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Article

# Public Art as Administrative Communication: Policy Narratives and Community Participation in Public Art Projects

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how public art projects function as a dynamic medium of administrative communication through the strategic use of policy narratives and active community participation. Taking Mural Arts Philadelphia, Superkilen Park in Copenhagen, and London's Fourth Plinth as diverse comparative cases, it systematically analyzes how public art translates abstract policy goals into visible, spatial, and highly debatable public experiences. The study adopts a rigorous comparative case study method combined with narrative analysis, focusing specifically on policy goals, art-historical narratives, participation mechanisms, communication pathways, and inherent project limitations. The empirical findings show that Mural Arts Philadelphia represents a community repair-oriented model, effectively transforming urban governance concerns into participatory mural storytelling. Meanwhile, Superkilen demonstrates a multicultural negotiation model by embedding residents' diverse cultural memories and everyday objects into a cohesive public space. Furthermore, the Fourth Plinth reflects a public controversy model, utilizing temporary contemporary commissions to challenge traditional monument paradigms and generate vital civic debate. Ultimately, the paper argues that public art becomes effective administrative communication only when policy goals are concretized through compelling art-historical narratives, community participation is introduced at early stages, institutional power remains transparent, public space stays connected to everyday life, and feedback mechanisms are sustained over time. However, the study cautions that when participation becomes merely symbolic or public art is entirely absorbed into urban branding and commercial spectacle, its fundamental communicative function and democratic potential may be significantly weakened.

**Keywords:** public art; administrative communication; community participation; urban governance; civic engagement

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## 1. Introduction: Why Public Art Becomes a Medium of Policy Communication

### 1.1. Research Background

Public art projects are no longer limited to urban beautification or cultural decoration. They are increasingly embedded in urban regeneration, social inclusion, community governance, cultural memory, and place branding [1]. A mural, sculpture, public square, or participatory artwork can therefore function not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a visible interface between public policy and everyday urban life.

Traditional administrative communication often relies on official announcements, policy documents, public hearings, consultation reports, and media releases [2]. Although institutionally necessary, these methods may seem abstract, bureaucratic, and distant to ordinary residents. Public art can bridge this gap by translating policy intentions into images, spatial forms, stories, and participatory processes. Rather than simply informing

the public, it allows residents to see, experience, question, and sometimes co-produce policy meanings.

Public art also depends on art-historical narratives [3]. Mural traditions, monument culture, avant-garde art, site-specific art, community art, and participatory art provide symbolic resources for public policy. These traditions connect present policy goals with longer histories of visual representation, shared memory, and civic identity. Thus, art history offers not only stylistic references, but also narrative legitimacy for administrative communication.

### *1.2. Research Questions*

This paper explores the role of public art as a medium for administrative communication, focusing on art-historical narration and community engagement [4]. It addresses three key questions:

RQ1: In what ways do public art projects translate policy objectives into discernible art-historical narratives?

RQ2: How is community engagement structured, articulated, and institutionalized within public art initiatives?

RQ3: What variations exist in the administrative communication outcomes of public art projects, and what constraints do they highlight?

### *1.3. Research Objects and Case Selection*

This paper selects three representative cases. Mural Arts Philadelphia exemplifies a model of community repair and urban governance, integrating mural storytelling with neighborhood identity and civic participation. Superkilen Park in Copenhagen highlights multicultural negotiation and local identity, transforming cultural differences into spatial narratives through objects and symbols from diverse communities. London's Fourth Plinth explores monumentality, public dialogue, and symbolic reinterpretation, utilizing temporary commissions to reimagine public monuments within a diverse urban context [4].

### *1.4. Research Methods*

This paper employs a comparative case study method combined with narrative analysis. It explores five key dimensions: policy goals, art-historical traditions, participation mechanisms, administrative communication pathways, and project limitations. Emphasis is placed on the translation, presentation, reception, and contestation of policy messages, as well as the extent to which participation becomes symbolic, institutionally controlled, elitist, or reduced to an urban spectacle. The analysis concludes that public art serves as an effective medium for policy communication only when artistic narration is meaningfully integrated with community participation [5].

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Art-Historical Narratives, Administrative Communication, and Community Participation**

### *2.1. Art-Historical Narratives in Public Art*

Public art often communicates policy meanings through art-historical narratives. These narratives provide symbolic forms through which administrative goals can be made visible and culturally legitimate [3]. Three traditions are especially relevant to this study.

The first is the monumental tradition. Historically, public art has been closely connected with national memory, heroic commemoration, and urban authority. Monuments usually stabilize certain historical values in public space and present them as shared memory. However, contemporary public art often questions this stability [6]. London's Fourth Plinth is a typical example. Located in Trafalgar Square, it transforms an unfinished monumental site into a platform for temporary contemporary commissions. In doing so, it revises the monument tradition by replacing fixed historical authority with temporary, diverse, and often debated public meanings.

The second is the mural and social art tradition. Murals are frequently associated with working-class communities, ethnic identity, neighborhood memory, and social

movements. Unlike museum-based art, murals directly enter everyday urban environments and become part of residents' visual experience. Mural Arts Philadelphia shows how this tradition can be adapted for administrative communication [2]. What began as a response to graffiti and urban disorder has developed into a broader model of community art, civic participation, and social repair. Here, the mural is not merely a decorative wall image, but a public narrative through which community identity and policy concerns are jointly expressed.

The third is the participatory and site-specific tradition. Since the late twentieth century, public art has increasingly emphasized site, body, process, and participation rather than the completed object alone. Art is understood as a social and spatial practice. Superkilen Park in Copenhagen reflects this logic. It is not a single sculpture placed in public space, but a spatial composition that incorporates residents' memories, cultural references, and objects from different parts of the world. Its meaning depends on the interaction between design, community identity, and everyday use.

### *2.2. The Transformative Mechanism of Administrative Communication*

Administrative communication in public art is not simple propaganda or one-way information delivery. It is a process of transformation in which policy objectives are translated into artistic and spatial forms. This paper proposes a four-stage framework [5].

The first stage is policy encoding [7]. Government departments, cultural agencies, or partner institutions define a policy concern and convert it into a project theme, such as urban renewal, social inclusion, community healing, or multicultural recognition.

The second stage is artistic translation [8]. Artists, designers, and curatorial teams transform the policy theme into images, spatial arrangements, symbols, narratives, and material forms. This stage is crucial because it determines whether policy remains abstract or becomes visible and emotionally accessible.

The third stage is community participation [3]. Residents may participate through interviews, workshops, voting, storytelling, consultation meetings, or co-creation. Participation allows policy communication to move beyond institutional language and enter local experience.

The fourth stage is public feedback. After completion, the artwork continues to communicate through media discussion, public use, criticism, and everyday interaction [9]. Feedback may reinforce the original policy goal, challenge it, or reveal differences between administrative intention and community perception.

### *2.3. Levels of Community Participation*

Community participation in public art can be categorized into three distinct levels [10]. The first is consultative participation, where residents provide input but possess limited influence over decision-making. While this approach can expand public engagement, it risks being merely symbolic if institutional stakeholders retain control over final decisions.

The second level is collaborative participation, which involves residents contributing to the development of the project's theme, content, and form. This approach enables community experiences to have a more direct impact on artistic and policy-related narratives [1].

The third level is co-creative participation, where residents actively contribute as producers of the artwork and its narrative [11]. In this model, they transcend the roles of audience or consultees to become integral contributors to the project's meaning. These three levels serve as a framework for analyzing selected cases and assessing the extent to which public art facilitates community-centered administrative communication.

## **3. Case Study I: Mural Arts Philadelphia and Community Repair-Oriented Administrative Communication**

### *3.1. Project Background*

Mural Arts Philadelphia serves as a significant example for analyzing public art as a medium for policy communication and community engagement. Initially conceived as an urban anti-graffiti initiative, it evolved into a comprehensive public art program integrating art creation, education, social equity, neighborhood involvement, and civic dialogue. This progression illustrates how public art can transcend mere decoration to become an integral component of urban governance.

At its inception, the project had a clear administrative goal: reducing graffiti, enhancing the city's visual landscape, and revitalizing neighborhoods impacted by urban decline. However, its significance lies in its shift from perceiving graffiti solely as a form of disorder to recognizing it as a mode of community expression. This transition represents a pivotal change in administrative communication, where governance extended beyond control to encompass representation, acknowledgment, and participation.

Through mural initiatives, policy objectives such as neighborhood revitalization, youth development, social inclusion, and community healing were translated into accessible visual narratives. Rather than relying exclusively on official statements or enforcement measures, the project fostered public imagery that allowed residents to connect with their histories, identities, and aspirations [11]. Consequently, Mural Arts Philadelphia exemplifies how administrative communication can evolve from hierarchical regulation to participatory storytelling.

### *3.2. Art-Historical Narrative*

The art-historical foundation of Mural Arts Philadelphia lies in urban muralism, community art, and social realism. Murals possess a strong public character because they are not confined to museums or galleries. They appear on streets, schools, community centers, transport routes, and neighborhood walls, becoming part of residents' daily visual experience.

Historically, mural art has often been associated with shared memory, working-class identity, ethnic communities, and social movements. It can transform social issues into public images. In Philadelphia, this tradition provides an important narrative resource. The mural is not merely wall decoration, but a medium through which local history, community identity, and public concerns are made visible.

In this context, art-historical narrative bridges policy and community. Urban governance issues such as graffiti, neighborhood decline, social fragmentation, and youth marginalization are translated into visual stories. These stories may include local residents, historical figures, cultural symbols, everyday work, shared challenges, and future aspirations. In this way, muralism gives administrative communication a human and historical form.

### *3.3. Policy Communication Mechanism*

The administrative communication mechanism of Mural Arts Philadelphia can be described as a transformation of urban governance concerns into community-based visual narratives. The process typically begins with a specific issue, such as graffiti, social exclusion, public safety, youth development, or cultural recognition. Rather than addressing these issues through abstract policy language, the project translates them into mural themes conveyed through stories, images, symbols, and local memories.

Community participation plays a pivotal role in this transformation. Through workshops, interviews, meetings, educational activities, and collaborative design, residents share experiences, discuss neighborhood history, contribute visual ideas, and, in some cases, directly participate in painting. This approach transforms administrative communication into a dialogic process rather than a one-directional exchange. Residents are not merely recipients of policy messages; they actively shape the visual and narrative content through which these messages are conveyed.

Mural production becomes a collaborative endeavor involving artists, residents, social organizations, schools, and public institutions. Its significance is derived not only from the final image but also from the participatory process that underpins it [12].

Questions regarding inclusion, representation of stories, and the community's negotiation of its public image become integral to the artwork's social meaning.

Once completed, the mural continues to serve as a medium of communication within public spaces. It becomes a part of the neighborhood's identity, a local landmark, and occasionally a site for community memory or public events. In this way, the mural functions not only as an artwork but also as a communicative infrastructure that bridges policy concerns, community narratives, and urban identity.

### *3.4. Effects and Limitations of Community Participation*

The first effect is the strengthening of neighborhood belonging. Because murals are located in everyday spaces, they connect residents with familiar streets and shared histories. When local stories are represented visually, residents may feel acknowledged by the city, especially in communities often underrepresented in official narratives.

The second effect is the inclusion of underrepresented groups in civic storytelling. Public art can provide symbolic visibility to young people, ethnic communities, individuals with prior offenses, low-income residents, and other groups whose voices are often less prominent in formal policy processes. Through mural-making, these groups may become part of the city's public narrative rather than merely subjects of governance [13].

The third effect is a change in policy communication. Instead of "government persuading residents," the process becomes closer to "residents jointly narrating the city." Policy meaning is produced through images, memories, workshops, and public space, rather than solely through official documents.

However, the project also has limitations. First, it still depends on government agencies, foundations, cultural institutions, and professional artists to define frameworks, allocate resources, and approve outcomes. Community participation therefore does not necessarily mean full community control [12]. Second, participation can become institutionalized. Residents may contribute opinions or stories but lack real power over budget, theme selection, artistic direction, or long-term maintenance. Third, murals may be absorbed into urban branding. Once successful, they can become part of tourism promotion, creative-city discourse, or neighborhood image-making, reducing their social and cultural significance.

Overall, Mural Arts Philadelphia demonstrates both the potential and challenges of public art as administrative communication. Its strength lies in transforming governance issues into community narratives and turning residents into participants in public meaning-making [14]. Its limitation lies in unequal institutional power behind participation. Therefore, public art can support community repair only when visual storytelling is connected with genuine participation, shared authorship, and sustained civic dialogue.

## **4. Case Studies II and III: A Comparison of Superkilen and the Fourth Plinth**

### *4.1. Superkilen: Multicultural Negotiation as Spatialized Administrative Communication*

Superkilen is located in Copenhagen's Nørrebro district, an area with a strong multicultural character. Unlike a single monument, it operates through urban surfaces, colors, furniture, objects, and everyday facilities. Its space is constructed through cultural references associated with different countries, communities, and personal memories. Therefore, Superkilen is not only an urban design project, but also a spatial narrative about migration, diversity, and local belonging.

Its art-historical narrative differs from traditional monumentality. It is closer to site-specific art, socially engaged art, postcolonial and multicultural narration, and an "everyday object museum" within urban design. Benches, signs, lamps, and playground elements are not neutral facilities; they become carriers of memory, identity, and cultural recognition [12].

This design gives Superkilen a distinctive administrative communication function. It does not explain multicultural policy through official language. Instead, it embeds the

idea of inclusion into spatial experience. When residents encounter objects connected with different cultural backgrounds, the space suggests that migrant memory and cultural identity can be visible within the city. In this way, an abstract policy value is translated into concrete urban form.

Superkilen also spatializes community participation. Residents' memories, cultural references, and object choices are transformed into elements of the built environment. However, this model has limitations. Cultural symbols may become aesthetic spectacle when removed from their original context. Migrant objects may be displayed as visual signs without fully representing the complex experiences behind them. The depth of participation and long-term maintenance of community meaning also remain uncertain [15].

#### *4.2. The Fourth Plinth: Public Controversy as Administrative Communication*

The Fourth Plinth in London provides a different model. Trafalgar Square is strongly associated with imperial memory, national history, military victory, and monumental authority [16]. The Fourth Plinth was originally an unfinished monumental base, but it later became a platform for temporary contemporary public art commissions. As a result, a historically authoritative space is repeatedly opened to new artistic interpretations and public dialogue.

Its art-historical narrative centers on the reinterpretation of the monument. Traditional monuments usually emphasize permanence, heroism, national memory, and stable public values. By contrast, the Fourth Plinth introduces temporary, changing, and often debated works into a symbolic urban space. These commissions explore what should be commemorated, who deserves visibility, and how public memory should be represented in a plural society.

For example, Tschabalala Self's *Lady in Blue*, scheduled for display in 2026, has been discussed in relation to the diversity of contemporary London and the visibility of Black women in public sculpture. Such a work does not communicate policy through direct instruction. Instead, it opens public space to questions of representation, identity, and historical revision. The administrative communication logic of the Fourth Plinth is therefore based on public commissioning, display, interpretation, discussion, and feedback.

The project conveys several policy meanings. Urban identity is not fixed, but can be continuously revised. Public space does not belong only to historical heroes or dominant national narratives, but can also include diverse contemporary groups. Artistic debate can also become part of democratic discussion. However, participation largely remains at the level of viewing, commenting, consultation, and media engagement. The project is also shaped by art institutions, selection panels, curatorial frameworks, and the cultural prestige of central London [14]. Compared with Mural Arts Philadelphia and Superkilen, its participatory depth is more limited.

#### *4.3. Comparative Analysis*

Superkilen and the Fourth Plinth both translate policy values into visible and debatable forms, but their mechanisms differ. Superkilen emphasizes spatial inclusion. It communicates multicultural policy by embedding cultural memory into everyday urban design. Its strength lies in making diversity physically present in a local neighborhood. The Fourth Plinth emphasizes symbolic engagement. It communicates changing civic values by placing temporary contemporary artworks within a historically monumental space. Its strength lies in generating public dialogue about memory, identity, and representation.

Their participation models also differ [4]. Superkilen is closer to collaborative participation because residents' cultural references are incorporated into the material space. The Fourth Plinth is closer to consultative and interpretive participation because the public mainly engages through viewing, response, and dialogue. Therefore, Superkilen turns administrative communication into spatial recognition, while the Fourth Plinth turns it into public discourse.

Together, these cases show that public art does not always communicate by direct persuasion. It may give visibility to cultural memory, as in Superkilen, or open public symbols to dialogue, as in the Fourth Plinth. Yet both cases also reveal limitations when participation is shallow, cultural symbols are aestheticized, or institutional authority controls public meaning. Thus, the effectiveness of public art depends not only on visual impact, but also on how deeply communities participate in shaping the narratives presented in public space.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion: Conditions and Boundaries of Public Art as Administrative Communication

### 5.1. Comparison of Three Administrative Communication Models

The three cases demonstrate that public art can facilitate administrative communication through distinct mechanisms. As outlined in Table 1, Mural Arts Philadelphia exemplifies a community repair-oriented approach, Superkilen represents a multicultural negotiation framework, and the Fourth Plinth illustrates a model centered on public dialogue. Their variations extend beyond artistic forms to encompass policy objectives, levels of participation, and communicative outcomes.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Administrative Communication Mechanisms in Three Public Art Cases

| Dimension                | Mural Arts Philadelphia                                          | Superkilen                                                    | Fourth Plinth                                                           |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Policy goal              | Community repair, social governance, urban beautification        | Multicultural integration, public space renewal               | Urban identity renewal, public value debate                             |
| Art-historical narrative | Mural tradition, community art, social realism                   | Site-specific art, participatory art, multicultural narrative | Monument tradition, contemporary public art, counter-monument narrative |
| Participation mode       | Workshops, co-creation, cooperation with community organizations | Residents' memories, object collection, spatial use           | Public consultation, viewing, commenting, media discussion              |
| Communication type       | Community repair-oriented                                        | Multicultural negotiation-oriented                            | Public controversy-oriented                                             |
| Main strength            | Deep participation and strong social connection                  | Direct spatial expression and visible identity                | High public visibility and strong symbolic value                        |
| Main limitation          | Risk of being absorbed into urban branding                       | Risk of symbolization and spectacle                           | Limited depth of participation                                          |

Table 1 highlights that no single model is universally optimal. Mural Arts Philadelphia excels in fostering community-based participation, though it risks being subsumed into city branding efforts. Superkilen enhances the visibility of multicultural identities within everyday spaces, yet its cultural symbols may be reduced to aesthetic elements. The Fourth Plinth encourages public engagement, but the participation tends to be interpretive rather than collaborative.

### 5.2. Effective Conditions for Public Art-Based Administrative Communication

The comparison indicates that public art serves as an effective medium for administrative communication only under specific conditions. These conditions are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Conditions for Effective Policy Communication in Public Art Projects

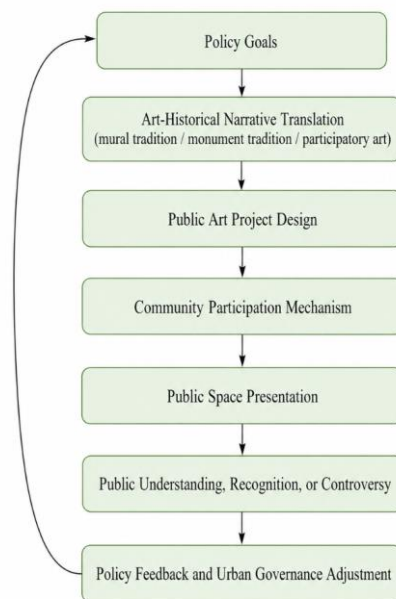
| Condition                 | Meaning                                                                              | Explanation in the cases                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Narrative concretization  | Policy goals must be translated into specific stories, figures, spaces, or symbols   | Philadelphia uses community stories, Superkilen uses residents' objects, and the Fourth Plinth uses contemporary sculpture |
| Early-stage participation | Community participation should not occur only after project completion               | Philadelphia and Superkilen are stronger, while the Fourth Plinth is more consultation-based                               |
| Power transparency        | Decision-making over themes, budgets, artists, and final plans should be clear       | All three cases show different degrees of institutional control                                                            |
| Everyday spatiality       | Public art should enter daily community life rather than only serve tourist viewing  | Philadelphia and Superkilen show this more clearly                                                                         |
| Continuous feedback       | Maintenance, interpretation, and community response should continue after completion | Otherwise, projects may become one-off urban spectacles                                                                    |

As illustrated in Table 2, the effectiveness of public art relies less on its visual appeal and more on the interplay of narrative, participation, power dynamics, spatial context, and feedback mechanisms. When policy objectives remain vague, public art risks being reduced to mere decoration [6]. If community participation is delayed, residents may be relegated to symbolic roles. Furthermore, when decision-making lacks transparency, public art may reinforce institutional authority instead of fostering meaningful civic engagement.

### 5.3. Mechanism of Policy--Narrative--Participation--Feedback

The overall mechanism is illustrated in Figure 1. This model demonstrates how art-historical narratives serve as intermediaries, bridging the gap between policy objectives and public experiences.





**Figure 1.** The Policy--Narrative--Participation--Feedback Mechanism in Public Art Projects

As depicted in Figure 1, administrative communication through public art is not a straightforward process of policy dissemination. Instead, it operates as a cyclical mechanism. Policy objectives are initially interpreted through art-historical narratives and subsequently realized via public art initiatives and community engagement. Once integrated into public spaces, the artworks elicit various responses, such as comprehension, alignment, dissent, or dialogue [2, 13]. These reactions can then inform and refine future governance strategies.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

Through the cases of Mural Arts Philadelphia, Superkilen, and the Fourth Plinth, this paper argues that public art can serve as an important medium of administrative communication. Its significance lies not only in aesthetic value, but also in its capacity to translate policy goals into public experiences that communities can understand, engage with, and critically interpret.

Mural Arts Philadelphia demonstrates the potential of public art for community repair and participatory storytelling. Superkilen shows how multicultural policy can be expressed through space, objects, and local memory. The Fourth Plinth illustrates how public art can reopen monument traditions to contemporary discussion and more plural forms of public identity.

However, public art also has clear limitations. When community participation is reduced to symbolic consultation, when cultural memory is transformed into visual spectacle, or when public art is absorbed into city branding, its communicative function may be weakened. Effective public art governance should therefore incorporate participation at an early stage, make institutional power more transparent, return part of narrative authority to communities, and establish continuous feedback mechanisms. Only under these conditions can public art move beyond decoration and function as a meaningful form of administrative communication.

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