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Perceiving Urban Art and Neighbourhood Change: A Metropolitan Survey and Two Case Studies from Milan

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Abstract:
Urban art is frequently presented as a means of improving neighbourhoods, strengthening local identity and activating community participation. Yet the social effects attributed to murals and related practices are often inferred from project narratives rather than examined through the perceptions of residents and practitioners. This article investigates how people living in Milan and its metropolitan area, together with stakeholders working in urban art, understand the contribution of urban art to neighbourhood change. It combines an exploratory online survey of 168 respondents, six qualitative interviews with artists, cultural organisers and foundation representatives, and a contextual comparison of two Milanese projects: CORBA - Urban Transformation in Villaggio dei Fiori and Manifestival in Gallaratese. Survey results show broad but conditional support. Most respondents considered urban art capable of transforming neighbourhoods, while acceptance depended strongly on artistic quality, contextual fit and the involvement of local communities. Perceived transformative potential was positively associated with the perceived usefulness of a dedicated urban-art space (Spearman's rho = .464, $p < .001$), and respondents already active in neighbourhood life were more likely to believe that urban art strengthens community bonds. Qualitative responses and interviews nevertheless distinguished aesthetic improvement from structural regeneration: murals could create identity, landmarks, encounters and interpretive opportunities, but could not substitute for housing maintenance, services or inclusive governance. The two cases further demonstrate that participation is not a single condition but a spectrum ranging from celebratory involvement to structured listening, workshops and co-produced themes. The article argues that urban art contributes to neighbourhood change most credibly when treated as a situated communicative process rather than a self-sufficient physical intervention.

Keywords: urban art; neighborhood change; community participation; Milan;

Introduction

Murals and other forms of urban art have become increasingly visible within programmes concerned with neighbourhood improvement, cultural participation and the redefinition of public space. Their scale and public accessibility make them especially powerful communicative objects: they can alter the visual character of a street, produce new landmarks and introduce narratives that are encountered in everyday life rather than inside dedicated cultural institutions. At the same time, the social outcomes attached to these interventions are often described in expansive terms. Projects are said to regenerate neighbourhoods, empower communities, increase social cohesion or transform local identity, even when the evidence concerns primarily the completion of artworks or the visibility generated around them.

The ambiguity is partly rooted in the breadth of the term urban art. It can encompass practices derived from graf-

fiti writing, street art and contemporary muralism, which differ in their relation to authorisation, institutions, audiences and physical scale (Blanché, 2015; Baldini, 2022; Schacter, 2017). Large commissioned murals, in particular, frequently require building permissions, funding, technical equipment and mediation among organisations, residents and artists. They are therefore not simply images applied to surfaces: they are outcomes of relational and organisational processes. As public strategies have increasingly incorporated urban art into cultural and territorial policy, researchers have also highlighted its multiple and sometimes contradictory uses, from cultural democratisation and local activation to city marketing and the symbolic revaluation of property (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Mathews, 2010; Campos & Barbio, 2021).

The debate has often been organised around a binary question: does urban art support community-oriented transformation, or does it facilitate gentrification and the commodification of place? That question is important, but it can obscure how residents perceive interventions before any long-term economic effect can be demonstrated. It can also flatten differences among neighbourhoods and among forms of participation. A mural may be welcomed as colour in an otherwise monotonous environment, rejected as incompatible with local architecture, valued as a record of collective memory, or treated as a superficial response to unresolved structural problems. The same artwork may perform several of these functions simultaneously.

This article focuses on these perceptions. It asks how residents of the Milan metropolitan area and stakeholders working in urban art perceive the contribution of urban art to community formation and neighbourhood change, and how those perceptions are reflected in two contrasting Milanese cases. The main research question is:

How do residents of the Milan metropolitan area and urban-art stakeholders perceive the role of urban art in neighbourhood transformation, and how are these perceptions reflected in the cases of Corba and Gallaratese?

The study combines three forms of evidence. First, a bilingual online survey collected 168 responses from people living in Milan or the surrounding metropolitan area. The questionnaire examined neighbourhood attachment, exposure to urban art, willingness to host murals, perceived transformative and community value, participation in local life, communication preferences and interest in a digital platform. Second, six qualitative interviews gathered the perspectives of artists, cultural communicators, project directors and foundation representatives active in urban-art initiatives. Third, the article compares CORBA - Urban Transformation in Villaggio dei Fiori and Manifestival in Gallaratese, two projects located in Milanese peripheral contexts but characterised by different building morphologies, promoters, artistic programmes and modes of community involvement.

The article makes four contributions. It provides empirical evidence from a metropolitan public rather than relying exclusively on project promoters or professional commentary. It differentiates general attitudes towards urban art from perceptions tied to specific neighbourhood conditions. It shows that participation is better understood as a spectrum of practices - listening, co-design, workshops, observation, celebration and interpretation - than as a simple present-or-absent variable. Finally, it identifies a role for communication design not merely in promoting completed murals, but in creating the interpretive and participatory infrastructure through which residents can understand, discuss and contest urban-art projects.

The argument developed is that urban art can contribute to neighbourhood change, but its contribution is conditional and partial. Its strongest effects concern perception, identity, symbolic recognition, encounters and cultural accessibility. These effects can support broader community processes, yet they do not amount by themselves to physical redevelopment or social regeneration. The credibility of transformation claims therefore depends on how artistic interventions relate to local needs, whether residents have meaningful opportunities to participate, and whether communication continues before, during and after the production of the work.

Urban art acts in a space that is simultaneously physical, social and symbolic. A mural changes a visible surface, but its meaning emerges through the relations surrounding that surface: who owns it, who authorises the intervention, who selects the artist, how the theme is defined, who is represented, and how residents encounter the

work over time. This relational quality explains why identical artistic formats can produce very different local responses.

Community development literature emphasises that communities are not simply populations sharing a bounded territory. They are produced through networks, shared practices, negotiation and the capacity to act collectively (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2016). From this perspective, an artwork does not automatically create community. It may, however, become a shared reference, a pretext for interaction or a visible expression through which local groups negotiate identity. Research on street art in Italian neighbourhoods has described its role in recognition and in the process of making social spaces familiar or meaningful (Colacicco, 2016). Other studies have shown how murals can articulate political resistance, collective memory and alternative narratives, particularly in peripheral or contested urban areas (Di Giulio, 2017; Galdini & Ricci, 2018).

The public nature of urban art supports several possible community functions. First, it may operate as a landmark. Respondents in the present study repeatedly described murals as places by which people orient themselves or arrange to meet. Such functions do not require formal participation in production; they emerge through repeated everyday use. Second, urban art may contribute to place identity by linking images to local history, social groups or cultural practices. Third, the process of producing a mural can generate temporary spaces of encounter through workshops, public painting, neighbourhood events and conversations with artists. Fourth, the artwork may become an object of discussion, disagreement or controversy. Community formation should therefore not be equated only with consensus. The capacity to make values and conflicts visible can itself be socially relevant.

These functions remain highly dependent on context. Research comparing urban protest art in Barcelona and Madrid has shown that the same general medium can support local commerce, resistance or community visibility while remaining constrained by narrow margins of political and institutional acceptance (Domínguez Pérez et al., 2022). Analyses of public strategies similarly stress that urban art is used differently according to governance arrangements and policy goals (Campos & Barbio, 2021). A community-oriented project may include sustained workshops and local partnerships, while another intervention may be commissioned primarily for visual impact or external visibility.

The scale and form of contemporary muralism add another layer of complexity. Schacter (2017) argues that monumental muralism often treats the wall as a canvas and can dominate rather than assimilate into a place. This critique is especially relevant when institutions and sponsors enable large-scale works. Monumentality can democratise access to art and give neglected locations cultural visibility, but it can also privilege spectacular images over local processes. The public may appreciate the visual result while remaining excluded from decisions about theme, style or location.

Perception is therefore a central dimension of neighbourhood change. A physical environment is not experienced only through measurable infrastructure; it is interpreted through atmosphere, recognition, memory and everyday narratives. Vahtrapuu (2021) argues for a sensory approach to artists' roles in urban regeneration, drawing attention to how artistic practices affect the felt experience of the city. Survey responses in this study repeatedly referred to colour, relief from greyness, curiosity, pride and emotional comfort. These are not substitutes for material improvement, but neither are they trivial. They describe how public space is inhabited and perceived.

At the same time, the distinction between aesthetic change and structural change is essential. Art can improve a facade without repairing the building, create an attraction without providing services, or generate publicity without increasing residents' power over neighbourhood decisions. The literature on art and gentrification has long warned that symbolic improvement may be appropriated by property markets and development strategies (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Mathews, 2010). This concern also appears in the survey, especially in responses referring to Milanese neighbourhood branding and rising rents. The question is consequently not whether visual change is real, but what kind of change it represents and how it relates to other transformations.

Participation offers one way to evaluate this relationship, but participation itself has different intensities. Residents may be informed, consulted, invited to attend an inauguration, involved in workshops, asked to propose themes or directly engaged in production. These activities cannot be treated as equivalent. A celebratory event can create meaningful encounters, even when residents did not shape the artwork. Conversely, a consultation may be too limited to affect final decisions. The present comparison uses participation as an analytical spectrum rather than a binary label.

Communication is closely connected to that spectrum. Urban art can appear immediately accessible because it is visible in public space, yet its visual codes, production histories and institutional relationships are not always self-evident. Mapping, tours, plaques, interviews, digital archives and documentary media can extend interpretation beyond the moment of production. Greco (2017) highlights the role of digital mapping and locative media in documenting urban art and its absence, particularly given the vulnerability and ephemerality of works. Communication may therefore perform at least three functions: making projects legible, preserving their changing history and enabling feedback or participation. The survey explores how metropolitan residents value these functions, while the interviews show how practitioners understand their practical importance.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods design combining a metropolitan survey, qualitative stakeholder interviews and contextual case-study analysis. The components were not intended to represent equivalent samples. The survey examined general perceptions among residents of Milan and its surrounding area; the interviews investigated professional and organisational interpretations; and the cases provided situated evidence about how different participatory arrangements operate in practice. Findings were integrated through a joint reading of convergences and tensions rather than through an attempt to generalise the two cases to the entire metropolitan area.

An anonymous bilingual online survey was administered through Google Forms between 3 and 18 March 2025. The questionnaire comprised 27 questions in Italian and English. It addressed respondents' demographic and residential profiles, neighbourhood attachment, exposure to urban art, willingness to see murals on nearby buildings, perceived transformative capacity, participation in neighbourhood life, perceived community effects, recognition of urban-art areas, communication preferences, motivations for attending events, desired digital-platform functions and open suggestions.

Participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling with elements of informal chain-referral recruitment. The link was initially circulated through the researcher's personal and professional networks and was subsequently forwarded to acquaintances of the original recipients. No institutional mailing list, paid campaign or geographically targeted sampling frame was used. Eligibility was defined broadly as living in Milan or the surrounding metropolitan area. This recruitment strategy increased accessibility but produced a self-selected sample that cannot be treated as statistically representative of the metropolitan population.

Google Forms was chosen because it was accessible through common web browsers and mobile devices. According to the researcher's configuration, the form was limited to one submission per Google Account to reduce repeated responses. Account identifiers and email addresses were not included in the exported research dataset. The restriction therefore reduced duplicate submissions from the same account but could not establish a one-to-one correspondence between accounts and physical individuals.

Before entering the questionnaire, participants read an information notice in both languages. It explained the purpose of the master's thesis research, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymous and aggregate use of responses, the possibility of requesting rectification or deletion, and the applicable data-protection framework. Submission of the form indicated consent to the stated processing. A total of 168 responses were retained; all closed questions used in the analysis were complete, while missing values occurred in conditional and open-ended questions.

Closed responses were analysed descriptively through frequencies, percentages, medians, means and standard deviations where appropriate. Five-point ratings were treated as ordinal variables. Associations aligned with the research question were explored using Spearman's rank correlation, Kruskal-Wallis tests, Mann-Whitney post-hoc comparisons with Holm adjustment, chi-square tests, Fisher's exact test and Cramer's V or rank-biserial correlation as effect-size measures. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, but results were interpreted as exploratory because of the convenience sample and the number of possible relationships in the dataset. Analyses were conducted in Python using SciPy.

The principal analyses examined: the relationship between perceived transformative potential and the usefulness of a dedicated urban-art space; differences in transformative ratings according to willingness to host murals; differences according to perceptions of community impact; the association between current neighbourhood participation and belief in community strengthening; and whether age or existing exposure to urban art was associated with acceptance or transformative ratings.

Three open questions generated substantial qualitative material: 128 respondents explained their rating of urban art's transformative potential; 99 explained its possible relationship with community; and 52 offered final suggestions. Responses were read iteratively and coded inductively for recurrent themes. The coding was multi-label because a single comment could refer, for example, to aesthetic improvement, neighbourhood identity and the need for resident consent. The principal themes concerned aesthetic and emotional change, place identity and memory, communication and cultural expression, participation and social encounter, contextual fit and artistic quality, structural limits, maintenance, and risks such as vandalism or gentrification. Coding was conducted by a single researcher and should therefore be understood as an interpretive thematic analysis rather than a reliability-tested classification.

The qualitative component included six interviews with people working in urban art, cultural communication and project organisation: Silvia Scardapane of INWARD; Clara Amodeo, president of Another Scratch In The Wall; Marco KayOne Mantovani, artist and art director of Stradedarts; Walter Contipelli, artist with Orticanoodles and art director of Manifestival; Veronica Pini, president of the Arrigo and Pia Pini Foundation; and Luca Rancy Mayr, artist and art director of Poli Urban Colors. Participants were selected purposively for their knowledge of urban-art practices and, in several cases, of the projects examined.

Interview material was analysed around five recurring dimensions: definitions of transformation and regeneration; modes of resident involvement; the role of communication and documentation; organisational and financial conditions; and perceived benefits, limits and risks. The interviewees occupy different positions in the field but are not external evaluators: several are directly involved in promoting or producing projects. Their accounts are consequently treated as situated professional perspectives and compared with survey responses rather than taken as independent evidence of impact.

Villaggio dei Fiori - Cascina Corba and Gallaratese were selected because both contain substantial mural programmes in peripheral Milanese residential contexts, but differ in morphology, scale and organisation. CORBA - Urban Transformation is located on low-rise public terraced housing in Villaggio dei Fiori and is promoted by Stradedarts, an association based in the area. Manifestival operates on large residential facades - social housing - in Gallaratese and is promoted by the Arrigo and Pia Pini Foundation with artistic direction connected to Orticanoodles.

The cases were reconstructed through project documents, direct observation and visual documentation undertaken during the thesis research, and interviews with relevant stakeholders. They are not treated as controlled comparisons or as representative of all Milanese urban art. Their value lies in showing how apparently similar mural interventions can embody different relationships among artistic themes, architecture, residents, promoters and public visibility.

Table 1. Survey sample characteristics (n = 168)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18-24	37	22.0
	25-34	53	31.5
	35-44	24	14.3
	45-54	14	8.3
	55+	40	23.8
Gender	Female	110	65.5
	Male	57	33.9
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6
Residence	More than 10 years in Milan	99	58.9
	6-10 years	15	8.9
	1-5 years	24	14.3
	Less than one year	10	6.0
	Surrounding metropolitan area	20	11.9
Neighbourhood attachment	Feels part of a specific area	111	66.1
Local urban art	Reports urban art in neighbourhood	89	53.0
Housing	Lives in an apartment building	153	91.1

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

In the Gallaratese case, he participated in guided tours and related public activities, such as a community event where residents expressed their preferences for the upcoming murals, organised as part of Manifestival (Figure 1). In the CORBA case, he attended a mural inauguration, which provided an opportunity to observe the presentation of the work, the presence of residents and stakeholders, and the forms of interaction generated around the event. These experiences provided contextual familiarity with the projects, their locations, public-engagement practices and some of the actors involved. At the same time, this proximity created an insider position that may have influenced the interpretation of the cases. To address this potential bias, the analysis distinguishes contextual knowledge from the empirical evidence obtained through the metropolitan survey, stakeholder interviews and project documentation. These experiences were not treated as a separate participant-observation dataset, since no systematic observation protocol or field-note coding procedure was employed.



Figure 1. Community event in Gallaratese: residents can express their preferences for the upcoming murals. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork, Milan, April 2025.

Results

The sample included respondents across all adult age groups, with the largest group aged 25-34 (31.5%), followed by those aged 55 or above (23.8%) and 18-24 (22.0%). Women represented 65.5% of the sample, men 33.9%, and one respondent preferred not to answer. Most participants had a long relationship with the city: 58.9% had lived in Milan for more than ten years, while 11.9% lived in the surrounding area. Two thirds (66.1%) felt part of a specific area of Milan or its surroundings.

The residential profile was predominantly urban and collective. A total of 91.1% lived in an apartment building, and 95.8% reported at least some residential buildings near their home. Slightly more than half (53.0%) reported large murals or comparable urban-art elements in their neighbourhood, 42.3% reported none and 4.8% were unsure. These characteristics make the sample relevant to questions about facade-based urban art, while the recruitment method and gender imbalance limit population-level inference.

Respondents generally attributed substantial transformative potential to urban art. On a scale from 1 to 5, the mean rating was 3.80 (SD = 1.00), the median was 4 and 63.1% selected either 4 or 5. Only 7.1% selected 1 or 2. Yet support was not unconditional. When asked whether they would like to see murals on their building or nearby walls, 38.1% answered positively, 44.6% said that it would depend on the style of the work, and 17.3% preferred not to.

This conditionality was statistically meaningful. Transformative ratings differed across the three acceptance groups, $H(2) = 28.41$, $p < .001$, epsilon-squared = .160. Respondents who would welcome murals rated transformative potential more highly ($M = 4.22$, median = 4) than those whose acceptance depended on style ($M = 3.77$, median = 4), who in turn rated it more highly than respondents who preferred not to see murals ($M = 2.93$, median = 3). All three pairwise differences remained significant after Holm adjustment. The finding suggests that willingness to host a mural is related not only to a general attitude towards art but to the degree of transformative capacity attributed to it.

Age, by contrast, was not significantly associated with the three acceptance positions, chi-square(8) = 7.93, $p = .440$, Cramer's V = .154. Older respondents were not uniformly more resistant, and younger respondents were not uniformly more enthusiastic. The open comments help explain this result: participants across age groups framed acceptance in terms of context, artistic quality, architectural compatibility, maintenance and consent.

Existing neighbourhood exposure also did not predict stronger transformative ratings. Respondents who reported urban art in their area, those who reported none and those who were unsure had nearly identical distributions, $H(2) = 0.13$, $p = .938$. Urban art's perceived potential was therefore not simply a function of living near a mural. Attitudes may be shaped by broader cultural experiences, media exposure and examples elsewhere in Milan or other cities.

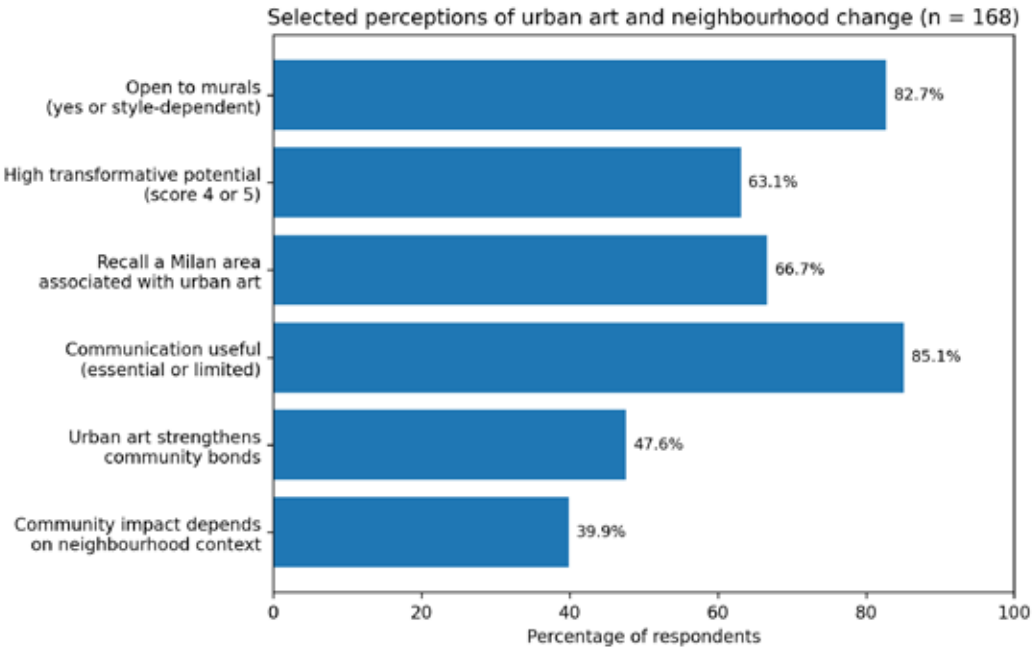


Figure 2. Selected perceptions of urban art and neighbourhood change

Note. Items combine response categories as indicated in the labels. Percentages are based on all 168 respondents.

Responses concerning community were positive but more divided than the general transformation ratings. Nearly half of respondents (47.6%) believed that urban art strengthens bonds between people; 39.9% answered that the effect depends on the type of neighbourhood; 8.3% had no opinion; and 4.2% believed it had no social impact or might produce contrary effects.

The community categories were related to transformative ratings, $H(3) = 18.85$, $p < .001$, epsilon-squared = .097. Respondents who believed that urban art strengthens bonds gave the highest average transformation score ($M = 4.14$), compared with those who considered the effect context-dependent ($M = 3.54$). The small group rejecting social impact gave the lowest average rating ($M = 2.71$). Post-hoc analysis confirmed a significant difference between the positive and context-dependent groups and between the positive and negative groups after Holm adjustment.

Current participation in neighbourhood life was also relevant. Overall, 9.5% participated often and 37.5% occasionally; 32.1% did not participate but wished to, while 20.8% were not interested. When these responses were collapsed into currently active and not currently active groups, 58.2% of active respondents believed that urban art strengthens community bonds, compared with 38.2% of those not currently active. Fisher's exact test indicated a significant association (odds ratio = 2.25, $p = .013$). The effect does not establish causation: people who already value collective life may also be more likely to attribute community potential to urban art. It nevertheless shows that perceptions of artistic community-building are connected to wider dispositions towards neighbourhood participation.

Respondents also rated the usefulness of a dedicated urban-art space in their area moderately positively ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.04$; median = 3). Ratings of transformative potential and usefulness were moderately correlated, Spearman's rho = .464, $p < .001$. Those who saw urban art as more transformative also tended to see greater value in a space where it could be produced, interpreted or encountered.

Table 2. Exploratory statistical associations

Relationship	Test	Statistic	p	Effect size
Transformative potential and usefulness of dedicated space	Spearman	rho = .464	< .001	Moderate
Transformative ratings by willingness to host murals	Kruskal-Wallis	H(2) = 28.41	< .001	epsilon-squared = .160
Transformative ratings by perceived community effect	Kruskal-Wallis	H(3) = 18.85	< .001	epsilon-squared = .097
Current neighbourhood participation and belief that art strengthens bonds	Fisher exact	OR = 2.25	.013	phi ≈ .200
Age group and willingness to host murals	Chi-square	chi-square(8) = 7.93	.440	Cramer's V = .154
Existing local urban art and transformative rating	Kruskal-Wallis	H(2) = 0.13	.938	Negligible

Note. Tests are exploratory and do not support causal inference. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons for willingness groups used Holm-adjusted Mann-Whitney tests.

Urban art had substantial metropolitan recognisability. Two thirds of respondents (66.7%) could recall at least one Milanese area distinguished by urban art. Open answers referred to a wide range of places, including Isola, NoLo, Ortica, Navigli, San Siro, Niguarda, Lambrate, Bicocca, Barona and areas around railway or transport infrastructure. This variety indicates that urban art is not perceived as belonging to one coherent cultural district. Instead, it forms a distributed and uneven metropolitan geography.

Communication was considered important by 85.1% of respondents: 63.1% described it as essential for conveying the meanings and codes of urban art, and 22.0% considered it useful but limited. Only 4.8% believed that urban art communicates entirely by itself, while 10.1% were unsure. These responses challenge the assumption that public visibility guarantees interpretive accessibility.

When asked which communication tools could help narrate urban art in a neighbourhood, respondents selected direct contact and experiential formats most frequently. Meetings with artists were chosen by 65.5%, workshops and laboratories by 54.8%, guided on-site tours by 53.0%, videos and documentaries by 51.2%, and explanatory plaques by 49.4%. Meetings with the neighbourhood community were selected by 33.3%, while virtual tours, magazines or fanzines, podcasts and digital platforms each received between approximately 27% and 30%. The results suggest that digital tools are valued, but not as substitutes for embodied and interpersonal forms of interpretation.

The channels currently used to discover cultural initiatives were dominated by social media (87.5%) and word of mouth (53.0%), followed by websites, specialist blogs and newsletters (31.5%), live events (23.8%) and printed communication (19.6%). This distribution reflects the convenience-sampled and connected character of the respondents but also highlights a communication gap: discovery is heavily digital, whereas the preferred interpretation of urban art often involves meetings, tours and workshops.

Motivations for participating in an urban-art event similarly combined cultural curiosity and social process. Discovering new works was selected by 53.6%, the cultural and social value of the initiative by 51.8%, meeting artists by 38.1%, active workshops by 36.9%, interaction with the local community by 23.8% and immersive technologies by 20.8%. The attraction of an event therefore appears to depend more on access to works, meanings and people than on technological novelty alone.

Responses concerning a digital platform were clearer. An interactive map with murals and their histories was selected by 73.8%, followed by a digital archive (47.6%), guided tours (47.0%), public events and workshops (45.2%), artist interviews (37.5%) and the ability to report new works (33.9%). The platform imagined by respondents is not merely promotional. Its preferred functions combine spatial orientation, historical documentation and opportunities to move between digital information and physical participation.

Table 3. Selected survey indicators

Measure	Response	n	%
Transformative potential (1-5)	Score 4 or 5	106	63.1
Willingness to see murals	Would welcome	64	38.1
	Depends on style	75	44.6
	Would prefer not	29	17.3
Community effect	Strengthens bonds	80	47.6
	Depends on neighbourhood	67	39.9
Neighbourhood participation	Often or occasionally active	79	47.0
Recognition	Recalls a Milan area associated with urban art	112	66.7
Communication	Essential or useful to a limited extent	143	85.1
Dedicated space (1-5)	Score 4 or 5	76	45.2

Note. The mean transformative-potential score was 3.80 (SD = 1.00); the mean usefulness score for a dedicated urban-art space was 3.40 (SD = 1.04).

Aesthetic and emotional change was the most immediate theme in explanations of transformation. Respondents described colour as a relief from the grey, crowded or monotonous experience of Milan. Murals could make a place feel more lively, welcoming or contemporary and could provide moments of emotional interruption during everyday movement. Several comments presented beauty and visual stimulation as forms of wellbeing rather than superficial decoration.

A second theme concerned identity, memory and recognition. Respondents argued that urban art could give a neighbourhood 'a face', make it less anonymous and communicate local history. Suggestions included representing former industrial activities, anti-fascist memory, social struggles and the experiences of communities living in the area. Murals were also described as orientation devices: one respondent recalled using a mural as a simple way to communicate their location to a family member. This everyday landmark function shows how an artwork can become incorporated into local language without becoming a formal meeting place.

A third theme was conditionality. Many respondents wrote that impact depended on style, quality, message, maintenance, architecture and the population of the neighbourhood. They distinguished commissioned or skilled work from tags perceived as vandalism and objected to the idea that every facade was equally appropriate. Historical architecture, established visual character and residents' preferences were frequently invoked. Some comments explicitly required local agreement before interventions were installed. Support for urban art was therefore often support for a situated and negotiated practice, not for unrestricted mural production.

A fourth theme concerned community process. Respondents were most confident about social effects when residents could watch artists work, contribute ideas, participate in workshops or share a goal. Co-production was described as a mechanism through which people might compare perspectives, develop respect and build relationships. Several respondents specifically proposed involving schools, children, adolescents and older residents. The final suggestions repeatedly asked for intergenerational formats rather than activities aimed only at young audiences.

A fifth theme identified limits. Numerous comments stated that murals could beautify an area but could not repair housing, reduce traffic, provide green space or deliver missing services. Some respondents argued that neighbourhoods required maintenance and social investment before or alongside artistic intervention. This distinction closely mirrors the terminology used by stakeholders: visual transformation may be real, but calling it redevelopment or regeneration can assign an unjustified scale of achievement.

Finally, a minority of responses raised risks. These included poor maintenance, the possibility that damaged murals might worsen perceptions of neglect, the commercial use of urban art, and the contribution of neighbourhood branding to gentrification. One respondent living in NoLo feared that art could become part of a marketable narrative disconnected from unresolved degradation and rising rents. Such comments did not necessarily reject urban art; they questioned who benefits from the stories created around it.

The interviews converged strongly with the survey's distinction between artistic and structural change. Silvia Scardapane emphasised the need to separate 'artistic redevelopment' from 'social regeneration', noting that cultural organisations do not replace institutions responsible for urban planning and material works. Marco Kay-One Mantovani made a similar distinction in choosing the name CORBA - Urban Transformation. He rejected the claim that murals had redeveloped the neighbourhood, while recognising that they had made it more pleasant and changed its perception. Veronica Pini likewise stated that Manifestival had brought attention, lightness and new awareness to Gallaratese, but had not substantially changed residents' quality of life or resolved the shortage of services.

Participation was described through different practices. Scardapane referred to workshops, community interaction and empowerment in the Parco dei Murales experience. Mantovani explained that Corba residents did not directly produce the murals, but inaugurations were or-

ganised as collective moments in which neighbours, institutions, artists and supporters met. Contipelli described a more structured listening process in Gallaratese: ideas were collected during neighbourhood events and translated into thematic briefs or 'manifestos' for artists. Pini highlighted tours and workshops as mechanisms that created dialogue with residents and schools. Mayr argued that workshops are especially important when an intervention visually alters the environment close to people's homes.

These accounts demonstrate that participation has at least three levels. The first is receptive participation: residents observe production, attend an inauguration or use a mural as part of everyday space. The second is interpretive participation: tours, meetings and communication enable residents to understand themes and express opinions. The third is formative participation: local ideas, memories or concerns influence artistic briefs and activities. Direct co-painting is only one possible practice within this wider spectrum.

Communication emerged as a second cross-cutting theme. Clara Amodeo summarised the mission of her organisation by stating, "we do not make urban art; we communicate urban art". She argued that documentation, content, maps and design give broader publics the codes needed to understand a field that can otherwise speak primarily to itself. Scardapane emphasised communication after the completion of a work, when the temporary intensity of workshops and production risks disappearing. Mayr and Pini both valued digital archives because urban artworks are vulnerable to fading, destruction and replacement. In these accounts, communication is not a final publicity layer but a means of extending memory, interpretation and accountability.

The interviews also revealed organisational constraints. Mantovani described the difficulty of finding sponsors for peripheral projects, where visibility is lower than in central locations. Pini noted the absence of an interconnected strategy for Milan or the metropolitan area, leaving projects to emerge through isolated opportunities. Mayr contrasted self-produced, bottom-up organisation with larger institutional entities. These differences influence not only funding but the degree to which projects can maintain continuity, communicate with residents and preserve records.

Stakeholders did not ignore the risk of gentrification. Contipelli acknowledged that the cultural prestige of a major mural might eventually be used in real-estate promotion, but argued that this possibility should not automatically deprive residents of access to significant art. The position captures a central tension in the evidence: cultural value and market appropriation are not mutually exclusive. The task is not to assume one outcome but to examine governance, ownership, narrative and the distribution of benefits.

CORBA - Urban Transformation takes place in Villaggio dei Fiori, an area of small public terraced houses built in the 1950s. The human scale of the buildings differs markedly from the monumental facades of Gallaratese. As of June 2025, nine murals had been completed, linked through a winter-sports theme associated with the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic context. Some works connect the theme to local references, including hockey and the former neighbourhood ice rink. The project is promoted by Stradedarts, whose base in the area provides a direct territorial relationship.

Participation in Corba has been primarily relational and celebratory rather than co-productive. Residents did not define or paint the murals, but project inaugurations were intentionally used as moments of gathering (Figure 3). The local association's presence and the repeated addition of walls created continuity over several years. At the same time, the project faced difficulties attracting sponsors and exists alongside visible housing-maintenance needs. Mantovani's insistence on the term transformation reflects this limitation: the murals change appearance, atmosphere and local recognition, but do not claim to solve the material condition of the public-housing stock.



Figure 3. Kraser mural inauguration in Villaggio dei Fiori: meeting the artist during one of CORBA's main community events. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork, Milan, November 2025.

Manifestival operates within a different spatial and organisational setting. The selected Gallaratese area contains large residential buildings - social housing - that offer monumental surfaces and a strong relationship with the district's modernist architecture and public-housing history. The project, promoted by the Pini Foundation, has involved internationally recognised artists and themes including music, collective memory, women's social roles, sport, peace, nature and sustainability. The scale and visibility of the works can bring external attention to a neighbourhood often described as residential and underserved.

Gallaratese also exhibits more formalised mechanisms for gathering local content. Contipelli described neighbourhood listening sessions and the collection of ideas that were converted into thematic briefs for artists. Workshops, tours and engagement with schools extended the project beyond facade production. This arrangement does not amount to residents controlling every artistic decision, but it places local narratives closer to the formative stage than in Corba.

The comparison shows that neither case can be reduced to a simple opposition between bottom-up and top-down practice. Corba is initiated by a locally based association but provides limited resident influence over themes; Gallaratese is promoted by a philanthropic foundation and works with prominent artists, yet includes structured listening and educational participation. Organisational origin does not determine participatory depth automatically.

The morphology of the sites also shapes the experience of art. Corba's small facades and narrow streets produce intimate, serial encounters. Gallaratese's large walls cre-

Table 4. Corba and Gallaratese as contrasting participatory configurations

Dimension	CORBA - Villaggio dei Fiori	Manifestival - Gallaratese
Urban morphology	Low-rise public terraced houses; small facades and narrow streets; close everyday encounter.	Large residential blocks; monumental facades; long-distance visibility and stronger spectacular potential.
Promoter and organisation	Stradedarts, an association based in the area; continuity through a sequence of walls; difficulty attracting sponsors for a peripheral site.	Arrigo and Pia Pini Foundation with artistic direction linked to Orticanoodles; philanthropic and festival-based organisation; greater external visibility.
Artistic programme	Winter-sports theme connected to Milan-Cortina 2026, with some local references such as hockey and the former ice rink.	Themes developed around music, memory, sport, women, peace, nature and sustainability; several internationally recognised artists.
Resident involvement	Residents did not co-produce murals; inaugurations functioned as repeated moments of encounter among neighbours, artists, institutions and supporters.	Ideas gathered through neighbourhood events and listening groups; workshops, tours and school engagement; local themes translated into artist briefs.
Primary claimed contribution	Aesthetic and perceptual transformation, project identity, local familiarity and celebratory gathering.	Visibility, awareness, cultural access, youth activation, social themes and structured interpretation.
Limits and risks	Housing maintenance needs remain unresolved; sponsor dependence; need for continuity and care; explicit refusal to call the project redevelopment.	Persistent lack of services; risk of spectacle and future property appropriation; fragmented city-level strategy; participation does not equal control of all decisions.

Note. The table synthesises project documentation, direct observation and stakeholder interviews.

ate distant visibility and stronger spectacular potential. These affordances affect the relationship between residents, visitors and artists. Monumental works may generate metropolitan recognition and symbolic prestige, while smaller works may become embedded in everyday proximity. Both can create landmarks, but the scale of their public address differs.

Across both cases, the survey's conditions for acceptance are clearly visible: contextual fit, meaningful themes, opportunities for encounter, maintenance, communication and honesty about limits. Corba illustrates how a local project identity and repeated celebrations can generate familiarity without claiming structural regeneration. Gallaratese illustrates how listening, workshops and strong artistic visibility can activate attention while leaving unresolved questions about services, long-term governance and the possible appropriation of cultural value.

Discussion

The findings support a qualified account of urban art's contribution to neighbourhood change. Respondents were broadly favourable, but their support was neither automatic nor purely aesthetic. The most consistent pattern was conditional acceptance: people valued urban art when it was perceived as artistically credible, compatible with place, maintained over time and connected to residents. This helps explain why age and local exposure did not produce simple differences. Attitudes were shaped less by demographic categories or mere proximity than by judgements about the relationship between work and context.

The survey also distinguishes two connected but non-identical perceptions. Transformative potential was rated highly, yet fewer than half of respondents stated unequivocally that urban art strengthens community bonds. A large group considered community impact dependent on the neighbourhood. This gap is analytically important. Visual transformation can occur quickly and be perceived by individuals, while community formation requires social processes, repeated encounters and shared investment. The moderate correlation between transformative ratings and the usefulness of a dedicated space indicates that respondents who value change also recognise the need for an infrastructure around it.

The association between existing neighbourhood participation and belief in community strengthening reinforces this interpretation. People already active in local life may be more able to imagine murals as part of collective action, or they may have experienced the role of events and shared spaces directly. Conversely, respondents who are disengaged may see urban art mainly as decoration. The data do not determine direction, but they suggest that art does not create participation in a vacuum. It interacts with prior social capacity, local organisations and willingness to engage.

Open responses and interviews converge on the idea of urban art as a catalyst. It can initiate attention, conversation, pride, orientation and emotional relief. It can provide a shared object around which activities are organised. Yet a catalyst requires other elements to produce sustained change. Housing conditions, public services, green space, transport, maintenance and economic pressures remain outside the direct capacity of mural projects. This is why the distinction between transformation, artistic redevelopment and social regeneration is more than semantic. It establishes a proportionate relationship between intervention and claim.

The cases show how this proportion can be maintained. CORBA's name explicitly avoids claiming that art has redeveloped the area. Its contribution lies in a sequence of site-related works, a recognisable project identity and recurring occasions for residents to gather. Manifestival similarly generates visibility, themes and participation (Figure 4), but its own promoter acknowledges that neighbourhood services and quality of life have not been transformed to the same degree. Such statements increase rather than weaken the credibility of the projects because they prevent aesthetic outcomes from being substituted for social evidence.



Figure 4. One of the guided tours conducted by the researcher with a group of scholars in the Gallaratese district. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork, Milan, May 2025.

Participation should therefore be evaluated through its location in the project cycle. Involvement after completion can support interpretation and celebration, but it does not influence theme or commission. Involvement during production can generate curiosity and contact with artists. Workshops enable learning and shared activity. Listening processes can introduce local narratives into briefs, while stronger forms of co-governance would allow residents to influence objectives, budgets and long-term use. The study does not establish a universal hierarchy in which every project must reach the highest level. It does, however, show that claims about community should specify what residents were able to do.

This specification is particularly important for large-scale muralism. Monumental works can offer significant cultural access to areas outside central institutions. They can also attract visitors, media and property narratives that exceed local control. The Gallaratese interviews illustrate a pragmatic position: the possibility of future market appropriation should be recognised, but it does not nullify the immediate value of giving residents important artworks. The relevant question becomes how projects protect local voice and distribute cultural benefits over time.

Communication design can contribute at each stage. Before production, it can support accessible consultation, visualise alternatives and document expectations. During

production, it can explain processes, introduce artists and invite participation. After completion, it can preserve the work, record changes, provide historical context and create channels for feedback. The survey's preference for maps and archives, combined with strong interest in meetings, workshops and tours, indicates that digital and physical communication should be connected. A map is useful not only for tourism but as an interface to local histories, project decisions, conservation status and upcoming activities.

The strong role of social media in discovery should not lead projects to rely exclusively on promotional content. Survey respondents preferred interpersonal and explanatory formats for understanding urban art. Social media can distribute attention, but communication design must also create depth. Amodeo's concern that the urban-art community risks speaking to itself is relevant here: accessible interpretation should not simplify works into marketing images, but should provide enough context for non-specialists to form their own judgements.

A metropolitan perspective further reveals the fragmented geography of urban art in Milan. Respondents recalled many different neighbourhoods rather than one recognised circuit, and stakeholders described a lack of coordination among projects. Fragmentation can preserve local distinctiveness and bottom-up initiative, but it also creates uneven documentation, repeated organisational effort and limited continuity. A metropolitan platform could respond to this condition if it operates as a civic archive and participatory observatory rather than merely a visitor guide. Its design should make visible not only completed murals but promoters, permissions, themes, resident involvement, maintenance and changes over time.

The evidence ultimately supports a situated model of contribution. Urban art affects neighbourhood change through four linked dimensions: visual and sensory change; symbolic identity and memory; social encounters and participation; and communicative infrastructure. The strength of each dimension depends on local morphology, governance, existing community capacity and broader urban pressures. No single dimension is sufficient, and the presence of one does not guarantee the others. This model avoids both celebratory determinism and blanket suspicion. It allows urban art to be valued for what it can do while remaining accountable for what it cannot.

The study has several limitations. The survey used convenience and informal chain-referral recruitment, so respondents were connected directly or indirectly to the researcher's networks. The sample is not representative of Milan or its metropolitan population, and the predominance of women may influence the distribution of attitudes. The one-response-per-account setting reduced repeated submissions from the same account but did not constitute identity verification.

The questionnaire measured perceptions rather than observed neighbourhood outcomes. Positive ratings cannot demonstrate that urban art caused stronger community bonds, increased wellbeing or reduced degradation. Cross-sectional associations also do not establish direction. For example, participation may shape belief in urban art's community value, but people who already hold positive attitudes towards collective cultural activity may simply be more likely to participate.

Some survey questions used broad terms such as 'urban art' and 'transformation'. Although examples were provided, respondents may have imagined different practices, from illegal graffiti to commissioned monumental murals. Conditional answers and open comments partly reveal this variation, but they cannot eliminate it. Future surveys could use visual stimuli or project scenarios to distinguish responses to scale, style, authorisation and participation.

The qualitative coding was undertaken by a single researcher and was not tested for inter-coder reliability. The interviews were purposively selected and include actors involved in promoting urban-art projects, which may produce more favourable interpretations. Their critical comments provide balance, but the stakeholder sample does not include municipal officers, housing managers, property actors or a systematic group of residents from the two cases.

The researcher had greater direct involvement in Manifestival than in CORBA, which may have produced unequal contextual familiarity with the two cases. To miti-

gate this imbalance, the comparative analysis was based primarily on interviews, survey findings and documented project information rather than on the researcher's personal experience.

Corba and Gallaratese were analysed contextually rather than through longitudinal impact evaluation. The study does not include pre-intervention and post-intervention measures, systematic observation of participation over time, housing-market analysis or representative resident samples within each neighbourhood. The cases therefore illuminate participatory configurations and perceived effects but do not prove long-term social or economic outcomes.

Conclusion

Residents of the Milan metropolitan area perceive urban art as capable of changing neighbourhoods, but their support is conditional on how projects relate to place. Artistic quality, contextual fit, maintenance, meaningful communication and resident involvement repeatedly shaped acceptance. The survey demonstrates that perceived transformation is associated with openness to murals, belief in community value and interest in dedicated spaces, while simple exposure and age do not explain attitudes.

The evidence also clarifies the scale of the contribution. Urban art can make environments more vivid, produce landmarks, carry memory, create opportunities for encounter and offer accessible cultural experiences. These effects matter because they influence how residents perceive and narrate everyday space. They should not, however, be confused with the provision of services, housing repair or the redistribution of power and resources.

Stakeholder accounts and the comparison between Corba and Gallaratese show that community participation is not a single method. Inaugurations, observation of production, tours, workshops, listening groups and thematic input - but also citizens' participation in the creation of the mural, as occurred during the 2025 edition of Manifestival - represent different forms of involvement. Projects that claim community benefits should state which forms were used, who participated, and whether local input influenced final decisions.

Communication design is central to this accountability. It can connect metropolitan discovery with neighbourhood knowledge, preserve ephemeral works, explain artistic and institutional choices, and create interfaces through which residents contribute. The preferred platform features identified by respondents - interactive mapping, historical information, archives, tours, events and artist interviews - point towards a hybrid infrastructure linking digital documentation and physical participation.

Urban art contributes most convincingly to neighbourhood change when it is understood not as a decorative solution or an autonomous engine of regeneration, but as a situated communicative process. Its value emerges from the relationships it activates, the narratives it makes visible and the degree to which it remains connected to the people and conditions of the place.

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