

Research Paper

# Public Art as a Tool for Urban Resilience through Accelerated Social Capital; a Meta-Analysis on Lyari and Madrid

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## Abstract

*This research seeks to broaden the understanding of the relationship between social capital and urban resilient neighbourhoods that results from the collaborative engagement of citizens in the creation of public art. This study particularly focuses on those areas that have already been immunocompromised by factors, such as violence, political disorder, financial hardships, etc. For the purpose of this paper, attention will be placed on the civic engagements in the town of Lyari in Karachi, Pakistan and a comparison will be drawn across the Imagina Madrid program, an initiative of the Madrid City Council's Department of Culture. A qualitative meta-analysis of the secondary data available on Lyari and Madrid will be carried out and it will take the form of comparative analysis informed by the exploration of the aforementioned communities, both, in terms of the processes and the context. Drawing on social capital's theoretical basis as its framework, particularly its network-based approach and within that the concept of bonding social capital, this paper recognizes public art as an antecedent to the urban resilience of neighbourhoods and communities. By examining the effects of the presence of open cultural infrastructures and the involvement of citizens in advocacy initiatives through participatory artistic expression in Lyari and Madrid, this study explores the intersection of public art, urban resilience, and social capital. This study has twofold aims: to identify the role of public art in augmenting social capital and laying down the framework for urban resilience; and to compare participatory art approaches in Madrid and Lyari in light of their context, history, and message strategies to recognize their adaptive capacities and the extent of social capital that binds the communities together for social action movements. The concept of urban regeneration will be a central point, which is contingent on the extent of social capital that exists within a community of practice. The qualitative meta-analysis reveals that social cohesion and trust unfold from people's engagement with public art, resulting in the acceleration of social capital that is ultimately tied to building community resilience. Contemporary modes of civic engagement and participation in urban processes are an efficient way to generate a sense of belonging, especially in the co-creation of public art in shared spaces.*

## Keywords

*Bonding Social Capital, Public Art, Urban Resilience, Social Practice Placemaking, Disadvantaged Neighborhoods*

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## 1. Introduction

The social capital phenomenon has stirred an increased consciousness among scholars, thinkers, and researchers regarding its implications in a multitude of practical domains. Contemporary modes of civic engagement and participation in urban processes are an efficient way to generate a sense of belonging, especially in the co-creation of public art in shared spaces. This reformulates the social fabric to take the community ownership to the next level while stimulating change within this arena (Courage, 2017).

Originating from Lefebvre's idea of "right to the city" (1968), it is implied that public spaces of practices are crucial to the spatial justice realm (Robazza, 2020). Following through this narrative, David Harvey (2003) goes on to postulate this idea further by emphasizing the freedom of the city inhabitants to participate in the construction and reconstruction of the urban spaces (Robazza, 2020).

The repercussions of any environmental or economic crisis puts the adaptability of a community under interrogation. The resilience of the community emerges as a key factor to curtail any foreseeable or unprecedented detrimental circumstances, the absence of which makes the community susceptible to any deleterious events. (Feinberg et al., 2020)

This paper employs social capital's theoretical basis as its framework, particularly its network-based approach and within that the concept of bonding social capital, in order to explore public art as an antecedent to the urban resilience of neighborhoods and communities. This paper will first pan out the theoretical concepts, then shed light on some already existing literature. Further to that, the paper will elaborate on the examples of art practices found in Lyari and Madrid. These practices will be discussed in the illumination of the concept of placemaking.

This study has twofold aims: to identify the role of public art in augmenting social capital; and to compare participatory art approaches in Madrid and Lyari in light of their context, history, and message strategies to recognize their adaptive capacities and the extent of social capital that binds the communities together for social action movements.

## 2. Theoretical Framework – Concept and Theories

The theoretical framework that will govern this study will be the networks view of social capital. Within this perspective, the study will particularly focus on bonding social capital theory. Bonding social capital is recognized as "strong intracommunity ties that give families and communities a sense of identity and common purpose" (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000, p.230). It is in Bowling Alone (2000), Putnam's classical work on civic engagement, that the bridging and bonding concepts of social capital theory emerge. According to Putnam, the bonding social capital is localized within a community, thereby, bracing up the homogeneity through an inward-looking perspective. It boosts the harmony among people who belong to the same background and culture (Quinn and Wilks, 2013, p.24). Spatially, bonding social capital would exist as the connections within a village, a neighborhood, or a specific group of people where there is a strong affinity towards each other, clue to which they can kickstart collaborative actions, especially for those that come from a vulnerable socio-economic background. (Claridge, 2018, p.1-3)

Events causing social disintegration have played a huge role in creating new urban realities (Miles, 2013). Relevant to this are those collaborative practices that enhance social capital, and this research sheds light on one of them, namely participatory art. This study will traverse through the *Imagina Madrid* Program and the creative expression found in the Town of Lyari in Karachi to understand how linking social capital is instrumental in advancing civic engagement to address political disorder or vulnerability through the

creation of public art that ultimately leads to increased urban resilience and contributes towards establishing adaptive capacity in citizens by enhancing cultural production.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Social Capital Provision in Areas of Conflict

Literature corroborates the fact that festivals can augment social cohesion across the diverse group of social actors, not just among the attendees but also among the organizers (Devine and Quinn, 2019). Looking at it from a spatial perspective, festivals impart a certain distinctiveness to the cityscape and to its inhabitants, influencing the “use of space” and constructing “an atmosphere of potentials” (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011 and Pløger, 2010, p.853 in Devine and Quinn, 2019).

According to a study conducted by Quinn and Wilks (2013) to assess the social impact of festivals and investigate their part in stimulating social interactions, it was evidently deduced that at the core of the festival activities lie a great deal of bonding social capital, especially found to be widespread amongst family and friend circles. The study targeted two separate festivals: the Waterside festival in Milton Keynes, England, and the Temple Bar Trad Fest in Dublin, Ireland. From both these settings, qualitative data was collected from a varying combination of stakeholders. Participant interviews maintained that most of the attendees of these two festivals adopted a “socially connected” attitude throughout the festival experience. Insights from the findings revealed that a lot of attendees had their friend circles join the celebrations too either as a result of a pre-planned schedule or simply relying on former experiences of the same group attending festivals, thus, assuming the pattern to repeat again. That, in turn, opened the window to reinforce the bonding social capital with familiar acquaintances (Quinn and Wilks, 2013). The premise of this study was to enquire into the question of how social capital functions across the spectrum constituting various actors.

#### 3.2. Scope of Public Art

Within the scope of public art, an eminent position is held by the social public art domain by means of which identified social issues are tackled in a creative and innovative manner in order to bring about a transformative change (Tehranizadeh and Dawei 2019, p.62). Contrary to the general convention, public art has transformed and broadened its functionality while also adding onto the list of the different form in which it can materialise. It partakes in regulating the built environment of the society while simultaneously guiding the social interactions therein (Misni and Suran, 2018, p.49). Beckman, a painter, describes public art as an avenue to express oneself and unleash the creative essence of the soul (Misni and Suran, 2018, p.49). Contrariwise, Hall and Robertson (2001) trace public art to complement the sense of civic identity while also intercepting the issue of social exclusion, thus, catalysing a social reform (Misni and Suran, 2018 p.49). Further to that, Sharp and et al. (2005) maintain that public art is, in truth, something with purpose and that purpose goes beyond just a visual exhibit; its fundamental objective is to engross the spectators in a meaningful encounter. Above all, it is a physical or imagined space where people can explore their identities and connect to their roots, culture, environment (Misni and Suran, 2018, p.49).

#### 3.3. Community Resilience

The social resilience of a society is marked by three chief aspects: (i) adaptability and learning; (ii) averting disruptions and conflict; and (iii) recovery and reclamation from the episode/s of physical, economic, and social strain (Wilson, 2015, p. 232). The general conjecture is that there are 4 different



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kinds of adaptive capacities that blend in together to attain community resilience and escalate it for the larger aspiration of the wellness of the population (Vårheim, 2009). These 4 adaptive capacities are inclusive of economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence (Norris et al. 2008). Aldrich (2012) contends that instead of a momentous economic thrust, government aid, or the incidence of lesser disruption, it is admittedly the presence of a significant amount of social capital that expedites the way for recovery and allows for a plausibly systemized response for the survivors (Vårheim, 2009).

Social practice placemaking is primarily an amalgamation of the tenets of social practice art and placemaking itself. This phenomenon breaks itself free from the constraints of the built structure in favor of the broad social outcomes of the art. As a relational art practice, the placemaking process pertains strongly to human connections within the realm of the public space; it looks at the intersection of the social context with the urban space and the participatory involvement of the community in bridging this intersection (Courage, 2017, p.8). This paves way for initiating a dialogue at the individual and collective levels be it for personal affairs, social issues, or political inclinations (Courage, 2017, p.8).

## 4. Case Study - Lyari

### 4.1. Area Context

Lyari is a multi-ethnic district located in the Southern part of Karachi. It has been predisposed to a decade of violence and conflict with a lot of actors involved, including criminal gangs, political parties, and the security forces. The perpetually dwindling atmosphere of hostility enfeebled the urban landscape. Seemingly appearing as a localized conflict, it extends beyond the geographical expanse, infiltrating into national and regional boundaries (Kirmani, 2015, p.1). Drug trafficking and smuggling of weapons across the border are just some key factors contributing to it, especially as a result of the Afghan war that made Lyari the epicenter of various criminal groups. (Kirmani, 2015, p.7)

The population of Lyari is an outcome of a long trail of migration. It is an ethnically and religiously diverse area ranging from *Katchchhis*, Sindhis, Baloch, and Muhajirs (Kirmani, 2015, p.3). Regardless of its strategic location on the map of Karachi with close proximity to the port and markets, Lyari has suffered through a derelict of infrastructural development and welfare reforms (Kirmani, 2015, p.4). The land extortion and *bhatta* mafia channeled by the countless criminal gangs continued to escalate and instill fear among the residents.

The years 2004 to 2008 saw an aggressive gang war between these leading criminal groups for the sake of acquiring supremacy over the criminal operations in Lyari. From 2010 to 2011, another episode of violence swept across the city taking the lives of hundreds of people. Following the events of 2011, a seven-day operation was announced in 2012 in Lyari. The local public in that vicinity endured great unrest and disorder. (Kirmani, 2015, p.8-9)

The operation killed 45 people, some of which were the residents. (Hashim 2012). In 2013, another political fissure was created and a very gruesome war transpired that intensified the bombings and target killings leading to innumerable casualties. It got so far that involving the paramilitary troops became the need of the hour; the rangers started rolling out security operations to eradicate the criminal groups, in particular the Lyari gangs. (Kirmani, 2015, p.10)

## 4.2. Public Art in Lyari

### *Mehr Ghar*

The gang wars and bloodshed that sailed through Lyari were indeed a haunting episode for years, however, this did not prevent some beautiful and innovative brains to backpedal at the same route. Alternatively, these humans joined forces to prepare grounds for the inauguration of a safe space in the vicinity - commonly called by the name of Mehr Ghar and referred to as the T2F of Lyari. Mehr Ghar was established primarily for the purpose of allowing a safe recreational platform for those youth who experienced years of trauma. The co-founder of this initiative highlighted the need for this place by asserting that "When we started our social work, we knew there was an absence of a place where we could gather different communities under one roof." Therefore, Mehr Ghar is a space that is carefully designed for the interaction of the community, in particular the youth, with public art forms like music, open mics, celebrations, dialogue, and poetry. (Ali and Salim, 2021)

### *The Happy Street*

Situated in the Baghdadi Lane no 10., the vibrant, spirited, and multicolored Happy Street (also known by its local name: the Baghdadi Gali) in Lyari is a project executed by The Kiran Foundation in 2017. It is a well-kept street that has been liberated from all garbage and clutter. (Naz, 2017). A few years prior to the renovation of this street, the Kiran Foundation established a library on this very lane (The Karachi Walla, 2017). Painted in the shades of the 7 colors of the rainbow, the buildings and houses that stand on this street extend a very lively vibe to the passersby, community members, and especially children, who were essentially the target audience of this project (Chughtai, 2018).

The Kiran Foundation has pulled off a fantastic maneuver to nurture a sense of community and belonging among the inhabitants of the area. The Baghdadi Gali is indeed a case in point as to how public art and design can influence the quality of life of people and bring them together. (Chughtai, 2018)

### *Lyari and Rap*

The budding rapper of Lyari, Mohammed Omer, describes Lyari in the following words: "Lyari was a notorious place because of the gangs and the war. It was almost impossible for outsiders to even think about entering." (Geo, 2019) Damaging the socio-cultural milieu of the area, these gang wars were responsible for the closure of businesses and educational institutions, depriving the younger generation of the most useful asset in life and instead infusing fear in their hearts. After the paramilitary operations of 2013, the violence was scaled down and in turn, steered the community towards an era of social practice placemaking. In the domain of sports, top-notch footballers and boxers appeared on the scene. Within the scope of music, a rapidly emerging group of rappers was identified to be ascending and making waves on social media across the country. (Geo, 2019)

Lyari Underground, a group of young, talented rappers went viral in 2017 with their song titled "The Players of Lyari" - a song dedicated to the passion for football that can be found in the locality and a protest against those institutions that have long forsaken this potential. A foremost reason why the rappers of Lyari caught the attention of the wider community was the assimilation of their lived experiences in the lyrics. Qammar Anwar Baloch, a producer belonging to the alleys of Lyari marks this distinction by saying, "in other cities and provinces, there's rap but it's mostly about beautiful women and luxury cars. We are showing reality." (Geo, 2019)

## 5. Case Study - Madrid

### 5.1. Area Context

In 2004, Madrid, the capital of Spain and one of the largest cities, encountered a brutally malicious terrorist attack. These attacks were targeted on the commuter trains operational in the city and came to be known as the 'Madrid train bombings.' (Ray, 2010) As many as 10 bomb blasts were reported on four different trains that were in close proximity to the Atocha Station which is centrally located in the city (Ray, 2010) during the peak morning (History, 2010). Other targeted locations were the Santa Eugenia and El Pozo stations alongside the surrounding area of T llez (Boiling et al, 2007, p.26). According to records, a total of 20 trains were operating at the time the bombing happened. (Boiling et al, 2007, p.26). It can be hypothesized that these bombings were intensively pre-planned and calculated since they transpired merely three days prior to the general elections of Spain. Indefinitely, they did have a noticeable impact on the political arena of the country. (Ray, 2010) With over 1800 casualties and the loss of 191 lives, these attacks were inordinately considered to be the most pernicious events occurring on the map of Europe since the year 1998, when the Lockerbie bombing took place. (History, 2010)

The government of Spain was quick to allege the ETA for being the brainchildren of this terrorist attack. ETA was a separatist organization that had been previously involved in practices of war and terror for over 3 decades at the cost of human lives. The day after the bombings, there was an influx of protests across the country to resist the forces of conflict and to pay homage to the victims who lost their lives and were injured. But later on, the police investigations into the case revealed the involvement of al-Qaeda (Ray, 2010). The political setting was extremely disturbed and also the sense of insecurity heightened in the community. (Boiling et al, 2007, p.26)

### 5.2. Public Art in Madrid

Founded in 2007, Intermediae was dedicated as a space for artistic practices that were deeply embedded within the social fabric. Thereafter, it has adorned the presence of a leading cultural avenue located in Madrid and set an exemplar, both at the local and international level, in the sphere of community development that incorporates artistic and cultural values in its framework. (Intermediae, 2021 in Hurtig, 2021).

It was the Intermediae-Matadero that engineered the Imagina Madrid program in support of the Culture Department of the City Council (Intermediae, 2017). As a public art program (Hurtig, 2021), it voyages on a journey to introduce unique art forms and interventions in the public space and simultaneously, stimulates the co-creation practices among the community. (Intermediae, 2017) An important aspect of the program is the partnership between residents and artists to improve the urban infrastructure and use of space. (Imagina Madrid, 2021 in Hurtig, 2021)

The guiding principles that have allowed for the growth and expansion of this program are (i) scouting for urban regeneration through art; (ii) establishing and promoting effective interaction modes between the inhabitants, the artist community, and the city administration; and (iii) bringing about a reform in the placemaking policy structures by co-creation practices. (Soundcloud Imagina Madrid, 2018 in Hurtig, 2021)

Kooper and Ensintonia in the districts of Vallecas and Argenzuela respectively are examples of the projects executed under the umbrella of the Imagina Madrid Program (Intermediae, 2017)

**Kooper**

The public space targeted for this intervention were the Miradores in Palomeras Bajas. The severely under-utilised space of the Miradores was seen as an opportunity for public engagement and to rejuvenate the spirit in the area. What was suggested was that the artists would organise an opera for the communities existing there and facilitate them to voice their issues through this channel. Otherwise considered as an elite indulgence, the opera infiltrated into the working-class settings of Miradores and also employed creative tools, such as, dancing, drama, and different makeovers. (Intermediae, 2017 and Hurtig, 2021)

**Ensintonia**

The public space targeted for this intervention was the Rutilio Gacis Park. It was potentially seen as the locus of social bonding, however, the interaction between the users of the space and the residents in the locality was nonexistent. As a result, the park was revived as a public space for the organisation of cultural events that would ultimately push the buttons of exchange and dialogue within the community. Additionally, the central stakeholders of this project were identified as families and children in particular. (Intermediae, 2017 and Hurtig, 2021)

**6. Analysis**

It can be rightfully said that the notion of social capital becomes a very appropriate tool to investigate matters of social cohesion, inclusion in a community, and their expanding engagement with the arts. Putnam's outlook regarding the utility of arts in order to proliferate the mutual trust, reciprocity, and cooperation that can unite diverse groups of people to enhance their wellness has also piqued the curiosity of American and British politicians. The general sense of providing voluntary services and extending philanthropic acts in a community is what Putnam claims to be a measure of social capital and he goes on further to contend the usefulness of art events in overcoming fences between people in favor of fostering a network growth among them. (Quinn and Wilks, 2013, p.22-23)

The argument drawn from the aforementioned case studies is that both the contexts had a history of violence and were discriminated against in one way or the other or pushed towards the periphery. Thus, it gave rise to the initiation of those socio-cultural interventions that were to increase the bonding social capital of the stakeholders involved and public art surfaced as a vital tool to do so. Waves of conflict, violence, and discordance in any social scenario have sparked and flowered forms of creativity that result from the shared collective trauma of the community within (Miles, 2013). Regardless of the onomatology of these forms of creativity, be it referred to as collaborative art, participatory art, co-creation, or placemaking practices, (Bishop, 2013) they all converge towards the attainment of social cohesion (Hurtig, 2021).

The premise of public art lies in the participation of members of a community and emphasizes greatly the process that is undertaken, not the final product (Hurtig, 2021). Whether the process is all-inclusive and receptive to diverse groups is determined by the process (Sharp et al, 2005). Projects of art practices localized within a community have greater social and cultural value instead of economic outcomes (Hurtig, 2021). The thought that public art has overwhelmingly contributed to developing harmony among various actors to work towards a mutual cause and obtain increasing social capital has been in circulation among many thinkers and researchers and has begun to settle very well.

## 7. Conclusion

Social capital theorists, like Putnam, have time and again claimed that for a society to prosper, the vital elements of trust, reciprocity and networks should be present that produce benefits for the individual and the collective, at large. The case studies and the literature explored in this paper presented a glimpse into the function those artistic interventions have on community development in a sustained manner. These interventions can range from cultural celebrations to music circles, from storytelling to play, and many more. On a very critical note, the paper explored real-time examples of the process of transformation of vulnerable neighborhoods, not just in terms of their built environment but also in terms of their perception and identity. Practices of art in public spaces have imparted agency to the members of society and have gone to great lengths to ensure their involvement in the decision-making processes that take part in the urban space. Above all, it has abundantly contributed to the proliferation of bonding social capital through networking which has conclusively boosted urban resilience.

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