Institute for Global Prosperity

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Harnessing the Visual Public Realm for Community Prosperity

Authored by: Marine Tanguy and Holly Norman

June 2025

About MTArt Agency

MTArt Agency is the art sector's leading talent agency representing some of the most talented, forward-thinking artists in the world. With a track record of delivering over 300 projects across major global cities, brands, and institutions – including Apple TV, Le Louvre and the World Cup. MTArt Agency and its team are experts in crafting compelling visual stories that captivate large audiences and secure global press coverage through public art projects, art works' acquisitions, visual campaigns and licensing.

About the Institute for Global Prosperity, UCL

The Institute for Global Prosperity at UCL (IGP) is redesigning prosperity for the 21st century, changing the way we conceive and run our economies, and reworking our relationship with the planet. IGP's vision is to build a prosperous, sustainable global future, underpinned by the principles of fairness and justice, and allied to a realistic, long-term vision of humanity's place in the world.

The IGP undertakes pioneering research that seeks to dramatically improve the quality of life for current and future generations. Its strength lies in the way it allies intellectual creativity to effective collaboration and policy development. Of particular importance to the IGP's approach is the way in which it integrates non-academic expertise into its knowledge generation by engaging with governments, policy makers, business, civil society, the arts and local communities.

About Fast Forward 2030

Fast Forward 2030 is a network of impact entrepreneurs hosted by the IGP to encourage transformative enterprises that challenge the status quo and deliver shared prosperity through sustainable innovation.

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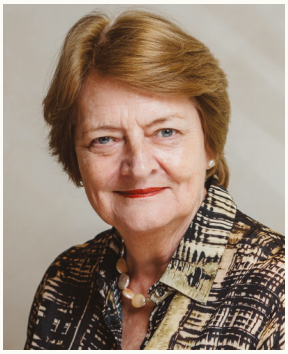
Contents

Acknowledgments

We need to see the values of the society we wish to live in, and we need to protect our civic spaces for being what they shall do best: inspire us, create conversations and represent visually our diversity of thinking and existing in our cities. I am so grateful to Henrietta Moore, Arthur Kay, Holly Norman, Hanna Baumann and Ignacio Gutierrez Gomez from UCL Institute for Global Prosperity and Fast Forward 2030 for believing in the urgency of this topic, at a time when our consumption of visuals is increasing every day and makes us pure consumers rather than citizens. It's time to reclaim our visual environment and fight visual pollution. I also want to thank the many artists, BIDs, councils, cities and real estate developers who supported MTArt Agency's vision for the last ten years. None of the 300 public art projects and visual narratives we implemented in the urban space would have been possible without them.

Marine Tanguy,
Founder and CEO of MTArt Agency

Foreword



Professor Dame Henrietta Moore
Founder and Director, Institute for Global Prosperity
at University College London

For just over a decade, the Institute for Global Prosperity at UCL (IGP) has been redefining what prosperity means for the 21st century – reimagining how we conceive and run our economies and reshaping our relationship with the planet.

Our vision has always been to build a prosperous, sustainable, global future, underpinned by the principles of fairness and justice, and allied to a realistic, long-term vision of humanity's place in the world.

Today, the imagery in the shared spaces through which we move and in which we interact is increasingly dominated by commercial interests. Our streets, transport hubs, and urban landscapes are saturated with visual messaging that positions individuals primarily as consumers. These messages often promote consumer debt and or harmful beauty standards, exacerbating existing power dynamics rather than addressing crucial challenges such as social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

Public spaces in cities, understood as part of the commons belonging to all, have been co-opted by advertisers and corporate brands who extract value from them – profiting financially while communities bear the social and environmental costs. The erosion of local identity, declining wellbeing, and deepening inequality are among the consequences that commercial visual saturation leaves in its wake.

This White Paper proposes a bold alternative: to reclaim the visual public realm as a space for civic dialogue and community value. It advocates for policy mechanisms that would require outdoor advertisers and commercial visual media companies to reinvest in the very communities whose spaces they use. It draws a direct line from visual extraction to civic reinvestment – offering real strategies for how revenue from outdoor advertising can be redirected toward community-led public art, green space development, cultural programming, and local regeneration. In doing so, cities can transform the visual public realm from a site of passive consumption into a living infrastructure of community, culture, and care.

Published as part of a series led by Fast Forward 2030 – an international network of impact-driven entrepreneurs hosted by the IGP – this white paper aligns with efforts to redesign economies and support communities in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Fast Forward 2030 supports businesses that centre environmental and social impact at the core of their models, innovation strategies, and governance.

In June 2025, we launched this White Paper as part of the London Design Biennale, through our pavilion, *People Powered Prosperity.* The pavilion explored how citizen-led co-creation can reshape our understanding of prosperity and unlock new forms of knowledge to address today's most urgent societal challenges. To accompany the launch, the IGP hosted a panel discussion Reclaiming the Visual Public Realm: Public Art, Urban Identity, and Democratic Space led by Marine Tanguy, Founder and CEO of the MTArt Agency. Here, artists, designers, and urban researchers came together to reflect on how public art can challenge visual inequality, strengthen civic engagement, and contribute to more just, sustainable, and creative urban futures.

Introduction

The visual public realm – the images, symbols, and messages that populate our streets and shared spaces – plays a profound role in shaping the identity, memory, and lived experience of urban communities.

Yet in cities across the globe, this shared environment is increasingly dominated by commercial interests. Rather than serving as spaces for civic expression and democratic participation, many urban settings have been reduced to transactional zones where individuals are addressed primarily as consumers. This shift undermines local identity, public health, and collective wellbeing – eroding the commons in favour of private gain.

The IGP and MTArt Agency view the visual public realm not merely as a visual backdrop, but as a powerful platform for sparking civic dialogue on pressing contemporary issues – from environmental sustainability and social justice to representation, beauty standards and combatting disinformation. As explored in this paper, and supported by a growing body of scholarship (Kucukali, 2023; Sharp *et al.*, 2005, Hall and Robertson, 2010), socially engaged public art and visual storytelling can reshape relationships with place, strengthen cultural belonging and contribute to inclusive, community-led urban futures (Olsen, 2019; Bonnett, 1992; Hawkins, 2013).

Across the world, public spaces are being saturated with commercial imagery that diminishes civic values and weakens community cohesion. This paper critically examines the implications of this trend, arguing that the visual public realm is becoming less democratic, less representative, and increasingly shaped by the logic of profit rather than the needs of people.

However, a vibrant counter current is gaining momentum – grassroots, participatory public art practices that reclaim shared spaces and rewrite the visual narratives of the city from the ground up. When understood as acts of commoning (Eynaud *et al.*, 2018), these creative interventions challenge the hegemony of commercial imagery and instead foster reflection, dialogue, and social connection (Iveson, 2011). By injecting the everyday with a multiplicity of voices, textures and imaginaries, these projects invite more inclusive and equitable visions of urban futures (Vickers and Saelens, 2017).

As the boundaries between formal and informal creative production continue to blur, public art is emerging as a transformative force in how urban life is organised, experienced, and negotiated. In cities like Bristol, acts of subvertising and creative placemaking demonstrate how communities are pushing back against visual saturation and asserting their right to shape the environments they inhabit. These movements raise a fundamental and generative question: how can we build more democratic, inclusive, and culturally rich visual landscapes?

In response, this paper calls for urgent policy innovation. While efforts to regulate visual pollution are growing across Europe, they remain fragmented and often ineffectual without cohesive, unified strategies (Sourisseau, 2024). This paper argues not only for recognition of the challenges facing the visual public realm but for amplification of the solutions already being pioneered by communities. Drawing on international and UK-based case studies, this paper outlines policy recommendations that support citizen-led creative interventions and encourage reinvestment in visual cultures that serve the common good.

By reclaiming the visual public realm as a space of civic value rather than commercial extraction, we can help build more just, inclusive, and prosperous cities – and in doing so, take meaningful steps toward delivering on the ambitions of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

Commercial Imagery in the Visual Public Realm

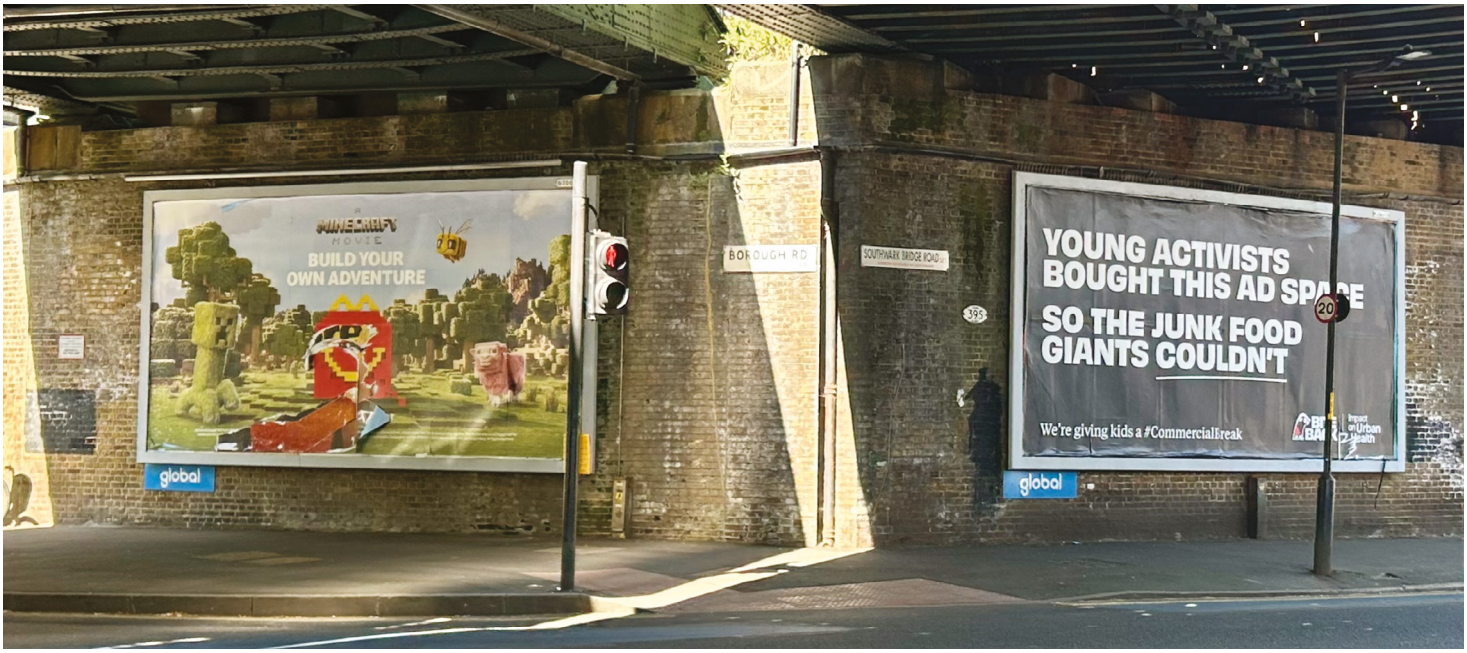
Outdoor advertising plays a powerful role in shaping public space and influencing daily life. Originally intended to be minimally intrusive, traditional billboards and posters have evolved into a pervasive visual force. The rapid expansion of digital advertising infrastructure – capable of rotating multiple ads per minute – has increased both exposure and profitability but raises urgent concerns around public wellbeing and environmental sustainability (Gillett, 2022; JCDecaux, 2025a; Billington, 2021). In cities like Manchester, a single digital billboard consumes as much energy as three households and obstructs pedestrian space (Fifield and Pidd, 2022).

Commercial imagery saturates urban environments at an unprecedented scale and level of sophistication, shaping how people experience and move through cities (Koeck & Warnaby, 2014). These visuals do more than promote products – they contribute to 'the buzz' of urban life, reinforcing consumption as a central organising force (Cronin, 2006). This saturation – sometimes described as visual pollution or 'billboard smog' – is characterised by 'clutter', 'disorder', and sensory overload (Chmielewski *et al.*, 2016:801; Gomez, 2012:190; Borowiak *et al.*, 2024). It has been linked to psychological stress, cognitive fatigue, irritability, and diminished quality of life (Rangel-Buitrago *et al.*, 2023; Nowghabi and Talebzadeh, 2019; Lascu, 2015). As well as being a hazardous distraction for drivers and pedestrians (Edquist *et al.*, 2011; Dukic, 2013; Decker, 2014).

// Commercial imagery saturates urban environments at an unprecedented scale and level of sophistication, shaping how people experience and move through cities.

The content of these ads matters. It subtly shapes aspirations, reinforces existing hierarchies, and often promotes harmful stereotypes and unhealthy lifestyles disconnected from local community realities (Altenberger, 2022). Crucially, unlike other types of media, outdoor ads are unavoidable, without consent or ability to opt-out (Stocchetti, 2014). The public is involuntarily subjected to visual imagery and ideas that may conflict with social values, cultural norms, or personal beliefs, often without even realising it. This can fragment local identities, stoke social tensions, and contribute to feelings of alienation and loss of belonging (Portella, 2014; Gao *et al.*, 2024; Nawaz and Wakil, 2022).

↓ *FIGURE 1: One Bite Back billboard reads: "Young activists bought this space so junk food giants couldn't. We're giving children a commercial break." Positioned beside it is a McDonald's Happy Meal advertisement promoting A Minecraft Movie – a striking juxtaposition that underscores the campaign's goal: to expose just how deeply fast-food marketing permeates children's everyday environments. Photo: Holly Norman. Southwark, South London, April 2025.*



As outdoor advertising dominates the visual landscape and the monetisation of public attention structures 'the flow of city life', urban environments are transformed into transactional zones with residents and visitors positioned as consumers rather than members of a civic community (Baker, 2007:1188). Moreover, it erodes the democratic function of public space with profound implications for inclusivity, community identity, and shared experience (Chmielewski *et al.*, 2016).

This becomes especially critical when considering public health, existing inequalities, and the advertising of high fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) products. A growing body of research shows that HFSS advertising is heavily concentrated in the most deprived areas of UK cities, contributing to widening diet-related health inequalities. For example, an audit by Bite Back, the University of Liverpool, and Impact on Urban Health found that in cities like Southwark, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Newcastle, HFSS ads made up 44% of all observed ads in disadvantaged areas, compared to just 4% in wealthier areas (Bite Back, 2025; Tapper, 2025). These findings echo international trends seen in Los Angeles, USA as well as Wellington, and Aotearoa, New Zealand (Lowery & Sloane, 2014; Lui *et al.*, 2022; Kneller *et al.*, 2024).

Public and political support for change is gaining traction. The youth-led organisation Bite Back has showcased the power of citizen action through its #CommercialBreak campaign, which strategically acquired 365 advertising spaces across London to challenge the pervasive influence of junk food marketing (Lee, 2025). The campaign is estimated to have prevented over 14.8 million exposures to advertisements for HFSS food products (Bite Back, 2025).

Despite growing momentum for healthier visual environments, substantial barriers remain – chief among them, industry lobbying. Drawing on tactics reminiscent of the tobacco industry, advertisers have applied financial and political pressure to resist local restrictions (Borland, 2025). In some cases, cash-strapped local authorities –including Liverpool City, Tower Hamlets, and Luton Borough – have paused or scrapped proposed junk food advertising bans, citing warnings about potential revenue losses (Cork, 2019; Tapper, 2025). These decisions come despite the fact that more than 40% of 10–11-year-olds in these areas are overweight or obese (Borland, 2025). Crucially, emerging evidence shows that limiting HFSS advertising can deliver measurable diet-related health benefits, particularly for children in deprived communities, without negatively impacting council revenues (Bernhardt, 2025).

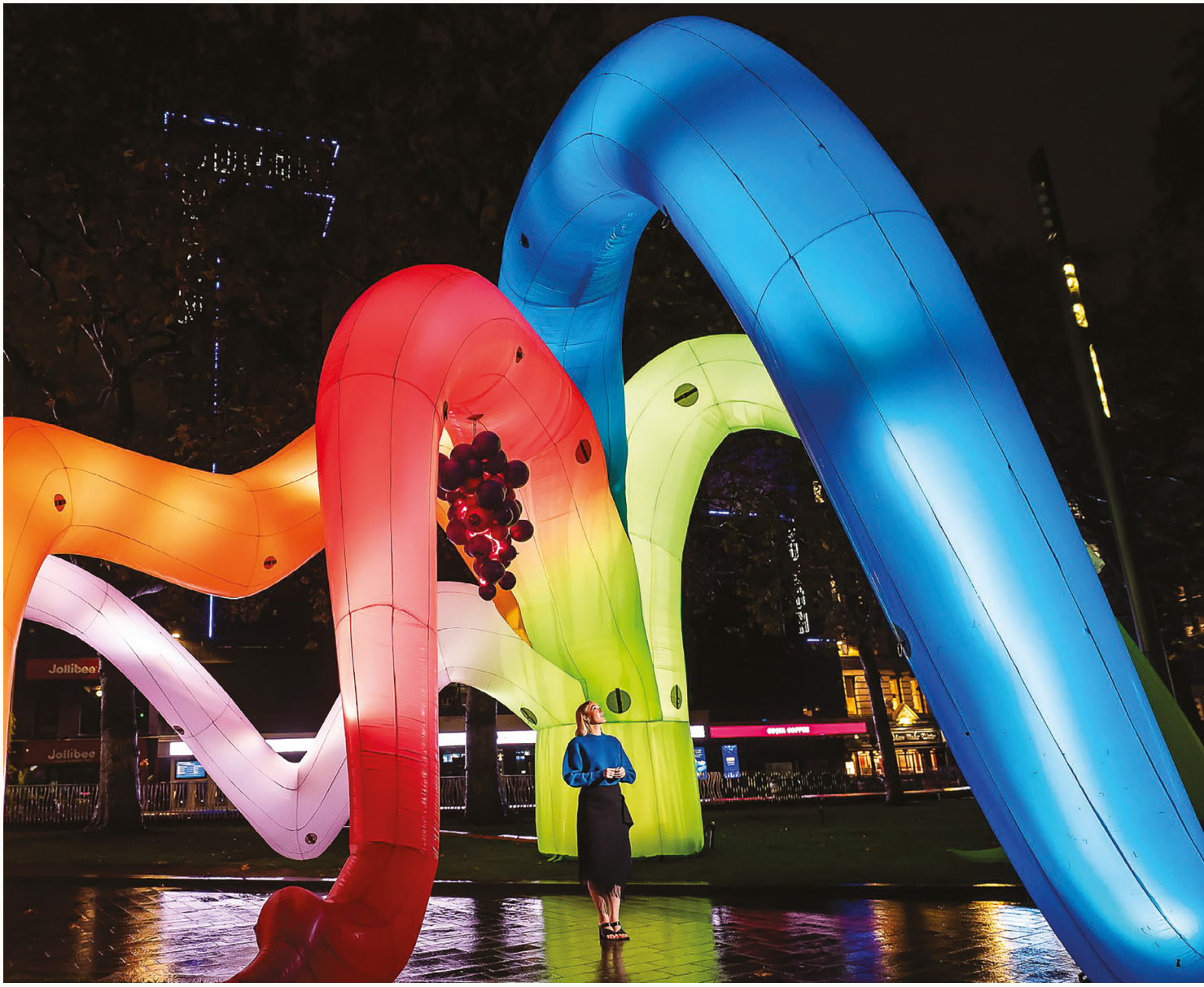
Public Art and Visual Storytelling for Community Prosperity

Public art operates as a dynamic and often contested force within the urban landscapes – functioning simultaneously as a tool of regeneration and a mode of resistance, a vehicle for inclusion and a form of critique. Long embedded within the strategies of culture-led urban development, public art has played a central role in revitalising neglected spaces, stimulating local economies, and positioning artists as influential agents in the reshaping of cities (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Hall and Robertson, 2001; Sharp *et al.*, 2005; Lovaglio and Scortichini, 2021). Its accessibility and capacity to bring together diverse communities grant it unique power to leave a lasting imprint on places and the people who inhabit them (Chueng *et al.*, 2021).

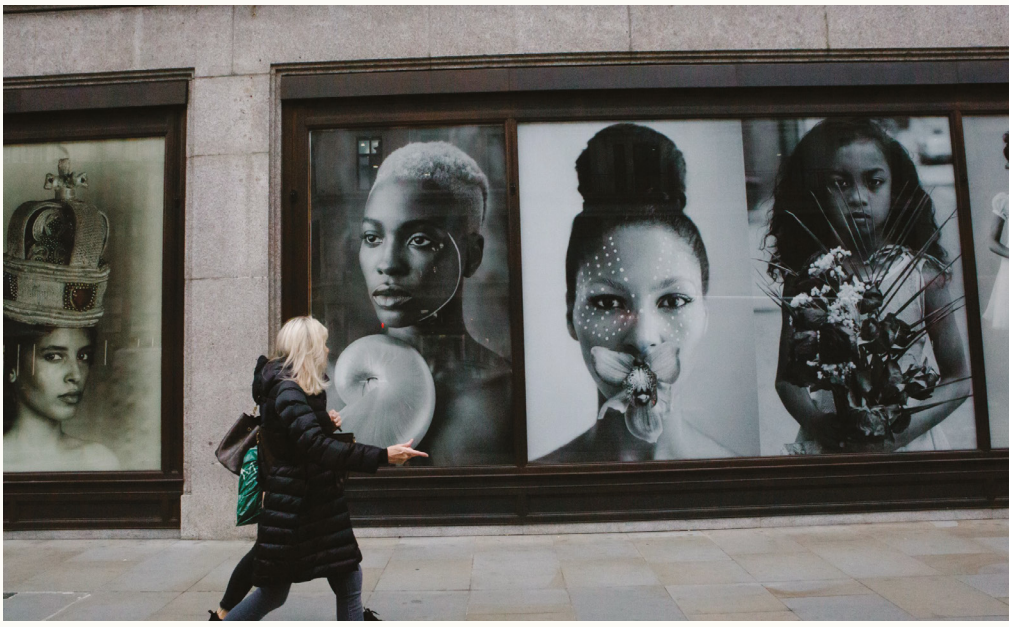
Contemporary creative practices vividly illustrate the power of the arts to catalyse social and urban transformation. The creative sector plays a pivotal role in fostering solidarity and driving change. MTArt Agency, for example, leverages large-scale public installations to amplify underrepresented artists and voices while contributing to local cultural and economic revitalisation. One such project featured Claire Luxton's seven-metre inflatable, LED-lit sculpture – symbolising growth, beauty, and the vibrant energy of the West End – commissioned to reenergise Leicester Square's night-time economy.

In another initiative, working with The Crown Estate, MTArt Agency transformed vacant retail units into temporary galleries, simultaneously enriching the visual landscape and boosting footfall in Central London.

The transformation of Nantes, in north-western France, offers a powerful example of how the creative sector and a unified cultural strategy can drive urban regeneration (Dunmall, 2016). Confronted with decades of industrial decline, local artists and cultural visionaries collaborated with the city's mayor to reimagine Nantes through inclusive and accessible public cultural programming. Early projects such as *Le Lieu Unique* and the Estuaire biennale laid the foundation for *Le Voyage à Nantes* – a municipal body that integrates culture and tourism under a single, cohesive vision. With its emphasis on free outdoor events and active public participation, the programme revitalised the city's image while delivering tangible economic returns, generating nearly €49 million from just a €3 million investment. Nantes now stands as a compelling model for how cities can reclaim and reinvent their identity while promoting sustainable social and economic renewal.



↑ *FIGURE 2: Claire Luxton's The Cornucopia created in partnership with Art of London. Photo: MTArt Agency. Leicester Square, Central London, 2023.*



→ *FIGURE 3: MTArt Agency public art exhibition, One Love, occupies 12 metres of vacant shopfronts in the heart of Regent Street, and showcases Delphine Diallo's powerful photography. Photo: MTArt Agency. Central London, 2023.*

// Across Europe, cities are increasingly recognising the potential of public art to support community prosperity and democratic expression.

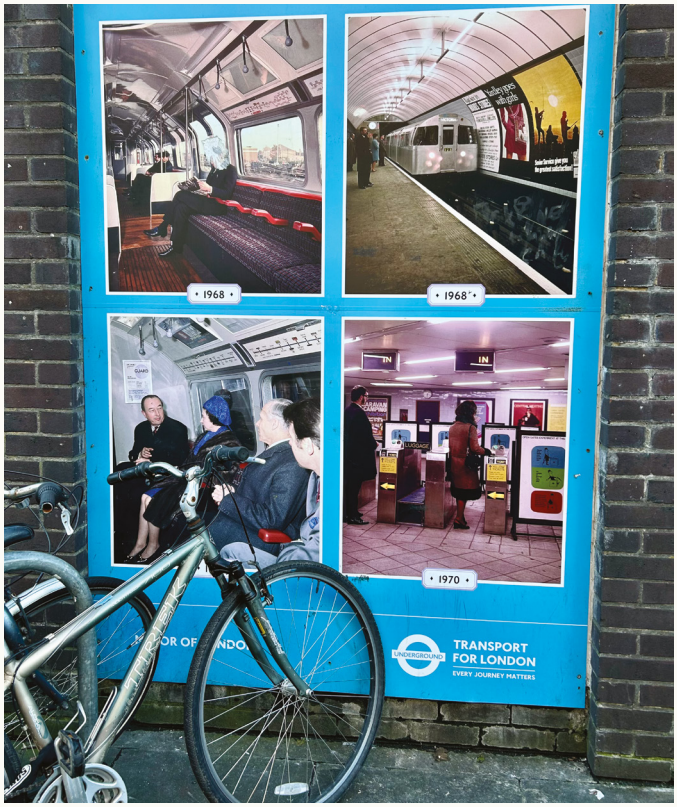
A similar story of cultural regeneration unfolds in Lisbon, where public art has become central to the city's broader revitalisation strategy (Campos and Barbio, 2021). Through the *Galeria de Arte Urbana* – an initiative of the Lisbon City Council's Cultural Heritage department – mural sites are identified, property owners are engaged, and artists are commissioned to create works that enhance both private properties and the city's wider cultural landscape. Strict guidelines protect Lisbon's architectural heritage: murals must respect original stonework and tiles, remain in place for a minimum of three months, and contain no commercial advertising. Crucially, participating artists are fairly compensated. This formal embrace of street art reflects – but also complicates – Lisbon's complex relationship with visual expression. After Portugal's 1974 revolution ended decades of dictatorship, graffiti became a powerful medium of political dissent and public voice. Today, street art remains a vehicle for unity. Yet tensions persist between sanctioned art and unsanctioned graffiti, raising unresolved questions over who holds the right to shape the city's visual realm. In cases where areas are marked by unregulated tagging, all expressions – official or not – are repainted, exposing deeper conflicts over control, authorship, and access to Lisbon's visual public realm.

Across Europe, cities are increasingly recognising the potential of public art to support community prosperity and democratic expression. In Sweden, the *Art is Happening* initiative, led by the Department of Culture and delivered by the Public Art Agency, uses artistic interventions to foster democratic participation in areas with historically low voter turnout (Wiberg, 2022). Likewise, in Munich, the city commissioned artist Gretta Louw's *The Commons,* an installation that interrogates the use of shared space for the collective good of people and planet (Molina, 2024).

In London, the Mayor's *Fourth Plinth* in Trafalgar Square exemplifies participatory public art at a high-profile site. Uniquely, the selection process invites public engagement: shortlisted proposals are exhibited for public viewing, expert review, and popular vote – allowing both residents and visitors to shape the final commission. This open process transforms a historically charged location into a democratic space for cultural expression and dialogue. The 2024 installation by Teresa Margolles, *Mil Veces un Instante,* emerged from this process as a powerful tribute to trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming lives. Composed of hundreds of plaster face casts, the sculpture gradually disintegrated under London's weather, symbolising the fragility and impermanence of life. At once a memorial to victims of transphobic violence and a celebration of resistance, the work illustrates how public art can confront social injustice while affirming shared human dignity (Fountain, 2024).

Such commitments to public art and visual storytelling are especially critical in cities saturated by commercial imagery. In dense urban centres like London, advertising dominates much of the visual environment – often to an 'overwhelming' degree (Tanguy, 2024:221). From tube stations and escalators to buses and shelters, commercial messaging permeates the transport network, constituting a major portion of the visual stimuli city dwellers encounter each day (Finlay, 2021). In response, Transport for London (TfL) and the Mayor of London have embedded public art initiatives into these high-visibility spaces. These interventions go beyond aesthetic enhancement; they seek to visually communicate community-driven messages and elevate narratives rooted in local histories, cultural identities and shared legacies (Bamford, 2025).

↑ *FIGURE 4: TfL and Mayor of London poster by Charlie Davis celebrating the introduction of the 'Baby on Board Badge'. Photo: Holly Norman. London Fields Overground station, East London, March 2025.*



↑ *FIGURE 5: TfL and Mayor of London poster exhibiting historic photographs of the Underground in 1968-1970. Photo: Holly Norman. Seven Sisters Underground station, North London, February 2025.*

Initiatives have ranged from historical photography exhibitions and poster campaigns marking key milestones in TfL history to *Art on the Underground,* which curates site-specific, socially engaged works across the transit system. Notable examples include *Angels of History,* a mosaic installation at St. James's Park that explores the intersection of public space, gender, sexual identity, and state infrastructure, and David Hockney's vibrant digital animations at Piccadilly Circus, created for free as part of the Mayor's *Let's Do London* campaign – the city's most ambitious domestic tourism campaign (Chilton, 2021; McLean, 2021). Collectively, these projects demonstrate the transformative potential of public art and visual storytelling in reimaging transit environments as vibrant arenas for cultural reflection, civic engagement, and shared memory.

Such initiatives are closely aligned with broader urban strategies focused on city branding, place-making, and cultural-led development (Matthews and Gadaloff, 2022). Partnerships with galleries and initiatives – such as *Art Below,* which further expand public access to art in everyday settings. However, the substantial costs associated with participation (£695 – £1950 per display) raise critical concerns around equity and accessibility, highlighting ongoing tensions between commercial models and inclusive cultural representation in public space (Ad Lib Gallery, 2024).

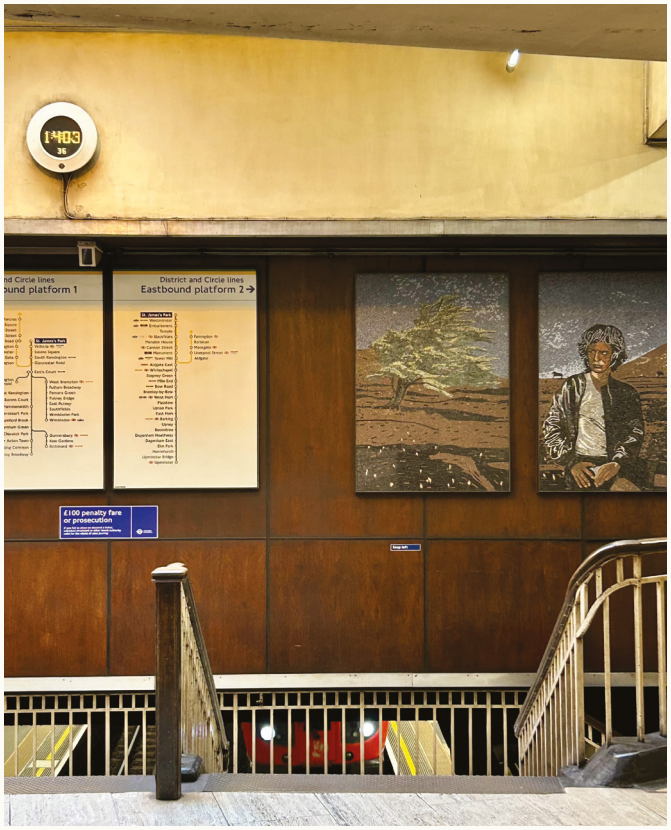


FIGURE 6: Angels of History: A permanent mosaic artwork by Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings at St. James's Park Underground station. Photo: Holly Norman. London, April 2025.

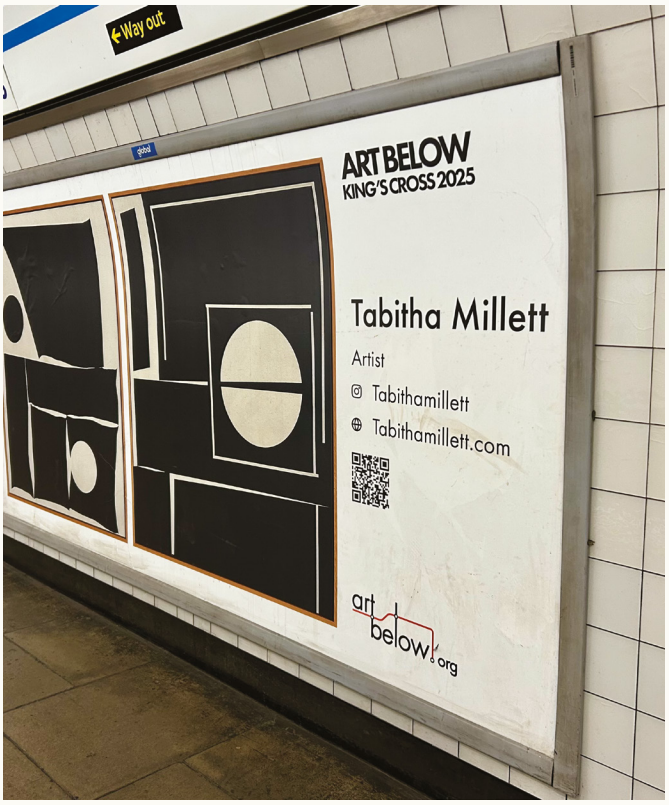


FIGURE 7: Art Below outdoor gallery at Kings Cross St. Pancras Underground station. Photo: Holly Norman. London, April 2025.

The transformative potential of public art lies not merely in beautification, but in its ability to spark joy, foster emotional connection and ignite civic imagination. Whether permanent, site-specific, interactive, or responsive, public artworks reconfigure the urban landscape into sites of meaning, memory, and shared identity (Chueng *et al.*, 2021). They become platforms for engagement – inviting reflection on collective histories, values, and future aspirations. More than an aesthetic contribution, public art and visual storytelling are vital instruments of democratic expression and social change. They challenge dominant narratives by asking: who is represented in cities, and who gets to shape them?

Street installations, sculptural works, and billboard art all have the power to disrupt the rhythms of everyday life, puncturing urban space with alternative imaginaries and inviting public reflection (Iveson, 2011). These interventions not only contribute to visual enrichment and regeneration, but to connection and visibility by fostering shared identities and cultivating a sense of belonging (Cartiere, 2014; Zebracki *et al.*, 2010; Usher and Strange, 2011). Such efforts are driven by a diverse coalition of actors – non-profits, artist collectives, universities, civic organisations, commercial entities, B Corps, and municipal authorities – working together across sectors and scales.

One particularly impactful strategy within this landscape involves the creative repurposing of advertising infrastructure to serve public, cultural, and ecological purposes. By embedding art into the everyday visual environment, these interventions reclaim spaces once dominated by commercial messaging and reorient them toward community engagement and critical reflection. A growing number of recent initiatives demonstrate this transformative potential. The *I AM WATER* campaign, developed by the *Ecoartspace* collective, used billboards to raise awareness around water security and climate change (Marcisz, 2022). *Retracing Footsteps: The Changing Landscape of Yr Wyddfa / Snowdon,* an interdisciplinary project explored unsustainable tourism and environmental degradation through site-specific billboard installations (University of Chester, 2024).

Tate Collective's *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography* featured young artists who celebrated African community and culture via citywide photography poster displays, extending the themes of a Tate Modern exhibition into the urban fabric (TATE, 2023).

This growing movement also includes community-driven projects that use visual storytelling to build social solidarity and collective responsibility. In Bristol, a collaborative initiative supported by the University of Bristol and Rising Arts Agency, transformed lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis into powerful visual narratives that fostered empathy (University of Bristol, 2022). The *For Freedoms* collective exemplifies how art can become a platform for civic action and cultural transformation. Operating as a decentralised network, it equips artists, institutions, and communities with the tools to activate public space and advance social justice. Billboards serve as both medium and message – reclaimed as canvases for dialogue, representation, and collective responsibility. Campaigns such as *Another Justice: By Any Medium Necessary* foregrounded marginalised perspectives and ignited public discourse with artworks like *The Land Remembers* which honoured the Apsáalooke nation, asserting collective memory and belonging in the face of erasure (Paige, 2022).

In London, Hackney Council's *Old Street Digital Canvas* demonstrates how municipal authorities can work in partnership with advertising firms to repurpose commercial media infrastructure as platforms for public art. Positioned in one of the capital's busiest intersections, the initiative temporarily inserts contemporary artworks into the daily rhythms of city life – reaching diverse audiences, including those who may not typically engage with formal cultural venues (Billboard Insider, 2024). Similar ambitions drive the work of non-profits such as The Billboard Collective and SaveArtSpace, which transform advertising sites into open-air galleries. These organisations assert that access to art and culture is not a luxury but a public right – challenging traditional assumptions about where art belongs and who it is for.

Expanding on this ethos, Buildhollywood's *Your Space or Mine* series offers emerging artists a temporary but visible platform to share their work with the wider public. Initiatives like *All About Love* – inspired by bell hooks and featuring voices such as Helen Cammock – foreground Black, queer, non-binary, and women artists, asserting their presence within the visual fabric of the city (He, 2023). As an independent media group, Buildhollywood bridges commercial advertising with socially engaged, creative storytelling. From hand-painted murals to interactive installations, their projects spotlight pressing issues – from housing insecurity to criminal justice – often told through personal narratives and artistic practices. Collaborations with initiatives like *Art Not Evidence,* which defends creative freedom in contexts of surveillance and criminalisation, further exemplify how advertising infrastructures can be reimagined as spaces of advocacy, resistance, and cultural justice (Monteith, 2024).

In various contexts, digital outdoor media infrastructure is being reimagined as a dynamic, multifunctional spaces for visual storytelling and civic communication. No longer limited to purely commercial purposes, these platforms are increasingly leveraged to convey public interest messages – amplifying community priorities, supporting social campaigns, and promoting health and wellbeing. For instance, JCDecaux, one of the world's largest outdoor advertising firms, now integrates socially driven content into its advertising schedule. In partnership with municipal authorities, art agencies, and non-profits, JCDecaux has supported campaigns that signpost people to mental health services, encourage active lifestyles, promote local cultural events, and disseminate public health guidance (JCDecaux, 2025b). Through these collaborations, advertisers are repositioned not just as commercial actors, but as contributors to community wellbeing and urban resilience. This evolution marks a broader shift: from advertising infrastructure as tools of passive consumption to active channels of public value and civic engagement (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2017).

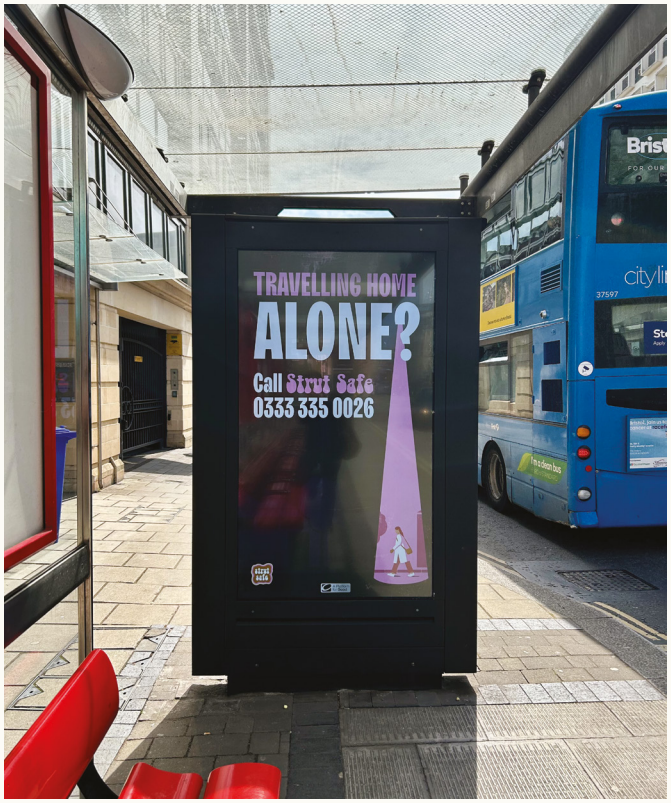


FIGURE 8: JCDecaux supported a Strut Safe campaign, a volunteer-operated support line which fosters community safety through compassion and reassurance. Photo: Holly Norman. Bristol City Centre, April 2025.

What is especially compelling across these examples is their potential to foster broader public understanding of urban transformation – not merely as a technical or aesthetic process, but as a socially embedded, participatory endeavour. Public art and creative placemaking act as accessible entry points into complex issues. When embedded within urban strategies aligned with the UN SDGs – these cultural initiatives do more than beautify the built environment. They contribute to inclusive urban governance, promote cultural rights, and encourage civic agency. By making transformative processes visible and meaningful to diverse publics, such efforts build capacity for shared ownership of the city's future – advancing both local regeneration goals and global commitments to sustainable, just urban development.

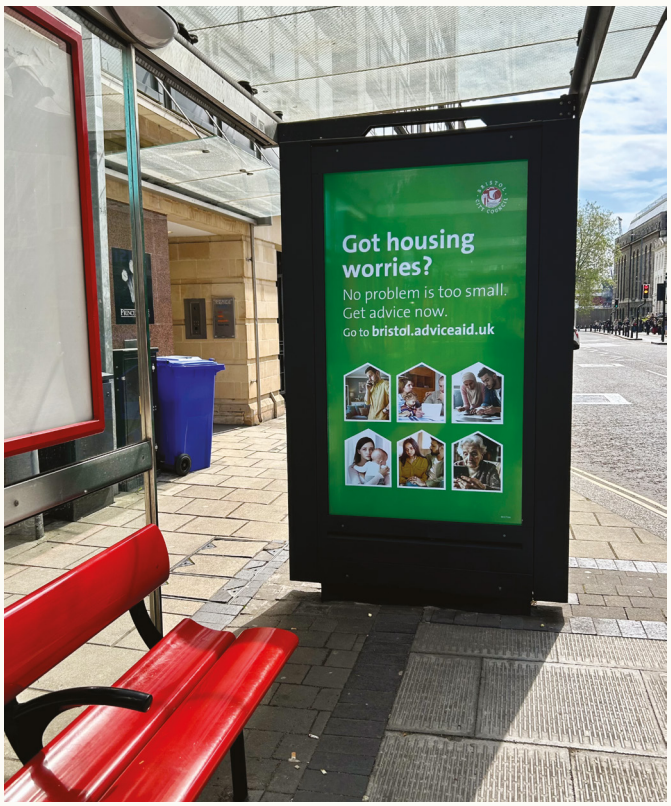
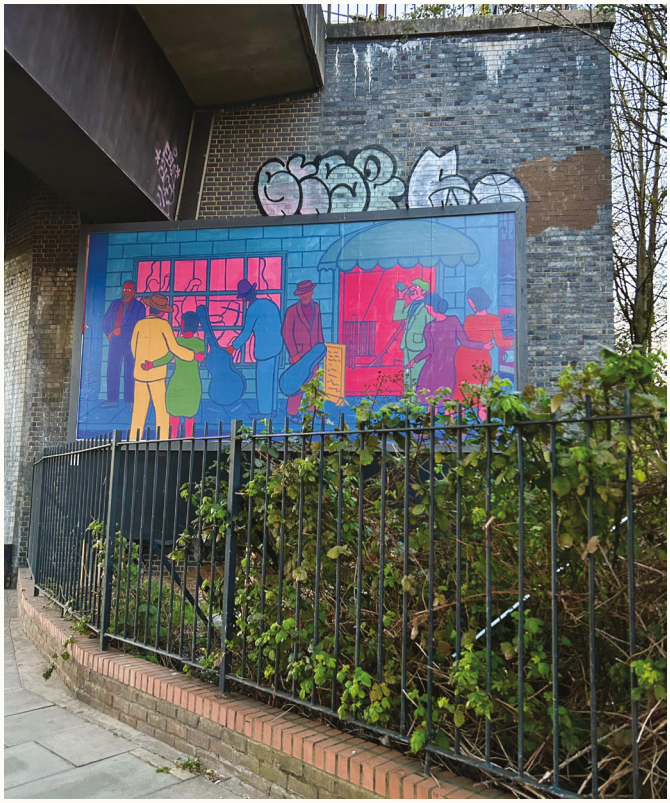


FIGURE 9: Digital advertising space being harnessed to raise awareness of housing advice services provided by Bristol City Council, demonstrating how commercial media infrastructure can serve critical public outreach and support. Photo: Holly Norman. Bristol City Centre, April 2025.

As demonstrated throughout this section, embedding artistic expression and visual storytelling into the urban fabric reclaims the visual public realm as a dynamic platform for civic engagement, community connection, and cultural dialogue. These examples illustrate how a diverse range of stakeholders, including city authorities, artists, media agencies, and cultural institutions, can collaboratively reimagine traditional advertising infrastructure to balance economic sustainability with public value. In emerging dual-use models, billboard and digital screen spaces are shared between commercial advertisements and artistic or socially conscious content, creating a flexible framework for cultural exchange. This hybrid approach transforms public space into a more inclusive cultural commons – one that nurtures creative exploration, supports wellbeing, and reinforces a sense of collective urban identity.

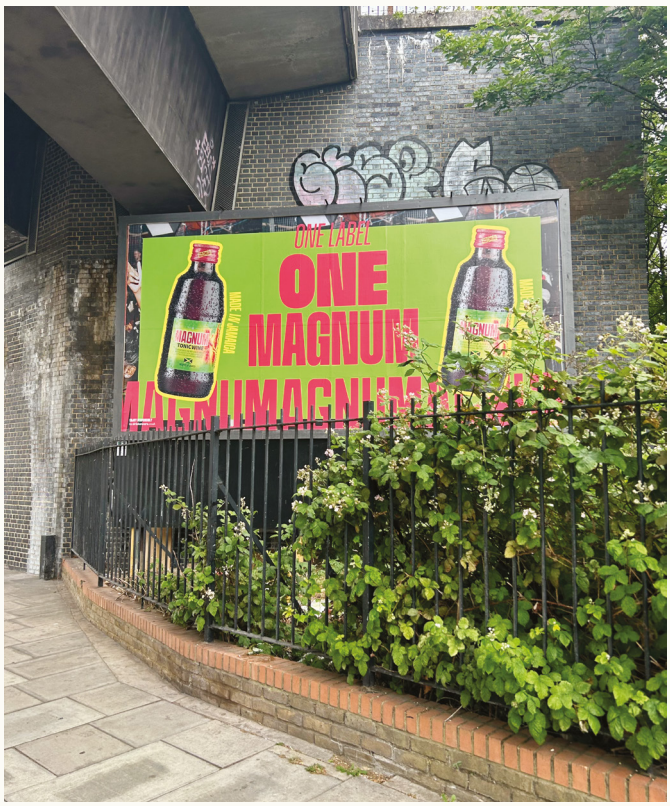
FIGURE 10: Artwork by artist and illustrator Gauab Thakali based in South-East London, featured as part of Buildhollywood's Your Space or Mine series – an initiative that invites emerging artists and creatives to exhibit their work on commercial advertising sites. Photo: Holly Norman. Hackney, East London, May 2025. →



However, this model is not without its contradictions. While outdoor advertising platforms are increasingly used to promote public health, charitable causes, and socially relevant campaigns, they frequently continue to display advertisements for harmful or unhealthy products – such as fast food, alcohol, and gambling – often targeting economically disadvantaged communities. Compounding these concerns, some advertisers sidestep formal planning regulations by installing billboards and poster sites without permission, contributing to visual pollution and raising alarms about the unchecked encroachment of private commercial interests into shared public spaces (Adblock Bristol, 2022a).

Critics have also raised concerns about the depth and authenticity of engagement. Frank (2021) cautions that temporary artistic takeovers can risk becoming forms of *artwashing* – symbolic gestures that enhance the public image of advertisers or landlords without addressing the deeper structural inequalities they may perpetuate. Such interventions, while visually appealing, can inadvertently undermine the radical potential of visual reclamation by reinforcing, rather than challenging, the dominance of commercial messaging in public space.

Furthermore, the growing reliance on public–private partnerships to govern outdoor media surfaces critical questions about representation, power, and control. Who has the authority to determine what is suitable for public display? Iveson (2011:163) critiques the dominant 'unidirectional model of communication' that characterises most public advertising, shaped largely by the interests of global brands and corporate agendas. He argues that true reclamation of the visual public realm demands more than occasional or symbolic access – it requires a fundamental reimagining of the visual public realm as a participatory and democratic platform, where collective agency can challenge corporate monopolies, foster inclusive expression, and contribute to more just and equitable urban futures.



↑ *FIGURE 11: The presence of an advertisement for Magnum Tonic Wine (16.5% ABV) on the same billboard site underscores the complex dual use of such spaces – where artistic expression and public benefit coexist uneasily with the promotion of unhealthy commodities. Photo: Holly Norman. Hackney, East London, June 2025.*

Community-led Transformation

Since public art can be co-opted by processes of urban governance and gentrification, Li (2024) poses a critical question: how can spatial practices cultivate conditions for the emergence of art outside state-led, market-driven, and elite-centred frameworks? This provocation is essential for reimaging the visual public realm not simply as a vehicle for commercial persuasion but as a potential site for democratic engagement, cultural expression, and the pursuit of more just urban futures.

Across cities, communities are actively reimagining the visual public realm by pushing back against the overwhelming presence of commercial imagery. This resistance stems from growing awareness of the deeper impacts of visual pollution – ranging from sensory overload and compulsive consumerism to the environmental costs of overconsumption (Ro, 2020). In response, communities are taking action through diverse and creative means: purchasing advertising spaces, filing legal and planning objections, and engaging in subversive acts of visual defiance. These efforts seek to reclaim public space as a platform for community voices, cultural expression, and civic dialogue (Baker, 2007). The following section showcases grassroots, community-driven initiatives that disrupt dominant visual narratives through participatory art, collective imagination, and sustained local organising – reclaiming the visual public realm as a space for inclusivity, creative expression, and shared community wellbeing.

Reclaiming Space

In today's media-saturated world, outdoor advertising is often dubbed 'the only medium you can't turn off' (Iveson, 2011:153). Its constant presence in public spaces makes it both inescapable and a prime target for resistance. One such response is subvertising – also known as culture jamming or brandalism – a form of anti-consumerist activism that connects local actions to global movements, and reclaims the visual public realm for political and cultural expression (Lekakis, 2020). By mimicking the style and language of advertising, subvertising exposes the commercialisation of the visual landscape and invites critical reflection (Ware, 2023).

The prominent global network, *Subvertisers International,* launched its #SubvertTheCity campaign in 2017, altering over 500 billboards across cities including New York, Berlin, Mexico City, and Tehran. Interventions involved whitewashing advertisements to create blank canvases – inviting artists and passersby to contribute their own expressions. This was paired with public forums on the social consequences of visual pollution (Subvertisers International, 2017). Within this network, the UK-based collective Brandalism has led striking interventions (Vickers & Saelens, 2017). During the 2015 UN Climate Summit in Paris, they replaced more than 600 ads with satirical artworks targeting greenwashing and alleged human rights abuses of sponsors (BBC News, 2015; EcoHustler, 2020; Denyer, 2020b).

In Bristol, they subverted 50 billboard ads for cars and alcohol, using grey paint to mirror the city council's graffiti removal tactics – highlighting the sanitisation of public space (Davis, 2017; Saelens, 2016). Near Bristol International Airport, the network used critical artworks to urge the city to extend its Advertising and Sponsorship Policy – which already restricts ads for junk food, gambling, and payday loans – to include 'high carbon' products such as cars and flights (Limbu, 2023; Booth, 2024; see also Humphries, 2024).

Creative Placemaking, Public Art, and Community Building

Across the UK, communities are reclaiming their right to shape the visual public realm – pushing back against the dominance of commercial imagery through grassroots placemaking and creative activism. These efforts challenge the commodification of urban visual culture, repositioning public spaces as arenas for connection, expression, and solidarity. They make clear that people want to see the visual public realm used ways that reflect their values and local identity.

Placemaking, as Collins (2020) and Chueng *et al.* (2021) define it, involves the (re)design of public spaces to make them more usable, inclusive, and reflective of the needs and aspirations of those who inhabit them. In this context, public art becomes more than aesthetic embellishment – it becomes an active agent in fostering vitality, anchoring place identity, and facilitating dialogue. While some interventions affirm a shared sense of place, others spark productive tensions, revealing the contested nature of urban space.

// Across the UK, communities are reclaiming their right to shape the visual public realm – pushing back against the dominance of commercial imagery.

At the vanguard of this work are organisations like Adfree Cities and its affiliate, AdBlock Bristol. These volunteer-led networks confront the overwhelming presence of commercial imagery in urban spaces and champion shared spaces that prioritise art, nature, and cultural expression. Since its founding in 2017, AdBlock Bristol has successfully opposed over 40 digital billboard proposals and helped drive the removal of numerous existing structures – transformative acts of spatial reclamation that exemplify community driven urban governance (Adblock Bristol, 2022b; Denyer, 2022a). They reimagine commercial advertising sites as platforms for spontaneous public participation and expression. Through handwritten prompts like *What do you love about BS3?* or *How are you today?* temporary canvases invite reflection, connection, and conversation – fostering a sense of local presence (Davis, 2017; Wills, 2022). As Cankaya (2021) notes, such interventions strengthen neighbourhood cohesion by generating visible spaces for collective voice and identity.

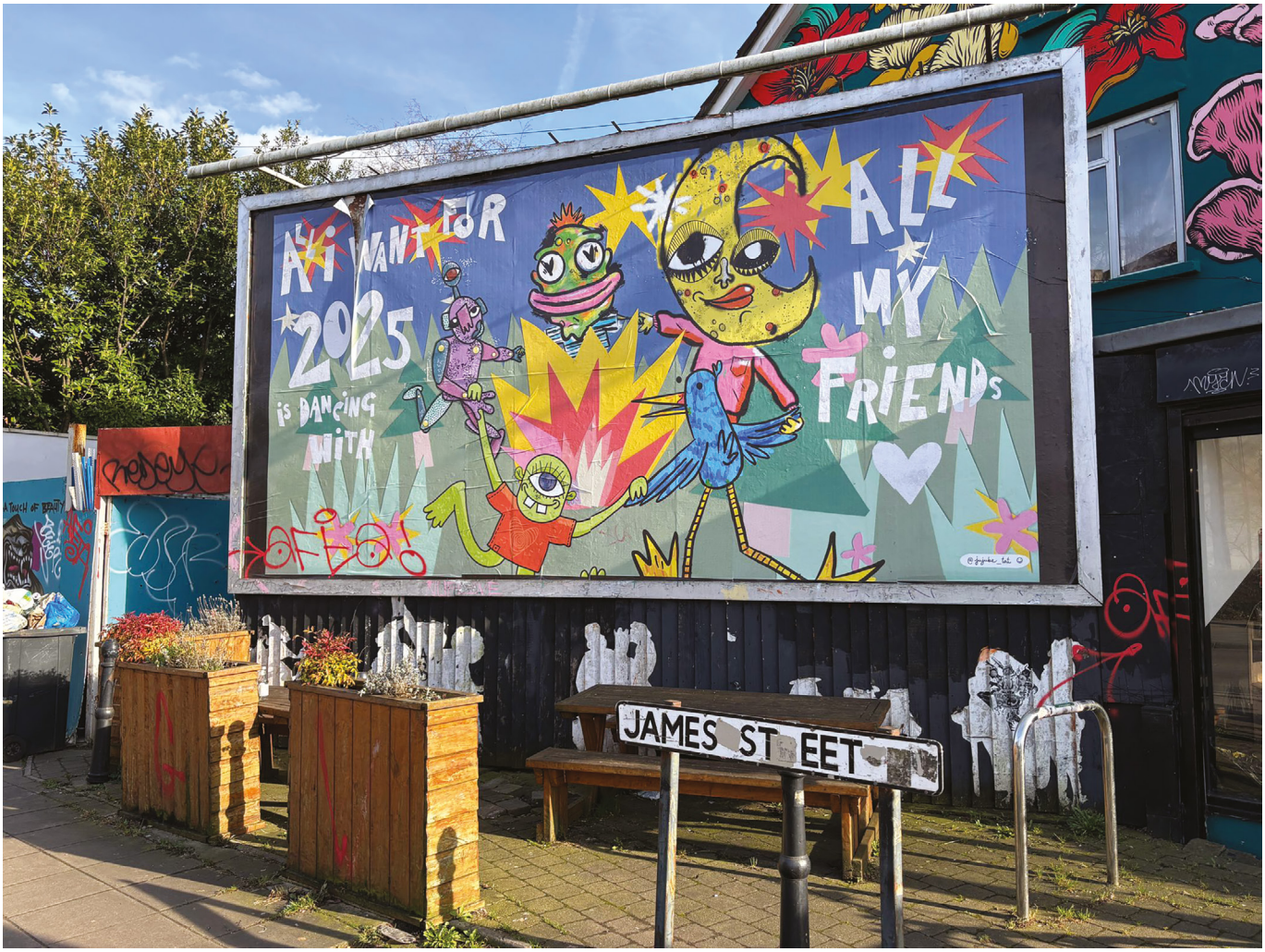
In Bedminster, South Bristol, the AdBlock BS3 group along with residents, businesses, councillors, and the Bedminster Business Improvement District – representing over 350 local businesses – united to remove two prominent billboards from North Street Green. The advertisements, seen to promote global brands at odds with local identity, became the focal point for a community-driven campaign (Bedminster BID, 2020). A petition garnered over 600 signatures, and by 2023, the billboards were dismantled. While the landowner, National Grid, framed the removal as a commercial decision, for residents it marked a clear victory for grassroots action and people-powered urban change (Wilks, 2021; 2024).

Following their removal, the site was revitalised with tree planting, murals, raised flower beds, and a community noticeboard – exemplifying a move toward participatory, people-centred design that fosters community wellbeing and prosperity (Cork, 2023; 2021). This reimagining of public space foregrounds the regenerative role of creative practice within urban transformation – an approach that aligns with broader trends in culture-led development and the recognition of nature's intrinsic place in sustainable city-making (Lovaglio and Scortichini, 2021; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Lossau and Stevens, 2015; Mathews, 2010; Hall and Robertson, 2001; Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017; Balarezo and Karimi, 2018; He *et al.*, 2021; Moreno-Tabarez *et al.*, 2023).

Elsewhere in Bristol, a compelling case of sustained, community-driven creative placemaking can be found in the Burg Arts project in St. Werburgh's. Originally launched between 2010 and 2013 by resident groups who collectively purchased a former advertising site, the project was reactivated in 2018 by AdBlock Bristol and Adfree Cities, in collaboration with St. Werburgh's City Farm, resident associations, and neighbourhood organisations. Operating outside of municipal funding structures, the project embodies what Schwarz (2023:78) describes as a fusion of 'artistic imagination' and 'collective hands-on mentality'.

The Burg Arts project serves as a lasting platform for socially engaged art that emerges from, and responds to, community voices. Its inaugural commission after relaunch – a mural by artist Matt Bonner created with local input – posed a simple yet resonant question: *What do you love about living in St. Werburgh's?* (Adblock Bristol, 2018). Since then, the project has hosted a range of participatory activities including workshops, youth-led initiatives, and interactive events like a Giant Paint-by-Numbers installation, that have opened space for dialogue on pressing issues such as airport expansion and fossil fuel advertising.

Far from being limited to urban beautification, the site has become a space for civic storytelling and cultural expression. Contributions from local artists and groups – including The People's Art Club (Bennett, 2025), anti-racism education initiatives (UWE Bristol, 2024), celebrations of neurodiversity, and support for independent, local businesses – have surfaced the lived experiences, political aspirations, and diverse identities that shape the neighbourhood. Artworks such as *Allotments Are for Everybody,* created in collaboration with Bristol Allotmenteers Resist, exemplify how public art can challenge socio-economic injustice and advocate for community control overland, in this case in response to proposed rent hikes (Woolerton, 2024).



↑ *FIGURE 12: The Burg Arts project in collaboration with Adfree Cities and AdBlock Bristol with artwork by Jules which says 'All I want for 2025 is dancing with all my friends'. The community-led transformation of the space, from installing street furniture to cultivating roadside flower beds, further reinforces how creative, arts-based practices support pathways to prosperity. Photo: Holly Norman. St. Werburgh's, East Bristol, March 2025.*

The Burg Arts project exemplifies the transformative potential of participatory public art to reimagine the visual public realm as a dynamic space for civic engagement, social dialogue, and collective creativity. As Thomas *et al.* (2014) suggest, intentional, arts-based interventions can foster 'meaningful dialogue through the generation of creative and social friction,' allowing diverse voices and expressions to surface and interact. These practices demonstrate that when creative placemaking is genuinely participatory and rooted in local contexts, public art can cultivate the public realm as a living infrastructure of community, culture, and care. It is precisely through these productive tensions – where artistic imagination meets social complexity – that new, more inclusive urban futures can take shape.

In this sense, the Burg Arts project functions not only as symbolic commons but also as an active, participatory site of co-creation, stewardship, and shared meaning-making (Beauregard *et al.*, 2020; Eynaud *et al.*, 2018). It offers space for new social imaginaries to take root – grounded in mutual care, collective responsibility, and neighbourhood resilience. Through collaborative artistic practice, public art becomes a vehicle for place-based organising, a catalyst for democratic engagement, and a powerful tool for envisioning and enacting more inclusive and imaginative urban futures.

City-Level Recommendations

Cities are increasingly recognised as critical arenas for meaningful, long-term action to advance prosperity (Hale, 2017). At the same time, they often magnify social and spatial inequalities, exposing and deepening vulnerabilities in complex and uneven ways. This paper has explored a series of encouraging examples – from grassroots initiatives to innovative partnerships between local authorities, art agencies, businesses, and grassroots organisations – that reveal how more inclusive, accountable, and imaginative approaches to public space are not only conceivable but already underway. In the following section, we propose policy directions that build on these foundations, supporting communities in reclaiming and reshaping the visual public realm in ways that serve the collective good.

Regulation

Harnessing the visual public realm for community prosperity requires cities to adopt clear, enforceable limits on the scale and nature of outdoor advertising and visual pollution. While enhanced legislative powers at the local level remain necessary, many European cities are already pioneering bold, innovative approaches that reclaim public space – illustrating the growing momentum for change.

In France, for example, local authorities have the power to regulate the size and number of advertising panels within their jurisdictions, though content restrictions remain beyond their remit. Despite these constraints, cities like Lyon Métropole are taking decisive action. In June 2023, Lyon adopted a comprehensive advertising regulation covering all 58 municipalities in its metropolitan area, targeting a 75% reduction in advertising panels (Bourgeois, 2024).

This builds on earlier efforts by Grenoble, which in 2015 became the first European city to ban commercial advertising in public spaces, removing 326 billboards and replacing them with trees and community noticeboards – a shift prioritising public expression and ecological integrity (Mahawi, 2015). In 2024, The Hague became the first city globally to legally prohibit fossil fuel-related advertising, moving beyond voluntary restrictions introduced in cities like Amsterdam and Edinburgh (Kaminski, 2024).

Despite these promising developments, the absence of harmonised regulation across regions threatens to undermine their impact. A robust policy framework is urgently required – one that:

- Prioritises local businesses over multinational corporations and e-commerce giants,
- Enforces strict limits on the brightness, energy use, and scale of digital screens,
- Restricts commercial advertising to designated zones, protecting residential areas, schools, parks, and local high streets from visual intrusion.

Such measures are vital to ensure the visual public realm remain oriented towards the common good. However, detaching public infrastructure from commercial dependency remains challenging. Many municipalities operate under vague regulatory mandates, face aggressive industry lobbying, and navigate ongoing financial constraints. In contexts such as the UK – where austerity-driven budget cuts have pressured local councils to seek alternative revenue streams – advertising often fills critical funding gaps (Mahawi, 2015; Sourisseau, 2024).

// Harnessing the visual public realm for community prosperity requires cities to adopt clear, enforceable limits on the scale and nature of outdoor advertising and visual pollution.

Empowering local governments with greater authority and clearer legal frameworks is essential to enable communities to meaningfully shape their visual environment. One powerful example of this potential is seen in the experience of TfL. In 2019, TfL introduced a landmark ban on unhealthy food advertising across its network. While advertisers were still permitted to promote brand identity, HFSS-specific products were restricted (Tapper, 2025). Backed by public health advocacy groups, the Healthier Food Advertising Policy aimed to address health inequalities and improve outcomes for children (Bite Back, 2025). Public support was overwhelming: 82% of Londoners backed the initiative (Bernhardt, 2022a).

Contrary to industry concerns, TfL's advertising revenue remained stable and even increased by £2.3 million in the policy's first year. Revenues continued to hold steady during 2020–2021, despite pandemic-related disruptions (Bernhardt, 2022b; Finlay, 2021). Early evaluations are promising (Tapper, 2025; Bite Back, 2025; Thomas *et al.*, 2022). Research from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found a 20% reduction in purchases of sugary products, and a weekly average decrease of 1,000 calories per household from HFSS items (Bernhardt, 2025). Projections suggest long-term benefits, including 95,000 fewer obesity cases, 3,000 fewer diabetes diagnoses, 2,000 fewer heart disease cases, and hundreds of millions in NHS savings (Bernhardt, 2022b; PHIRST, 2022).

TfL's success illustrates the broader, underutilised potential of publicly controlled advertising infrastructure. When guided by common good, transport systems and other civic assets can serve as platforms for health equity, civic identity, and cultural expression. For policymakers, local authorities, and urban planners, the lesson is clear: with strategic regulation, the visual public realm can be reimagined – not only to generate revenue, but also to foster community prosperity.

Requirements

Local authorities frequently maintain commercial contracts with advertising firms for the use of council-owned infrastructure, such as bus shelters with digital screens. These contracts generate significant revenue for advertising companies – often amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds – while public spaces become dominated by commercial messages from multinational corporations. Although these concessions provide income for local councils, public infrastructure should do more than just promote consumer spending. As discussed in this paper, harnessing the visual public realm has the potential to amplify social support systems, foster welcoming atmospheres, tackle disinformation, and serve as platforms for art and civic participation.

Many advertising panels, including digital screens, are already installed across cities. While the expansion of digital advertising infrastructure raises concerns, the removal of existing panels is not financially practical. However, this installed infrastructure can be reimagined to support community prosperity. A policy should be introduced that requires advertisers to allocate a significant portion of existing advertising space for local, non-commercial, and community-driven purposes.

Through flexible, dual-use models, public visual infrastructure can be transformed into a democratic and inclusive cultural common. Such spaces can reinforce civic identity, nurture creativity, and support wellbeing. Access can be granted to voluntary organisations, neighbourhood associations, charities, mutual aid networks, and other civil society groups. This would mark a meaningful shift toward the democratisation of the visual public realm, enabling community voices to become more prominent and visible in urban environments. Importantly, the cost of this policy must be carried by the advertising companies – not local authorities.

Reinvestment

An important policy innovation – whether as a precursor to or complement of advertising restrictions – is the introduction of a dedicated tax on commercial actors who extract value from the visual public realm. At present, while outdoor advertisers must comply with regulatory frameworks, they are not taxed in a way that directly channels financial benefits to the communities where their billboards, digital screens, and signage are placed.

A targeted levy could address this imbalance by requiring advertising companies and brands to pay fees based on both their occupation of public visual space and the revenue generated from it. Modelled similarly to a carbon tax, this approach would both discourage the excessive use of public space for private profit and generate funds that could be reinvested into initiatives that support local communities. Such a tax would recognise that the visual environment is a shared civic resource. The revenue raised could support a wide range of community benefits: from funding public art programmes and reclaiming former advertising sites for allotments or gardens, to supporting local educational, environmental, or cultural initiatives.

This model would help correct the existing asymmetry between private gain and public cost, converting commercial exploitation into a mechanism for community enrichment. Local authorities could be granted discretion over how these funds are distributed – ensuring alignment with local needs and priorities. Several international cases demonstrate how this model could work in practice, albeit not without legal or logistical challenges:

- **France:** *The Local Tax on Outdoor Advertising* is a municipal tax in France, applicable to companies that operate outdoor advertising, such as signs and billboards. Rates vary depending on the size, type, and location of the medium, and the population of the municipality. The tax is only applicable where local governments choose to implement it and applies solely to fixed, outdoor advertising formats (Public Service, 2025).
- **The Netherlands:** Dutch municipalities are permitted to levy an advertising tax on advertisements visible from public roads, including billboards, illuminated signs, and window displays. Tax rates vary across municipalities and are influenced by factors such as advertisement size and building characteristics. Environmental permits are generally required for such displays (Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2022).

- **Pittsburgh, the United States:** In 2012, Pittsburgh City Council approved a 10% tax on billboard revenue generated within city limits. Although it was approved without controversy, billboard companies have blocked its implementation through prolonged legal disputes, leaving the tax unenforced for over a decade. Advocacy organisations like Scenic Pittsburgh continue to campaign for its enactment, proposing that the funds be allocated toward public benefit initiatives such as fly tipping and rubbish cleanups, property maintenance, greenspace development, and improved recycling infrastructure (Scenic America, 2020).

These examples highlight both the opportunities and challenges of implementing such taxes. A crucial policy priority is the effective use of the generated revenue. It is recommended that funds collected from outdoor advertising taxes be reinvested into civic-oriented, participatory visual initiatives – particularly public art that promotes education, health, wellbeing, and community expression. By doing so, cities can reimagine the visual public realm – not as a passive backdrop for consumer messaging, but as an active canvas for creative storytelling, community resilience, and shared prosperity.

Comparable frameworks already exist in other areas of urban policy. In England, for example, Section 106 agreements require developers to offset the impacts of private construction by contributing to local infrastructure. As a condition of planning approval, a developer might be obliged to build a public amenity such as a park, playground, or community centre that serves the wider neighbourhood. In much the same way, the proposal here calls for commercial advertisers – who profit from access to the urban commons – to reinvest a portion of that value back into the public realm. This would help counterbalance the negative effects of visual clutter and ensure that the shared urban environment serves the broader public interest.

// The visual public realm can be transformed into a vibrant space for civic expression – shaped by the people who live there.

Participation

As cities move to regulate outdoor advertising and curb the saturation of commercial imagery, attention turns to what should take its place. The solution lies not in top-down directives but in harnessing the democratic power of collective imagination. The visual public realm can be transformed into a vibrant space for civic expression – shaped by the people who live there and reflecting the rich diversity of identities, values, and histories woven into everyday urban life. This transformation requires more than tokenistic consultation; it calls for a fundamental redistribution of power. Participatory processes are not peripheral to urban governance – they are essential to rethinking how cities are shaped and designed. When communities are given the tools, resources, and authority to influence their environments, the visual public realm shifts from being a backdrop for consumption to a platform for agency and social solidarity. Through citizen assemblies, neighbourhood workshops, school projects, and artist collaborations, new, grounded visions of the city can emerge – plural, inclusive, and rooted in the lived experience of communities.

As Sen (2004) asserts, the freedom to participate in social life is a basic human capability. Yet, as Fraser (1990) reminds us, access to the public sphere has long been mediated by systems of exclusion. Reclaiming the visual and spatial commons is therefore not just symbolic – it is an act of structural justice. It reopens space for those historically marginalised in urban decision-making, and for ways of knowing that are embodied, relational, intergenerational, and resistant to commodification.

Fostering inclusive public environments involves sustained dialogue, trust, and a commitment to care. It requires nurturing informal community networks that bolster wellbeing, enhance safety, and steward land in ways that prioritise both social and ecological flourishing. Such approaches reposition public space not as a vehicle for profit, but as a shared resource – a site of belonging, repair and imagination. This is not merely a critique of visual pollution or spatial inequality – it is an invitation to co-create alternative urban futures. Futures in which public art, design, and visual culture serve as tools for transformation, amplifying community voices, confronting contested histories, and envisioning prosperous communities.

In this context, rather than smoothing over tensions or delivering unidirectional messages, public art invites dissent, reflection, and conversation. It aligns with Rancière's (2013) notion of art as critical engagement, and with Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) vision of radical democracy, where conflict is not a disruption to be eliminated but embraced as a vital condition for pluralism and transformation. Creative interventions in the visual public realm thus operate as acts of resistance, inclusion, and democratic renewal. Situated in the urban cracks that Verschelden *et al.* (2012) describe – spaces of tension and possibility – they can enable collective learning, foster new forms of belonging, and support the ongoing reimagining of cities as thriving places for all.

// Creative interventions in the visual public realm operate as acts of resistance, inclusion, and democratic renewal.

In increasingly complex and diverse societies – where difference is a fundamental strength – we must reclaim the capacity for meaningful public dialogue on issues that matter, especially where disagreement exists. Recognising and integrating local knowledge and lived experience into urban governance is increasingly seen as a democratic imperative (Moreno-Tabarez *et al.*, 2023). By placing the insights and creative contributions of residents, artists, urban planners, businesses, and civic leaders at the centre of decision-making, we can foster cities that are not only more equitable and responsive but also socially dynamic and inclusive (Hale, 2017). This approach goes beyond improving physical streetscapes; it lays the groundwork for deeper social solidarity and a more just urban life.

Conclusion

Reclaiming the visual public realm is more than a rejection of commercial encroachment – it is a powerful opportunity to reimagine how public spaces can nurture belonging, wellbeing, and civic participation.

The visual dominance of profit-driven imagery in urban environments has far-reaching consequences: it restricts equitable access to public space, perpetuates consumerist values, and suppresses community expression. Across cities, a growing grassroots movement is pushing back – through community art projects, participatory murals, gardening initiatives, and other acts of placemaking. These actions not only challenge the visual monopoly of commercial media but also illuminate what a more inclusive, culturally resonant, and democratically shaped visual public realm could look like. This paper has explored such community-driven alternatives, supported by emerging policies that prioritise public good over private gain. These initiatives expose structural inequalities, elevate marginalised voices, and reassert the right of communities to shape both the physical and symbolic landscapes they inhabit.

By centring community voices and fostering collaboration among local authorities, artists, art agencies, businesses, schools, and civil society organisations, cities can co-create visual environments that reflect shared values, honour local histories, and tell collective stories. These partnerships lay the foundation for more cohesive, inclusive, and resilient urban environments with public art serving as a powerful social and political stimulus, capable of confronting dominant visual narratives and amplifying underrepresented voices (Andrzejewski and Maliszewska, 2022).

To truly transform the visual public realm, we must go beyond reducing exposure to advertising. This shift opens space for creative, healthy, and socially cohesive content that celebrates local places. It signals a move from corporate promotion to collective expression – a reinvestment in the visual culture of care, identity, and connection.

This paper has offered policy proposals to support that vision. But meaningful change will not emerge from institutional deliberation alone – it must be co-produced through collaboration, participation, and community-led action. As awareness grows regarding the social and psychological impacts of how visual landscapes impact people, it becomes imperative to bring everyone into decision-making processes. Local communities deserve not just a voice, but real power in shaping their surroundings. Their knowledge, values, and lived experiences must guide how we design the visual public realm to foster prosperity, health and belonging for all.

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