

Article

A balancing act: urban regeneration through arts & culture

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Abstract: Starting with the 1970s, major European cities successfully added arts and culture to their mix of urban renewal strategies. When art is part of the vision for a better city, streets are transformed into open-air galleries, buildings become alternative environments for creative expression, and the quality-of-life increases. This positive transformation tends to attract newcomers with higher income levels, which can lead to gentrification, a phenomenon which negatively affects local communities. Finding the equilibrium in this balancing act demands carefully planned urban regeneration strategies, aligned with local contexts and flexible enough to address the various needs of the long-term inhabitants.

Keywords: urban regeneration; arts; culture;

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INTRODUCTION

Urban regeneration (hereinafter also "urban revitalization") has been defined as a metabolic process of resource reuse and reconstruction of the city landscape (Zheng et al., 2017). Other authors describe it as a complex and organized process that involves finding a balance between the goals set by the central administration and the interests of various stakeholders from both the public and private sectors (Liu et al., 2023). The process is seen as a solution to solving a broad spectrum of city problems and improve the quality of life in certain neighborhoods. At its core, urban revitalization offers solutions to address social and economic challenges. Some of the studied beneficial effects of the urban renewal process include improvement of the quality of public spaces, the reconstruction or rehabilitation of some buildings, the consolidation of the city's infrastructure, and the decongestion of traffic. These effects invariably lead to positive changes in society, such as generating new jobs, improving connections between the inhabitants, and civic involvement (dos Santos Figueiredo et al., 2022).

As cities undergo transformation and modernization, conscious preservation of cultural heritage becomes an important factor for sustainable growth. The restoration of historic buildings and architectural monuments not only brings physical improvements to urban spaces, but also protects cultural traditions, stories, and everyday practices, cultivating a sense of belonging among residents. Heritage conservation provides economic benefits, boosting tourism and revitalizing local economies. Moreover, the reuse of historic buildings aligns with the principles of sustainability, reducing the environmental impact associated with new constructions.

The Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo (URHC) project, initiated in 2010, serves as an illustration of urban revitalization through the restoration of heritage buildings. The project was launched by UNESCO-WHC and sought to create a conservation plan for the historic part of the Egyptian capital. Its objectives included increasing the population's awareness of the degree of deterioration of the historic center, strengthening the technical capacities of Egyptian institutions in order to carry out complex projects and elevate living standards in the region. The historic center of Cairo presents an intricate urban structure of medieval origins and an ensemble of architectural and artistic masterpieces. Buildings, monuments, and public spaces of significant importance were therefore targeted for restoration, including the Al-Azhar Park

and the Ayyubid fortification (which dates to the 12th century).

Cultural and creative initiatives can be a great catalyst for positive change in urban regeneration processes. By intertwining art, culture, and creativity, city administrators can highlight the aesthetic charm and cultural vibrancy of a certain region or neighborhood. Encouraging local artists, commissioning art installations, and hosting cultural events all play a role in fostering a healthy community identity.

Mecca and Lami in their 2020 article, argue that over the past few decades, culture has emerged as a predominant force driving urban regeneration on a global scale. Starting with the 1970s, local authorities in European cities like Copenhagen, Lyon, Vienna, Rome, and Stockholm have embraced strategies aimed at reconnecting residents with the beauty and charm of their cities. Primarily, these strategies sought to convert the city center into a safer and more appealing environment for both residents and visitors. Thus, new public policies were introduced in order to animate city life and public space. These included the organizing of various events and art festivals, establishing creative centers, pedestrianizing certain streets, enhancing street lighting, improving public transportation efficiency, and reducing car traffic. The main goal of these policies was not only to regenerate the local economy, but also to counter the trends of social isolation and cultural consumption focused exclusively on TV programs at home. Authorities thus understood and took advantage of the importance of city centers as social catalysts (Landry et al., 1996).

Beginning with the second half of the 1980s, recently deindustrialized cities adopted tangible strategies for revitalization through art. Notable examples include Cardiff, a city in the United Kingdom where public art was used extensively to enhance the coastal area in preparation for building a new concert hall; Bradford, in West Yorkshire, where the National Museum of Film and Photography and the Alhambra Theater were integrated into the tourism development strategy, or Sheffield, which developed a district of cultural industries. And if most cities in the 80s chose to invest in the regeneration of the center, a symbolic place for urban identity, more and more of today's municipalities are developing strategies for the revival of neglected or marginalized neighborhoods. The renovation of former industrial structures and the development of cultural neighborhoods offers alternatives to rediscover the past and unleash the creative potential of the region. In this context, Vahtrapuu (2021) illustrates the case of Barcelona,

Oslo, and Helsinki, where substantial investments have been made to restore riverbanks and incorporate them into city centers. Through residential buildings and newly created public spaces, including parks and other recreational areas, city administrators managed to create new connections between residents and nature, as well as create attractive leisure spaces and activities.

Vahtrapuu also mentions two important examples of urban renewal through arts and culture. The first is the Kultuurikatel district in Tallinn, Estonia, where an extensive program of rehabilitation was planned, aimed at architectural monuments in the city center built before 1940. The program extended and further included the revitalization of former industrial and military buildings in more remote areas, specifically in the coastal region of the city, buildings that were not in use during the 1940-1991 period. The most imposing rehabilitated building in The Kultuurikatel area is the former power station, which has been transformed into a cultural center, with public meeting spaces, concert halls and a theatre.

The second example offered by Vahtrapuu is the Arabianranta district of Helsinki, located four kilometers northwest of the city center. In 1992, plans were drawn up to transform this abandoned industrial area into a residential district. Work began in 1998 on brownfield lands near the coast, even though pollution remediation and damming costs were high compared to other types of redevelopment projects at the same distance from the city center. The project was a success and the thriving district currently includes housing units (including social apartments), offices, museums, a shopping park and the student campus of the Helsinki University of Art and Design. The centerpiece of the neighborhood, the former Arabia ceramics factory, has been renovated to house a museum, library, bookstores, cafes, office and commercial spaces. The district is separated from the sea by a strip of 20 hectares of green spaces, included in the Natura 2000 program. To highlight the artistic character of the newly animated district, the Helsinki authorities redirected up to 2% of the total construction costs to art funding. Thus, works of art were placed in strategic places: in public courtyards, on the banks of the water, on alleys and in parking lots (Vahtrapuu, 2021).

Regeneration through culture is a complex process that requires collaboration, creativity, and long-term effort. Tailoring strategies to the unique characteristics and needs of city communities is critical to a successful revitalization project. Investments in 'vernacular' culture (simple and meaningful experiences such as book clubs, dance classes, crochet meetings or themed neighborhood

festivals) have real potential (Edensor et al., 2010; Nicuta et al., 2018) as they respond to the need for belonging to the community.

Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, United States, a historic Japanese American neighborhood, is an eloquent example of the recovery and regeneration of a community through cultural initiatives. The Little Tokyo neighborhood has faced many challenges over the years, from the unjust prisons of World War II (during which 120,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned) to the threat of a radical transformation of the neighborhood under the process of expanding the city's civic center in the 1990s and the impact of COVID-19. In the current context, the Little Tokyo community (residents, businesses, activists, and non-profit organizations) are making considerable efforts to preserve the neighborhood's cultural and artistic distinctiveness. The Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) association, in collaboration with various organizations, has initiated an extensive program of cultural initiatives and artist residencies. Creatives interacted with community members through artistic workshops and addressed issues such as eviction, homelessness and strengthening neighborhood bonds. Another project invited 200 residents to get involved in designing a development plan for their community, based on their own needs and values. Among the changes expressed by residents. The residents highlighted several key neighborhood needs, including low-income housing, support for small business ventures, environmentally friendly infrastructure, and more open spaces for the arts.

In the case of Little Tokyo, arts and culture had a crucial role in the survival of the historic district, as well as for ensuring community health and well-being. Moreover, this approach led to a city awareness of the needs of marginalized communities.

Despite all these success stories, it is important for authorities to recognize that cultural initiatives alone may not address all challenges. In urban areas characterized by severe poverty and unemployment, an integrated cultural program should represent a significant part of a much wider regeneration strategy, one which needs to be accompanied by economic growth. Cities must, above all, realistically assess the capacity of cultural programs without underestimating their subtle impact (Landry et al., 1996).

LIMITS TO URBAN RENEWAL THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE. THE PROCESS OF GENTRIFICATION

Previous examples demonstrate how integrating culture and the arts into urban development strategies can have positive economic and social outcomes. When art is part of the vision for a better city, streets are transformed into open-air galleries, buildings become unconventional environments for creative expression, and the quality-of-life increases. Furthermore, culture can be the element that binds together urban diversity, building a sense of belonging and collective identity. In other words, urban regeneration through arts and culture opens new horizons in the transformation of the urban environment.

However, there are scenarios in which urban revitalization through culture may result in negative social consequences, with gentrification being the most prevalent phenomenon in this regard. The term “gentrification” was defined as a process in which working-class urban areas are revitalized by higher-income earners, this interaction leading to socio-economic transformation and to an increased attractiveness for investments (Osman, 2016). Other authors, such as Neil Smith (1982) and David Ley (2003), have examined the political and economic aspects of gentrification, often emphasizing the inequalities and negative social consequences for local communities. The process mainly involves touristic dimensions, as many cities in Europe undergo the revitalization of their central districts through an explosion of visitors, which is then followed by the phenomenon of gentrification. In Portugal, for example, the period of the Great Recession (2008–2014), which was defined by simultaneous national financial setbacks, led the government to turn to urban regeneration and the tourism industry as means to mitigate the crisis. Legislative measures have been implemented to attract international residents with higher income levels and have them investing in real estate. The Portuguese administration issued a number of tax incentives and residence permits for foreign investors. The phenomenon is even more evident in Lisbon's historic districts, such as Alfama, which has now become an important urban center for international real estate investors (Sequera and Nofre, 2020).

In 2019, Alfama was known as the neighborhood with the largest number of Airbnb tourist apartments in Lisbon. The district of 3300 inhabitants had 1703 apartments listed on the tourist rental platform. With 35% of the total housing in the neighborhood dedicated exclusively to tourists, Alfama resembles

a large "outdoor hotel" (Sequera and Nofre, 2020), and residents face various problems, from high rents, to crowded streets and a general discomfort in everyday life due to the large number of tourists. This kind of prioritization of the needs of tourists over those of the locals represents an aggressive form of urban transformation, affecting the middle- and low-income social classes. Managing this phenomenon requires implementing a complex set of strategies designed to protect vulnerable communities and preserve the authentic character of urban areas. These strategies include sustainable and balanced development with focus on affordable housing, strict real estate regulations and the protection of tenants through appropriate policies.

Gentrification may also arise due to the cultural and creative evolution of an area. The presence of artists in a certain neighborhood has the potential to entirely reshape its ambiance, leading to the emergence of art studios, galleries, open-air events, and bohemian gathering spots such as cafes and restaurants. Once a neighborhood becomes more attractive to higher earners and investors, the real estate market rises, driving up rents and the cost of living. Thus, arts and artists have traditionally been seen as having a role in gentrification and displacement of lower-income inhabitants from central city neighborhoods (Ley, 2003; Ioan et al. 2013, Luca & Ciobanu 2016).

According to some authors, gentrification can be a vehicle for positive changes in disadvantaged areas, as it can increase property values, provide access to quality services, decrease crime rates and the create a general sense of safety in the neighborhood (Papachristos et al., 2011). But there are many voices criticizing the phenomenon; in the long run, gentrification through arts can also cause the displacement and emigration of people with long-term residence in the area, as well as the bankruptcy or displacement of small local businesses (Doucet, 2014). However, more recent literature argues that the benefits of artistic developments in urban communities outweigh the negative effects of gentrification through culture, a phenomenon that has otherwise been recorded in a small number of cities and cannot yet be generalized (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; Stern and Seifert, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, cities are facing a rapid process of urbanization and a massive wave of immigrants, becoming increasingly vulnerable to a shortage of resources and a series of problems associated with urban decline. Regeneration initiatives are seen as

real and functional solutions in urban dynamics, improving the living conditions of the inhabitants, being thus considered important tools for local authorities in the transition to a sustainable future (Liu et al., 2023). However, it is crucial that urban regeneration strategies align with the local context and are flexible enough to adapt to various territorial development scenarios (Bromley et al., 2005).

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