

# Evaluating the Evolution of Public Art across the World and Exploring Its Growth in Urban India

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**Abstract**—Public Art is a tool with the power to enrich and enlighten any place; it has been accepted and welcomed effortlessly by many cultures around the World. In this paper, we discuss the implications Public Art has had on the society and how it has evolved over the years, and how in India, art in this aspect is still overlooked and treated as an accessory. Urban aesthetics are still substantially limited to the installation of deities, political figures, and so on. The paper also discusses various possibilities and opportunities on how Public Art can boost a society; it also suggests a framework that can be incorporated in the legal system of the country to make it a part of the city development process.

**Keywords**—Public art, urban fabric, placemaking, community welfare, public art program, imageability.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ART is a language which can stimulate different expressions, senses, and experiences using various mediums. It flirts with the morphology of a place leaving the users with moments of serendipity and surprise. Art in a public place intensifies our relation with the city and enhances our sense of community. It can transform, invigorate and energize societies and bring vibrancy to an otherwise mundane place.

‘Public art is a reflection of how we see the world – the artist’s response to our time and place combined with our own sense of who we are’. [1].

Art in public spaces can be of any size and shape; it can be contextual (site specific) or stand in contrast with its surroundings, it can be created with a single medium or be an amalgamation of various mediums. It seeks to inspire the community, engage the mind and senses, and enhance the environment and transform the landscape.

It is a powerful tool and contributes considerably to the society;

- A. As an enabler of a safe and secure environment - public art alters the perception of a space and converts it into a livelier atmosphere.
- B. It imparts imageability and inspires identity.
- C. Makes art accessible - free for all - this kind of art is not enclosed within four walls and is easily accessible to the public, and in most cases, community participation becomes a large part of the process.
- D. As a facilitator of creative placemaking, it vitalizes spaces with art and encourages communities to be a part of the process. It imparts character to the public space and creates a vibrant and inclusive environment.

E. It also connects various artists with different communities.

Public Art creatively stimulates spaces and performs under the following principles:

**Inclusive** - Public Art is a collaborative process in which communities are engaged at various stages of planning and implementation. This process enables the community to become a stakeholder and promote a sense of ownership for the neighbourhood. The outcome is a result of collaboration between various stakeholders including artists, design professionals, public and private sector.

**Accessible** - Visual and physical accessibility is of great importance for Public Art; hence, it should be strategically placed with a defined access and free movement for all.

**Sustainable** - There is a continuous need of management and maintenance for sustainability of the artwork as they can be seen mostly in open public spaces. Thus, it should be ensured that the works retain the original intention of the artist and are not compromised by any lack of upkeep.

**Diversity** - Projects for Public Art consists of an array of artistic culture and expressions which reflect the diverse interests of the masses.

**Creativity** - Public Art is a creative endeavour, open for a broader definition. It should not limit artists and foster innovation and excellence by enabling freedom of expression.

**Quality** - Being an integral element of urban fabric requires the artwork to be of the highest quality, skill, and craftsmanship. The integrity of the installation needs to be preserved by the city to reflect its ambition and direction [2].

India’s rich cultural heritage has always limited itself within enclosures, an absence of any art history within the public domain has led many cities to fashion very scattered efforts in creating a city-wide framework for Public Art. These include the Mahatma Gandhi mural at ITO, Mudra (hand gestures) sculptures at IGI Airport, Chintan Upadhyay’s baby head at traffic signal Nariman Point, Mumbai and colourful wall art across Connaught Place.

India has been trying to embrace this form of art and create awareness which in turn helps cities to alleviate. Within the country, many artists have taken over the streets and public spaces to initiate a creative dimension and create a positive impact on the society, while paving the way towards making people more conscious of their surroundings.

## II. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ART POLICIES AROUND THE WORLD

Public Art originated in 1930’s in the United States under the then President Franklin Roosevelt to uplift the economy from The Great Depression. ‘*The Federal Art Project*’<sup>2</sup> was

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one of the programs involved in relieving the economic distress by hiring unemployed artists to produce art for public buildings. Likewise, Public Art in Urban spaces gained rapid momentum and was swiftly adopted by other countries like France, Germany, Canada, UK, etc., making France the first country to implement such projects.

*'The Percent for Art' policy in the 1930's states that for all construction projects for public buildings, universities or schools, 1% of the total project fee should be used on the installation of artwork' [3].*

There is no globally accepted model for Public Art programs available. Hence the best way to understand the different programs is by carrying out a comparative analysis of the US, France, and UK that differ in their social, economic, historical, and ethnic identities, while seeing an abundant variety of Public Art projects in the past years. Since the inception of Public Art, these three countries have come across various issues and hurdles related to such programs. The nature of the problems has been similar to each other and so has been the strategies adopted by these countries to avert them. [3] Following are several ways in which the public bodies of these countries supported Public Art:

1. *Appropriations on a project-by-project basis;*
2. *Special public commission programs;*
3. *Percent for Art legislation or ordinances;*
4. *Funding public art through the redevelopment process (public-private partnerships).* [3]

The differences in cultural and political systems have lead to variations within the Public Art projects in these three countries. For instance, France has a centralized system for existing public space management; whereas, the US and UK function majorly with Public-Private partnership models. Besides these differences, the widespread use of art within these countries is due to the development of Percent for Art as the principal policy [3].

There is a significant shift in the role of Public Art from being a piece of ornamentation to contributing to the enhancement of society. Art in public places was introduced to decorate and enrich an urban space which mostly consisted of sculptures, frescos, murals, etc., with its focus being a cosmetic and beautifying relief. In the US during the 1930's depression, many artworks were installed throughout the country representing the prosperity and modernity of the nation.

As societies evolved, Public Art evolved with it – Art became an integral part of daily life by being more site conscious and less object oriented. The artist's collaboration with other creatively associated fields (landscape architects, architects, urban designers, city planners, etc.), helped develop socially aware and well-integrated parks, promenades, plazas and other such urban projects. Artists like Scott Burton, Siah Armajani, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt and others used art as a medium to shape and define urban spaces and the interactions that took place within them. Art in these areas was largely characterized by street furniture, temporary fixtures, lighting, paving, landscaping, etc.

One such example is Scott Burton's *'Chairs of Six'* which consisted of six chairs facing each other with the intent of

inviting strangers to start a conversation.



Fig. 1 Harry Sternberg's "Chicago: Epoch of a Great City" from 1937 placed in the Lake View Post Office in Chicago, Illinois [4]



Fig. 2 The sculpture was placed in the plaza at the Grant Street entrance to their building in 1986 [5]

With the growing popularity a 'new genre of public art' was introduced which catered to social issues such as women's safety, violence in urban youth, etc. and aimed towards participatory and community-led initiatives focusing on the welfare of the masses. This style of Public Art helped in the display of social, economic, environmental and political issues (rather than the built environment) in urban spaces to educate individuals and create awareness within them; therefore, to date, this style of Public Art is practiced on a large scale. *'Knotted Gun'* simply titled *Non - violence* installed at the U.N. headquarters is one such representation [6].



Fig. 3 Sculpture installed at the U.N. Headquarters - Originally placed across the street from John Lennon's New York home [7]

As a catalyst, Public Art leads to social demonstration and acts as a mass communication tool. It provides a release and vent for people who cannot voice an opinion on social issues or political sentiments. This kind of Public Art brings people together regardless of their social, racial and cultural differences [8].



Fig. 4 This stencil depicts the loss of innocence for many children of Iran's urban lower-strata, often forced to work to supplement their families' low income [9]

The above discussion demonstrated how governments of different countries have actively supported and encouraged art in the public domain which has changed the meaning of art from art in public places to art as public spaces, to art in the public interest [6].

### III. PUBLIC ART IN INDIA

The previous chapter explained how Public Art has evolved over the years and how it has become an integral part of the society. India, on the other hand, is embracing Public Art at a much slower pace than the other countries. Art within the urban space in India is unfortunately reduced to decorative and picturesque elements which do not add value to the community.

Inadequate understanding and education among society regarding the importance and benefits of Public Art has led to many cases of vandalism in various Indian cities.

Many pioneers in this field have expressed their views. Gautam Bhatia has described Public Art in India as 'an unflattering form of political deification; it rouses no spirit in the Indian consciousness, placed as it is in the leftover space of the city. As a mismatched moment in a public scene of such debilitating flux, it often goes unnoticed. Besides, its complete incompatibility with its surrounding is a sure sign that the artist and his municipal patrons have not spoken to each other. As a result, most art oscillates between the absurdly realistic to the obscurely abstract: either a full-size Nehru or a meaningless concrete or steel form'. [10].

Examples of Public Art in India are visible in a haphazard manner. The capital itself holds many such instances where an attempt to integrate art with public spaces is displayed. A giant pair of spectacles with mirrors in place of the lens mounted on stone called '*The Mirror*' was installed in Connaught Place, New Delhi with intent to encourage people to look at their reflection [11]. As it failed to convey the message and interact with the public, this artwork was vandalized and received extensive criticism. On the other hand, Street Art developed by the *St.+Art Foundation* at Lodhi Colony received universal acclamation and is now recognized as the 'Lodi Art District'. The success of this project is mainly due to its (1) extensive

public participation which helped people to understand and relate to the canvases; (2) central location of Lodi Colony with shaded walkways to encourage pedestrian movement and, (3) the liberal display of art making it accessible to all enabled a successful Public Art project within Delhi.



Fig. 5 Vandalized public art initiative at Connaught Place, New Delhi [12]



Fig. 6 Colours of the Soul by Senkoe. Inspired by the beauty of nature at Lodhi Art District [13]

Similarly, like New Delhi, Mumbai is another important city in India where Public Art has started gaining momentum. Mumbai also lacked any history related to Public Art and the only form of art in public spaces seen for a long time are the statues of notable men erected during British Raj. Being an exceptionally fast paced city, Mumbai does not stop or pause to appreciate any new addition within the urban space, and this has led to the failure of many Public Art endeavours. Another reason for the failure is the lack of open/public spaces. Mumbai's density being very high has caused the city to lose most of its urban fabric which is readily seen in international cities such as New York, Chicago, and London.

R. K. Laxman's '*Common Man*' statue showing a man standing in deep thought was vandalized, and therefore, was replaced by a seated statue that also became a well-known photo-op location with the visiting public [14].





Fig. 7 (a) R.K. Laxman's Common Man at Worli sea face, Mumbai [15] (b) R.K. Laxman's Common Man at Worli sea face, Mumbai [16]



Fig. 8 (a) Daku's BREATHE – a street artist from Delhi is a satire of the city's most basic problem of air pollution, WIP New Delhi, 2016 by St. + Art Foundation [18] (b) Exhibition aimed to revitalize unconventional and neglected public spaces in Okhla, New Delhi, WIP Delhi, 2016 by St. + Art Foundation [19]

There is no central mandate for the uniform implementation of Public Art in India; hence, different states within the country have started initiating a dialogue on Public Art at the city level. New Delhi is one of the first cities to adopt strategies for Public Art and incorporate it within development policies. The Unified Building Bye Laws for Delhi [17] has included a chapter stating the provisions of Public Art. Following are few of the clauses extracted from the document:

- 'The extent of public art (measured in terms of cost) should be at least 1 percent of the cost of construction of the structure as per prevailing CPWD rates.
- Public art work shall be incorporated in the building sanction plans for scrutiny by Delhi Urban Art Commission'.<sup>5</sup>

The document also cites the role of various local authorities to expend up to 2%, but not less than 1% of the cost of building works for works of art:

'Design proposals submitted must outline how the sum of money allocated to art is to be utilized. Local authorities, while giving building approvals, should see that the scheme for incorporation of art, as approved by the Delhi Urban Art Commission, is effectively implemented' [17].

Cities like Hyderabad and Bengaluru have also progressed in embracing Public Art; many endeavours have demonstrated the involvement of local and international artists to create art districts. WIP (Work in Progress) by the St.+Art Foundation is one such example curated to revitalize unconventional and neglected public spaces and talk about issues related to the city that affect the population at large. Air pollution, being the most prominent problem within New Delhi gained widespread attention at the exhibition.

In addition to this, governments have collaborated with various artists and NGO's to use Public Art as a medium to illustrate social issues through different forms – murals, workshops, installations, screenings, talks, etc., being the most acceptable techniques.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Works of art in India are predominantly enclosed or concentrated in certain locations. The meaning and sense of what art can be and its impact on a society are unknown to the majority. The new era of development in the nation has opened gateways for a number of international collaborations. Being a fresh canvas, many artists/visionaries are keen to explore various possibilities of curating public spaces with works of art.

India's diversity permits her to possess a vocabulary for art, which when used for the community, can mould the space to accentuate the urban fabric. To encourage this local artistry and create further alliances which impart imageability, recommendations are laid in which every state formulates a framework to incorporate Public Art as a strategy within the development/implementation process and not treat it as an appendage.

With the absence of awareness and acumen related to Public Art within local governments, there is a need to initiate a program for Public Art to amplify the outreach of these works of art and also to incorporate them into the design and building process. The program should ensure (1) Review, and approval of applications for public art projects after thorough scrutiny; (2) Ensure the working of the Public Art program; (3) Advocate for Public Art to enhance awareness and maximize outreach; and, (4) The program may suo-motu (on its own motion) promote without prejudice any proposal /project related to Public Art.

The program aspires to benefit the society through:

- Urban development.
- As an effective tool for revival and rejuvenation of the surroundings.
- To open spaces for interaction.
- To explore various art forms.
- Integrating public art with mobility.
- Enhance the walking and cycling experience by the inclusion of numerous art elements infused in the surroundings making them vibrant and lively.
- Pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods creating liveable cities.
- Preservation of art and history.
- To become a tool in preserving historic culture of an area,

- space or site by integrating urban design with art features.
- It would become an instrument to display the local art and culture of that area, space or site.
- Promote tourism.
- To establish a network of tourist nodes and also create new tourist destinations.
- It becomes an effective tool to market tourism both domestically and internationally due to its inherent link with the arts and culture – key factors in tourism.

Many cities across the globe encourage the creation of Public Art. India, being one of the fastest urbanizing countries, has started attaching itself to the urban aesthetics within the public spaces, yet there is a long road ahead for the country to create cities, not as a concrete and glass jungle but as cities with soul.

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