

## CHARACTERIZING THE URBAN CREATIVITY ECOSYSTEM: AGENTS, PROCESSES, AND MEDIATIONS TOWARD SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

*By recognizing creativity as a driver of urban sustainability, this study analyses the transition from conventional planning toward the Urban Creativity Ecosystem, understood as a multiscalar network in which human, infrastructural, institutional, and symbolic capitals co-produce social, economic, cultural, and environmental value. Through a selective, structured, and integrative literature review and comparative case analysis, the study identifies its components and dynamics of scaling, co-evolution, and resilience. It proposes an open planning framework in which urban professionals and civil society collaborate to promote equitable development. The cases of El Campo de Cebada and Luz nas Vielas show the role of artists as cultural mediators capable of activating shared narratives, community bonds, and appropriation of public space. Finally, the article concludes that these processes require governance models that prevent heritage commodification, residential displacement, and the loss of local identity.*

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## 1. Introduction: From the traditional urban-planning process to the Urban Creativity Ecosystem

In urban-planning terminology, “urban land” refers, quite simply, to the city itself: the sum of the historical and contemporary physical fabric that sustains the city’s social and economic relations (Lynch, 1984, pp. 110-112; Newman & Kenworthy, 2015, pp. 34-36). Historic centres, spaces in which successive societies have accumulated their built legacy, concentrate heritage and cultural values that today face “pressures of modernization, demographic decline and physical deterioration” (Getty Conservation Institute, 2009, p. 3; UNESCO, 2011, p. 2).

By contrast, more recently created neighbourhoods often lack the vitality characteristic of consolidated urban fabrics: the absence of mixed uses translates into “empty streets and underused parks” (Gu et al., 2024, p. 4; Molina Costa, 2014, p. 61; Montgomery, 1998, p. 93). Empirical studies confirm that monofunctional districts show “critically low levels of urban vitality” when pedestrian flows and service density are analysed (Garau & Annunziata, 2022, p. 3; Wang et al., 2025, p. 11).

These findings reinforce the premise - already advanced by Jacobs (1961, pp. 148-151) and the European Commission (European Commission, 1990, pp. 23-24) - that every urban intervention, whether in the historic core or in modern expansions, should seek a balance between heritage preservation, functional diversity, and the provision of public spaces and facilities that guarantee high environmental and social quality.

Cultural and artistic practices have demonstrated their capacity to foster economic innovation, social cohesion, and environmental resilience in both historic centres and modern districts (Evans, 2009, p. 1032; Landry, 2008, p. xiii). The recognition of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability (Hawkes, 2001, p. 25) has led planners and policymakers to incorporate creative strategies to revitalize deteriorated heritage areas and activate monofunctional suburbs (UNESCO, 2019, p. 5). Evidence from urban activation and place-identity building projects - placemaking projects - shows that arts-led interventions stimulate local economies and strengthen community ties (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010, p. 3), while studies based on multisource data reveal that neighbourhoods with lower functional diversity and weak patterns of urban activity tend to show reduced levels of urban vitality (Chen et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023).

On this basis, this article proposes to address these relationships through the concept of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem. Understanding this ecosystem is essential for analysing how creative capacities, urban infrastructures, institutional frameworks, and the social fabric can be articulated in more inclusive, liveable, and low-carbon urban-development strategies (Duxbury et al., 2016, p. 7; Rogerson, 2021, p. 84). In this framework, artists do not act solely as producers of objects or aesthetic interventions, but as cultural mediators capable of activating shared imaginaries, strengthening community participation, and contributing to the configuration of socially sustainable urban environments.

This approach is especially pertinent in a context in which creativity, together with originality and initiative, has been identified as one of the key skills for the jobs of the future (Withing, 2020). However, creativity should not be understood as an innate talent reserved for a few exceptional individuals, but as an aptitude that can be stimulated, guided, and developed through learning processes (Robinson, 2009; Selva Ruíz et al., 2018). In the architectural field, this capacity is not reduced to formal production or the embellishment of space; rather, it participates in the construction of relationships between interior and exterior, place and function, users and built materiality, as well as in the production of evocative, communicative, and conceptual values in architectural work (De Souza Sánchez, 2018, p. 215). From this perspective, urban creativity can be understood as a relational, cultural, and situated capacity, especially relevant in a stage of hybridization among disciplines and artistic genres in which contemporary creation tends to be configured as a collaborative and multidisciplinary process (De Souza Sánchez et al., 2022).

Urban planning is a complex and multifaceted field that shapes the development and management of urban areas around the world. To understand the complexities of urban-planning processes, it is essential to recognize the various agents or stakeholders involved in them. The main actors participating in urban planning are the State, the private sector, and civil society. Within this framework, creativity does not operate as an added or merely ornamental element, but as a cross-cutting factor capable of influencing the definition of objectives, the articulation of agents, and the social, cultural, and environmental orientation of urban interventions. Figure 1 synthesizes this relationship by representing how urban-planning processes can be influenced by creativity. On the basis of this diagram, it is necessary to describe the main creative agents involved in these processes, as well as their functions and contributions. Although there may be significant differences in each country, we can establish certain common points and outline the main elements that shape sustainable urban planning. These creative agents perform various functions, ranging from policy formulation and infrastructure development to community participation and environmental assessment.

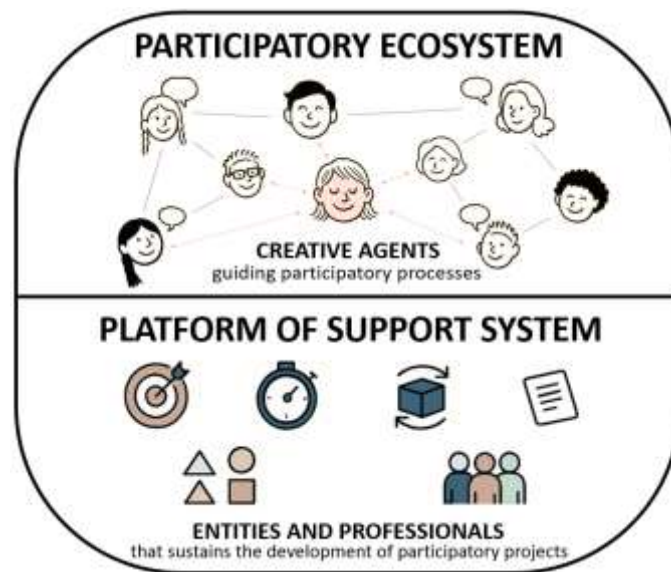
**Figure 1.** Relationship between creativity and sustainable urban-planning processes



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Finally, this study characterizes the broad spectrum of creativity's influence on urban landscapes and examines in depth the multifaceted nature of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem and its fundamental role in shaping sustainable communities, seeking to define its basic components and clarify its significance. It also explores the diverse role of artists in the context of socially open urban-planning processes and their contribution to the realization of sustainable urban environments. In schematic terms, the existence of a participatory ecosystem requires the establishment of a support system: a platform of entities and professionals that sustains the development of participatory projects undertaken by residents under the guidance of creative agents (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Participatory Urban Creativity Ecosystem and its support system



Source: Prepared by the author based on graphic sketches by Britton and Anderson (n.d.).

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this research is to structure and define the Urban Creativity Ecosystem, with the aim of clarifying, describing, and detailing the influence of art and creativity on the configuration of the main agents involved in participatory processes of sustainable urban planning. To this end, the following specific objectives are pursued: (1) to describe the professionals involved in open processes of sustainable urban planning; (2) to examine the role of civil-society agents in achieving sustainable urban environments; and (3) to analyse the relationship between artistic interventions in public space and community participation, highlighting the role of artists as cultural mediators.

This study employs a selective, structured, and integrative literature review combined with a comparative case analysis. The corpus comprises 94 references, including peer-reviewed scientific articles, books, book chapters, institutional reports, grey literature, project documentation, journalistic sources, and specialized digital resources. The sources were identified through open academic databases and indexes - Google Scholar, JSTOR, Dialnet, DOAJ, and ERIH PLUS - as well as through institutional repositories, official project websites, and specific documentation on the cases analysed. Priority was given to recent literature, with a significant presence of references published between 2021 and 2026. The journals represented in the corpus include *Street Art & Urban Creativity*, *Urban Studies*, *Sustainability*, *City, Culture and Society*, *Journal of Urban Design*, *Sustainable Cities and Society*, *Heliyon*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *Critique of Anthropology*, *WIREs Climate Change*, *Space and Polity*, *City, Human Review*, *ACE: Architecture, City and Environment*, and *IUS Doctrina*, among others. The review was guided by criteria of conceptual and empirical relevance in relation to three axes: (i) the Urban Creativity Ecosystem and its components; (ii) the functions of the State, the private sector, and civil society in sustainable urban-planning processes; and (iii) the cultural-mediation functions of public art. Subsequently, a qualitative and comparative reading of emblematic cases - El Campo de Cebada, Luz nas Velas, Outsiders Krew, and East Side Gallery, among others - was undertaken to trace mechanisms of co-creation, knowledge transfer, stewardship, care or co-responsible management, as well as outcomes linked to collective efficacy, pride of place, environmental literacy, and the symbolic appropriation of urban space.

### 3. Defining the Urban Creativity Ecosystem

The evolution from the creative-city metaphor to the concept of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem represents an epistemological shift: it moves from a focus on competition for individual talent and investment attraction to an approach based on the systemic interdependence of actors, infrastructures, symbolic-economic flows, and environmental conditions. Pratt (2021) stresses that speaking of an ecosystem “helps us to reconsider the networks, connections and interdependencies” that characterize the creative economy, and places sustainability as a structural criterion of success (p. 1).

Recent literature understands the Urban Creativity Ecosystem as a socio-ecological system in which infrastructures, actors, and symbolic-economic flows interact to produce cultural, social, and environmental value. This holistic vision integrates three fundamental concepts:

- I. Local capitals and networks (Kerimoglu, 2024, p. 1)
- II. Collaborative infrastructures - coworking spaces, hubs, open laboratories - that act as “intermediaries” connecting resources and communities (Gao & Psenner, 2024, pp. 1-2)
- III. Orientation toward sustainability and social justice, incorporating the SDGs into cultural production (Spychalska-Wojtkiewicz et al., 2025, p. 2)

These ideas are articulated through four constitutive components of the system (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Constitutive components of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem

| Component                                 | Description                                                                                            | Key evidence                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Human and relational</b>               | Creatives, scientists, entrepreneurs, and their trust-based networks.                                  | Bettencourt (2013) shows that, at the urban scale, socioeconomic outputs grow superlinearly - more ideas per person as population increases - revealing the multiplier effect of creative interactions (p. 1438). |
| <b>Infrastructural</b>                    | Physical and digital spaces: coworking spaces, fab labs, connectivity.                                 | UNESCO and the World Bank (2021) describe the “physical and spatial environment” as the main enabler in their “Cities, Culture and Creativity” framework (p. 15).                                                 |
| <b>Institutional-regulatory framework</b> | Cultural policies, funding, flexible regulatory frameworks, and cultural and educational institutions. | The same report documents that public-private partnerships and polycentric governance facilitate the translation of creativity into social and economic benefits (UNESCO, 2021, p. 48).                           |
| <b>Symbolic-cognitive</b>                 | Local narratives, territorial brands, cultural repertoires.                                            | Komorowski et al. (2021) identify creative networks as the “glue” that articulates cultural and social value within local ecosystems (p. 2).                                                                      |

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Within this framework, cultural and educational institutional actors play a strategic role in articulating the Urban Creativity Ecosystem. Universities, schools, laboratories, archives, museums, foundations, and art centres can act as platforms of mediation between expert knowledge, local heritage, applied creativity, and territorial needs. The experience of Project-Based Learning with real projects developed in La Orotava shows how collaboration among the university, architecture and advertising-communication students, municipal representatives, and cultural entities can activate processes of interpretation, communication, and valorization of urban, natural, and artistic heritage. In this case, the university does not operate only as a teaching institution, but as a territorial agent capable

of mobilizing creative talent, connecting public and cultural actors, and contributing to the positioning of the city as a destination for investment, work, residence, and tourism (De Souza Sánchez & Godoy Rodríguez, 2021, pp. 715, 721, 724, 736-737).

The systemic dynamics and functions that shape the Urban Creativity Ecosystem present essential features - mechanisms, effects, and empirical references - which, when compared, reveal how each dynamic reinforces the capacity of cities to innovate, adapt, and generate social, economic, and cultural value within a sustainability framework (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Dynamics and functions of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem

| <b>Dynamic/Function</b>                  | <b>Operational description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Autocatalysis and scaling</b>         | Cities act as “social reactors”: once a critical threshold of relational density has been exceeded, urban infrastructures channel the interactions that trigger knowledge generation and innovation (Bettencourt, 2013, p. 1439).                                |
| <b>Co-evolution of actors and spaces</b> | Spatial changes - new centres, coworking spaces, laboratories, and so on - and the configuration of creative networks mutually reinforce one another; cases of rural intermediation show how these spaces rearticulate local resources (Florida, 2012, p. viii). |
| <b>Value cycles and resilience</b>       | Quadruple-helix networks - academia-industry-government-civil society - distribute risks and absorb external shocks, increasing ecosystem resilience, especially in post-pandemic scenarios (Komorowski et al., 2021, p. 6).                                     |

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

It should be noted that, within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs - UNESCO and the World Bank (2021) explicitly link creative ecosystems to three “resulting benefits”: spatial - SDG 11 -, economic - SDG 8 -, and social - SDG 10. Section 1 of their report highlights that, before COVID-19, cultural industries generated around US\$2.25 trillion annually and employed more young people than any other sector (p. 8), while also warning of labour vulnerabilities and the growing pressure of gentrification.

In summary, an Urban Creativity Ecosystem is now defined as a multiscalar adaptive network in which human, infrastructural, institutional, and symbolic capitals jointly generate cultural, social, economic, and environmental value. Its effectiveness depends less on the static accumulation of assets than on the quality of interactions and the capacity for collective learning to orient them toward sustainability and equity.

### ***3.1. Professionals involved in sustainable and socially open urban-planning processes***

Urban planners are no longer considered merely technicians at the service of public administration and political action, but also technicians of civil society (Friedmann, 1998). Urban planning should undoubtedly be a political activity based on an alliance among professionals, politicians, and the general public (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999). According to Peter Calthorpe (2013), urban planners are professionals who specialize in creating and implementing comprehensive urban-development plans. They work on zoning regulations, land-use policies, and infrastructure planning. Most urban planners are architects, urban designers, and landscape architects who contribute to the physical and aesthetic dimensions of urban planning. They define the characteristics of new urban layouts, the development of new buildings, public spaces (Carmona, 2021), the renovation and transformation of neighbourhoods, and transport networks (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Main professionals involved in conventional urban-planning processes



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

With regard to transport networks, civil engineers and road engineers are essential for the design and construction of urban infrastructure, ensuring functionality and safety (Dimitriou, 1992). As Todd Litman (2023) explains, transport experts are professionals who should focus on creating efficient and sustainable transport systems, including public transport, cycling infrastructure, and safe and accessible pedestrian routes. However, as Soria-Lara et al. (2022) remind us, transport projects require a deep and detailed environmental assessment; therefore, the circle of experts traditionally involved in urban planning would not be complete without the participation of environmental consultants, professionals trained in biology, geography, and environmental sciences who conduct the preliminary environmental analysis and assess the future impact of urban-development projects, providing recommendations for sustainable practices (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Main professionals involved in sustainable urban-planning processes.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Archaeologists and art professionals, including art historians, as advocates of artistic and cultural heritage thanks to their expertise in the discovery and interpretation of historical and artistic assets, also play an important role in defining sustainable urban policies. Artistic and cultural heritage is an invaluable asset that enriches the identity of cities and contributes to their vitality. As Giulia Torta et al. (2019) point out, urban policies aimed at preserving and promoting heritage are fundamental for maintaining cultural diversity and fostering a sense of belonging.

Finally, the list of professionals would not be complete without adding the participation of economists and sociologists, who, through their economic and social analyses, assess the financial viability of urban projects and their possible economic and social impacts on local communities. Leichenko and Silva (2014) and Solecki et al. (2011) note that the

environmental consequences of climate change generate a major impact worldwide on national economies, but at the local level they are felt most harshly by the poorest strata of society, who often reside in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of cities. Public economic policies should therefore focus on the equitable and sustainable development of infrastructure and facilities to mitigate and reduce the impact of the dramatic consequences of extreme weather events (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Connections among professionals involved in open processes of sustainable urban planning



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

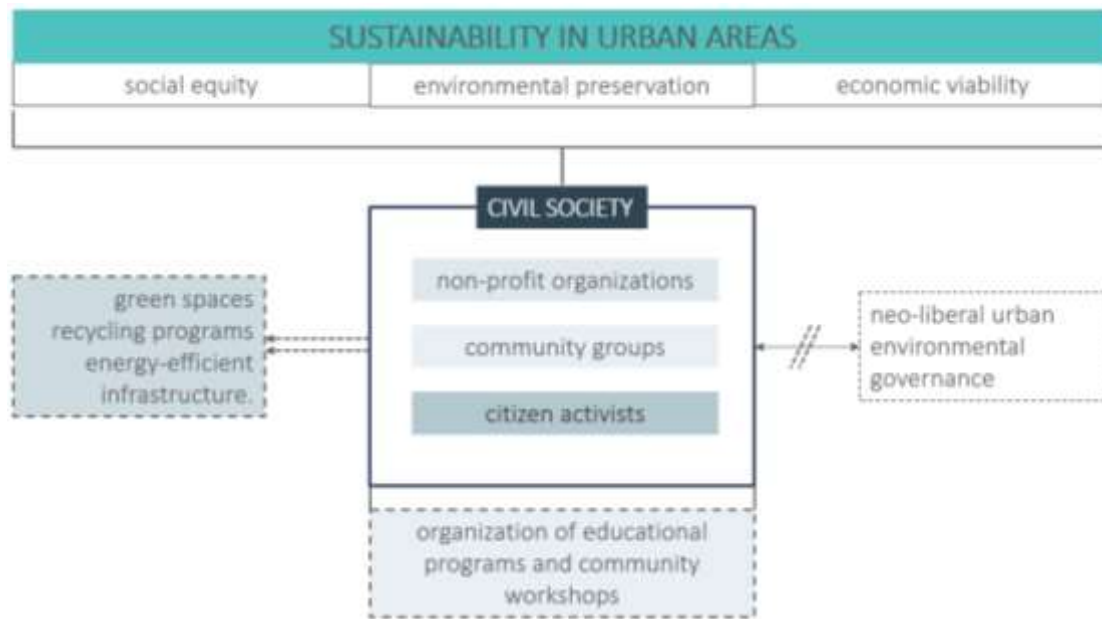
### ***3.2. The role of civil-society agents in achieving sustainable urban environments***

Achieving sustainability in urban areas involves complex challenges related to social equity, environmental preservation, and economic viability. Civil-society agents, including non-profit organizations, community groups, and activists, play a fundamental role in advancing sustainability goals. Analysing this multifaceted role makes it possible to understand civil-society agents in the promotion and achievement of sustainable urban environments and to gain insight into the dynamics of inclusive, environmentally responsible, and economically viable urban development.

As Roy (2011) demonstrates, non-profit organizations and local community-based organizations can act as a counterweight within neoliberal urban environmental governance. In addition, local neighbourhood associations can advocate sustainability at the grassroots level by promoting green spaces, recycling programmes, and energy-efficient infrastructure (Orr, 2004). Likewise, organized citizens and activists can pressure local governments to adopt sustainable urban policies, often mobilizing public support for renewable energy, conservation, and environmentally responsible urban planning (Leontidou, 2010; Lopes de Souza, 2006).

Moreover, as Igoe (2010) and Hart (1997) explain, the frequent organization of educational programmes and community workshops on environmental awareness by civil-society agents helps promote local environmental awareness and the adoption of ecological behaviours. All this favours citizen involvement in decision-making through participatory urban planning and makes it possible to incorporate sustainable practices and community contributions into urban-development projects (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** The role of civil-society agents in achieving sustainable urban environments



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

### 3.3. Public art and community participation: artists as cultural mediators

Contemporary urban theory has shifted the understanding of public art from its ornamental function toward its relational, cultural, and political dimension. Within this framework, it can operate as a practice of mediation among diverse publics, disputed spaces, and overlapping urban agendas. At the neighbourhood scale, the concept of “Creative Neighbourhoods” makes it possible to situate creativity as an urban strategy aimed at activating citizen participation, revitalizing areas affected by processes of social exclusion, and fostering forms of smart and sustainable urbanism based on collective intelligence (De Souza Sánchez, 2022, pp. 27-28). This perspective shifts attention away from the artistic intervention understood as an isolated object and toward processes of urban transformation in which art acquires cultural, social, and political value: it shapes collective relations, makes conflicts, aspirations, and hopes visible, and contributes to the construction of shared identity. In continuity with this approach, artistic interventions that are explicitly framed as connectors among art, society, and individual participation can contribute to the development of creative neighbourhoods that reinforce environmental resilience and social cohesion (De Souza Sánchez, 2024, p. 236). From this perspective, artists act as cultural mediators: they not only produce images or objects, but also facilitate processes of collective interpretation, symbolic appropriation, and the shared construction of urban space.

El Campo de Cebada was the self-managed transformation of the empty plot left by the demolition of the former La Latina sports centre - approximately 2,300 m<sup>2</sup> - a project halted by the 2008 economic crisis, into an open and free public space. After a temporary occupation during La Noche en Blanco in September 2010, neighbourhood associations, architectural and artistic collectives such as Zuloark and Basurama, and activists linked to the 15-M movement convened an open assembly that, in February 2011, signed a temporary-use agreement with the City Council. On 15 May of that year, the space was officially inaugurated with a set of rules developed through weekly assemblies (Andreu, 2012; Escobar-García, 2025, pp. 332-333). For six seasons (2011-2017), it was self-managed through voluntary work and community microfunding, and hosted urban gardens, self-construction workshops, debates on new forms of participatory urban planning, open-air cinema, sports, and cultural forums; each intervention was openly documented to facilitate its replication, and the structures were built with recycled materials (Basurama,

2012). This approach is close to the strategy of doing almost nothing described by Enia and Martella (2019), based on minimal interventions capable, depending on the context, of protecting, recovering, or reactivating the latent qualities of a place (p. 154).

This model of horizontal governance turned the site into a laboratory of citizenship which, according to research on urban appropriation, generated strong affective ties and increased the “collective capacity to produce and manage space” (Escobar-García, 2025, p. 335). However, it was not free of conflicts and challenges inherent to grassroots associationism and individual freedom, which required the establishment of minimum rules for safety, control, cleanliness, and spatial order (Figure 7).

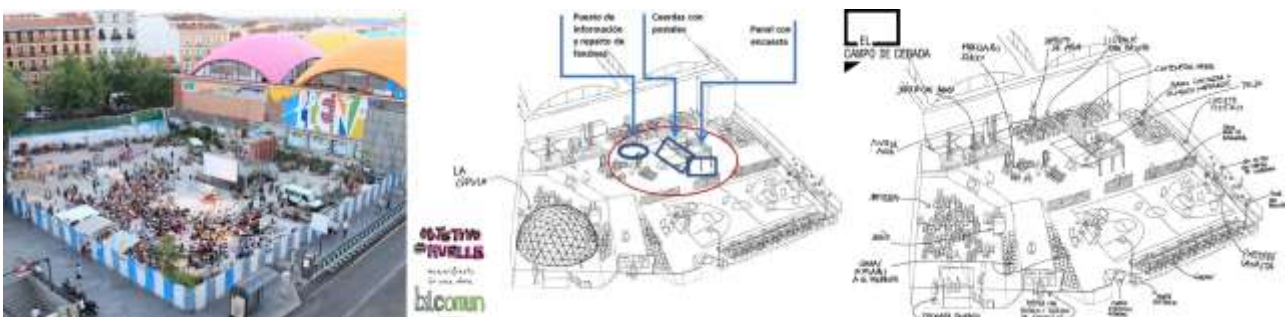
**Figure 7.** Signs with the definitions and rules of use of El Campo de Cebada



Source: Prepared by the author based on images by Rodríguez-Pina and Bracero (2015).

In this sense, the intervention and participation of architectural professionals helped to organize and structure the place, facilitating the implementation and compatibility of its multiple uses and enhancing its multifunctionality and versatility (Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Aerial photograph of El Campo de Cebada and axonometric drawings showing the distribution of uses



Source: Prepared by the author based on images by Carmona (2013).

Its impact transcended the neighbourhood scale and placed the experience within international circuits of discussion on urban culture, citizen participation, and the temporary transformation of public space. In 2013, El Campo de Cebada received the Golden Nica from Ars Electronica in the Digital Communities category, a recognition that highlighted its capacity to test new forms of collective production, management, and use of urban space (Prix Ars Electronica, 2013). It was also a finalist for the 2012 European Prize for Urban Public Space (FRAVM, 2012) and received an award at the 12th Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism (Ministerio de Fomento. Dirección General de Arquitectura, Vivienda y Suelo, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, the case can be linked to the notion of urban commons, understood as spaces and resources collectively managed through forms of community governance located beyond the State-market dichotomy (Foster & Iaione, 2016; Ostrom, 1990). Thus, El Campo de Cebada showed that temporary transfer of use, neighbourhood co-production, and transparency can reactivate vacant spaces and test democratic forms of governance of public space.

Figure 9 synthesizes this logic of co-creation through materials for convening, self-construction, and knowledge transfer developed in El Campo de Cebada. The Hand-Made workshop, prototypes using recovered materials, and manuals disseminated under open licences show how the documentation of practices enabled their replication in other urban contexts (Basurama, 2012; Ciudad Huerto, 2017). These devices materialize indicators of “audience diversity” and “depth of co-creation” that Cheung et al. (2021, pp. 7-8) link to greater cultural and governance benefits.

**Figure 9.** Artists as cultural mediators. Workshops at El Campo de Cebada in Madrid.



Source: Prepared by the author based on images from Basurama (2012).

The photograph of the neighbourhood’s first cinema confirms these impacts: collaborative cultural programming redefined the site as an urban common, generating pride of place and social capital, effects comparable to those measured in Philadelphia’s Porch Light programme (Tebes et al., 2015, p. 35). At the same time, shared self-construction reinforces what Zukin (2010, p. 219) calls the “struggle for authenticity” in gentrifying cities, where cultural expression is used simultaneously to promote neighbourhoods and to resist exclusionary redevelopment, giving the community an active role against possible dynamics of commodification. Thus, the experience of El Campo de Cebada demonstrates that collective-construction practices can transform a vacant urban space into a laboratory of citizenship and shared care.

Other cultural infrastructures, such as La Cárcel Segovia Centro de Creación in Segovia, further demonstrate how creativity can act as a catalyst for the transformation of residual or underused urban spaces. Rodrigo-Martín and Núñez-Gómez (2025) analyse how this former prison was converted into a hybrid space where cultural production, artistic innovation, and community participation intersect. Their study highlights the capacity of creative collectives and institutional support to convert places marked by a history of exclusion into inclusive nodes of urban regeneration, thereby reinforcing the comparative importance of El Campo de Cebada within a broader ecosystem of Spanish initiatives.

This connection among art, memory, and collective identity is not exclusive to Spain. In Colombia, Perdomo Vanegas and López Pineda (2025) document how collaborative artistic practices in San Martín - Meta - enabled communities to reconstruct historical memory and re-signify urban spaces affected by conflict. Through action research and art-based research methodologies, they show how cultural manifestations - murals, installations, performances - functioned as agents of memory, turning squares, parks, and streets into spaces of dialogue between past violence and the resilience of the present community. Their findings reinforce the argument that participatory artistic interventions are powerful tools not only for improving cultural identity, but also for healing social wounds and strengthening local governance through art.

The power of creative collectives to intervene in public space and act as catalysts for creativity and community participation in urban planning can also be observed in the actions of Outsiders Krew and the Madrid-based collective Boa Mistura, which exemplify a participatory and relational approach to public art. Originating in graffiti culture, the members of Boa Mistura - architects, designers, and visual artists - use a four-stage protocol called “Crossroads”: immersion, co-design, collective painting, and handover, in order to

embed each project in its local context and transfer skills to residents (World Habitat, 2018) (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** Examples of public workshops conducted by the Hispanic-American artistic collective Boa Mistura.



Source: Prepared by the author based on images of Boa Mistura's work appearing in Gordon, 2012.

Its flagship intervention, “Luz nas Vuelas” (São Paulo, 2012), shows how co-creation, storytelling, and learning converge. Working with more than 100 children in Vila Brasilândia, Boa Mistura painted colourful anamorphic words such as “Beleza” and “Orgulho” on the walls and pavements of alleyways, so that the messages are revealed only from specific viewing points (Helm, 2012). The project converted previously stigmatized passages into playful routes charged with identity, inspiring young people to “pursue their dreams” (Institute for Public Art, 2012). The use of anamorphosis forces viewers to move and “read” the space from a situated position, generating what Garofalo (2020, pp. 1-3) calls an embodied dialogue among poetry, architecture, and everyday life.

In this case, artistic mediation is not limited to the visual improvement of the environment; rather, it operates through bodily participation, the construction of shared messages, and the re-signification of ordinary spaces. The incorporation of local mediators and the continuity of work with the community are fundamental so that the intervention remains linked to those who produce and inhabit it and is not absorbed by external logics of territorial promotion (World Habitat, 2018).

A clear example is Outsiders Krew's PAZ mural in the Mariscal Sucre neighbourhood of Bogotá. During their second visit, the French duo Seb Toussaint and Spag worked with residents to paint more than thirty facades on a steep slope next to Avenida Circunvalar, arranging saturated blocks of green, violet, pink, and blue so that, when viewed from the urban highway, a single anamorphic word emerges: PAZ. The artists' Share the Word method invites neighbours to choose a term that synthesizes their aspirations; in previous visits, Felicidad, Humildad, and Amor had been chosen. As Toussaint explains, the aim is to “draw attention, through the language of graffiti, to a community that expresses itself in its own words” (Sáenz, 2016). By integrating residents' voices into the city's visual field during the year of the post-conflict plebiscite in Colombia, the project converted a marginal hillside into a symbol of civic hope and affirmed the neighbourhood's presence within Bogotá's broader cultural landscape (Figure 11).

**Figure 11. PAZ, Outsiders Krew's hopeful message in Bogotá.**



Source: Prepared by the author based on images of Outsiders Krew's work appearing in Sáenz, 2016.

The intervention by Outsiders Krew shows how the participatory mural can operate as a device of public visibility and symbolic affirmation. By inscribing a community-chosen word at the urban scale, the project not only transforms the external perception of the neighbourhood, but also turns a collective aspiration into a shared sign. Its continuity through periodic visits and maintenance actions also reinforces the importance of long-term management so that such practices are not reduced to one-off or merely cosmetic interventions.

Artists who co-produce large-scale, site-specific images with communities often intervene at critical historical moments, turning controversial infrastructures into sensory reminders of collective memory and hope. Few examples illustrate this better than the East Side Gallery, a 1.3 km remnant of the Berlin Wall - originally erected in 1961 by the German Democratic Republic to prevent its citizens from leaving the country, turning the State into a regime of extreme border control - painted in 1990 by 118 artists from 21 countries immediately after reunification (Chronik der Mauer, n.d.). Murals such as Curriculum Vitae, by Susanne Kunjappu-Jellinek, a stark recounting of each year the Wall stood (1961-1989), and the anonymous black-background canvas with the word BERLIN written beneath a rising red sun, turn this former barrier into a walkable archive of struggle and resistance (Figure 12).

Like the participatory works analysed above, these paintings transform complex social, environmental, and economic issues into situated experiences that invite dialogue, foster pride of place, and shape the collective imaginary, making visible not only the memory of oppression, but also the global significance of its fall in 1989, which became a symbol of the collapse of communist regimes and the restoration of freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe.

**Figure 12. Photographs of the East Side Gallery in Berlin.**



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Although millions of people visit it every year, local debates persist over conservation versus commercialization, echoing the warning by Sharp et al. (2005, p. 1002) that public art can be "inclusive and exclusive at the same time". The vandalism of Dmitri Vrubel's iconic Fraternal Kiss, painted in protest against current geopolitical conflicts, shows how the Wall

remains a stage on which competing narratives about power, identity, and resistance are negotiated (Die Welt, 2024).

However, when grounded in long-term management and community governance, these paintings retain the emancipatory potential highlighted by meta-analyses of participatory art (Cheung et al., 2021, pp. 7-8). Restoration workshops regularly involve Berlin residents, school groups, and former dissidents, ensuring that the surface of the Wall continues to function as a shared surface of public memory rather than as a commercialized product. Thus, the East Side Gallery, like Boa Mistura's *Luz nas Viegas* or Outsiders Krew's *PAZ*, exemplifies the dual condition of public art: it can reinforce urban inequalities or, through inclusive processes of co-production, keep alive a democratic claim to memory, space, and belonging.

The empirical literature on participatory public art makes it possible to systematize these effects in diverse urban contexts. Longitudinal evaluations such as that of the Porch Light programme in Philadelphia show improvements in collective efficacy, perceived safety, and the aesthetic quality of the immediate environment (Tebes et al., 2015, p. 35). For its part, the meta-analysis by Cheung et al. (2021, pp. 7-8), based on 147 studies, identifies impacts in five domains: culture, economy, sustainability, well-being, and governance, and shows how participatory murals, site-specific artworks, and climate-data-based installations can improve environmental literacy, trust between groups, and citizen engagement in cities such as Oslo and Hong Kong. Along the same lines, experiences of narrative healing and stigma reduction, such as *Finding the Light Within*, evidence progress in individual and community recovery through participatory artistic processes (Mohatt et al., 2013, p. 198).

The shift from the artistic object to the social process has redefined contemporary public art. Early research on community arts indicated that artistic participation can foster personal growth, skills development, and employability (Matarasso, 1997, p. 6), while later studies have emphasized its dialogical dimension, in which the quality of relationships becomes as important as the resulting form (Matarasso, 1997, pp. 85-86). However, this mediation is not free of tensions: in contexts of urban regeneration, artworks can be simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, because their meaning is co-produced through the processes by which they are inserted into the urban fabric.

Based on this review, three main mechanisms of cultural mediation can be identified: co-creation, which reinforces collective efficacy and the appropriation of space; narrative healing, which makes it possible to re-signify memories, conflicts, and stigmas; and knowledge exchange, which fosters situated learning among experts, artists, and residents. Table 3 synthesizes these mechanisms and their associated outcomes.

**Table 3.** Participation mechanisms that reinforce cultural mediation

| <b>Mechanism</b>                                   | <b>Key outcomes</b>                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Co-creation and collective efficacy</b>         | Reinforcement of collective efficacy, perceived safety, and the aesthetic quality of the immediate environment (Tebes et al. 2015, p. 35) |
| <b>Story-based healing and stigma reduction</b>    | Participation of 1,200 people and progress in individual and community recovery from suicide stigma (Mohatt et al. 2013, p. 198)          |
| <b>Knowledge exchange and place-based learning</b> | Greater awareness of cultural values and bidirectional knowledge transfer between experts and residents (Cheung et al. 2021, p. 7)        |

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

These mechanisms make it possible to formulate an integrated evaluation framework for analysing artistic mediation in processes of urban transformation. This framework combines:

- I. Process indicators: diversity of participating publics, depth of co-creation, and artists' facilitation skills.

- II. Relational outcomes: changes in trust, collective efficacy, and dialogue between groups.
- III. Spatial and environmental outcomes: perceived safety, environmental literacy, and pro-environmental neighbourhood practices.
- IV. Equity safeguards: monitoring displacement, affordability, and community representativeness.

Mixed-methods designs, such as the longitudinal evaluation of Porch Light, show how surveys, block audits, and qualitative interviews can operationalize this framework at the urban scale.

#### **4. Discussion. Tourist branding and urban heritage: the dark side of cultural commodification.**

Recognition of the heritage value of places with tourism potential can contribute to the reactivation of disrupted local economies, but it can also lead to branding strategies in which marketing, profitability, and territorial differentiation prevail over the principles of conservation, protection, study, dissemination, and development of artistic and architectural heritage. Against this logic, Enia and Martella (2019) argue that minimal, community-driven interventions - what they call a strategy of “doing almost nothing” - can offer an alternative to large-scale profit-oriented redevelopment by reactivating urban voids through low-cost actions that preserve their everyday authenticity and latent social qualities.

This tension had already been noted by Senabre López (2007a) in his critique of tourism associated with historical-artistic heritage. In the article *Is “cultural tourism” culture?*, the author argues that many studies on cultural tourism have focused more on improving the business efficiency of the cultural offer than on analysing the phenomenon from a humanistic perspective. In the words of Senabre López, a member of the Spanish National Committee of ICOMOS - the International Council on Monuments and Sites -, “consulting firms dedicated to preparing Tourist Excellence Plans conceive these spaces as integral resources and even exploit the imagination - sometimes excessively - to propose new activities and insert them into itineraries” (Senabre López, 2007b, p. 166). This critique warns of the risk of transforming heritage into a repertoire of cultural consumption disconnected from its social, historical, and symbolic conditions.

Contemporary processes of heritagization mediated by the urban image clearly reveal this ambivalence. De Souza Sánchez and Naranjo Henríquez (2026) analyse how Antoni Gaudí’s legacy is reinterpreted in contemporary architecture, urban art, and digital mediations, functioning simultaneously as an identity resource, urban attractor, and device of cultural projection. The case of Barcelona shows that these operations can contribute to the construction of urban identity, but can also become subject to tensions among heritage preservation, artistic experimentation, touristification, and the spectacularization of public space. From this perspective, artistic heritage should not be understood merely as a branding asset, but as a field of cultural mediation in which memory, identity, social appropriation, and urban value are negotiated.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the Madrid neighbourhood of Lavapiés, where Urquía Uriaguereca (2025) shows how urban art has become intertwined with neighbourhood-branding processes through Instagram. His content analysis reveals that, although urban art is the most recurrent theme in posts tagged with #Lavapiés, it tends to be associated with gastronomy and lifestyle more than with citizen participation or political expression. This association points to a depoliticization of street art, absorbed by everyday consumption and tourist imagery. By highlighting this disconnection, Urquía Uriaguereca underscores the underestimated role of institutions in shaping brand identity, while warning of the risks that cultural production may be co-opted by market-oriented logics. This reading converges with the critique advanced here: cultural branding can act as a driver of gentrification, residential displacement, and the loss of social complexity.

This problem forms part of a broader urban crisis. Florida (2017) has described how contemporary cities, driven by processes of economic concentration, real-estate speculation, and global competition, tend to intensify inequality, segregation, and the exclusion of the middle and working classes. In the face of this dynamic, urban planning must be oriented toward an “urbanism for all”, capable of incorporating citizen participation not as a secondary consultative mechanism, but as a structural condition for urban equity.

In this context, territories and cities with rich cultural and artistic heritage - often affected by processes of demographic decline, tourist pressure, or the need to reconsolidate their historic spaces - should aspire to transform the perception of heritage as a “tourist product” into that of a tourist, cultural, and residential attractor. As a product, heritage appears available for consumption, especially in territories where tourism has a decisive weight in the local economy. As an attractor, by contrast, tourism could be redefined: it would cease to operate as superficial and ephemeral consumption and become an agent capable of stimulating cultural creation, reinforcing the quality of habitable space, and contributing to the city’s social regeneration.

This transformation also requires an educational dimension. It is not enough to recognize heritage as an urban resource; it is necessary to develop citizens’ capacity to interpret the cultural assets and heritage elements present in the city as part of a formative experience that can unfold both in formal contexts and in informal spheres linked to tourism, culture, and leisure. In this sense, heritage education allows these assets not to be perceived solely as products of tourist consumption, but as supports of memory, local identity, collective belonging, and conservation awareness (Rodríguez-Naveiras & De Souza Sánchez, 2018, pp. 48-49). In the educational field, this orientation coincides with recent approaches that situate innovation and creativity as transversal competences linked not only to imagination and aesthetic sensitivity, but also to critical reasoning, historical culture, and the capacity to respond to complex technical and social demands (De Souza Sánchez et al., 2023).

The reconsideration of heritage as a cultural and residential attractor also requires attention not only to the material dimension of urban space - its morphology, uses, accessibility, or state of conservation - but also to its immaterial dimension: bonds of belonging, symbolic repertoires, collective memory, and the social capacity to give meaning to the territory. This line of interpretation has precedents in the work of Naranjo Henríquez on landscape, identity, and the symbolic dimension of territory (Naranjo Henríquez, 2011, 2023), and is methodologically developed in the concept of *épuisement du territoire* - territorial exhaustion. Naranjo Henríquez and De Souza Sánchez (2026) propose analysing this phenomenon by articulating the material and immaterial dimensions of territory, and show that a greater perception of exhaustion may be partially associated with lower territorial identification. They also link this process to dynamics of deterritorialization, understood as the loss of social capacity to transform, appropriate, and give meaning to inhabited space.

The relevance of this approach is not only cultural or symbolic, but also systemic. Ondiviela García et al. (2025), based on the comparative analysis of 175 cities, show that cities with higher levels of creativity - measured through cultural assets, creative industries, and citizen participation - have greater capacity to adapt to climate, economic, and social crises. This evidence reinforces the hypothesis that the Urban Creativity Ecosystem is not a peripheral cultural strategy, but a relational infrastructure for urban resilience.

From this perspective, art in the urban sphere should not be reduced to a cultural product, scenic resource, or instrument of tourism promotion. To achieve urban quality and resonate with the population, it must help reinforce shared meanings, bonds of belonging, and territorial identity. Therefore, the Urban Creativity Ecosystem must be understood as a relational structure capable of articulating heritage, artistic practices, civil society, and institutions in processes of cultural mediation and situated governance. Only in this way can creative strategies prevent the conversion of heritage into symbolic merchandise and

instead contribute to the production of sustainable, liveable, and socially meaningful urban environments.

## **5. Conclusions: The power of creativity to address the challenges of the global city in contemporary society.**

This article has proposed the concept of the Urban Creativity Ecosystem as a framework for understanding the relationship between creativity, sustainable urban planning, cultural mediation, and community development. In contrast to intervention models focused solely on infrastructure, profitability, or the urban image, the ecosystemic approach makes it possible to understand creativity as a relational capacity distributed among agents, institutions, spaces, artistic practices, communities, and symbolic repertoires.

The analysis developed here shows that creativity should not be understood as an exceptional or merely individual attribute, but as a social competence that can be activated, shared, and oriented toward the transformation of the urban environment. In this sense, artistic and cultural practices can strengthen citizens' capacity to interpret, respond to, and adapt to the economic, social, and environmental changes affecting the contemporary city. Their value does not lie in the production of objects or cosmetic interventions limited to the superficial embellishment of urban space, but in the aesthetic dimension understood in a broad sense: a cultural capacity to produce meaning, activate bonds, articulate shared narratives, foster symbolic appropriation, and promote more conscious and propositional forms of urban participation.

The cases analysed show that artists can act as cultural mediators in socially open urban-planning processes. By co-producing images, stories, and spatial interventions with local communities, they help transform vacant, degraded, or stigmatized spaces into places of encounter, learning, memory, and collective care. Experiences such as El Campo de Cebada, Luz nas Vieiras, PAZ, and the East Side Gallery show that participatory public art can reinforce collective efficacy, pride of belonging, environmental literacy, and the community's capacity to claim symbolic and material rights over the city.

Nevertheless, the study also confirms that these practices produce contradictory effects. The creative activation of heritage and public space can be captured by logics of branding, cultural commodification, touristification, and exclusionary neighbourhood revalorization. When creativity is instrumentalized as a resource for urban competitiveness, it risks becoming a symbolic commodity that weakens community bonds, displaces the resident population, and reduces the social complexity of places. Urban creativity should therefore not be limited to cosmetic operations of visual improvement or economic activation, but should help reinforce spatial justice, community appropriation, and continuity among memory, identity, and urban transformation.

Consequently, governance models associated with the Urban Creativity Ecosystem must attend not only to heritage protection and residential affordability, but also to the immaterial dimension of territory. This means avoiding processes of deterritorialization and strengthening bonds of belonging, appropriation, and shared meaning. Urban sustainability cannot be reduced to environmental, functional, or economic criteria; it must also incorporate communities' capacity to recognize, interpret, care for, and culturally project the spaces they inhabit.

These findings suggest several theoretical and practical implications for sustainable urban development. First, public administrations should move from the provision of closed infrastructures toward functions of coordination, facilitation, and support for open co-creation platforms. Second, conventional economic indicators are insufficient for evaluating the vitality of creative ecosystems; they must be complemented by metrics capable of capturing relational density, network diversity, resource circularity, social inclusion, the quality of territorial bonds, and the permanence of community benefits. Third, the integration of criteria of spatial and climate justice - such as carbon neutrality, accessibility,

sociocultural diversity, and the protection of local identity - is essential to mitigate the risks of exclusion associated with the creative revalorization of central neighbourhoods.

In this way, the Urban Creativity Ecosystem can be understood as a platform of co-production capable of articulating cultural, social, economic, and environmental value. Its main contribution consists not only in promoting urban innovation, but also in orienting that innovation toward more equitable, resilient, and liveable forms of city. To this end, creativity must operate as a collective resource rather than a simple strategy of territorial differentiation; as mediation among heritage, community, and institutions, and not as an instrument for the symbolic consumption of urban space.

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