

REVITALIZING SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES THROUGH ART INTERVENTION: REACTIVATING PUBLIC SPACES

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Abstract: By 2050, 70% of the global population will reside in cities, making urban areas central to the future of global life. Currently, large cities have numerous advantages in resident welfare, job opportunities, and public spaces, attracting a large number of young people and ensuring urban vitality. However, this trend has diluted the populations of small and medium-sized cities, causing them to enter an ageing society earlier, and in some cases the risk of disappearing. In order to address this challenge, improving the quality of life of the inhabitants, revitalizing small and medium-sized cities, and rethinking the possibilities of 'activating' urban spaces and branding cities have become important research directions for urban policy makers, designers, and cross-disciplinary collaborations. Artistic interventions are an innovative strategy for the revitalization of small and medium-sized cities and their sustainable social and economic development by enhancing the memory and emotional climate (happiness, sense of belonging, place attachment) of the inhabitants and promoting their cohesion towards the city. This paper analyzes and discusses how artistic interventions can promote innovation and city branding in urban public spaces from both short-term and long-term impact dimensions. Through a simulated practice in the small northern Italian city of Piacenza, the application of the research theory is demonstrated, aiming to provide references and methodologies for sustainable urban regeneration.

Keywords: art intervention, public spaces, city branding, place attachment, urban vitality

Introduction

By 2050, approximately 70% of the global population will reside in urban areas (United Nations, 2018). This rapid urbanization has concentrated economic resources, job opportunities, and cultural vitality in large cities, making them centers of growth. Metropolises successfully attract a large number of young people through rich cultural activities, ensuring continuous social and economic vitality (Haase et al., 2016). However, this prosperity has not extended to small and medium-sized cities (SMCs), which have been left behind in the competition for resources and talent. The outflow of young people and the depletion of resources have accelerated the aging of the population in SMCs, leading to a decline in urban vitality and further weakening their capacity for long-term development (Gospodini, 2001). This phenomenon poses significant challenges for the survival and revival of SMCs, particularly in terms of attracting residents, improving the quality of life, and enhancing the emotional attachment of residents to the city. In many SMCs, the decline in quality of life is closely tied to the deterioration of public spaces. As young people migrate to larger cities and resources are lost, public spaces in SMCs are often neglected. This neglect not only strips these spaces of their

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functions as centers of social, cultural activities, and resident interactions but also weakens residents' sense of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The deterioration of public spaces not only affects the daily lives of residents but also exacerbates their sense of isolation and loneliness, further eroding the social cohesion that holds communities together. In response to these challenges, artistic interventions have gained increasing attention as an innovative strategy for urban regeneration. Unlike traditional urban development projects that prioritize infrastructure or economic objectives, artistic interventions aim to restore the connection between people and space through social and emotional engagement. By activating underutilized spaces through public art installations, community-driven projects, and temporary cultural events, artistic interventions not only improve the physical environment but also rebuild social bonds, enhance place attachment, and reshape local identity (Bianchini, 1990; Richards, 2001).

Research on place attachment suggests that reshaping public spaces not only helps to improve their functionality but, more importantly, strengthens the emotional bonds between residents and the city (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Particularly in SMCs, artistic interventions help residents re-establish a sense of belonging and identity by infusing emotional and symbolic value into public spaces. These emotional connections transform urban spaces from mere physical entities into catalysts for social cohesion. Artistic interventions can help revitalize urban spaces and provide residents with a platform to express local identity and community values. Additionally, artistic interventions play an important role in shaping city branding and enhancing urban attractiveness. Many SMCs, through the implementation of innovative artistic intervention projects, are able to inject new cultural vitality into the city, attracting tourists and investors, thereby elevating their economic and cultural standing (Richards & Wilson, 2006). These projects create unique cultural symbols that express the city's vision and development direction, highlighting its distinct cultural appeal and innovative potential. As Gospodini (2001) points out, culture and art play a critical role in enhancing the identity and appeal of cities, particularly in resource-constrained SMCs.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how arts interventions can activate public space in small and medium-sized cities, promote social cohesion, enhance emotional attachment, and contribute to city branding. By analyzing case studies, this study provides practical references for small and medium-sized cities, demonstrating how arts interventions can help cities reactivate public space and revitalize the city. This research addresses a critical gap in current urban studies: while artistic interventions have been widely studied in metropolitan areas, their potential impact on SMCs remains understudied. Our study provides both theoretical frameworks and practical implementation strategies for urban planners and policymakers worldwide.

Theory

Traditional urban planning approaches in SMCs have primarily focused on infrastructure development and economic initiatives, while often overlooking social and cultural dimensions that are crucial for urban vitality. While these conventional methods have contributed to basic urban development, they frequently fail to address deeper issues such as declining community engagement and weakening place attachment that particularly challenge SMCs today. This gap calls for innovative approaches that can complement traditional planning methods.

Artistic interventions have emerged as a significant tool in contemporary urban regeneration, particularly in revitalizing underutilized public spaces in small and medium-sized cities (SMCs). Through diverse forms of public art, neglected or overlooked urban spaces can be transformed into dynamic environments that not only enhance the aesthetic quality of the city but also foster social interactions and emotional connections among residents. This transformation redefines these spaces as cultural and social hubs, fostering stronger engagement between citizens and their urban surroundings (Gospodini, 2001; Richards & Wilson, 2006). Reactivating the physical environment through artistic interventions provides a platform for social interaction. Previously neglected spaces gain new value through visual and multi-sensory experiences that draw in residents and visitors alike. Public art installations, light displays, and murals enrich the visual landscape while simultaneously creating new opportunities for social encounters (Bianchini, 1990). This process not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of urban spaces but also shifts their function from static, underutilized areas to vibrant, interactive zones where social exchange can take place (Richards & Wilson, 2006). In doing so, these interventions bridge the gap between physical space and social engagement, allowing urban spaces to serve multiple purposes in fostering a more inclusive and connected urban life.

In addition to physical revitalization, artistic interventions play a pivotal role in fostering emotional connections between residents and their city, enhancing what is often referred to as "place attachment" (Korpela, 2012). Place attachment refers to the emotional bond that individuals develop with specific locations, which in turn shapes their sense of identity within the city. Through public art and creative initiatives, residents are given new ways to engage with their surroundings, strengthening their emotional ties to the urban environment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). These emotional connections are particularly important in SMCs, where the loss of young residents and resources has weakened traditional community bonds. Artistic interventions, by infusing public spaces with symbolic and emotional significance, help residents reconnect with their city and foster a renewed attachment to a place (Brown et al., 2003). Social cohesion, a key factor in urban regeneration, is further strengthened through these emotional connections. As Korpela (2012) explains, social cohesion refers to the trust, shared values, and mutual understanding among community members, which are critical for building a resilient and supportive community. Artistic interventions foster social cohesion by creating shared experiences that allow residents to come together, interact, and collaborate in meaningful ways. Through participation in community-driven art projects or events, residents build stronger bonds with one another, reinforcing the social fabric of the city (Richards & Wilson, 2006). This social fabric, in turn, supports broader urban regeneration efforts, as cohesive communities are more likely to engage in collective action and contribute to the well-being of the city as a whole (Brown et al., 2003).

As these emotional and social ties strengthen, artistic interventions also contribute to city branding efforts. City branding, while often secondary to the more immediate goals of social and spatial revitalization, benefits from the cultural significance that artistic interventions bring to urban spaces. By transforming public spaces into culturally significant landmarks, these interventions enhance the city's identity, making it more attractive to both residents and visitors (Richards, 2011). The process of creating unique cultural symbols through art not only elevates the city's image but also helps to differentiate it in a competitive global landscape (Gospodini, 2001). For SMCs, this cultural rebranding is especially important as they seek to attract new investment, tourism, and talent.

Looking toward the future, artistic interventions hold promise as a sustainable strategy for urban transformation. As cities continue to evolve, the activation of underutilized spaces through art and culture will remain crucial for fostering both social cohesion and long-term urban sustainability. The true impact of these interventions lies not only in their immediate visual or aesthetic effects but in their ability to foster lasting emotional and social bonds among residents (Richards & Wilson, 2006). As these bonds strengthen, they contribute to a more resilient, cohesive, and vibrant urban environment, ensuring that cities remain places where people not only live but also thrive.

Ultimately, the success of urban regeneration efforts in SMCs will be measured by the extent to which they can restore both the physical and emotional vitality of their public spaces. Artistic interventions, through their ability to engage residents on both an emotional and social level, provide a powerful tool for achieving this goal. By reactivating neglected urban spaces and fostering a cohesion among residents, these interventions lay the foundation for sustainable urban regeneration and transformation. Through the interaction of these multi-dimensional factors, we can see more clearly the comprehensive impact of arts interventions on urban revitalization. The figure below visualizes the interaction between these key elements.

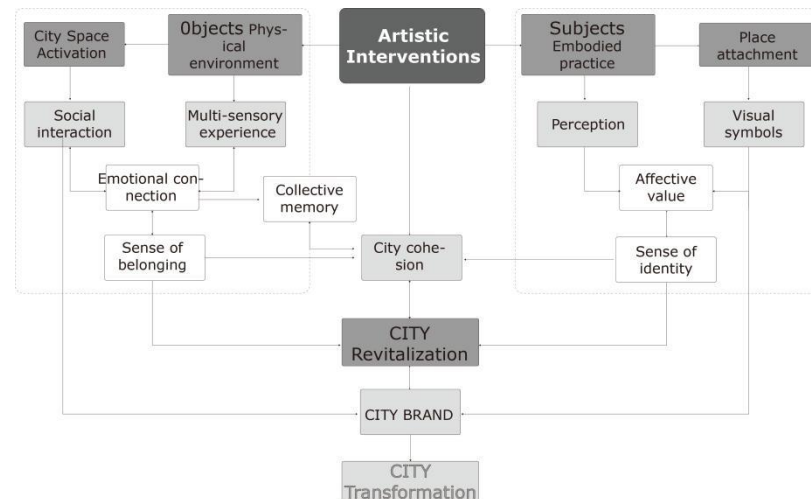


Figure 1: Theoretical framework diagram

Materials and Methods

This research utilizes a combination of comparative analysis and case study methodologies to assess the effectiveness of artistic interventions in revitalizing underutilized public spaces within small and medium-sized cities. The primary objective is to identify which forms of artistic interventions—such as public art installations or artist residencies—are most successful in engaging local communities and transforming urban spaces. Through the integration of these two methodologies, the study offers both in-depth insights into individual projects and broader patterns across diverse urban contexts (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017). Ragin's (1987) comparative method forms the foundation of this research framework, facilitating systematic comparisons of artistic interventions across varying scales, formats, and socio-cultural environments. This approach emphasizes identifying shared success factors and key contextual influences, thus providing critical insights for urban planning and policy-making processes. By focusing on both commonalities and context-specific variations, this method underscores the factors that contribute to the efficacy of artistic interventions in different urban

settings (Ragin, 1987). The case study methodology further complements the comparative approach by allowing for a nuanced examination of each intervention's unique context. This approach focuses on local dynamics—such as community engagement, cultural policy frameworks, and specific urban characteristics—that shape both the implementation and outcomes of the artistic projects (Yin, 2017). The combination of these two methodologies ensures a comprehensive understanding, balancing generalizable patterns with detailed contextual analysis. Data collection was conducted through qualitative interviews, document analysis, and structured observation. Qualitative interviews were performed with stakeholders including urban planners, government officials, artists, and community members directly involved in each artistic intervention. These semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, with a total of 12 interviews across the five cases. Aspects of project planning, implementation and community response were explored. The interview data were then subjected to thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring themes related to public space activation, community involvement, and the broader cultural impact of the interventions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Document analysis played a vital role in contextualizing each intervention. By examining policy documents, urban planning reports, media articles, and archival records, the research situated these artistic interventions within the wider strategies of urban regeneration and cultural development (Flick, 2014). This step also served to verify and cross-reference the qualitative data gathered through interviews. Structured observation was employed to gather quantitative data, including participant numbers, duration of engagement, and financial metrics. Project reports provided by event organizers were instrumental in assessing the scope of participation and the financial sustainability of each intervention. The integration of qualitative insights with quantitative metrics allowed for a more holistic evaluation of each project's overall impact on the community and urban space.

The comparative framework developed in this study focuses on key dimensions essential for evaluating the effectiveness of artistic interventions: duration, scale of public participation, extent of physical transformation, and organizational structures. The duration of the intervention directly affects its capacity to foster sustained community engagement. Short-term installations may generate immediate visual or social impacts, whereas longer-term projects provide opportunities for deeper community integration. The scale of public participation measures the extent of community involvement. Public art installations tend to draw larger crowds due to their visibility, while smaller interventions may engage fewer participants but offer more profound and sustained interactions. The extent of physical transformation examines the tangible changes an intervention brings to the urban landscape. Public art installations often lead to significant alterations in the appearance and use of public spaces, which can enhance the social and cultural value of these areas. Finally, the organizational and funding structures determine the feasibility and long-term viability of artistic interventions. Larger-scale projects typically require more complex coordination among multiple stakeholders, influencing both the scope and sustainability of the project (Yin, 2017). By focusing on these dimensions, the study aims to reveal how artistic interventions shape both the physical environment and the social fabric of urban spaces. Through this multidimensional analysis, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the potential of artistic strategies in promoting urban revitalization and fostering community engagement.

In order to systematically compare the interventions, a detailed framework was developed, focusing on key dimensions of each project. The table below summarizes the critical components of the analyzed artistic interventions, offering a structured comparison of their characteristics and outcomes.

Table 1: Comparative Framework of Artistic Interventions in Urban Spaces

Types of artistic interventions	Artist Residency		Public Art			
Name	“The Circle and the Square”	“Final Gasp of the Nervous System”	Night of Culture 2024: Neuron City	Vieux Port Pavilion	La Valentina Installation	Matera 2019: European Capital of Culture
Classification of Art Intervention Types	Community participation	Personal creation	Art events	Public Art Pavilion	Art Installation	Art Events
Official Name	Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope	Tom Thomson Shack Residency	Night of Culture 2024	Foster + Partners	El Fabricante de Esferas	European Capital of Culture
Kind of Happening/Event	Three-day performance, combining Shape Note singing and Sufi chanting	Site-specific residency , focusing on printmaking and textile art	Large-scale, one-night interactive installation event	Public structure integrating historical context and contemporary use	Interactive kinetic sculpture installation	Year-long series of art, music, theater, and cultural activities
Designer/Creator	Suzanne Lacy	Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka	Various international artists	Foster + Partners	El Fabricante de Esferas	Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation
Knowledge Background	Community-driven arts, public engagement, heritage conservation	Environmental art, handicrafts, cultural preservation,	Digital art, media art,	urban design	Installation art, urban design	Cultural heritage, community engagement
Intention	Reuse of industrial spaces for local community arts.	Artistic reflection on nature and traditional craftsmanship.	Urban reimagination using technology to reshape public interactions.	Renew and transform a historic urban waterfront.	Activate underused urban spaces to revitalize urban vitality.	Promote cultural development and raise Matera's international profile
Time Spent on Implementation	3 years	1 year	1 week	6-12 month	1 week	4 years
Number of participants	500+	50-100	100,000	1,000,000	1000	1,670,000
Participant type	Local community	Visitors	Residents,	Residents,	Residents,	Residents,

	residents, Visitors		tourists	tourists	tourists	tourists
Access (Fee)	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free and ticketed
City	Brierfield	Ontario	Lublin	Montreal	València	Matera
location type	Interior Space (factory)	Interior Space (Thomson Shack)	Public Space (Lublin Streets)	Public Space (Vieux Port)	Public Space (square)	Public spaces, historical sites, and cultural venues
Intervention Existing Spatial Situation	Temporary activation	Temporary activation	Temporary activation	Re-use	Temporary activation	Temporary activation and reuse
Funding Through	Arts Council England, Super Slow Way, Building Bridges Pendle	Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts	Lublin City Government, Polish Ministry of Culture	Montreal City Government	Mexico City Department of Culture	European Union, Italian Government, local sponsors
Amount Funding	Approx. \$133,500 - \$334,000	Approx. \$25,000-50,000	Approx. \$408,000	Approx. \$500.000-1000.000	Approx. \$50,000 USD	Approx. €48 million
Duration	3 years	1 year	1 night event	2014-now	1 week	1 year (2019)
Archive	Video Photography	Photography	Photography Posters Magazine Exhibition	Photography Posters Magazine	Photography Posters Magazine Exhibition	Photography, videos, publications, and digital archives
Social Interaction Level	Medium Interaction is limited to specific groups, mostly centered around the curatorial team and performers.	Low Focused on individual artistic creation, with limited public involvement.	High Multiple public spaces across the city are activated, with tens of thousands of participants engaging in various forms of interaction.	Medium The reuse of public space fosters greater public participation and interaction.	High Transformed the space into a gathering spot, and last day, participants were given materials from the artwork, (bags, boxes,plants), as a way to share in the experience.	High – extensive community participation and international collaboration

Through a comparative analysis of five case studies, it is clear that public art, particularly art installations, is highly effective in activating urban spaces, fostering social interaction, and engaging diverse audiences. A common thread across all five projects, whether large public art installations or smaller artist residencies, is their role in revitalizing and activating underutilized urban spaces. Regardless of scale or format, each project contributed to the transformation of the physical environment, turning otherwise ordinary or overlooked spaces into sites of artistic and social significance. “Artist residencies”, such as the “Tom Thomson Shack Residency”, often focus on smaller, more intimate engagements. These residencies tend to take place in enclosed, indoor spaces and involve fewer participants, but they still play a key role in enhancing local culture and creating meaningful artistic experiences in the communities they engage with (Hoop et al., 2022).

In contrast, “public art installations,” which take place in open, urban environments, are designed to engage a broader public and have an immediate impact on the urban landscape. “Night of Culture 2024” is expected to draw tens of thousands of participants in one evening, transforming various urban locations into vibrant centers of public interaction. Similarly, the “La Valentina Installation” in Mexico City transformed an underutilized urban square into a site of communal participation by allowing the public to take home parts of the installation. This transformation of public spaces into hubs of social and cultural interaction is a defining characteristic of public art installations (Hoop et al., 2022).

Although the “intention” behind these interventions varies—with artist residencies focusing more on personal creation and reflection, and public art installations aiming for larger public engagement—each project successfully activated urban spaces, bringing new life to them. “Vieux Port Pavilion” by Foster + Partners rejuvenated Montreal’s historic waterfront while maintaining a connection to its cultural past, thereby achieving both physical and social activation. Similarly, Matera 2019, the European Capital of Culture, exemplifies the transformative power of public art in a small city context. Prior to 2019, Matera faced challenges such as limited international visibility and underutilized public spaces. The year-long program of cultural events and public art projects revitalized the city by significantly boosting social cohesion and cultural engagement among residents and visitors. Tourist arrivals increased by 153.7% between 2014 and 2019, with overnight stays rising by 198.3%, alongside substantial economic benefits as 59% of project contracts were awarded to regional businesses. Matera successfully rebranded itself as a modern cultural hub while preserving its historical identity, demonstrating the profound impact public art interventions can have on fostering both economic growth and cultural revitalization.

Despite differences in scale and ambition, all five projects demonstrate how artistic interventions can convert ordinary spaces into places of interaction, creativity, and cultural engagement (Hoop et al., 2022). Moreover, the “archival methods” employed in public art projects extend their influence, preserving the social and cultural significance of these interventions long after they are completed. Unlike artist residencies, which typically document the creative process through simple photography or video, public art installations utilize more diverse archival formats, including media coverage, exhibitions, and public records. For instance, the “Vieux Port Pavilion” remains an enduring cultural landmark in Montreal, its significance preserved through various forms of documentation (Hoop et al., 2022).

In conclusion, while both artist residencies and public art installations play valuable roles in activating urban spaces, public art installations offer distinct advantages for small to medium-sized cities. These installations tend to engage a broader audience and make an immediate impact by transforming urban landscapes and fostering public interaction. In contrast, artist residencies may encourage deeper, more intimate engagements with local communities and spaces. However, through comparative analysis, it becomes evident that public art installations are generally more effective in revitalizing underutilized spaces and promoting cultural visibility. Given their ability to stimulate broader community engagement and provide visible transformation, public art installations are often better suited for achieving tangible, widespread cultural impacts in small to medium-sized urban areas.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this research demonstrate the significant role that artistic interventions can play in revitalizing public spaces, particularly in small and medium-sized cities (SMCs). In many SMCs, urban vitality has been challenged by economic decline, population outflow, and social disconnection, which have contributed to the underutilization or deterioration of public spaces (Gospodini, 2001). This study employed a comparative analysis method to examine various cases of artistic interventions in urban spaces, allowing for the identification of shared success factors across different contexts. By comparing successful interventions in multiple cities, this method enabled a systematic understanding of how public spaces can be reactivated through art, highlighting the critical role that such interventions play in fostering social interaction and emotional engagement. Artistic interventions have been shown to activate neglected public spaces by providing both aesthetic improvements and functional enhancements, which, in turn, encourage social interaction. As observed in various cases analyzed in this study, public art installations and community-driven projects have the potential to transform urban spaces into areas of cultural and social significance. The theoretical framework of this study emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and sense of happiness, concepts that are deeply rooted in the literature on urban regeneration. For instance, Scannell and Gifford's (2010) work on place attachment underscores the emotional bonds that residents develop with their urban environment, which are crucial for fostering community. This study confirmed that artistic interventions play a pivotal role in enhancing these emotional bonds, thereby contributing to the overall revitalization of public spaces and strengthening the social fabric of cities. The revitalization of public spaces through art is not merely a physical transformation; it also involves the creation of emotional bonds between residents and their city. These interventions serve as catalysts for social cohesion, as they create shared experiences that strengthen the social fabric of a city (Brown et al., 2003). In cities where economic decline has weakened social networks, the reactivation of public spaces through art provides a means to rebuild these connections, fostering a renewed sense of community. The comparative analysis method used in this study allowed for a detailed examination of how these interventions function in different urban environments, revealing common patterns of success, such as the use of interactive and participatory art to engage residents.

In addition to enhancing social cohesion, artistic interventions also contribute to the city's branding and identity. This is particularly important for SMCs that often struggle to compete with larger cities for talent, investment, and tourism. Artistic interventions, through their capacity to create unique and engaging public spaces, offer SMCs an opportunity to differentiate themselves in the global urban landscape (Richards & Wilson, 2006). These projects often serve as cultural landmarks, attracting

both residents and visitors and contributing to the city's economic revival. As Gospodini (2001) points out, the cultural identity that emerges from these interventions can play a key role in enhancing a city's attractiveness and promoting urban sustainability. The comparative analysis highlighted that city which successfully integrate art into their branding strategies tend to have a more cohesive and vibrant urban image. The ability of artistic interventions to enhance a city's cultural appeal has broader implications for urban planning and development. By leveraging local culture and engaging the community in artistic projects, SMCs can create an environment that is not only visually appealing but also economically viable. This is particularly important in the context of city branding, where a strong cultural identity can draw tourism and investment, contributing to the city's long-term sustainability (Richards, 2011). The Piacenza simulation study further supports these findings by demonstrating how temporary artistic interventions can serve as a testing ground for long-term urban strategies.

The insights gathered from the broader research are exemplified in the case of Piacenza, where a series of bubble-themed art installations were designed and simulated to reactivate underutilized public spaces. This simulation, while temporary in nature, allowed for the practical application of the success factors identified through the comparative analysis. The following section discusses how this simulation study offers practical insights into the ways artistic interventions can be strategically implemented to foster urban vitality in SMCs.

While these interventions show promise, they face several challenges: First, financial constraints are a major barrier for SMCs, often requiring creative funding solutions such as public-private partnerships, cultural grants, or phased implementation with temporary installations. Second, stakeholder resistance can arise when traditional infrastructure competes with artistic investments. This can be addressed through clear communication of measurable benefits, such as increased visitor numbers and enhanced business activity. For example, the Matera 2019: European Capital of Culture project boosted tourism and the local economy, with 59% of contracts awarded to local businesses, demonstrating regional economic growth. This case exemplifies the power of cultural projects in driving both economic and social benefits, highlighting the importance of strategic cultural investments for enhancing urban vitality in SMCs.

To address these challenges, our analysis suggests: establishing clear metrics for measuring success, developing sustainable funding models, ensuring continuous community engagement, creating frameworks for multi-stakeholder collaboration, and building maintenance and management plans for long-term sustainability. These evidence-based strategies provide SMCs with an effective framework to successfully implement artistic interventions while addressing the challenges and constraints inherent in real-world urban environments.

Simulation Practice

Piacenza, a small city in northern Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, faces several sociocultural challenges, including an aging population and limited employment opportunities for younger generations. Despite having an international population of 18.2%, the city's insufficient urban promotion has contributed to a noticeable decline in vitality. In response to these challenges, a simulated project of temporary art installations was developed, focusing on activating underutilized

public spaces to foster community engagement and contribute to city branding. This project aims to explore how Piacenza could be transformed into a culturally vibrant and innovative urban center through artistic interventions.



Figure 2: Piacenza City Map.

The design process involved carefully selecting installation sites, prioritizing underused areas with limited social functions. Seven art installations were conceptualized across different urban locations, including parks, stations, churches, residential areas, streets, and public squares. These art installations offering a walking route that provides visitors with a comprehensive overview of Piacenza. For residents, these installations act as interactive meeting points, offering convenience in daily life.

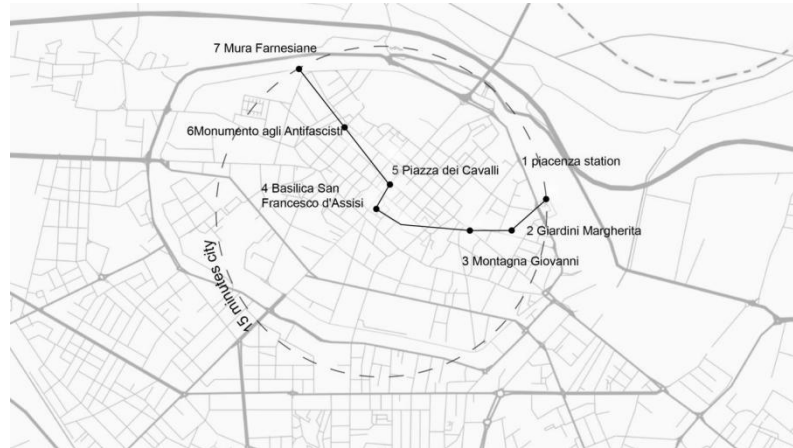


Figure 3: Piacenza -Installation Map.

The conceptual simulation revolves around the idea of "breathing life into Piacenza," with a series of bubble-themed installations symbolizing the city's vitality. These bubbles, dispersed throughout the city, create connections between residents and visitors by activating urban spaces.

Art Installation list

Art Installation 1: Bubble Information Kiosk

The Bubble Information Kiosk is strategically located at Piacenza's train station, a high-traffic area often perceived as unsafe due to inadequate lighting and heavy foot traffic, especially at night. This installation proposes a bubble-shaped kiosk that emits a soft, warm glow after dark, creating a more inviting and secure atmosphere. During the day, the kiosk serves as a hub for tourists, offering maps and city information. By combining an organic design with soothing lighting, this installation is expected to enhance both the physical safety and psychological comfort of the space, transforming the overall station experience.



Figure4: Bubble Information Kiosk.

Art Installation 2: Bubble Seesaw

The Bubble Seesaw is situated in Giardini Margherita, a popular park where residents come to relax but often lack opportunities for social interaction. This bubble-themed seesaw aims to bridge that gap by creating a playful structure that encourages neighbors to engage with one another. By encouraging spontaneous social interactions, the installation helps build collective memories and emotional connections, ultimately enhancing social cohesion within the community.



Figure5: Bubble Seesaw.

Art Installation 3: Bubble Roof Installation

The Bubble Roof Installation is located along Via Roma, a bustling street that connects major roads and leads to Piacenza's city center, framed by historic buildings. This green-tinted bubble roof is designed to filter sunlight, casting soothing green shadows that soften the street's concrete-dominated environment. By blending old architectural heritage with a contemporary design element, the installation transforms the atmosphere of the street, creating a dialogue between tradition and modernity.



Figure6: Bubble Roof Installation

Art Installation 4: Bubble Wishing Fountain

The Bubble Wishing Fountain is placed in front of Basilica San Francesco d'Assisi, one of Piacenza's most iconic churches. This interactive installation invites people to make a wish at the fountain, which activates bubbles that rise into the air, symbolizing hope and the shared dreams of the community. By encouraging this interaction, the design creates collective memories and emotional connections, offering a shared experience for both residents and visitors in a spiritually and culturally significant space.



Figure7: Bubble Wishing Fountain

Art Installation 5: Bubble Sofa & Fontanella

The Bubble Sofa & Fontanella Installation is located in Piazza dei Cavalli, a historic square in Piacenza that currently lacks adequate seating and visitor amenities. The introduction of bubble-shaped sofas transforms the square into a more inviting space, encouraging relaxation and social interaction. The installation transforms Piazza dei Cavalli into a more interactive public area.



Figure7: Bubble Sofa & Water Fountain.

Art Installation 6: Bubble Recliners

The Bubble Recliner Installation is situated on the steps of "Rat Street," a lesser-known residential area with a mysterious local legend. Bubble-shaped recliners offer a comfortable resting spot, while bubble draws attention to the hidden history of the street. By spotlighting Piacenza's local stories, this installation revitalizes the overlooked area, fostering curiosity and providing a cozy space for social interaction, encouraging residents and visitors alike to engage .



Figure8: Bubble Recliners

Art Installation 7: Bubble Rainwater Collector

The Bubble Rainwater Collector is located near Mura Farnesiane, the ancient city walls of Piacenza, a popular spot for joggers and local residents who frequent the area for leisurely strolls. This installation combines both artistic and functional elements, collecting rainwater to nourish nearby plants, symbolizing the protective role the walls once played. It attracts both visitors and locals to this historic site, fostering a deeper connection to the space by blending cultural heritage with sustainability, ultimately reinforcing a sense of place identity.



Figure8: Bubble Rainwater Collector

The design simulation for Piacenza showcases a cohesive system of bubble installations across the city, functioning as visual symbols to foster a strong place identity among residents. Through

interactive experiences, these installations activate underutilized public spaces, revitalizing the city's cultural and social dynamics. The temporary art installations have the potential to transform underused urban spaces by providing a flexible, adaptive framework that enhances community cohesion and cultural identity. This approach also allows Piacenza to experiment with various public engagement strategies through short-term urban interventions. The temporary nature of these installations gives the city flexibility to adapt to changing cultural trends and test design concepts before committing to long-term urban changes. By creating flexible and adaptive spaces that encourage social interaction and community participation, these installations align with Piacenza's broader urban development goals. The simulation demonstrates the potential for temporary art installations to serve as tools for city branding and cultural expression, offering practical and creative solutions for SMCs facing similar challenges. These installations play a key role in attracting cultural tourism, particularly for visitors interested in creative, vibrant urban environments. The artistic and interactive nature of these installations presents a unique branding strategy for Piacenza, distinguishing it from other cities by emphasizing its commitment to culture, creativity, and community participation.

In the future, Piacenza could collaborate with local artists, policymakers, and urban planners to implement these designs, ensuring that its public spaces remain dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of the community. This flexible approach not only provides a framework for artistic expression but also supports community building, social cohesion, and city branding.

Conclusion

This study focused on how artistic interventions can play a pivotal role in revitalizing small and medium-sized cities (SMCs) by reactivating public spaces and thereby restoring urban vitality. SMCs often face challenges such as population decline, economic stagnation, and underutilized public spaces, making these interventions crucial for addressing these issues. The findings show that through the creative use of art in underutilized or neglected areas, cities can transform these spaces into vibrant hubs of activity, promoting both social engagement and community interaction. The success of these interventions is not limited to aesthetic improvements but extends to the enhancement of social cohesion, emotional attachment to the city, and a renewed sense of place among residents.

The simulation in Piacenza highlighted the potential for temporary art installations to breathe new life into public spaces. More broadly, artistic interventions are demonstrated as a strategic tool for urban regeneration in SMCs, effectively addressing physical, social, and emotional needs. When thoughtfully designed and aligned with local context, these interventions can restore functionality to neglected spaces and re-establish their role as centers of community life.

In addition to their social benefits, artistic interventions significantly contribute to city branding. By creating unique and culturally resonant public art, SMCs can enhance their identity and appeal, attracting both residents and visitors. These efforts foster a deeper connection between the city's cultural heritage and its future development while also drawing external investment, which enhances economic sustainability and supports long-term urban resilience.

Despite their potential, artistic interventions face several key challenges. Financial constraints are often a major barrier, especially in smaller cities with limited budgets. Stakeholder resistance can also arise, particularly when traditional infrastructure needs compete with artistic investments. Scalability

is another concern, as interventions that succeed in one context may not easily adapt to others. Addressing these challenges requires strategic solutions that involve diverse funding sources, community engagement, and flexible design models that can be adapted to different urban contexts. Future research should focus on exploring how permanent artistic projects or recurring events can contribute to the long-term rejuvenation of public spaces, focusing on measurable economic benefits and community involvement. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons should be conducted to determine how unique urban contexts influence the effectiveness of artistic interventions. More research is also needed to develop and evaluate effective funding models, such as public-private partnerships and community-driven financing, which can help overcome financial barriers. Understanding the role of community involvement in the success of these interventions also remains a critical area for further investigation, as local participation often determines the relevance and acceptance of public art.

In conclusion, artistic interventions are a powerful tool for reactivating public spaces and reviving urban vitality in SMCs. However, key limitations such as financial constraints, scalability, and stakeholder resistance must be addressed through a combination of strategic approaches. Establishing sustainable funding frameworks is crucial, along with providing incentives for private sector involvement to support these initiatives. Implementing phased project rollouts allows for gradual adaptation, ensuring that the interventions are tailored to the specific needs and capabilities of the city. By adopting these approaches, artistic interventions can effectively contribute to creating vibrant, resilient public spaces that enhance the socio-economic vitality of small and medium-sized cities. Ultimately, leveraging art as a means to foster social connections and animate public spaces can help cities become more cohesive, adaptable, and vibrant, better meeting the needs of their residents.

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