The Role of Street Art in Sustainable Development: Art and Social Change

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential role of street art in making a contribution towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) via a review of the academic literature and a series of case studies of street art initiatives that demonstrate the congruence of this form of art with the SDGs and the 5 P's of the UN Agenda 2030: People (social), Planet (environmental), Prosperity (cities and economies), Peace, and Partnerships. The paper also examines the impact of visual forms of communication about sustainability issues, and concludes with a focus on the first organised initiative, internationally, to address the Sustainable Development Goals though street art - *TOward2030: WHAT ARE YOU DOING?* (Lavazza, 2019-2022). Building street art culture's awareness of the complex issues raised by the SDGs, encouraging artists to reflect on sustainability issues in their existing practice, and developing creative networks to include a wider range of stakeholders may augment the capacity of street art to make a significant contribution to progress towards the SDGs, although the instrumentalization of urban creativity towards the UN's agenda may be viewed by some as antithetical to the DIY ethic of the subculture.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainability, street art, social change

1. Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been described as a transformative agenda (UN 2015). This universal blueprint for global sustainable development has ambitious and comprehensive aims to eradicate poverty, protect the environment, and extend socio-economic inclusion (see Figure 1).

The British Council (2020) and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (2018) both provide a strong rationale for the relevance of arts and cultural initiatives to the sustainable development goals. Community-led projects that are grounded in art and education have been claimed to be effective in promoting cultural change and social cohesion towards sustainable development (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). However, arts and cultural programs are often under evaluated in practice, thus their impact is more often claimed than empirically demonstrated (British Council, 2020). Moreover, they are not universally benign

in their design and impact, and the arts may be instrumentally exploited to further violent and regressive agendas (Baily, 2018).

Art-based programs may be particularly effective in engaging communities when they are designed for, and adapted to work within, local cultural contexts. A review commissioned by the British Council on the Art of Peace: The value of culture in post-conflict recovery (Baily, 2018) found a series of positive outcomes for arts initiatives focused on security and stability (SDG 16). These include enhanced community engagement and collaboration; building skills for employment, particularly among marginalised young people; inclusive development initiatives that translate universal policy goals to regional development strategies; therapeutic interventions that may in part ameliorate the trauma of displacement and conflict; social cohesion, or the provision of a shared sense of heritage and culture

Figure 1. The Sustainable Development Goals. ©United Nations.

and identity to connect divided communities; and giving voice and agency to marginalised communities, especially when conventional forms of protest or public expression are impossible within local cultural contexts.

The existing literature on arts and cultural initiatives which address sustainable development refer to a wide range of art forms and cultural activities, including community theatre, arts education, murals, music, handicrafts, creative enterprises, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, digital engagement and artivism. As yet, street art-based initiatives have not been a focus within this literature. However, street art's responsiveness to site-specificity and to both global and local concerns may make this accessible art form particularly well suited to the adaptation of the SDGs to divergent cultural contexts. The process of cultural localisation is increasingly regarded as essential to translating the universal language of the SDGs into forms that resonate with people living in radically different cities, towns and regions around the world (Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, 2021). As an outsider to conventional cultural institutions and established forms of heritage, street art is an exemplar of a form of cultural expression that has a

uniquely accessible currency – one with the potential to effectively activate citizens' awareness of, and likelihood of taking action on, the sustainable development goals (Hansen, 2022). However, alongside this positive potential contribution, the environmental and health impact of organised street art-based initiatives - especially those that involve international travel and the use of environmentally damaging aerosol paint - should be considered. This is an area of concern for many artists and creative producers. For instance, artist Askew One (2021) has recently developed a series of provocative essays that aim to raise awareness of the environmental impact of spray paint use.

Despite the widespread shift in people's awareness of sustainability issues, translating these attitudes into changes in everyday behaviour and lasting lifestyle modifications has proved more difficult. For instance, Malaika (2016) notes that there is a stark value action gap between people's pro-environmental attitudes and their associated behaviours. A key challenge is the difficulty people may experience in associating their everyday actions with future consequences (Pahl et al., 2014). This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that such consequences are often

gradual in onset and may develop in their impact over a long-term time period (Moser & Dilling, 2004). While the long-term future-based temporality of consequences represents one particular challenge to encouraging sustainable changes in everyday actions, Boomsma, Pahl and Andrade (2016) point out a further challenge for environmental issues in particular is that they are often effectively 'invisible' in the majority of people's everyday lives, and are rather associated with distant and seldom-imagined parts of the world – for example, ice caps melting in the Arctic or forests burning in the Amazon. The upshot of this is that people may find it difficult to envisage the local impact of issues occurring in parts of the world far from their own neighbourhoods.

Studies of the images most commonly used to illustrate sustainability issues show that these are often global and abstract. Boomsma et al (2016) assert that this compounds the difficulty people may have in connecting these issues to their own lives and behaviours. They argue for the effectiveness of incorporating personally and locally relevant - rather than abstract and global – imagery. Images have long been argued to be more effective in capturing people's attention and provoking changes in behaviour than text-based communication (Whitehouse et al., 2006). However, our responses to images are not rational or linear. We perceive and interpret images in ways informed by the emotional responses they evoke (Myers, 1994). The strength of people's emotional responses may in turn predict their intention to take sustainable action in their everyday lives (Boomsma et al., 2016).

In both the sciences and the humanities there is some consensus that, regardless of the intentions of the image-maker, there is no universal or 'general purpose' vision or interpretation of what we see (Healey & Enns, 2002). Within cognitive science, and the field of visual communication, this variability tends to be framed in terms of perceptual and cognitive biases. Dunning and Balcetis (2013) assert that people apprehend and represent their environment in ways that align with and confirm their existing preferences and value frameworks. Street art practitioners are often attentive to the impact of place-based and socio-cultural contexts, as the value of imagery in prompting

reflexive agency is likely to be place-based and culturally specific – a key consideration for the cultural localisation of the SDGs.

Arts-based and humanities scholars tend to consider the function of images and art with an emphasis on aesthetics, interpretation, and the promotion of reflexive agency. According to Ranciere (2008) viewers are active interpreters, rather than passive recipients, of the visual:
Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed" (Ranciere, p.17).
Arts-based approaches often work creatively around the known issues with the communication of sustainability issues – e.g., uncertainty – with the aim of provoking people to ask active and reflexive questions (Thomsen, 2015). Rendell (2006: p. 4) argues that "art is functional in providing certain kinds of tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and social change. Art offers a place and occasion for new kinds of relationship to function between people." This is a mode of engagement relevant to the consideration of the impact of street art, and arts-based initiatives more generally, on viewers.

Alison Young (2014) suggests that encountering street art can lead to a sense of enchantment or wonder, as it arrests our habitual motion through the city. By this, she means all of the mundane journeys that people take in their everyday lives where they effectively stop actively seeing their environment, in walking the same route to work or school. Young asserts that street art has the power to arrest this habitual motion, and to surprise and enchant with unexpected changes in the visual landscape, which may in turn engage people in active interpretation and reflection. Similarly, Bengtsen (2018) claims that street art has the capacity to engage communities in a more active and mindful exploration of their environments. However, more recently, Bengtsen (2020) has noted that the increasing preponderance of sanctioned murals on the streets has the potential to lead to what he calls the "fossilisation" of urban public space, which may inhibit the conditions of production and unclaimed spaces necessary for unsanc-

tioned works to flourish. This, in turn may impact on the capacity of street art to change the ways that people think about and interact with their urban environments.

Street art-based initiatives often aim to raise people's awareness of social issues and to activate a sense of creative and political agency. Nuart, the world's longest running street festival, has long championed the capacity of street art to 'activate' public agency:

Street art is… driven by social, political and community agendas and initiatives… Our core goal is to bring art out of museums, galleries and public institutions onto the city streets and… to activate a sense of public agency… Our work is guided by our belief in the capacity for street art to positively change, enhance and inform the way we think about and interact with each other and the city (Nuart Festival, 2021).

Bengtsen (2018) similarly asserts that street art may provide a sense of community cohesion, belonging and connection that may inspire social action and enhance people's empathy with the plight of marginalised others – these are impacts clearly relevant to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, and related goals.

Although there is as yet little empirical evidence to support these claims with regard to the historically recent genre of street art, research on the impact of the more established allied artform of community murals supports these assertions. Tebes et al (2015: iv) maintain that "the singular power of murals is to engage a community, defined geographically or through a common experience, to come together to find meaning and shared purpose, including action for social change." Research on the impact of community murals demonstrates a public health impact at community level, with significant increases in collective efficacy, social cohesion and trust, and a reduction in experienced stigma, for residents living within a mile of newly painted murals (Tebes et al, 2015). This is in line with the evidence base in support of the positive impact of arts and cultural activities on wellbeing, health and mental health (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being) and with contemporary definitions of culture that emphasise its instrumental role in facilitating the levels of social cohesion and readiness for behavioural change conducive to sustainable development.

Since the early 2000s, street art has been enthusiastically adopted by city planners and local governments seeking to develop local environments and bring culture to communities. Street art is now a ubiquitous feature of many contemporary cities, and hundreds of mural-based street art festivals are held internationally. Cities and local governments increasingly approach street art as a means of 'bringing cities to life', with the hope that it may help to revitalise civic engagement and a sense of belonging in urban environments. Following Florida's (2002) controversial but still influential creative cities model, cultural planning and the mobilisation of creativity is now regarded as integral to cities' competitive economic performance, locally and internationally (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004). However, McCauliffe (2012; 2017) argues that attempts to harness street art as a form of creativity in contemporary cities have historically been grounded in a pervading sense of loss of community in urban environments, and that such creative projects have often nostalgically aimed to restore the conditions that will resurrect lost communal experiences. He asserts that in practice, this longing for lost forms of community has been often aligned with a desire for greater social order, and a clean and orderly city – with graffiti traditionally positioned as a threat to this order.

Creative city approaches instrumentalise culture and the arts as crucial elements in the regeneration and development of urban environments, and in the symbolic representation of cities as dynamic and creative. However, critics (e.g., Schacter, 2016) have argued that street art may contribute to the process of gentrification and displacement by acting as symbols that investors perceive as heralding an area's readiness for development – in which process, artists and other local residents are often eventually forced to relocate, as rising rents in creative districts transform places of artistic production into areas where art on the streets is 'consumed' by new upwardly mobile residential communities. The contribution of arts and cultural initiatives to the process of gentrification and displacement is also raised as a note of caution by the UCLG (2018) in their discussion of the role of culture in SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Figure 2. Aida Wilde. "The Lunatics Decorate…" Hackney Wick, London, 2016-2021. Photographs ©Aida Wilde.

2. Case study: Aida Wilde (London) "The Lunatics Decorate…" London, UK, 2016-2021

Street art practitioners are often critically responsive to the social, economic, and environmental issues raised by the process of gentrification and displacement. Gentrification is a recurring meta-theme referenced by many street artists in their work. Over the last decade, London-based artist Aida Wilde has organised a series of anti-gentrification art takeovers and artist-led initiatives in Hackney Wick, an area of London traditionally home to artists and creatives. In 2016, she curated a takeover of the iconic yet derelict Lord Napier building, featuring many of Hackney Wick's internationally renowned street artists (see above). This lasted for five years, even as new high-rise developments sprouted up around it, until all of the artwork on the Lord Napier was erased as part of its development by the Electric Star pub chain in 2021.

Street art is a critically reflexive genre that may operate as a barometer of community concerns with social, economic, and environmental issues (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). It has been characterised as a form of art that empowers people to assert their right to freedom of expression and to the city itself (e.g., Abarca, 2019). However, Abarca limits his observations to 'human scale' works and asserts that this romanticised position does not reflect the con-

temporary genre of street art, at least as operationalised in commissioned 'street art related' murals, while Schacter (2016) claims that street art is a period of art history that is effectively over.

Nonetheless, some continue to position street art as a creative form of resistance that questions and critiques the environment, challenges inequalities, and offers new visions for social, political, and environmental futures. Street artist and activist Bill Posters (2020: 12) encapsulates this perspective in describing street art as a weapon in the struggle against oppression:

Street art… is a weapon in the struggle against oppression, social and environmental injustice and conformity… forms of art that manifest creative forms of resistance to the multiple threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, racism (and the ever-present fear of 'the other') and inequality that threaten our understanding of what is truly important in life.

In their discussion of the role of culture in SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, both the UCLG and the British Council note the capacity of the arts to facilitate social change by highlighting oppression and injustice, and that the protection of the right to freedom of expression is fundamental to this goal. Baily (2018: 9) concurs that "the arts have long provided a platform for expressing oppo-

Figure 3. Bahia Shehab. Thousand No Wall. Cairo 2012. Photographs ©Bahia Shehab.

sition, challenging the status quo and resisting oppression peacefully [and may provide] a voice… when all other avenues of political expression [are] closed." Street art's grounding in forms of creative activism, and its accessibility to everyday citizens (both as producers and consumers) arguably make this art form allied to the sustainable development goals.

### 3. Case study: Bahia Shehab "A Thousand Times No." Cairo, Egypt, 2012

Street art and graffiti are often used as peaceful means of resistance, especially when other forms of communication are not possible. During the Arab Spring pro-democracy uprisings, street artist Bahia Shehab began spray painting the walls of Cairo to mark the widespread community outrage at the oppressive and violent actions of the authorities. She researched 1000 different ways of depicting 'لا', the Arabic word for "no" and painted messages such as "No to military rule." "No to violence." "No to dictatorship" and "No to beating women." Shehab's creative acts of resistance had both a local and an international impact, and she became the first Arab woman to receive the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture. Notably, prior to the Arab Spring, Shehab had never painted on the street, and

did not identify as a street artist. Her engagement in street art was not part of an organised arts program but was rather a self-initiated creative response to local and regional political circumstances (UNESCO, 2020).

Herein lies one of the strengths often claimed for street art as a democratic and accessible art form. It is argued to be democratic and accessible for two main reasons (Hansen, 2022). Firstly, in order to view it, citizens do not need to visit cultural institutions – which in any case may be inaccessible to many. Secondly, street art is a form of everyday creativity that is inclusive and accessible – people do not need to identify as artists, or have formal training in the arts, to engage in forms of urban creativity. In theory, everyone can participate in conversations on urban walls – although in some cultural contexts, this form of creative expression is not without considerable risk, and differently embodied, gendered and racialised persons may face different levels of risk (Posters, 2020).

4. Case Study: Street Art in the Campaign for Marriage Equality in Australia, 2017

Australia has a long history of discrimination against sexual minorities, with the decriminalisation of homosexuality
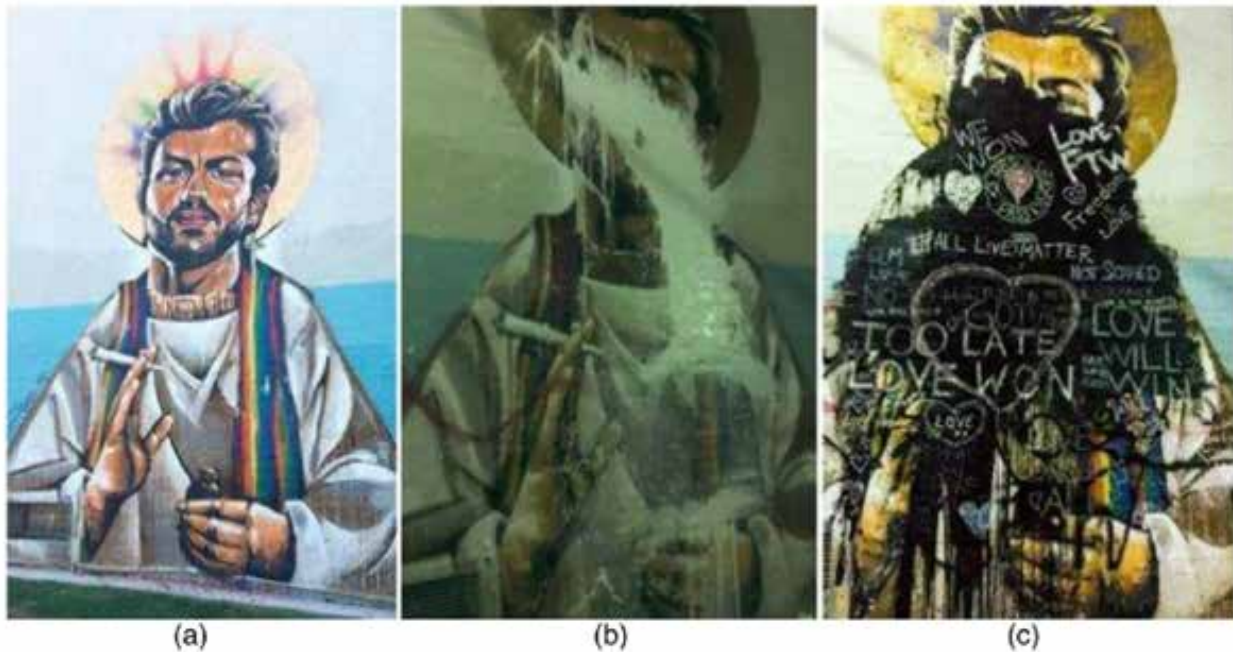
Figure 4. Saint George. Scott Marsh, Newtown. (a) Shows the original mural; (b) Shows the first attempt to paint bomb the mural; (c) Shows the mural painted over, with subsequent messages of resistance written in chalk over the buffed surface. Photographs ©Scott Marsh.

occurring as late as 1996 in some states. Between 2004 and 2017, 22 same-sex marriage bills were unsuccessfully brought before the Australian parliament before the eventual legalisation of same sex marriage in December 2017, following a national voluntary postal plebiscite. The six-week campaign leading up to the vote for marriage equality was marked by an increase in reports of homophobic hate crime. This has since been described by some as an acute external minority stress event which took a measurable toll on the mental health of LGBT+ people and their allies (Hansen, 2021).

This period was characterised by a highly emotive public debate marked by citizens' own political visual commentary in public space, via the street art and graffiti that proliferated during this time. Fundamentalist religious groups attempted to erase pro-marriage equality street art. However, in practice these attempted erasures inspired the proliferation of acts of creative resistance. This is evident above in the messages of defiance and hope added by

the local community to artist Scott Marsh's partially erased marriage equality murals—and in allied creative responses which show continued societal reflection and engagement. A musical which re-enacted the fate of Marsh's marriage equality street art was later developed and performed as part of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival.

The British Council (2020) argue for the capacity of the arts to operate as an innovative means of awareness raising and communicating vital information in an inclusive and culturally sensitive manner. Bengtsen (2018) notes similarly that street art is a persuasive way of engaging people with sustainable development issues and is a powerful agent of change. This is in part a product of the positive disruption of routine that unanticipated encounters with ephemeral street artworks represent in opening up space for active reflection on social, economic and environmental issues, which may spur people's motivation to adjust future behaviour accordingly.

Figure 5. *'Save Our Souls.' Splash and Burn Artist-Led Initiative. Curated by Ernest Zacharevic, Produced by Charlotte Pyatt, Sumatra 2018.* Photographs ©Ernest Zacharevic & Charlotte Pyatt.

5. Case Study: 'Save Our Souls.' Splash and Burn Artist-Led Initiative. Curated by Ernest Zacharevic & Produced by Charlotte Pyatt, Sumatra 2018

In 2018, artist Ernest Zacharevic collaborated with the Orangutan Information Centre and the Sumatran Orangutan Society to cut a giant SOS distress call into an oil palm plantation in Sumatra. The land was acquired by cosmetics company LUSH who partnered with SOS for the campaign. This artist-led initiative draws on both street art and land art traditions to expose the destruction of Indonesia's native forests and their associated ecosystems.

Save Our Souls is innovative in the scope of its aims. These include clearing a total of 100 hectares of plantation, planting trees native to the local forest, studying and safeguarding animals returning to the land, and building permaculture farms and public schools to employ and educate local communities. As such, this project follows SDG17: Partnership for the Goals, and illustrates the ways in which artists may extend their networks to productively engage with local governments, NGOs, private companies and other stakeholders to encourage sustainable social, economic and environmental change, without sacrificing the foundational DIY/activist principles of the genre.

Beyond simple awareness raising or the illustration of isolated issues, this project illustrates the capacity of art-based interventions to serve as a bridge to encourage critical reflection and collaborative action on complex intersecting issues - in this case, the negative impact of (economically positive) agricultural development on the biodiversity of tropical forests in Sumatra. *Save Our Souls* highlights the at times counterproductive relationship between environmental sustainability goals and socio-economic goals. This may in turn facilitate critical awareness of some of the inherent tensions and trade-offs between the SDGs, as in practice progress on one goal can be to the detriment of progress on another.
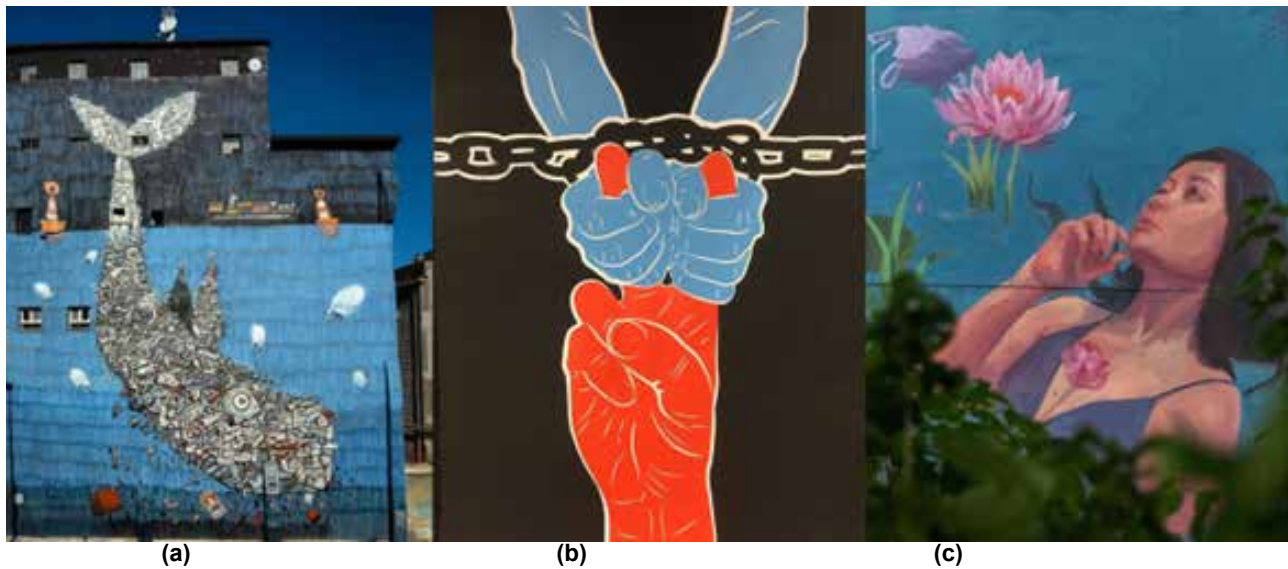
Figure 6.

(a) Phase I. TOward2030. SDG 14. Life Below Water. Mr Fijodor, Turin, Italy, 2019

(b) Phase II. TOward2030. SDG16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Prickly Sauce (TOward Tomorrow Prize Winner)

(c) Phase III. Vanguard x Bristol TOward2030. SDG12. SDG12 - Responsible Consumption. Caryn Koh, Bristol, UK, 2021.
Photographs ©Lavazza

6. TOward2030: WHAT ARE YOU DOING? (Lavazza, 2018-2022)

TOward2030: WHAT ARE YOU DOING? (Lavazza, 2018-2022) represents the first organised initiative, internationally, to address all 17 sustainable development goals though street art. The title given to the project aims to provide a call to reflection and accountable action in asking, "what are you doing?" This multiphase project is informed by an approach to culture as the missing pillar of sustainability and positions street art as a means to actively shape people's awareness of, and engagement with the SDGs.

As the first project to initiate city-wide public art action on the UN's sustainable development goals, *TOward2030: WHAT ARE YOU DOING?* provides a test case for future initiatives for local, city-wide and international initiatives at the intersection of culture and sustainable action. Fox and Macleod (2021) regard TOward2030 as an example of the evolution of good practice in citizen engagement that has improved awareness of the SDGs. In 2020-21, the City of Philadelphia launched a similarly ambitious city-wide mural campaign that also encompassed all 17 SDGs. This was co-produced by Global Philadelphia and the long running Mural Arts Philadelphia. However, despite a shared focus on city-wide public art addressing all 17 SDGs, the Philadelphia-based *Sustainable Goals Campaign* follows a different model to *TOward2030.* It is exclusively mural-based, and draws on Philadelphia's long history of community murals, rather than *TOward2030's* focus on street art's DIY/activist history and plurality of creative forms (including muralism). Further, the Philadelphia model is grounded in securing individual corporate sponsors for each SDG mural and allocating grants for associated community groups who are otherwise not actively involved in the project, whilst the *TOward2030* model (having benefited from three developmental phases) more actively engages the involvement of community groups, NGOs, local governments, and a range of SDG-allied stakeholders.

Phase I of the *TOward2030* project (2018-2019) involved an initial city-wide street art action in Turin, an Italian city renowned for its public art. 17 artists each responded to one of the SDGs, in addition to an overarching goal devised by Lavazza – Goal O: Spreading the Message. Marotta and Rabino (2020: 7) claim that Phase I of the project made Turin effectively "the world's first open air ambassador city of the United Nation's Global Goals." Street art from Phase I of the project was photographed by internationally renowned photographer Martha Cooper; an illustrated book was produced; and street art tours were held. In addition to the viewers of the physical artworks on the walls of the city of Turin, the project received significant online coverage and interest on social media. The dissemination of images of street art online and on social media – though perhaps not as powerful as the physical work in situ – have the potential to reach far wider audiences than those exposed to the work in situ (MacDowall, 2019). Further, an online mode of viewing allows for the combination of texts and links to further information and SDG-relevant resources, which may help to propel viewers towards action.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the second phase of the *TOward2030* project had to be executed as a virtual, rather than a physical initiative. However, the social media campaign-based adaptation of Phase II facilitated the continued impact and reach of the project. This phase involved a democratic open call for artists to respond creatively to the SDGs in an international contest entitled *TOward TOmorrow.* Phase II built on the structure established in Phase I by facilitating connections between artists and global NGOs. The NGOs reviewed all art submitted to illustrate the SDG most relevant to their own work, while creative industry professionals selected the final overall (youth/adult) competition winners.

Phase III of *TOward2030* (2021) took place in Bristol, United Kingdom (in collaboration with the Vanguard. Bristol Street Art: Evolution of a global movement exhibition at Bristol Museum's M Shed). The Vanguard Exhibition (2021) incorporated a focus on the SDGs via the inclusion of an Art for Social Change research wall (Zacharevic, Pitcher & Pyatt, 2021) which clustered together a wide range of existing individual street art interventions according to the 5 P's of the UN Agenda 2030: People (social), Pla-

net (environmental), Prosperity (cities and economies), Peace, and Partnerships. Brown and Rasmussen (2019: n.p.) assert that the 5 P's are a useful means of measuring progress on the SDGs in a way that recognises "the SDGs [as] an intertwined framework instead of a group of siloed goals [and that] progress on one P [should] balance and support progress on another."

TOward2030's final phase facilitated the embedded localisation of the global concerns represented by the SDGs via the involvement of a range of local community groups devoted to addressing the issues raised by each of the 17 SDGs, and liaison with a range of external stakeholders via Bristol's established SDG Alliance.

The *TOward2030* project encouraged participating artists to rethink their existing practice through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals and to develop their networks to include a broader range of stakeholders. Participating artists reported that they became more aware of the intersecting issues raised by the SDGs (Hansen, 2022). Stakeholders in turn were encouraged to think about the role of culture in general, and street art in particular, in city-wide strategies designed to address the SDGs.

Despite the clear relevance of street art to the sustainable development goals, until recently very few street artists appeared aware of - let alone employed - the language of the SDGs, and even fewer worked in active collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders - including local government, policy-makers and NGOs - to amplify the impact and reach of their work. Indeed, most street artists would likely not ordinarily conceive of the potential audiences for and impact of their work in this manner. Further, it seems likely that organised initiatives of this kind may be viewed by some subcultural members as a form of co-optation and instrumentalization that is antithetical to street art's independent and critical ethos (Ross et al., 2020). In any case, as a culture that has long been engaged in grassroots creative activism for social justice and environmental goals, street art appears to be already broadly aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – even in the absence of organised street art-based initiatives designed to address the SDGs.

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