitalization strategies across multiple countries [10]. Over time, public art has evolved from flagship projects designed to enhance a city's international image and showcase high-traffic commercial spaces to community-oriented initiatives emphasizing social participation and cohesion [11]. This shift underscores the growing role of community public art in enhancing local attractiveness [12], boosting economic development [13], fostering social interaction [14], and shaping community identity [15].

Despite a growing body of research on public art's aesthetic and sociocultural impacts, existing studies predominantly focus on specific case studies and lack systematic, generalized frameworks to elucidate the mechanisms and effects of public art across diverse urban micro-renewal contexts. Based on this, this study, grounded in urban micro-renewal theories and community public art models, seeks to advance understanding of how public art operates within the urban micro-renewal process. Employing a case study methodology, it systematically analyzes the functions and impacts of public art across various urban micro-renewal projects, with a particular focus on its roles in power dynamics, community transformation, and cultural development. By constructing a comprehensive analytical framework, this research enhances the theoretical and practical understanding of the interplay between urban micro-renewal and public art, offering insights into how art adapts to and influences different socio-spatial contexts, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive model of urban development.

2. Research methodology

This study adopts a case study methodology to investigate the synergistic relationship between urban micro-renewal and community-based public art. Through a cross-regional comparative analysis, it aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms by which community public art contributes to urban micro-renewal processes. The selection of case studies is guided by three primary criteria. First, the cases represent diverse cultural and political contexts, allowing for an examination of the differentiated interactions between public art and urban renewal policies. Second, each case serves as a representative example corresponding to the study's three core analytical dimensions—spatial restructuring, social interaction, and cultural identity. Third, the geographic distribution of the selected cases demonstrates the adaptability of public art to different regional conditions (**Figure 1**).

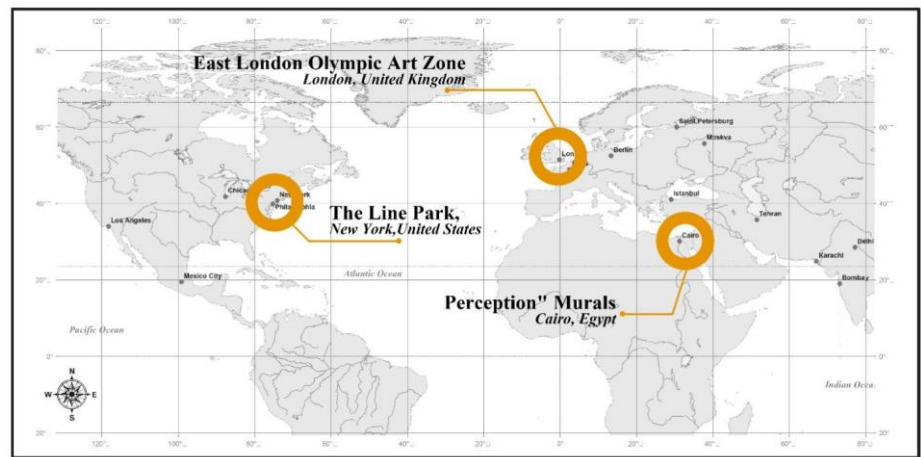


Figure 1. Geographic location of the three cases.

Accordingly, the research focuses on three representative public art practices located in North America, Western Europe, and the Middle East. Particular attention is given to the roles and mechanisms of public art across the three analytical dimensions. In terms of spatial restructuring, the study explores how community public art influences the configuration of urban spaces, including the creation of a sense of place, the enhancement of public infrastructure, and the transformation of the built environment. This analysis aims to assess the contribution of public art to improving the physical urban environment and enhancing spatial experience. In the dimension of social interaction, the research investigates how public art initiatives facilitate the formation of social relationships, increase community engagement, and promote equality and integration among diverse social groups. In doing so, the study seeks to evaluate the role of public art in fostering social inclusiveness within urban public spaces. Finally, from the perspective of cultural identity, the study analyzes how community public art contributes to the preservation of local culture, the reinforcement of urban identity, and the stimulation of cultural innovation. The findings of this research are expected to provide academic support for further theoretical development and practical strategies in the fields of urban renewal and public art.

3. Synergies between urban micro-renewal and community public art

As an alternative paradigm of spatial reproduction, urban micro-renewal has its theoretical roots in mid-20th-century critiques of large-scale modernist urban redevelopment [16]. During this period, a series of scholars raised critical perspectives. Jane Jacobs highlighted the destructiveness of large-scale urban renewal [17], while Lewis Mumford condemned comprehensive demolition-based approaches for severely undermining the organic functionality of cities, advocating instead for a human-scaled urbanism [18]. Christopher Alexander argued that large-scale developments compromise urban functionality and erode cultural value, emphasizing the need for small-scale, incremental [19] and diverse renewal methods to foster harmony between people, nature, and cities [20]. Wayne Attoe and Don Logan

introduced the concept of catalytic elements as triggers for urban transformation [21], while Colin Rowe, in *Collage City*, critiqued utopian urban designs that prioritize uniformity over organic urban growth, advocating for a collage-like approach to city-building [22]. In *Revitalization of Historic Urban Neighborhoods*, Steven Tiesdell promoted small-scale, diversified development strategies to preserve both the built environment and social structures, mitigating urban fragmentation [23]. Within this intellectual framework, urban micro-renewal has emerged as a human-centered, sustainable, and smart-growth-oriented practice [19]. It emphasizes low-cost temporary interventions to activate urban spaces, improve community environments, and foster socially and culturally sustainable development without disrupting the existing urban fabric [24].

The concept of community public art traces its origins to the 1970s' social engagement art movements [25], which redefined artistic space, subjects, and themes. Emphasizing social issues as creative focal points, these movements positioned communities as both creators and participants while utilizing local spaces as platforms for artistic practice [26]. The development of community public art is closely linked to Suzanne Lacy's notion of "new genre public art," also known as community art [27]. This approach conceives art as a participatory and transformative tool aimed at fostering public engagement, facilitating community dialogue, and advancing social justice. Community public art projects prioritize interaction and collaboration with local residents to explore social issues, strengthen community bonds, and drive social change, ultimately leveraging artistic expression to activate public spaces and enhance civic engagement [28].

The synergies between urban micro-renewal and community public art manifest in three key dimensions. First, urban micro-renewal, as a strategic social project, emphasizes small-scale, incremental transformations aimed at addressing urban challenges while preserving cultural value and fostering harmony between people and their environments. Community public art, as a critical component of urban cultural development, is inherently participatory, responsive to community needs, and attuned to local cultural characteristics. By engaging residents in artistic processes, community public art contributes to urban micro-renewal by enhancing social cohesion, improving public spaces, and fostering civic pride. Second, urban micro-renewal provides the spatial and structural conditions necessary for community public art to exert greater influence. Beyond its aesthetic contributions, public art strengthens community identity, promotes social integration, and drives local economic and cultural development. Finally, community public art enhances the inclusivity of urban micro-renewal by encouraging active resident participation. Functioning as a catalytic element [29], it revitalizes spaces, generates ripple effects that extend beyond the immediate area, and facilitates the organic renewal of urban environments.

4. Analysis

4.1. Forms of community public art in urban micro-renewal

Within the context of urban micro-renewal, community public art has emerged as an innovative spatial intervention strategy that manifests in diverse forms. It plays a crucial role in shaping community environments, fostering social interaction, and

enhancing urban cultural values. Based on current practices, the manifestations of community public art can be categorized into six major types: spatial transformation, sculptural installations, mural paintings, public infrastructure, digital media, and artistic activities [30,31] (**Figure 2**).

Spatial transformation is one of the core forms of community public art in urban micro-renewal. It often employs small-scale, bottom-up strategies that optimize community spaces through low-cost interventions. Beyond addressing residents' functional needs, spatial transformation emphasizes place identity and cultural recognition while fostering a sense of belonging through community co-creation. Unlike traditional architectural design, this form of micro-renewal adapts existing spatial configurations, encouraging the active participation of multiple stakeholders—including community residents, governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations—to achieve sustainable spatial enhancement.

Sculptural installations, an extension of traditional community public art, have evolved within the urban micro-renewal framework to emphasize interactivity and public engagement. Compared to conventional sculptures, these installations prioritize openness and participatory engagement, often utilizing sustainable materials such as reclaimed wood, metal, and plastics. By integrating environmental beautification and ecological education functions, sculptural installations encourage residents to engage with art organically in their daily lives, thereby reinforcing the overall cultural atmosphere of the community.

Mural paintings are among the most accessible forms of community art due to their low cost, high feasibility, and strong visual impact. Murals not only enhance the aesthetic quality of community spaces but also serve as carriers of local culture, collective memory, and emotional connection. Typically created through collaborative painting initiatives involving residents, murals strengthen community cohesion and ensure that artistic content aligns with local cultural narratives. Furthermore, murals possess a high degree of adaptability, allowing for periodic updates or modifications to maintain their artistic vitality [32].

Public infrastructure, as a shared community resource, serves essential functional purposes while simultaneously reflecting cultural identity and communal values. Within urban micro-renewal, the design of such infrastructure increasingly prioritizes functionality, sustainability, and interactivity. Examples include repurposing recycled materials—such as old fabrics, pipes, or tires—into public amenities or transforming discarded bricks into seating areas. This approach not only raises environmental awareness among residents but also promotes resource circulation, facilitating a transition toward a sustainable community model.

Digital media art leverages computational technologies, sensor-based devices, and interactive platforms to integrate elements such as light, sound, and video into the community environment, creating multisensory experiences. As an innovative form of community public art, digital media facilitates data collection and analysis to enhance residents' sense of place. Its role becomes particularly prominent in extraordinary circumstances, such as during pandemics, when it provides virtual communities with new modes of cultural interaction [33]. Additionally, digital media art fosters transregional connectivity, expanding the influence of community public art beyond geographical boundaries.

Community art activities, often organized in the form of workshops, festivals, and collaborative projects, aim to strengthen social bonds and promote participatory cultural development. These activities not only enrich residents' daily lives but also enhance their aesthetic appreciation and artistic practice through co-creation. As a mechanism of social interaction, community art activities contribute to identifying and addressing local issues while fostering inclusivity and strengthening community cohesion.

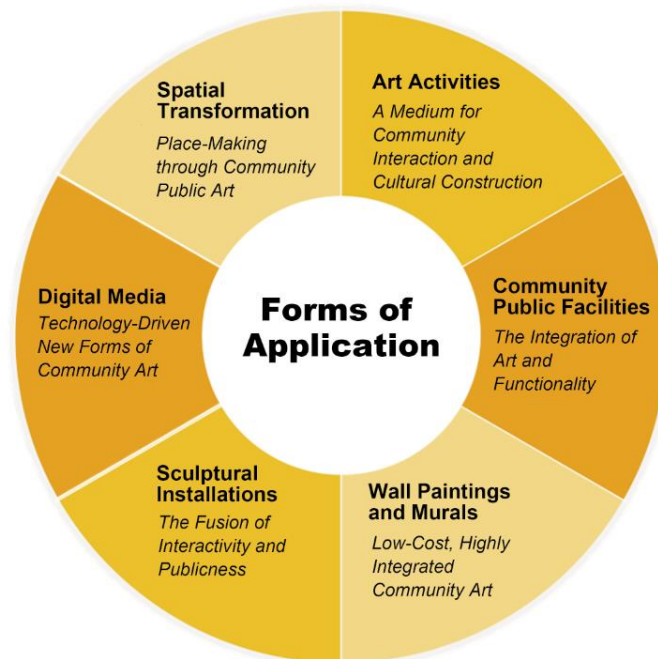


Figure 2. Forms of public art in the context of urban micro-renewal.

4.2. Principles of community public art practice in urban micro-renewal

In the context of urban micro-renewal, the practice of community public art is guided by four core principles: participatory engagement, local identity, progressive sustainability, and educational enrichment. These principles not only inform spatial improvement strategies but also shape community consciousness, cultural preservation, and long-term urban governance.

Under the human-centered framework of urban micro-renewal, community public art emphasizes responsiveness to public needs and the collaborative involvement of multiple stakeholders [3]. As the fundamental unit of urban space, communities serve as dynamic arenas for social interaction and identity construction. Effective community public art should exhibit broad accessibility and interactivity, ensuring that residents assume an active role in artistic initiatives. Implementation typically involves resident-led initiatives supported by governmental agencies, enterprises, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations, forming a collaborative governance model [34]. This approach maximizes public benefit by mobilizing resources efficiently while aligning projects with community priorities. Policy and financial support further provide institutional stability, ensuring the sustainability of community public art initiatives. Additionally, the incorporation of a ‘co-creation’ model fosters deeper engagement, positioning artists as facilitators rather

than sole creators. By acting as participants, organizers, and mediators, artists help stimulate residents' creative potential and sense of belonging, thus embedding community public art within everyday life and reinforcing bottom-up governance structures [35,36].

As a medium of cultural expression, community public art must respect local traditions and reinforce distinctive spatial identities [36]. Urban development is shaped by political, economic, and cultural factors, and long-standing community life fosters unique cultural identities, cognitive frameworks, and social norms. These cultural deposits not only influence residents' behavioral patterns but also serve as a critical source for community public art. Therefore, public art practices must engage deeply with a community's historical narrative, spatial characteristics, and social fabric to ensure contextual relevance. During conceptualization and execution, historical context, urban morphology, and residents' lifestyles should be thoroughly considered to achieve seamless integration of art into the community environment [37]. Notably, local identity should extend beyond mere visual representation to strengthen collective consciousness and place attachment [38]. Public art can incorporate regional materials, traditional craftsmanship, and symbolic motifs to reinforce cultural attributes, transforming community spaces into recognizable and meaningful urban elements.

Sustainability, a central concept in contemporary urban governance, advocates for the balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental considerations to safeguard future generations' needs [39]. Within community public art, sustainability is manifested through resource optimization, ecological responsibility, and long-term adaptability. Environmentally conscious materials such as low-carbon, recycled, and biodegradable substances should be prioritized to minimize resource depletion. Furthermore, public art serves as an educational tool for ecological awareness, fostering a sustainability mindset among residents through artistic engagement. Large-scale, one-time interventions should be avoided in favor of incremental, small-scale improvements that optimize community spaces progressively while minimizing social disruption. Beyond environmental considerations, sustainability also encompasses cultural continuity, ensuring that artistic projects respond to contemporary needs while maintaining long-term cultural significance [40,41].

Community public art extends beyond physical space enhancement to function as an educational platform that cultivates aesthetic literacy and cultural awareness. As a vital component of public education, art appreciation is intrinsically linked to community environments and socio-cultural backgrounds. Encouraging direct participation in artistic projects enhances residents' aesthetic perception and creative skills, fostering a deeper understanding of and engagement with artistic expressions in everyday life. Through this process, community public art contributes to higher cultural literacy and long-term civic enrichment.

4.3. The role of community public art in urban micro-renewal

Communities are shaped by complex power dynamics involving interactions between community administrators and residents, among residents themselves, and across different social groups. Managing and balancing these power relationships is crucial for maintaining community stability and fostering sustainable development.

Within the process of urban micro-renewal, community public art functions as a vital medium that not only reshapes power structures but also provides residents with a platform for expressing their concerns and asserting their rights. The integration of public art facilitates open channels of communication, enabling community members to strengthen their agency through artistic creation and aesthetic engagement. By participating in public art projects, residents experience a more transparent and equitable distribution of power, fostering a greater sense of inclusivity and fairness within the community. Public art, with its inherent appeal and interactive nature, effectively stimulates public interest in community affairs, encouraging active participation. Interactive artistic practices empower residents with greater expressive agency, transforming artistic engagement into a tangible force for community-driven change. An example is the High Line Park in New York City (**Figure 3**). Originally an abandoned freight rail line connecting the meatpacking district to the port, the site faced demolition. In 1999, local residents established the nonprofit organization Friends of the High Line (FHL), advocating for its preservation and transformation. Following extensive community consultations, the New York City Council and municipal government ultimately endorsed and funded the project, which was completed in 2004. Throughout the planning phase, designers collaborated closely with residents and local organizations, ensuring that community voices were integrated into spatial decision-making. Public art played a central role in the High Line's revitalization, featuring an array of artistic installations, sculptures, murals, and temporary exhibitions. These artistic interventions not only enhanced the site's visual appeal but also reinforced cultural identity and community cohesion [42]. Through artistic creation and interactive experiences, residents redefined their shared space, fostering a more democratic and equitable realignment of power structures.



Figure 3. High Line Park, Manhattan, New York City. Image by David Berkowitz. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0). <https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidberkowitz/5923527436/>.

At a broader level, community public art serves as more than a tool for spatial transformation—it is a catalyst for social change. Collaborative artistic practices provide a playful and engaging means to encourage civic participation, prompting residents to reflect on community issues and explore innovative solutions. This participatory process positions residents not merely as passive recipients of urban renewal but as proactive decision-makers and change agents, thereby advancing the sustainable development of their communities.

Beyond its role in community transformation, public art interventions

significantly enhance a community's visibility and influence within the urban landscape, expanding public awareness and attracting additional resources and support. A case is the "Perception" mural project in Cairo, Egypt. This initiative exemplifies how art can empower marginalized communities and reshape public perceptions. Zaraeeb, a neighborhood historically engaged in waste recycling, had long suffered from social stigma and exclusion. In response, artist El Seed collaborated with local residents to create a large-scale mural spanning multiple building facades. Community members actively participated in the painting process, transforming the artwork into a medium for asserting their identity. When viewed from a specific vantage point, the mural reveals a powerful Arabic inscription: "Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eye first." This artistic intervention not only redefined the community's self-image but also challenged external biases, ultimately reshaping the neighborhood's social and cultural standing [43] (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Mural works PERCEPTION image: image source: Artist eL Seed's public website Manshiyat Nasr, Cairo. <https://elseed-art.com/>.

From a cultural perspective, community public art plays a fundamental role in uncovering latent cultural resources while fostering diversity and innovation. Every community possesses a unique social structure and developmental trajectory, characterized by variations in demographics, traditions, lifestyles, values, and cultural openness. These cultural attributes, deeply embedded in historical narratives and social practices, shape collective identity and are expressed through daily rituals, behavioral norms, and shared experiences. As an irreplaceable cultural asset, this identity reinforces residents' sense of belonging and cultural confidence.

Within the framework of urban micro-renewal, community public art strategically integrates local historical and cultural elements to optimize spatial environments, highlight distinctive cultural characteristics, and strengthen residents' sense of place. By employing diverse artistic mediums—including form, color, materiality, and technology—public art conveys a community's collective ethos and humanistic values, enriching sensory and emotional engagement. Its unique aesthetic expressions not only bring community culture to life but also serve as a conduit for preserving historical narratives and value systems. Through the exhibition of artworks and cultural expressions, public art fosters a deep appreciation for local heritage while

creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and innovation. An example is the urban renewal of East London following the 2012 Olympics, where community public art played a pivotal role in cultural reconfiguration. The post-Olympic development attracted an influx of artists and creative professionals, transforming the Olympic Park into a cultural and historical landmark. To sustain the legacy of the Olympics while integrating it into local culture, the East London municipality commissioned artists and architects to create a series of large-scale public artworks, including sculptures, murals, and digital installations. These interventions celebrated the diversity and innovative spirit of the community while fostering local engagement. By actively involving residents in the artistic process, the project strengthened cultural identity and infused public spaces with deeper cultural significance. The initiative not only bolstered community cohesion but also enhanced the district's appeal to visitors, contributing to its social and economic revitalization [44].

The cultural transformation of East London underscores the far-reaching impact of public art in shaping vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable communities. It highlights how artistic interventions can serve as powerful mechanisms for cultural expression, fostering both local heritage appreciation and cross-cultural dialogue. By reimagining urban spaces as dynamic cultural arenas, community public art emerges as a crucial force in contemporary urban micro-renewal, offering valuable insights and replicable strategies for cities worldwide. See **Table 1** for a summary of cases.

Table 1. Key case studies on the role of public art in urban micro-renewal.

Case	Region	Art Forms	Functions	References
The Line Park, New York	North America	Spatial transformation, sculpture installations, public facilities, digital media	Restructuring power relations; promoting community transformation; enhancing cultural identity	[45]
Perception Murals, Cairo	Middle East	Mural painting, artistic activities	Social empowerment; cultural reconstruction; community transformation	[46,47]
East London Olympic Art Zone	Western Europe	Digital media, public facilities, mural painting, artistic activities, sculpture installations	Cultural innovation; spatial activation; social inclusion	[48,49]

5. Conclusion

As an adaptive strategy for addressing the challenges of spatial governance in the era of stock-based urban development, the synergy between urban micro-renewal and community public art has demonstrated significant theoretical value and practical potential. This study systematically analyzes their interplay, highlighting their interdependent relationship. It delineates the collaborative mechanisms between the two, revealing their coupling in spatial reproduction, social capital activation, and cultural identity reconstruction. Through a comparative analysis of multiple case studies, the research categorizes community public art into six major types: spatial transformation, sculptural installations, mural painting, public infrastructure, digital media, and artistic events, while also elucidating the spatial characteristics and social functions of each category. Findings from this study suggest that the integration of community public art into urban micro-renewal should be guided by several fundamental principles. Emphasizing broad participation, the process should actively involve local residents, ensuring that artistic interventions reflect the lived experiences

and aspirations of the community. At the same time, a strong connection to local characteristics and cultural heritage is crucial, allowing public art to reinforce the unique identity of each neighborhood. Rather than adopting a one-time transformation approach, artistic interventions should follow a gradual and evolving trajectory, allowing spaces to adapt organically to changing social and spatial dynamics. Moreover, public art should not only serve aesthetic and functional purposes but also act as a medium for cultural learning and social engagement, fostering a deeper awareness of community narratives and urban histories. Case studies demonstrate that community public art plays multiple roles within urban micro-renewal initiatives. At the material level, it enhances spatial quality by improving visual aesthetics and optimizing space utilization. At the social level, it fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens community cohesion by facilitating social interactions. At the cultural level, it contributes to cultural education and promotes economic development by transforming cultural capital into economic capital. These findings confirm the feasibility and effectiveness of community public art as a tool for urban governance.

However, this study has certain methodological limitations. While it reveals the immediate mechanisms through which community public art contributes to urban micro-renewal, the constraints of the project timeline limit the ability to track the long-term social effects of artistic interventions. This temporal limitation may result in an incomplete understanding of the sustained social, cultural, and spatial effects of artistic interventions. Future research should extend the timeframe of case studies and integrate both quantitative and qualitative analytical tools to systematically assess the long-term impact of community public art on urban transformation. Additionally, incorporating a broader range of case studies for comparative analysis would enhance the robustness of the findings. Such an approach would contribute to a more structured and scientifically rigorous academic discourse. By bridging theoretical innovation with practical exploration, community public art holds significant potential as a transformative force in urban governance. Its continued integration into urban micro-renewal strategies offers new possibilities for fostering inclusive and sustainable urban spaces.

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