

From Aesthetics to Functionality:

Planning for Public Art in Shaping Helsinki's Inclusive Public Spaces – A Case Study of the Pasila Neighborhood

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Abstract

Public art is a key issue in urban planning and design as impacts on quality of everyday life. These impacts include enhancing aesthetics, fostering social cohesion, reflecting cultural identity, and offering functional and educational benefits.

This study analyses the multi-dimensional impact of public art on public spaces through a case study of Helsinki's Pasila neighbourhood. Pasila's diverse cultural background, strong institutional support and its record as an art make it the most important case study to consider public art impacts on public spaces.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, including field observations, interviews with urban planners, analysis of public art contents and public space usage by people. In a deep observation, we have study whole urban sculptures and murals in Pasila which integrates art into pedestrian routes and enrich urban landscape.

The results demonstrates that these elements enhance wayfinding, promote cultural engagement, and encourage physical activity, making public spaces visually appealing.

Despite these benefits, some critics highlight a lack of community representation in Pasila's public art. It seems that residents' voices are insufficiently reflected in both the creation and content of artworks. In addition, there are concerns about an institutional gap between the Helsinki Art Museum (HAM), Urban Art Association and the City of Helsinki in planning for public art.

In summary, this study emphasizes on the role of public art in enhancing Pasila's aesthetic appeal while highlighting its limitations in fostering social inclusivity. The findings show a gap in community engagement, where local voices, especially from diverse cultural backgrounds, are underrepresented in public art projects through the process of artwork's creation and in their content. To address Pasila's multicultural identity, future public art development should focus on participatory and inclusive practices. This approach would enable public art to serve not only as visual enrichment but also as a meaningful tool for community cohesion and cultural representation.

Keywords

Public Art, Multicultural Neighbourhoods, Public Space Quality, Community engagement, Pasila neighborhood

1. Introduction

Regarding ongoing urban challenges worldwide, public art planning has been integrated into cultural policies to address these issues and enhance the quality of urban public spaces. A critical point in this process is how we perceive public art. This perception can result in either a purely visual impact of public art on public spaces or, in a broader view, can foster social interaction and community engagement, promoting greater social cohesion. This paper focuses on the broader perspective, considering public art within social dynamics.

From this point of view, public art, as defined by Luo et al. (2022), serves as a shared civic element that adapts over time to address social challenges. It prioritizes public engagement and the common good, creating spaces where people feel a sense of belonging and see reflections of themselves, fostering inclusion and community identity (Aharon-Gutman, 2017; Sharp et al., 2005). Kwon (2002) supports integrating public art with urban development to align with its social and spatial context, creating accessible and collective spaces for interaction. Public art's participatory nature often brings diverse voices into the creative process, giving marginalized communities a platform within urban spaces (Minty, 2005). Caris and Cowell (2016) view it as "situation art," emphasizing democratic engagement, while Phillips (1989) stresses that its "publicness" arises from its interaction with social issues, cultural patterns, and community life.

Promoting social cohesion and cultural vibrancy (Sharp et al., 2005), enhancing aesthetics, fostering cultural engagement and social cohesion. (Luo et al., 2022; Zhe & Uyttenhove, 2018) are among those impacts that public art might have on urban spaces. By welcoming cultural diversity and community identity, public art can create inclusive public spaces. (Hall & Robertson, 2001; Cartiere, 2016). Regarding Public art's interdisciplinary nature, Zebracki et al. (2017) has noted that public art has the potential to reflect socio-economic shifts and foster collective identities within public spaces. Public art can act as a dynamic platform that engages communities, challenges dominant narratives, and fosters dialogue (Guazon, 2013; Bengtsen, 2013; Szőke & Parizeau, 2019). It can influence the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of urban spaces, transforming them into livable cultural landscapes. (Mark & Pederick, 2010; Pérez et al., 2022).

Recent academic discourse concentrates on not well-discovered aspects of public art, particularly around publicness, civic participation, and the balance between community benefit and privatization (Ehrenfeucht, 2014). Collective experiences in public spaces would be assumed because of public art's integration into cities (Michels & Steyaert, 2016). Both curated and spontaneous public art can change public spaces through engaging communities in dialogue, enhancing cohesion and fostering identity (Raposo, 2022; Pollock & Paddison, 2014; Gagliardi, 2020). The impact of public art on social dynamics and urban regeneration has been pursued by some scholars emphasizing its potential as a tool for community innovation and cultural expression (Strom, 2020).

A review of current literature shows that public art is widely studied in terms of aesthetic, social, and economic benefits. There is a significant gap in the current literature, however, concerning respective vitality and full-course integrations into urban planning and design. Moreover, there are not enough empirical studies to prove that public art can affect the functional inclusiveness of public spaces. Questions remain about its effectiveness in creating accessible and welcoming spaces for people of diverse backgrounds. Another critique is related to the absence of community involvement in the process of planning and placement of public art. A disconnect between the artworks and the communities using public spaces could be assumed as a result of this absence. This lack of local engagement and neglecting the potential for art to shape a shared sense of place can result in spaces that feel imposed rather than inclusive. Regarding the gaps mentioned above,

this study aims to share a critical perspective of public art's influence in Helsinki's Pasila neighborhood. This kind of critic focuses on the essential need for community engagement in the process and procedure of planning for public art to resonate with and benefit the local people.

2. Literature review

Although the effects of public art on public spaces have been at the center of current literature, but a holistic view of these effects has not presented well. The role of public art in the aesthetic dimensions of public spaces, social interaction, placemaking, and urban renewal has been emphasized in many studies of current knowledge. On the contrary, its role in community engagement, inclusivity, and social commentary has not been fully explored.

Public art plays a vital role in affecting the public spaces to better serve their function, transforming them into inviting, engaging environments that contribute to community health and cultural identity. Environmentally integrated public arts further enhance the aesthetic appeal of places by fitting in with their natural surroundings. These works are meant to have long-term artistic value and to meet the requirements of environmental design (Zhe & Uyttenhove, 2018; Kwon, 2002). Public art is critical in defining unique spatial identities and producing places of experience (Evans, 2005; Ernwein & Matthey, 2019). The performative public art discussed by Massey and Rose (2003) and Zebracki (2015) provides visitors with an opportunity to touch it, and thus cultivation of their physical attributes in various ways induces unique emotional responses. This helps give rise to community engagement.

Public art, especially sculptures and other prominent installations, plays a major role in promoting social interaction within public space by providing focal points for conversation and engagement. Such works improve the social life of public spaces by making areas such as plazas more attractive and usable, establishing lively social environments where people congregate for leisure activities. (Abdulkarim & Nasar, 2014) At the same time, as larger groups of individuals are encouraged actively to use these public spaces, organizing themselves into loose yet effective organizational formations, the meaning that they attach to them can thus be nurtured in one way or another.

Public art also creates diverse spaces—whether material, virtual, or imagined—where individuals can ponder communal life and the usage of public places fostering sense of belonging. In this infinitely important and fundamentally necessary message to the world at large, some scholars have been especially outspoken (Aharon-Gutman, 2017; Sharp et al., 2005).

Public art contributes to place-making by transforming urban spaces and reshaping perceptions. It often takes place in areas associated with criminality and turning them into cultural and artistic hubs that improve public space inclusivity (Campos, 2020). By integrating site-specific elements, public art strengthens social and physical environments, aligning with trends in creative placemaking where various sectors collaborate to build neighborhood identities around arts and cultural activities, fostering local business viability and safety (Kwon, 2002; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). The concept of creative placemaking places a special emphasis on how public art can help create neighborhood character, support local markets and materials businesses, and ensure safety (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).

Public art is an essential factor in urban renewal. By redefining public spaces and developing them into local public spheres, it benefits communications between people and contributes to urban regeneration by creating culture and sense of place. To cite Aharon-Gutman (2017): public art can renovate urban environments but is also likely to involve conflicts, and in politically charged

contexts may bring these to the very fore. This sentiment points to the roots of tension existing in art and response by the public. Legalizing street art can also make cities more vigorous and change the direction of public space usage in a positive way (Chang, 2018). Mathews (2010) suggests that as public art is supportive of community building and economic development, it can further reinforce capital control by providing authorities with an opportunity to serve their own interests as well. Because of this dual potential within urban environments, public art requires credence as well as caution.

Public art provides a powerful vehicle for social and political criticism. The areas it creates are inclusive spaces in which memory, cultural background, and public opinion come together. Consequently, public art can both deal with societal divides and rejection, as a form of resistance, social norms and urban control (Aharon-Gutman, 2017; Villa, 1992; Kane, 2009). It is during the course of reflecting on issues such as in/exclusion that public art enters into a dialogue with the city, thereby giving space for marginalized individuals to participate in "everyday politics" and assert their identity in the public sphere (Kearns et al., 2020; Guazon, 2013; Youkhana, 2014).

Public art not only sustains public dialogue but also democratizes urban space by involving inhabitants in artistic processes, thus creating a sphere that is both participatory and inclusive (Radice, 2018; Wright, 2018; Hall, 2007). By depicting the identity and dreams of a community, public art keeps public spaces alive, fostering pride and a sense of ownership among residents (Evans, 2005; Lees & Melhuish, 2015).

On top of promoting engagement, public art can also enhance social inclusivity by providing a living platform where people in the community come together and perform activities together. Thus, at the same time as promoting social cohesion through shared experience and common memory banks can be established where people coexist in peace. (Fransberg et al., 2023; Hedegaard, 2014) Participatory art forms like graffiti and street art involve the public in creating and asserting their own identities. Other examples are the urban knitting project, which creates links among neighbors and breeds (Farinosi & Fortunati, 2018); and installations that help consolidate cross-community relationships and reconcile antagonistic groups (Downey & Sherry, 2022). Public art also generates "micropublics," which can serve as the bearers of meaningful dialogues bringing societal issues to the fore and promoting inclusion through interaction (Zebracki & Bekker, 2018; Malachowski, 2022). Public art thus becomes a form of emotionally compelling media through these various forms of engagement, a way where people in the city express, commemorate, and stand together by turns the common values. (Nguyen, 2019).

As a final note on the potential impacts of public art we can say it has close links to the quality of the public sphere; through creativity and artistic expression, it is able to foster inclusion, democratic citizenship, and communal involvement combined. When public art involves whole communities in the creative process, it reflects society even better and becomes invigorated with the site, causing it to impact the urban fabric all of a sudden (Caris & Cowell, 2016; Chang, 2008). It also enables citizens to assert their "right to the city" and address social problems (Pinder, 2005; Gartus et al., 2015). The co-productive nature of public art can create both ownership and belonging, not only endowing individuals with a sense of identity but also developing new types of urban citizenship whose development can be seen in street art (Lee, 2013; Palmer, 2018).

Therefore, public art's all-embracing nature not only contributes to the aesthetic enhancement of urban spaces but also benefits them socially by promoting interaction, dialogue, and an ebullient communal life. Despite references in the current literature to the role of public art in community engagement and inclusiveness in urban public spaces, few studies present this potential based on evidence-based research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study area

Pasila occupies a unique position in the Helsinki region, linking residential areas, commercial zones, and new urban districts as a transitional area. Its excellent location, linked to a major rail station, has elevated it into a daily waypoint for those on business or social visits in town, as well as those coming and going. Over the previous 25 years, improved accessibility and its modernist architectural style have made it an ideal site for urban art. As a result, Pasila's East has become a synonym of the coming art district. (Fig 1, 2 & 3)

Pasila is renowned as a unique blend of different peoples, languages, and lifestyles that has produced its incredibly multicultural atmosphere. With its vast walls of mid-century concrete, Pasila has developed into a leisurely downtown collection of murals and artistic installations. It emphasizes grand-scale effects that serve as architectural signatures for viewers to enjoy from pedestrian bridges on either side for a long distance. The neighborhood has been under renewal, with new mixed-use projects such as Mall of Tripla complex. Art in public places like Pasila has played a strategic role in creating the flavor of the district, moving it from being just a place people change trains to one where they live and work.

Now Pasila is at last becoming a dynamic and living cultural center both for the people who live there every day as well as those who come into it from other areas. There are such organizations as Helsinki Urban Art and Helsinki Art Museum (HAM), which carry out projects to bring art out of traditional galleries and place it directly in everyday places. This will provide the people with an experiential and accessible cultural opportunity that is interactive, personal, and enjoyable. The variety of artworks found in Pasila—everything from outdoor murals to statues and delicate lighting installations—means that it stands as a space encompassing numerous artistic voices.

East-Pasila's transformation into an art district also introduces Helsinki's cultural vision to integrate art into public spaces. It is also would be a sign of a forward-looking approach to urban design. This district represents the city's commitment to creativity within urban contexts and introducing Helsinki's reputation as an innovative cultural capital.

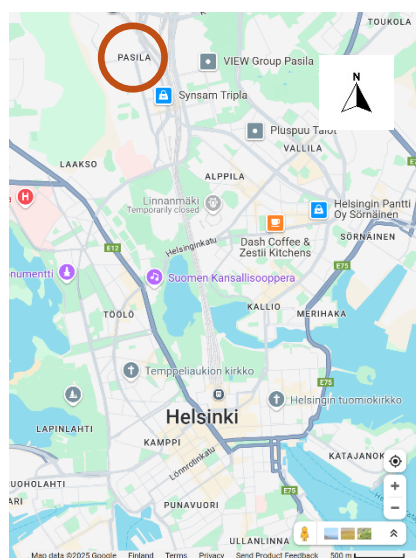


Figure 1: Psaila's location in Helsinki,
Google Map, 2025



Figure 2: location of artwork in East-Pasila
(Helsinki Urban Art Association, 2024)

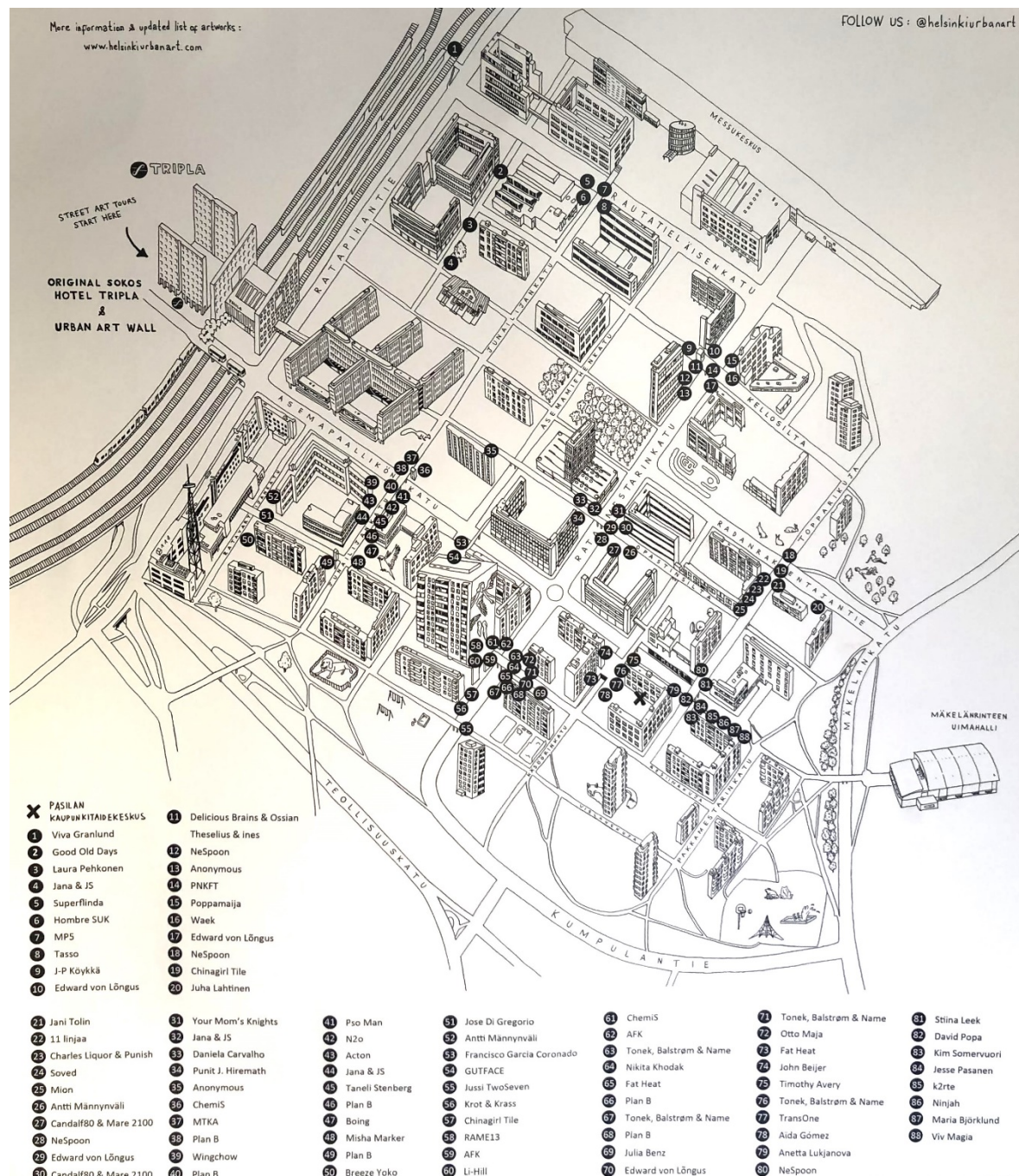


Figure 3 : spatial distribution of artworks (Helsinki Urban Art Association, 2024)

3.2. Methods

To carry out this study, we have combined field observations and structured interviews to analyze the role of public art in shaping inclusive public spaces within the Pasila neighborhood. We conducted systematic observations in Pasila to photograph its public art installations and content-analyze them for spatial interaction with the environment. The focus of the research lay on where artworks were sited in relation to the environment, how they melded with that physical environment, and what architecture they contained/deferred to, as well as content that reflects the diversities of culture in the neighborhood itself.

We paid particular attention to people's interactions with such public art—whether they looked at it quietly, came together socially to discuss it, or even played around nearby installations themselves. In doing so, we were able to capture changing patterns of engagement over time and how much time a person spent near the various installations. This observation data shows the subtle as well as more manifest ways that public art can help create an inclusive space where everyone feels like they belong. It also shows how residency is transformed and touches on issues of human interaction in cities.

Interviews were conducted with a diverse range of urban professionals and artists. In the interviews, they were asked to voice their views on public art's impact on urban inclusiveness, as well as its aesthetic and social functions.

The specific questions asked are:

1. How do you evaluate the impact of public art in Pasila on the overall aesthetic and everyday life of the neighborhood?
2. Does it primarily enhance visual qualities, or does it have a broader impact on social interaction, community engagement, and urban tourism?
3. Do you think that Pasila's public art reflects the cultural diversity which is present within the neighborhood?
4. How do you judge Pasila's public art in terms of inclusive content and process of producing? Is the voice mainly or entirely those of minorities or local inhabitants contained in murals and installations? Please give reasons for your answer.
5. What kinds of obstacles do you see now, and how would you suggest future public art plans in Pasila to be more inclusive and better meet community needs?

4. Result and Discussion

The impact of public art in East Pasila demonstrates both its potential and limitations in fostering inclusiveness within urban spaces. This study's findings, supported by field observations and expert interviews, indicate that while public art contributes to East Pasila's visual landscape, its role in cultivating a socially inclusive public realm remains constrained.

Field observations reveal that East Pasila's public art, primarily mural and graffiti-based works, is positioned in areas initially perceived as neglected or less welcoming. These artworks, placed along key pedestrian paths and transitional gateways, succeed in enlivening these spaces, providing a raw and organic aesthetic that resonates with East Pasila's diverse, urban character. This visually compelling environment invites exploration and engagement, contributing meaningfully to social interaction. However, despite these benefits, the inclusiveness of public spaces remains limited, as the artworks often lack direct input from the local community in their conceptualization. Consequently, these installations do not fully capture the voices and identities of East Pasila's residents.

Expert interviews further underscored the limitations in cultural representation within East Pasila's public art. While the artworks occasionally reference multicultural themes, their expression remains conventional and predictable, lacking spontaneity and local character typical of authentic street art. Experts observed that many of the artworks are generic commissions with limited site-specific engagement, reducing their impact and potential to serve as meaningful expressions of East Pasila's cultural diversity. The absence of raw, interactive elements in these works diminishes

their potential for inclusivity, as they fail to embody the unique, layered cultural narratives of the neighborhood.

The inclusiveness of the creation process was also questioned. Interview insights suggest that many artworks were commissioned by external experts, with minimal engagement from local residents or minority voices. This top-down approach to public art curation has resulted in installations that, although visually appealing, lack resonance with the community's unique social fabric. Without mechanisms for community involvement in art selection and creation, these artworks fail to reflect the lived experiences of East Pasila's diverse population. This disconnect reflects a broader challenge in making public art more inclusive: the need for participatory approaches that center local perspectives and encourage representation from marginalized groups.



Figure 4: reflection of inclusiveness, artist: Superflinda (Finland)

The study also identified institutional and policy challenges in promoting inclusivity through public art in East Pasila. The existing framework tends to prioritize political correctness and aesthetic safety, often at the expense of artistic authenticity or social critique. Based on experts' viewpoints that East Pasila's public art tends toward beautification rather than embracing dialogical qualities necessary for better community engagement. Also, improving institutional coordination, particularly between the Helsinki Art Museum (HAM) and the City of Helsinki, is needed for future public art development.

5.Conclusion

To sum up, this study shows the importance of public art in creating inclusive public spaces in East Pasila, Helsinki, as well as the complexity of its role. Though public art has been instrumental in beautifying the aesthetic landscape of the neighborhood and is helping get its image as an art district, it has limited benefits at the social level. It shows how the practices of public art in East

Pasila have not reached the level of impact since the initiatives lack the common will of the community, which reduces the installations to merely aesthetic value and does not reflect the cultural diversity and the voices of the citizens. Prioritizing local perspectives, especially those of marginalized and minority groups, is the gist of participatory approaches in public art planning; therefore, filling this gap.

Future programs might put more emphasis on collaborative initiatives among artists, policymakers, and the community to bolster the message that public art can not only beautify but strengthen community ties and reflect the multicultural identity of the region. Such inclusive practices enable public art to do its work as a transformative social force while bringing a sense of belonging and ownership into East Pasila's urban landscape.

6. References

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