

## Community Canvas: How Public Art Transforms Urban Environments

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### Article Info

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### Abstract

With the integration of global economy, the urbanization process in Rwanda develops rapidly. It appears particularly important to build city image. As manifestation of city characteristics, it reflects spiritual outlook of a city. Public art has participated in the process of transforming the aesthetics and symbolic meanings of civic centers across the country, even though for the most part its creative potential has been curtailed by the priority of urban planning and architecture as shapers of civic space. This research study discusses the role of public art in influencing urban environments in Rwanda, specifically within Kigali Cultural Village. The study explores the extent to which such an approach can raise local communities' environmental awareness as an indirect input to the process of upgrading the desires of those living in these areas and of international tourists. In addition, it reviews the experiences of different types of catalysts for regeneration, such as art and culture that can enhance the built environment's recognition, value, and economic growth. A qualitative evaluation is employed for this research study, which leverages subjective methods such as, consulting research papers and articles, interviews and observations to collect substantive and relevant data while examining the interaction of connectivity, attraction, and development as they relate to economics and other complex aspects of development. The findings reveal the main advantages of introducing public art to an urban space, namely in regard to acceptance, culture, and social behavior. In addition, the study helps identify new ways to use public art to enhance public interactions and participation in new urban environments development

### INTRODUCTION

Rwanda as a developing country continues to transform its art and culture to embrace the forces of urbanization that began to be witnessed in the country from 2013 onward. Rwanda's very rapid economic and population growth have created intense strains between the old and new in almost every aspect of life. Modern work patterns

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and pressures of competitiveness sometimes clash with traditional relationships based on trust and personal ties. Moreover, the greater freedoms and wider choices that accompany economic and social progress pose a challenge to deep-rooted social values highly cherished by society. Yet it is possible to combine modern life within the Kigali city with values and culture. Other societies have successfully shaped modernization around local culture and traditions. Rwanda's National Vision responds to this challenge and seeks to connect and balance the old and the new.

Rwanda has worked on large megaprojects designed to attract global investments and tourists. Certainly, the current process of globalization is improving competition between Kigali city capital and secondary cities and affecting the very establishment of a relationship between public art and urban development whereby public art is valued as a tool for increasing the individuality, uniqueness, and attractiveness of cities and consequently providing work for the local economic base while safeguarding and preserving cultural identity for future generations. In addition, public art provides a platform for local and international artists to examine the ingenuity of contemporary art.

Art trends and innovations constantly try to claim the status of public art, which is supposed to convey existential meaning through symbols that individuals can perceive and understand through an act of identification. The transformation of public art during Rwanda's period of development reopened important questions about how such art influences the contemporary city and whether it has or should have a specific role in the beautification, branding and identification of cities of Rwanda.

This research study paper explores:

- why public art is considered an important factor in urban development and
- how public art should intersect with city spaces and new art trends specifically in Rwanda, in recognition of its dedication to culture and its location in a recreational zones as to boost traditional heritage with modernism.

### **What is public art?**

The use of the term public art has been debated. Until today, whether it is the United States or other countries, there has not been a unified and clear conclusion about its concepts and ideas. Public art was born with the development and construction of American cities after World War II. In the process of re-planning and governance of the city, there are public spaces, and the sculptures of a group of representative artists in the United States have walked out of the art museum and were placed outdoors. They are named after this and are called public art. (Public art). In Taiwan, public art refers to "the use of public funds, set up in public spaces, become public assets, and have permanent artistic creations."

Broad understanding of public art: refers to works of art set up in public spaces, including painting, calligraphy, photography, sculpture, crafts and other means and techniques. In addition, art styles that can relate to the public in time and space, such as performances, singing and dancing, are also included in public art. The carrier of its art can include open murals, installations, water bodies, architectural structures, urban public facilities, etc. that the audience can perceive or participate in in different ways.

The narrow concept of public art holds that public art represents a new orientation in the relationship between art and society. When it comes to "art", people most intuitively associate it with the artist's paintings, photography, sculptures and other indoor personal artistic creations. It is the individual art that enters people's public living space from "on the shelf" and from the museum, and needs to face multiple object judgments.

According to (Syamim Azhari1 et al, 2014) Public art is an artwork or any visible component of art that embraces creativity and meaning, sited in public space. The emergence of public art in public space covers activities extending from functional, decorative, iconic, interpretive, integrated, ephemeral or temporary installation of

artworks. Over the past thirty years, artists, designers and city planners have discussed and acknowledged the values and roles of public art that contribute to the public's well-being.

Places are significant to people when they have meaning that is readily understood at some level (Remesar, 2003). Places that provide a 'theatre' for interaction and tell a story - be it historical, cultural or esoteric - project interest and invite participation. People, when they are included, identify with the place and it gains significance for them. Artworks in public places can be significant in a variety of ways - through physical nature, visual effect, public presence, cultural influence and spiritual significance.

### **What is urban environment?**

The definition of an urban setting varies from one context to another; it is usually agreed upon by governments at national level. However, there are a number of elements that constitute an urban setting that can be adapted and applied across contexts.

According to Center of Expertise for Urban Programming, (2013) an urban setting can be defined broadly on the basis of population density, concentration of administrative bodies and infrastructure and a diverse set of livelihood and income generation activities. Urban areas will be characterized by high population density when compared to other areas. While some cities are defined by municipal boundaries, many urban centers have not been designated as such. They are usually characterized by the presence of administrative structures such as government offices and courts and a relative concentration of services such as hospitals and financial institutions such as banks. In an urban setting, the forms of livelihood and income generation activities will be diverse and unlike rural areas not bound mainly to agricultural production.

### **Characteristics of Urban Public Art**

Urban public art has several typical characteristics, including artistry, expression diversity, publicity and specific field property. Its artistry and expression diversity show that it doesn't have specific pattern of manifestation and style, but it can combine diversified artistic forms, including building, multimedia, painting, device and sculpture. Any kind of means of expression needs to combine with technology and art, aesthetics and science. Besides, when designing, artists consider whether the art coordinates with city characteristics and conforms to local historic culture, emotional needs of the citizens and their receptivity for public art; as the most prominent feature of public art, publicity includes the meaning of public places and urban citizens exchange information and enter and leave the city freely.

Public art has specific field property. If a public artistic work is not placed in proper place, although it has sense of beauty, it cannot bring emotional resonance for the audiences. In this way, it cannot promote public art to create social atmosphere and represent city image.

### **Research Objectives**

Research objectives and research questions

The objectives of my research paper are as follow:

To describe the role public art plays in the city

To define what is public art

Outline in which ways public artworks are related to be the most important part of the city

This research study talk about the role of public art by influencing urban environment beautification in Rwanda, specifically within Kigali city. It explores the extent to which such an approach can raise local communities' environmental awareness as an indirect input to the process of upgrading the desires of those living in the surrounding spaces where public arts are installed and international tourists.

The above objective of my research interprets into the following main research question: How does public art affect the urban environment development of such space?

### **Literature review**

Although there are many definitions of public art, the most commonly understood is that public art is the art which is publically accessed such as monuments, sculpture, billboards, mosaic, special buildings and memorials. It may be individually or publically funded, but everyone is allowed to access it without any charges of admission. This also extends to paintings in city owned collections which are placed in public buildings such as museums, stadium, church and city hall.

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The studies conducted on the meaning of the environment revealed two categories of influential factors on the meaning of urban spaces: the first category is related to the factors in whose context the meaning of space is formed, while the second category is the poles around which meaning is created based on Gustafson's place meaning model. The contextual factors include cultural context and time. In the same vein, a large number of studies have investigated the influence of culture on the meaning formation of urban spaces (Farshid Aram, 2021).

### **Methodology**

This research study focuses on why and how public art and culture affect a specific instance of urban development. This study used primary (questionnaire and interview) and secondary data (books and journals, and electronic materials), to collect major and relevant data. The overall process includes three key steps: interviews, observation, and plan application.

A number of accessible approaches contribute to data gathering. According to Creswell, when primary and secondary data are used, the secondary data is usually employed to clarify the primary data. According to Ghauri and Gronhaug, secondary data helps readers develop a better understanding of the research topic. This analysis uses the purposive technique to pick out source papers and articles, a group of people representing stakeholders involved in the subject of the study, to interview; in this case, they are key members of the artist group, local authorities, key members of society, and specialists in related disciplines.

Observation and mapping are additional tools used to understand the dynamics of people, their interactions with the urban environment, and the type of art used; this alternative approach to data collection views people as objects by recording their behavior periodically, and valuable information is obtained when their behavior is systematically recorded in this way. Unplanned observations may result in inadequate findings that do not extend beyond surface appearances. Systematic observation of behavior, in contrast, takes into consideration four elements: people, activities, setting or space, and timing. The research observations were conducted within the administrative boundary of Kigali city. Open-boulevard murals (sculpture along urban streets) are observed in the areas surrounding different public works of art. The study will focus on the following issues:

Understanding public art and how it helps change the urban environment;

How citizens perceive public art projects and their contribution to the environment; Public Participation in public art; and the prospects for public art in Rwanda.

Technical and artistic aspects of the art will be discussed to a very limited degree because these intrinsic aspects of art are not the focus of this research.

### **Discussion**

There is a close relation between urban development and public art because most of popular cities around the world have one or more public artworks which are considered to be identities of those cities and for a city to attract tourists around the world, cities were built with public art inclusiveness. Not only for beautification of cities and as attraction tool, but also for historical and cultural representation of the country in which those public artworks are placed. If we take some example, the statue of liberty in New York USA, the Eiffel Tower of Paris in France, the great wall of china in Beijing and also Hotel Rwanda in Kigali Rwanda. These public artworks have extremely contributed to the urban environment of cities.

Public art has added huge value to the cultural, aesthetics and economic vitality of a community in which they are located. It is now put first as a principle of urban design that public art contributed to a community identity fosters public pride and a sense of belonging and enhanced the quality of life for its residents and foreigners who are considered as tourists.

What we have found out is that cities gain value through public art displays social, cultural and economic value. Art is setting a growing trend by being an important and recognized part of Rwandan public history and our evolving culture. It adds meaning to our cities and create uniqueness to our communities and neighborhoods, it reflects who we are and what we like to surround ourselves with. Public Art is accessible for everyone, it provides a bridge between the past, present and the near future, and it is the mirror image of its community, an intersection between discipline and ideas. Public ART is truly for everyone, even if some don't pay any attention to it, it is embedded in their way they think, feel and act.

### **Findings**

Kigali Cultural Village is one of tourism development projects located in Kigali city center. A traditional market and public space where local artisans & food vendors exhibit and trade their goods, the Kigali Cultural Village also hosts events, workshops, festivals and music. The village was opened in October 2010 featuring a theater, an amphitheater, libraries, art galleries, a heritage center, museums, and academic facilities all of these marking the first stage of completion. Surrounding these buildings are retail outlets, coffee shops, museum facilities, and market areas all designed to embody the historic theme of Rwanda, which also underlies the concept of the village. Thus, this cultural village has developed into a major tourist terminus in Kigali as visitors seek out art and artistic performances there. Indeed, average daily visitor counts exceed thousands of visitors especially people from Asia, Europe America and western Africa. According to researchers, most visitors to Kigali Cultural Village rate it their second most visited urban space after the Ethnographic Museum, also known as the National Museum, houses perhaps the finest ethnographic collection in East Africa.

This space involves various users, children among them. The users represent different socio-economic divisions and cultural backgrounds and include native residents. The space is designed to accommodate multiple users, including those interested in walking, sitting, relaxing, beach viewing, partaking in and accommodating traditional wedding ceremonies, eating, and, most importantly, learning about culture and arts through art exhibitions.



## **Observation**

Various types of public art can be found in Kigali, and each significantly affects people's interactions. Kigali features various contemporary art pieces alongside its traditional Rwandan architecture. The association of contemporary art and imitation of cultural images makes the landscape unique and attractive to tourists.

Public monuments arise from the desire to openly celebrate individuals or important events. They can be statues or landscapes, and their identification is largely undisputed. These works are part of the official historical record and heritage of public places.

A piece of artwork depends as much on its landscape as on its material, because an art installation must be an integral part of its physical context. As described by Serra, a piece of artwork can distinguish between east and west and provide humans a way of measuring their relation to nature. Like feature events in public places, works of art as feature objects may be integrated or simply inserted into public spaces. Moreover, they may be intimate artistic expressions or publicly accessible statements. Perhaps their meaning most frequently arises in the context of their references to viewers' backgrounds. Conclusions and discussion Because public art is both unique and visually distinctive, it can take on a symbolic role in establishing a city's identifiability and legibility, especially when it is designed and created in ways that are consistent with its surrounding area and site. It can also improve a city's energy while increasing the place attachment and sense of security that originate from an understanding of familiar elements, and it can intensify social interactions by establishing a connection with citizens and concealing the place in citizens' awareness.

According to the reviewed literature, public art is much more than art works placed in a public area to enhance the environment, which is what it is understood to be by many users; instead, it is a tool that participates in urban development and addresses urban issues. For example, the sculpture located at the roundabout of Sonatube in Kigali city became a current form of public art in Rwanda because it is relatively accessible to the people and gives visitors and all passengers the feeling that they are helping beautify the area.

Participation has been considered valuable in development theories because it is an important part of community development and is considered a key element of enablement. However, the decision to participate in environment-related activities such as public art usually depends on how the citizens perceive the art itself and how they perceive the effect of the art on their development and environment.

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