

# ART REVIEW

## Participatory Urban Art and Workplace Democracy: A Conversational Teaser

Ester Barinaga, Lund University School of Economics and Management

Consider the following: the neighbourhood where you live is derided in the public debate. Newspapers write about violent incidents occurring in the area, its grey architecture, and the tight living conditions of many of your neighbours. They ignore writing about the neighbourhood's varied and rich cultural traditions, the ambitious youth, and the active associational life. The negative image of your neighbourhood builds on selected facts. And although you do not recognise your neighbourhood in the dominant image of it, although you know there is more talent and capacity in the neighbourhood than what the general gaze seems to acknowledge, you see that decisions concerning the area are based on that limited, and limiting, knowledge—limited because it excludes residents' knowledge of their place; limiting because, through the decisions dominant actors make concerning the neighbourhood, dominant knowledge shapes the lives and future of the people living in it. The limited gaze so limits residents' life possibilities that, for fear of dismissive reactions, you do not include your home address in your CV, nor do you say where you live at party introductions.

This is what sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2007) calls “territorial stigmatisation”: the tainted collective and dominant representation fastened on a particular place. Territorial stigma not only conveys negative stories of a place and its residents; it often also has adverse consequences on the social and economic possibilities of the people looked upon through the stigmatising gaze. As Wacquant puts it, “whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners, matters little in the end: the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences” (68).

Acknowledging the effects of a place's general image on the social dynamics of the place highlights three dimensions of space: first, *physical* space, the geographical area describable through directional vectors and cartographic coordinates; second, *symbolic* space, the images and stories associated to a given geography and those who inhabit it and the general representation in the public debate of a place and its residents; and third, *social* space, the status or social position inscribed in sites and reproduced through stories. As the spatial turn in the social sciences has shown, the

social position and symbolic meaning a space holds in the public imaginary contribute to (dis)empowering the communities occupying the physical spaces that are so imagined (Massey 2005). In this way, three-dimensional space impairs democracy—understood as a social norm to organise ourselves based on interaction patterns characterised by equality, freedom, and fraternity/cooperation (Frega 2021)—in at least three ways:

- 1) It truncates representation. Stigmatised space distorts public debate on particular neighbourhoods and their residents by misrepresenting them (in both the descriptive and political senses of “misrepresentation”).
- 2) It limits voice. Stigmatised space results from and reproduces the asymmetrical possibility of voice—the voice of the dominant and privileged overpowering the voices of the vulnerable and oppressed—thus reinforcing epistemic injustice (Herzog 2022).
- 3) It impoverishes involvement. With limited voice and deceptive representation, the territorially stigmatised are constrained from shaping the social and material conditions of the world in which they live. Their possibility of involvement is reduced to voting every four years.

Aware of the socio-spatial limitations of democratic involvement, and inspired by Paulo Freire’s ([1970] 2010) critical pedagogy—a pedagogy that revalues the often denigrated knowledges of the oppressed—participatory art focuses on representing the voices of the oppressed and on actively involving them as equals throughout the process of producing art. The following is based on my practical experience organising participatory urban mural art processes in the stigmatised suburbs of major Swedish cities (see, e.g., Barinaga 2017); this reflection aims to raise awareness of the socio-spatial dynamics that constrain, or could strengthen, democratic practices.

#### HOW DOES THE PARTICIPATORY URBAN ART PROCESS ADDRESS THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACIAL LIMITATION OF DEMOCRACY?

To answer to the frustration residents of stigmatised suburbs experience, and in an attempt to redress the democratic deficit created by excluding from public debate those who are being debated, the focus of participatory urban art is on democratising the very art process by transforming it into *a process to let those who are talked about in the public debate take power over their own stories*. Three aspects grant participatory urban art particular democratising potential.

##### *Community Focused: Democratising the Social Dimension of Space*

The collective mural process starts well before any artist (professional or not) takes hold of paint and brushes. What the mural is to represent is not imposed on those who are to live with the final mural art; rather, the mural’s motif comes out of a months-long dialogue with the community who lives where the mural is to be painted. Grounded in a sincere respect for the community, residents are invited as experts of their neighbourhood and as masters of coping with the gaze that stigmatises the area. Workshops and



**Figure 1: Dialogue Meeting across Generations, Languages, and Residence Status**

dialogue meetings are organised where the elder and the young, migrants and those of solely national ancestry, decades-long residents and the newly arrived, share their past stories, their present concerns, and their dreams for the future (see [Figure 1](#); in supplementary materials published online, Appendix A provides additional photographs of the collective process). In common is their connection to the local territory and a resentment towards the misrepresentation of their neighbourhood. Participatory mural art is, above all, a dialogue process that involves residents, local associations, artists, activists, and other local actors working with each other; no one person imposes on another.

This dialogue goes beyond being a tool for the participatory artist to understand the community; it is more than a way to listen to their voices. The dialogue process is part of developing democratic practices of curiosity and mutual respect, regardless of the social position occupied by those in the dialogue. The community-based mural process thus works in two facets of *social space*: first, it creates a platform for interaction between various community groups and local actors, and second, the very process of discussing and coming to agree on what they want to say through the mural painting imbues a democratic praxis of equally recognising each other and equally valuing everyone's situated knowledge and experience.

That is, by bringing people together, by directing the discussion towards the shared message the community wants to communicate on the wall, and by engaging residents in various stages of the mural process—from discussion of the motif to actual painting—the collective production of mural art has the potential to enhance community and to develop democratic interaction patterns permeated by respectful listening and mutual influence.

#### *Visual: Democratising the Symbolic Dimension of Space*

Collective urban mural art takes public walls as platforms from which to communicate the stories coming from the neighbourhood in which the walls are located.

Residents, groups, and communities whose experiences are most often silenced in the public debate have a chance to be seen on the painted wall. The final collective mural condenses and visualises the testimonies of a community burdened by territorial stigmatisation, thus revealing the repressed voices of those marked by contempt. To illustrate, a major mural in Skärholmen (south of Stockholm) symbolised residents' pride for being, exactly, those whom the dominant gaze denigrated through the image of a dandelion—a flower able to withstand the worst conditions (see Figures 2 and 3; in supplementary materials published online, Appendix B provides additional photographs of the final murals). It is in this sense that the visual aspect of the final mural acts in the symbolic dimension of space: it becomes part of a struggle over the representation of the neighbourhood and its residents.

In that struggle, a collective participatory mural goes beyond questioning the dominant representation of the particular area. By grounding the final motif in the experiences and stories locals share during broad community dialogues about their neighbourhood, a mural proposes a description of the area as experienced and known by its very residents. In doing this, the mural has the potential to contribute to rearticulating the debate on that neighbourhood and its residents. The two meanings of representation (*depiction* and *speak for someone*) come to coalesce in the visual image. It depicts the neighbourhood's voice while speaking for its residents.

*In the Public Space: Democratising the Physical Dimension of Space*

A mural painting takes place in the physical space of the city. It is widely visible on public walls. It turns the grey walls that abound in our cities into smaller and bigger



**Figure 2: Wall in Skärholmen Previous to Painting of Collective Mural**

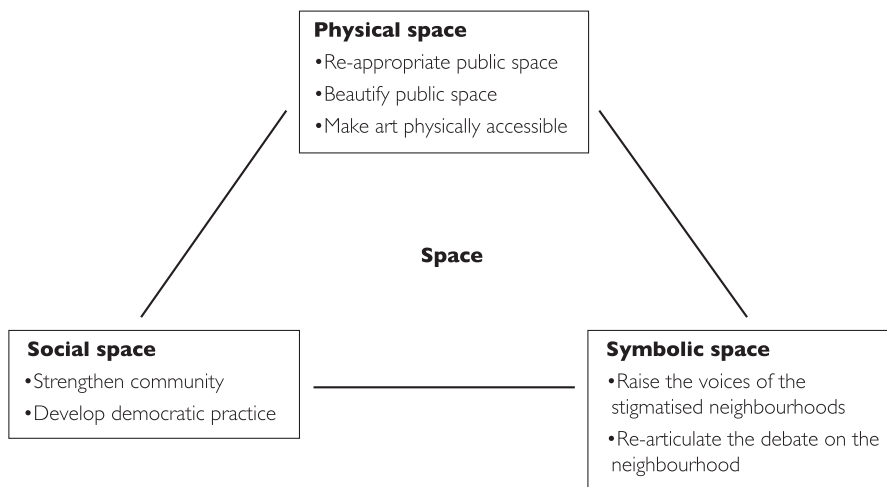


**Figure 3: Collective Participatory Mural in Skärholmen, by Förorten I Centrum**

pieces of colourful art. In that way, mural art beautifies the neighbourhood while also making art physically accessible to a large number of people.

Furthermore, seeing public space reappropriated by one's and one's neighbours' voices gives those who have participated in its production a strong feeling of ownership of the mural, of pride for the community who produced it, and of belonging in the neighbourhood (see Figure 4).

As uncommon a topic as participatory art and space may be for business ethics, they may help us tease a conversation on how to think through organisational spaces to advance workplace democracy. How would workplace dynamics be affected by the visualisation of the voices of the lowest-paid workers in the collective lunch-room? How would decision-making be affected by organisational dialogical practices that value equally the knowledges of minority and stigmatised groups? And how would an inclusive design of organisational spaces shape interaction in the workplace? A wider understanding of democracy as a social norm for how we interact and organise demands an awareness of the constraints space imposes on representation, voice, and active involvement. Yet, important as it is for business ethics to refine the definition of workplace democracy, if we are to advance democracy at work, we do need a practical guide on how to tackle such questions on an everyday basis. Participatory art can offer business ethicists a teaser to start developing such a practical guide. Its suggestion is to move towards more democratic patterns of interaction by acting on the three dimensions of space. Equally involving everyone as an expert on their own situation and publicly visualising the voices of those seldom heard open up space



**Figure 4: Socio-spatial Dynamics of Collective Participatory Mural Art**

to other social groups, widen the range of stories that make up symbolic space, and make physical space more resonant to the concerns of those living in it. Like communities, organisations are made of people sharing many spaces. Thinking of a workplace's many spaces in terms of their social, symbolic, and physical dimensions may help us enlarge and refine the idea of workplace democracy to attend to the social, symbolic, and material conditions that shape everyday interactions in the workplace.

### Supplementary Materials

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2023.8>.

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ESTER BARINAGA ([ester.barinaga@fek.lu.se](mailto:ester.barinaga@fek.lu.se)) is professor of social entrepreneurship at Lund University, School of Economics and Management. She also holds a position at the Copenhagen Business School. Her research focuses on concepts, strategies, methods, and practices social entrepreneurs use to advance social change. Currently she focuses on complementary currencies as instruments to build sustainable economies, inclusive cities, and resilient communities. The methods she uses are interventionist, actively taking part in the entrepreneurial processes she also studies. Her research has been published in top-tier academic journals, including *Organization Studies*, *Geoforum*, *Human Relations*, *Urban Studies*, *Ethnicities*, and the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*.