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Perceptions on Public Art in Kenya: The Case of University Students in Nairobi

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Abstract

Studies specific to public art and perceptions of youth is rare. Even more rare are research studies focusing on the impacts of public art on campus students. This study analyzed youth opinions towards public art projects in the diverse community of Nairobi city in Kenya. Specifically, this study utilizes questionnaires to access youth's perspectives to various public arts within the city. Thus the purpose of this research is to contribute to this field of interest, in order to initiate a debate on possible future works focused on the perceptions of campus students on public art. This approach is largely qualitative and determines what youth gain from public art and youths' perception of how art can foster change in community. This research, along with current literature concerning community engagement in public art, could create unity and be an encouragement for urban youth in the community. It is hoped that this study will open the dialogue for further literature.

Keywords: arts education, public art, public space, youth perspective



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1.0 Introduction

According to Public Art Online (2020), "...the term public art refers to artists and craftspeople working within the built, natural, urban or rural environment. It aims to integrate artists' and craft people's skills, vision and creative abilities into the whole process of creating new spaces and regenerating old ones, in order to imbue the development with a unique quality and to enliven and animate the space by creating a visually stimulating environment..." Working with artists and craftspeople offers an opportunity to design schemes, which go beyond the purely functional and create spaces which reflect the life and aspirations of the district, county or region. Public art is about good design and good design makes good sense. Quality environments send out positive messages. To implement these two principles does not necessarily mean more expenses. It is much more about working creatively with what one have got. Public art in general is concerned with the visual rather than performing arts. The media of public artworks basically comprises mostly sculptures and paintings. Our interviewees generally agree that public art is about installing artwork in a place or space accessible by the public: but given this commonality, public art encompasses much diversity in creative orientations, mediums of art, forms, artistic and cultural expressions, or audience and participants as in potentials for development (Hui, 2003).

There has been a proliferation of youth arts programs in urban centers in recent decade; however, the literature has not kept up with this phenomenon (Annual Report: State of Nonprofits 2013, 11). It is opined that participating in arts education benefits youth, and similarly that public art aids community awareness and cohesiveness (Chappell et al, 2013). Therefore the driving question behind this research is: what is the perception of youth towards community public art youth? The aim of this research is to find out perceptions of public art from youth perspective. The researcher hopes to fill a gap in the literature which fails to recognize perceptions of young people towards public art from youth point of view and discuss tangible benefits of public art. This study is significant because it examines a potentially underutilized tool in community regeneration. Youth have the right and responsibility to participate and contribute to their communities. In order to reach their full potential and affect positive change, young people need a broad range of opportunities including participation in public art. International research into the needs of youth recognizes the importance of art in their lives, not only for self-expression, but also as a methodology for useful learning and engagement with the world around them. Strengthening Youth and Communities through Art. (<http://www.serrey.ca/artgallery>)

2.0 Problem Statement

Best practice in public art is to consider the audience's acceptance of the form, subject matter, and content of the site-specific art work. Dependent on state legislative processes, some public higher educational institutions have little say regarding the "fit" of the work of art as it relates to the site. In worst case scenarios, some state-mandated public art projects end up on campuses against the better judgment of those who study on those campuses. Without appropriate procedures on public art on campuses, miscommunication, physical threat, monetary concerns, or inadequate education of the public often leads to opposition and social unrest. The literature specific to public art on campuses is impoverished. Even more rare are research studies discussing the role of public art on campuses. Thus the purpose of this paper is to contribute to this field in order to initiate a debate on possible future work focused on the role of public art and community participation within university setting.

3.0 Literature Review

Research tools to analyze the impact of an artwork on the community are lacking in rigorous results, especially those concerning university campuses (Pedrabissi, 2015). When analyzing this body of literature, it is clear that there is little framework which are specific to youth inclusive public art. For this reason, the researcher will pull from multiply researchers' themes to assess public art and arts education as they relate to the youth through empowerment. In arts education aspect, the closest parallel to youth-inclusive public art in North American literature place –based arts education and the environment is Inwood (2008) who suggests that arts education programs should be implemented to involve students in ecological literacy in their specific regions. This study displays "a way for art and the environmental educators to create powerful and memorable experiences for students by bringing self and community in dialogue with place". In many ways, this notion mirrors this study, the difference being the researcher will look at perceptions of youth in community betterment rather than environmental literacy. Grodach (2011) seeks to link revitalization of urban centers with commercial cultural centers. This is an attempt to link art with the larger scheme of development within communities. Grodach further seeks answers by creating surveys and conducting interviews to ask the artists and the spaces they displayed or worked with art how they perceive their role in the community. If youths are critically engaged, they can determine elements of their community which are beneficial or problematic. They then can implement projects aimed at highlighting youth concerns such as creativity and empowerment.

There is no breakdown of what role youth play in the regenerative process. What are their perspectives and goals- what outcomes would they experience after being engaged and included in the various projects. These are essential questions. (Palatinus, 2014). This study, like the one performed by Inwood (2008) and Grodach (2011) focuses exclusively on youth who represent a significant segment of the community.

Several types of works erected in public spaces strive to create interaction, enable participation and communication. Whether they have, as goal, the creation of identity, the creation of a collective memory, the pointing out of various societal problems, public thinking, the expression of different opinions, or simply the experience of community, they generate meeting points whose primary objective is to enable the establishment of contact. According to Palatinus (2014), there is lack of research into the practice of community participation in making permanent public artwork, its meaning, outcomes. Public art is a creative place making tool to enhance the quality of civic life and foster a sense of community. There is more to learn about how university community participation could contribute to understanding of public art and what is learnt in public spaces. How individuals i.e. the audience understands public art is in this sense of crucial importance. Artefacts of famous artists can be found anywhere in the world but not all of them are able to establish communication with the local environment and produce social, cultural, historical and special coherence. How various audiences integrate with public art can be described as a difference between the “visual landmark” and the “collective anchor-point” (Szostak, 2010). When analyzing the role of public art, it is important to stress that different audiences have different needs and different views towards how public art should be inserted in the urban space. In actuality, many examples of small scale permanent projects exist that involve community members as makers. These projects can be found in parks, schools and community centers, but rarely include university students in their making (Palatinus, 2014). There seems to be a lack of inclusivity of University students in participating in public art activities in communities.

Public art can be said to be an arena where art and community often collide. Public art, as marginalized within the already marginalized field of art, provides a vehicle for new ways of looking at art and art education in the context of social relevance (Palatinus, 2014). The best practices particular to public art on campuses require that the art’s form, subject matter, and content align with the institution’s specific needs, goals, and visions. Without appropriate procedures, miscommunication, physical threat, monetary concerns, or inadequate education of the public often leads to opposition and social unrest (Bock, 2006). Involving

university students in public art would empower and enhance knowledge among youth. The keystone to the artistic climate is the collaboration amongst the artists themselves, starting from individuals taking action for community development, by creating opportunities for the youth. By providing a platform for the youth to meet, and to develop and express their talent, and passion with the implicit vision to encourage youth to choose the right path in life (Palatinus, 2014). Youths can be empowered and nurtured to be the creative thinkers for their community in the future. Such initiative and collaboration would help to transform young people's potential, creativity, talents, initiative and social responsibility, through the acquisition of related knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Establishing dynamically built environments is a means of building a sense of community, creating institutional identity, and defining place. Involving young people in public art is a component of these aims. Art evokes a societal dialogue describing human experience and brings a sense of humanity to society. At their best, both art and higher education promote the free exchange of ideas, humanity, and innovation in that they operate as cultural beacons (Greiner, 2009). Even though a new web of virtual public spaces has emerged, architects, urban designers and artists still face the task of shaping public buildings and public spaces, and are therefore compelled to find links among the various forms and gradations of the public sphere that exists today. In this regard, public art is an essential field of investigation to understand the possibilities of how art can help to develop contemporary society. In particular because public art is defined by spaces in which both art and public art interact. The dynamics of the interactions between public, place, and aesthetic experience (art) are all critical to understanding what constitutes public art.

4.0 Research Design and Methods

In conducting this research, the researcher utilized qualitative data from the primary and secondary sources and survey compilations respectively. The survey data will be compiled included perceptions from youth meant to gauge students' involvement in community and their notions on public art. It is hoped that the surveys in this study will give incoming and outgoing perceptions of the power of public art to create a public change. Additionally, the surveys were formatted as a likert Scale, with range of answer choices ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree with an option for no opinion.



Figure 1: Dedan Kimathi Statue in Nairobi, Kenya

The statue is one of the city's landmarks found in the busy streets of Nairobi. Dedan Kimathi iconic seven-foot statue of the late Mau Mau leader is erected at the junction of Kimathi and Mama Ngina streets within the town center. The freedom fighter is clasping the nozzle end of a gun with right hand and a stick on the other.

4.0 Questionnaire Survey

4.1 Percentage on reply:

The questionnaire was devised to gauge opinion on public art by students of Technical University of Kenya Department of Design and Creative media. On questionnaire report, both male and female students were interviewed. Number of male who took part in the survey was 15 with 3 rejections and number of female respondents was also 15 with 2 rejections.

4.2 Definition of Public art

4.2.1 90% of male students know of famous Art examples in the world and in Kenya
70% of female students know of famous Art examples in the world and in Kenya

4.2.2 On the whole, the majority of each sex agreed on the meaning of Public Art as "Any artistic expression in the public, including sculptures, paintings and performances".

4.3 Importance of Public Art

4.3.1 Almost all the respondents agreed upon the importance of public art in Nairobi in the following:

a. Enhancement of the quality of life

Male: 95% (Totally agree+ agree)

Female: 100% (Totally agree+ agree)

b. Elevating the image of Nairobi as a world city

Male: 90% (Totally agree+ agree)

Female: 60% (Totally agree+ agree)

c. Enhancement of the aesthetic quality of the environment

Male: 100% (Totally agree+ agree)

Female: 100% (Totally agree+ agree)

4.3.2 90% of replies from Male while 80% female students do think that public art is a luxury for the rich.

4.4 Part III – Public Art Policy

4.4.1 Average 80% of each group does not know of any current Public Art policy

4.4.2 All agree that there should be a government policy on Public Art

4.4.3 All students agree that public art should be incorporated in all Universities.

4.5 Part IV –Participation

4.5.1 40% knows of artists involved in public art in Nairobi

4.5.2 None of the groups have taken part in Public Art

4.6 Part V–Education and Promotion

4.6.1 90% of all the students totally disagree that there is enough art education for the public in Nairobi

4.6.2 Almost all the replies totally agree that Public Art is a means for Art education for the general public (Male: 90% Female: 100%)

5.0 Discussion

5.1.0 There was high rate of reply as 75% completion rate was realized. Majority of the students, both male and female seemed to be aware of the importance of public art particularly in Nairobi.

- i. On definition of public art, most students choose the answer “any artistic expression in the public.” This seems to be more generalized idea than the normal definition as “artwork in public places” as given by most literature on public art.
- ii. Contrary to 80% of answers from students which disagree with the notion that art is a luxury only for the rich, there is still 20% that agree totally with it.
- iii. There is no exception to the idea that public art can enhance the aesthetic quality of the environment, nor that public art can enrich the quality of life. All the participants agreed that it enhances the aesthetic quality of the environment.
- iv. Most students agree that there is enough importance given to public art in Nairobi.
- v. There is overwhelming support from all students that there should be government policy on public art.
- vi. All the respondents support the idea that public art should be incorporated in all universities.
- vii. 90 % of the students do not agree that there is enough art education for the public in Nairobi.

5.1.1 The researcher concludes from the observations that the majority sentiment supports the idea of instituting some form of measures of incorporating public art in both public and private universities. All the groups advocate for a more thorough art education for the public.

6.0 Conclusion

This research aims to create a more holistic understanding of how public art can be used to offer change and as a community rebirth. It is hoped that this paper will add value on literature on public art and create more dialogue for further literature on public art, especially with the youths’ perception in contribution to urban public art in community. By giving the youth the means to showcase their observations of positive or negative aspects of their community in a sanctioned, visible manner, arts education organizations effectively amplify young people’s voice and give them a stake in the generative process. There is need and demand to set up courses and programs in public art in institutions of learning such as Universities of Kenya and other tertiary colleges. Public art can encourage a broad range of learning opportunities. Educational programs and interpretive opportunities can be used as basis for evaluation methodologies that assist to understand and engage public art audiences. Public art belongs to the public and it is a true expression of the people of a community. Public art’s attributes is able to draw people together to celebrate, to bring harmony, to heal society and to resurrect dying quarters or dead waste in the forgotten spaces of the city.

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