

Developing a Sustainability Framework for Enhancing

Public Art Projects in Nigeria toward Urban Regeneration

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Abstract

This study examines the role of public art towards urban regeneration, cultural preservation, and socio-economic development, addressing critical challenges in the Nigerian public art sector. It adopts a qualitative research design based on literature review, and Eisenhardt's theory-building approach, drawing on secondary data to generate insights from case-based analysis. Two contemporary Nigerian public art initiatives were examined using within-case and cross-case thematic analysis. The study integrates placemaking, cultural economics, social capital, place attachment, and regulatory theories to develop a sustainability framework for enhancing public art practice and administration in Nigeria. The study's findings indicate that sustainable public art interventions for urban regeneration depend on adequate funding, participatory governance, community engagement, supportive policy environments, and culturally grounded artistic practices. The study provides insights into how future public art projects in Nigerian urban spaces can foster social cohesion, create employment opportunities, and stimulate economic growth. It offers valuable implications for artists, urban planners, community organizations, policymakers, and public art stakeholders.

Keywords: *Public Art, Urban Regeneration, Sustainability Theories, Socio-economic Development, Nigeria*

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Introduction

Public art is distinct from art displayed in traditional gallery or museum settings, as it is designed to engage with and enhance the surrounding environment, making it an integral part of the urban landscape (Milne and Pojani, 2022). It encompasses artworks in any medium intentionally created and executed to be located in the public domain, typically in external spaces accessible to everyone (Paley, 2023). It refers to artistic works or installations created in any media for and displayed in public spaces beyond the confines of the conventional gallery setup, making them easily reachable to a wide range of people. It is typically accessible and often located in parks, plazas, streets, bridges, government buildings, and other public areas. Public art takes various forms, being both two and three-dimensional. Public art comes in different forms, encompassing multiple artistic expressions, including murals, sculptures, street lighting, digital art, street furnishings, architectural elements integrated into building structures, landform artworks, temporary installations, such as festival decorations, and more (Matthews and Gadaloff, 2022). Placing artworks in public spaces allows them to reach a wider audience than art galleries or museums, and the context in which these artworks are displayed can influence audience expectations and reactions.

Public art and humanity have been present throughout recorded history (Milne and Pojani, 2022). Public art, shaped by its societal context, exhibits historical traditions and diverse manifestations across various periods and cultures (Hao, 2024). The origins of public art can be traced from prehistoric cave paintings to the Egyptian pyramids and the architectural sculptures of ancient Greek and Roman cities, later evolving during the Middle Ages and Renaissance into monumental artworks and architectural embellishments that often reflected the authority of ruling elites and religious institutions (Kecheng and Hussain, 2023). There seem to be some doubts regarding the origin of modern public art. According to Gao (2022), the origin of modern urban public art traces back to World War II (1939-1945), with modern cities and urban civilization having the potential to aid in healing people's spiritual trauma. However, Liu (2022) asserted that modern public art emerged in the mid-1960s due to the significant shifts occurring amid a diverse landscape of artistic genres such as minimalism and conceptual art. The development of urban environments has laid a robust groundwork for the rise of contemporary public art (Liu, 2022). In broad terms, public art can be classified into five categories, including commemorative, expressive, functional, community-based, and technology-driven artworks (Jasmi, Hussain, and Omar, 2018).

Public art serves vital functions, including reflecting and expressing the identity of a city, celebrating significant individuals and locations, narrating the stories and histories of a place, fostering a sense of pride and belonging within the community, and enhancing the appeal of a locality (Yang, Jian, and Siu, 2023). Others include commemorating local events and histories, addressing community needs, enhancing aesthetic value, promoting a sense of community, and providing educational value to the community (Yang, Jian, and Siu, 2023). Public art projects are often collaborations between artists, urban planners, local authorities, and community members, and they can be funded through public or private sources because public art scenes are an activity centre with numerous benefits, and meaningful connections and attachments could be formed during use.

This study recognizes the government's ongoing efforts to facilitate regional development by harnessing the country's rich resources for poverty alleviation and economic growth in Nigeria (Anam et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to consider that all geopolitical regions in Nigeria have a rich cultural heritage that can be harnessed for urban revitalization by promoting public art initiatives in different communities. Public art in Nigeria celebrates the country's rich cultural heritage and encompasses diverse traditional and contemporary forms that contribute to the country's cultural, social, and economic development. However, the government has yet to maximize public art gains as of the time of this study. In developing countries like Nigeria, there is a relative lack of awareness regarding the role of public art in enhancing urban life, in contrast to developed countries. There is also a need to address how public art projects can be improved for urban revitalization and economic growth in Nigeria. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature. If properly harnessed, public art has the potential to transform the aesthetics and functionality of urban places in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions:

1. How do public art projects enhance urban revitalization, community engagement, and cultural preservation?
2. What challenges do public art initiatives face in Nigeria?
3. How can operational strategies in public art contribute to the sustainable creation, administration, and management of public art in Nigerian cities?

Literature Review

Urban Regeneration Through Public Art

Urban regeneration or revitalization involves the comprehensive improvement and renewal of urban areas to address decay and transform cities into vibrant, sustainable, and economically viable environments (Chinedu, 2024). Urban revitalization through public art is a multifaceted approach that combines artistic expression, community engagement, and economic development (Petroniene and Juzeleniene, 2022). Public art enriches cities and public spaces through aesthetic, economic, social, and cultural values (Hao, 2024). Urban revitalization through public art can have significant economic benefits and improve residents' well-being and quality of life (Mathews and Gadaloff, 2022). Revitalized urban spaces become more appealing to businesses, investors, and developers, increasing economic activity.

Cheung et al. (2021) categorized and analyzed the impacts of public art, identifying eight distinct categories, including placemaking, well-being, society, economy, culture, sustainability, wisdom, and innovation. According to Yang, Jian, and Siu (2023), the role of public art extends far beyond its physical presence as it serves as a celebration of distinctive cultures, a reflection of local histories, and a means of enhancing community facilities. It can stimulate profound transformations in the psychological and physical environment, serving as a bridge, blurring the boundaries between cultural aesthetics and ecological functionality, whether in actuality or perception (Paley, 2023). Public art serves various purposes in urban spaces, including decorative, functional, and more, from beautifying public spaces to reflecting local culture and history, stimulating dialogue, and promoting social interaction (Liu, 2021).

Public art can contribute to urban regeneration by nurturing a sense of identity (place and civic), addressing community needs, tackling social exclusion, providing educational value, promoting social change, and fostering economic development (Palermo, 2014). Public art

significantly breathes new life into neglected or underutilized areas, enhancing aesthetics, cultural vibrancy, and social cohesion (Paley, 2023). Integrating public art into urban revitalization projects becomes crucial as cities undergo efforts to address social, economic, and environmental issues (Palermo, 2014). Using public art in urban revitalization efforts makes it feasible to strengthen cultural amenities and local identity while attracting fresh investments and financing capable of revitalizing the surrounding urban environment where the artwork is situated (Palermo, 2014).

Wanjiku (2024) examined public art projects developed within large-scale urban revitalization initiatives across cities in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia. The study explored how public art interventions contribute to placemaking, tourism development, and community engagement within urban redevelopment contexts. Findings by Boonserm and Chandransu (2025) also reveal that public art possesses significant potential to address societal challenges, promote social healing, and support cultural preservation alongside economic development. These findings provide a useful framework for effectively harnessing the transformative potential of public art interventions in Nigeria. Public art possesses significant capacity to stimulate urban regeneration, particularly in culturally vibrant yet economically challenged developing countries like Nigeria.

Public Art Initiatives in Nigeria

Public art in Nigeria reflects the country's diverse cultural traditions, historical narratives, and contemporary urban realities (Oladumiye and Tolulope, 2015). Traditional artistic expressions such as Yoruba sculptural traditions, Benin bronze works, Hausa architectural ornamentation, and Igbo mural practices have historically functioned as community-centred artistic interventions embedded within public life. Contemporary Nigerian public art has further expanded into murals, commemorative sculptures, installation art, environmental art, and mixed-media urban interventions integrated into city landscapes. Public art projects are now visible in virtually all major cities in Nigeria, including Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Kano, Abeokuta, Kaduna, and Calabar, where they contribute to cultural identity, tourism promotion, urban aesthetics, and civic engagement.

Public art projects in Nigeria range from large-scale sculptures and murals to interactive installations that engage with the urban environment and the community, demonstrating the increasing relevance of art in urban regeneration. For instance, the Aro Meta sculpture at Eko Atlantic City in Lagos (Figure 1), functions not only as a monumental artwork but also as a visual identity marker that contributes to tourism, place attachment, and urban image construction. Similarly, Mace of Power sculpture at the National Assembly in Abuja represents Nigeria's cultural diversity and political history, attracting locals and tourists. This study recognizes different public art typologies used in urban and art-historical scholarship. These include: monumental and commemorative sculptures, murals and street art, interactive and participatory public art, environmental and landscape art, functional public art integrated into architecture and urban infrastructure, and temporary installations and festival-based interventions.



Figure 1. Aro meta statue at Eko Atlantic city, Lagos. Source: Chuks Nwanne, The Guardian Newspaper, 12 January, 2019. <https://guardian.ng/saturday-magazine/travel-a-tourism/aro-meta-stature-turns-eko-atlantic-city-to-tourists-attraction/>.



Figure 2. The sculpture at the National Assembly, Abuja. Photographed in 2001 by: Trager, Lillian (1947-2006). Archived in: University of Wisconsin – Parkside Library, African Studies Collection. <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/AB5AGTIOXY3AY8O>.

Potentials and Challenges of Public Art for Urban Regeneration in Nigeria

Public art possesses significant potential for enhancing urban regeneration in Nigeria. Public art can strengthen cultural tourism, improve environmental aesthetics, encourage local entrepreneurship, promote social inclusion, and increase the symbolic value of urban spaces. In densely populated urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Kano, and Enugu, public art can function as a placemaking strategy capable of transforming underutilized or socially fragmented spaces into culturally vibrant environments. The Nigerian creative economy also offers substantial opportunities for integrating public art into broader urban development strategies. According to Solanki, Speer and Huang (2014), public art projects have profoundly impacted participating youths and the wider community by enhancing the visual vibrancy of public spaces, empowering local youth, fostering community pride, and increasing young people's confidence and engagement in their surroundings. Given this, public art initiatives can generate employment opportunities for artists, urban planners, designers, curators, architects, cultural managers, and artisans.

Despite its transformative potential, public art development in Nigeria faces several interconnected challenges. One of the most significant challenges is inadequate and inconsistent funding (Ayodele and Adenle, 2022). Most public art projects depend heavily on private sponsorship, individual patronage, or short-term government intervention. There is presently no comprehensive national public art policy in Nigeria that establishes dedicated financial frameworks for commissioning, maintaining, and preserving public artworks. Institutional and bureaucratic limitations also constrain public art sustainability. Delays in project approvals, fragmented responsibilities among government agencies, and weak policy implementation often hinder long-term planning. In several Nigerian cities, urban beautification projects are executed without integrating professional artists, cultural historians, or local communities into the planning process.

Maintenance culture constitutes another major challenge. Numerous public sculptures and mural projects across Nigerian urban centres suffer from neglect, vandalism, environmental deterioration, and poor conservation practices (Ukim, 2019). Public art maintenance is rarely integrated into municipal budgeting systems, resulting in the gradual deterioration of artistic installations. Community engagement also remains inconsistent. Some public art projects are imposed through top-down administrative processes without adequate consultation with local residents. Consequently, certain artworks fail to reflect community identities or address local socio-cultural realities.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study research design employing Eisenhardt's theory-building approach, drawing from secondary qualitative data for theory generation as outlined by Palomino, Brown, and Rich (2014), supported by literature review to develop a sustainability framework for public art projects toward urban regeneration in Nigeria. The methodological approach was informed by Eisenhardt's theory-building framework from case studies, which facilitates the development of conceptual propositions through systematic comparison of multiple empirical cases (Ridder, 2017; Eisenhardt, 2021). The study therefore combines conceptual inquiry with empirical qualitative analysis by examining documented public art initiatives and interpreting their implications for sustainable urban regeneration.

Secondary qualitative data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, books, government reports, policy documents, newspaper archives, and documented public art project reports published between 2014 and 2025. Sources were purposively selected based on the following criteria: relevance to public art and urban regeneration; focus on public art practices in Nigeria or comparable urban contexts; availability of empirical evidence relating to community participation, policy implementation, sustainability, or urban transformation; and scholarly credibility through publication in recognised academic or professional outlets. Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords such as "public art," "urban regeneration," "placemaking," "street art," "street murals," "public sculpture," "creative city," and "urban culture."

Two Nigerian public art initiatives were purposively selected for comparative case analysis, namely the House of Bezalel public art projects in Lagos State (Ayodele and Adenle, 2022), and mural art interventions in Anambra State, particularly at Bridge-Head Onitsha, Nibo, and Aroma Flyover, Awka (Okafor, 2024). These cases were selected because they provide contemporary examples of public art interventions within Nigerian urban environments and demonstrate different scales, artistic forms, implementation strategies, and opera-

tional approaches to public art practice. The selected cases jointly provided a comparative empirical basis for examining how public art projects are conceived, implemented, managed, and integrated into urban regeneration processes in Nigeria.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis through within-case and cross-case analytical procedures in line with Eisenhardt's theory-building framework (Javaid and Hyder, 2018). First, each case was analysed independently to identify themes relating to sustainability, funding, policy implementation, community engagement, urban revitalisation, and cultural identity. Secondly, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and contextual differences across the selected initiatives. The analytical process was guided by placemaking, social capital, cultural economics, place attachment, and regulatory theories. These theoretical lenses provided interpretive frameworks for understanding how public art contributes to urban transformation, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and sustainable city development. To enhance analytical credibility and conceptual robustness, the study triangulated evidence from scholarly literature, policy documents, observational insights, and documented case materials. Findings from the comparative analysis informed the development of a proposed sustainability framework for public art projects in Nigeria toward urban regeneration.

Findings

Within-Case Analysis

Case Study 1: House of Bezalel Public Art Practice in Lagos State

Ayodele and Adenle (2022) examined the operational structure and artistic activities of the House of Bezalel, an indigenous group of millennial artists responsible for the production and installation of more than forty monumental public artworks across Lagos metropolis. The case demonstrates how coordinated artistic practice can contribute to urban beautification, place identity, and cultural representation within rapidly expanding urban environments. The projects executed by the group reveal the growing relevance of public art in reshaping urban landscapes, especially in commercially and socially strategic locations within Lagos. The study identified several operational strengths associated with the initiative. First, the group adopted a structured production model that enabled large-scale execution of public artworks within complex urban spaces. Second, the projects contributed to visual enhancement and placemaking by transforming ordinary urban spaces into culturally symbolic landmarks. Third, the initiative promoted indigenous artistic expression through artworks that reflected local cultural narratives and urban experiences.

Despite these achievements, the case also revealed several structural and institutional challenges affecting the sustainability of public art in Nigeria. One major challenge is inadequate funding and overreliance on inconsistent sponsorship arrangements. The absence of institutionalised public art funding mechanisms creates uncertainty in project continuity and maintenance. The study also identified iconoclasm and politically or religiously motivated destruction of artworks as recurring threats to sustainability. In addition, the commissioning of non-professional practitioners and the production of culturally disconnected artworks weaken the quality and public relevance of some public art projects.

Another important issue emerging from the case is the limited integration of local communities into the planning and implementation processes of public art projects. The House of Bezalel case demonstrates that professionally coordinated public art initiatives can signifi-

cantly contribute to urban regeneration in Nigeria. However, sustainable impact depends on stronger institutional support, inclusive stakeholder participation, policy frameworks, and long-term maintenance systems.

Case Study 2: Mural Art Interventions in Anambra State

Okafor (2024) investigated selected mural art interventions located at Bridge-Head Onitsha, Nibo, and Aroma Flyover in Awka, focusing on their contributions to urban revitalization and nation-building in Anambra State. The study presents mural art as an accessible form of public art capable of transforming neglected urban corridors into spaces of cultural communication, visual engagement, and community interaction. The findings revealed that the murals contributed significantly to improving environmental aesthetics and promoting public expression within urban spaces. The artworks visually transformed previously underutilized or visually degraded locations into culturally vibrant environments that attracted public attention and encouraged social interaction. The murals also reinforced cultural identity by incorporating locally recognizable symbols, narratives, and themes connected to everyday community experiences. The case further demonstrates the social function of mural art as a medium for civic engagement and public communication. Through visual storytelling and symbolic representation, the murals created opportunities for dialogue concerning cultural values, collective memory, and urban identity.

Nevertheless, several limitations constrained the long-term sustainability of the mural interventions. The study identified political interference, weak institutional backing, property ownership disputes, inadequate funding, and poor maintenance culture as major challenges. In some cases, the absence of clearly defined legal and administrative frameworks created uncertainty regarding responsibility for protection and conservation. Community participation was also found to be inconsistent, as residents were not always systematically involved in decision-making processes relating to project planning and implementation. The Anambra case therefore illustrates the potential of mural art as a low-cost but highly visible urban revitalization strategy in Nigeria. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of such initiatives depend largely on institutional coordination, participatory governance, maintenance planning, and policy support.

Cross-Case Analysis

The comparative analysis of the House of Bezalel projects in Lagos and the mural interventions in Anambra State reveals several converging themes regarding the role of public art in urban regeneration, while also highlighting important contextual and operational differences. A major point of convergence across both cases is the recognition of public art as an instrument for transforming urban environments and strengthening cultural identity. Both initiatives demonstrate that public art contributes to environmental aesthetics, public engagement, and symbolic representation within urban spaces. In both Lagos and Anambra State, public art transformed underutilized or visually neglected spaces into culturally meaningful environments capable of attracting public attention and encouraging social interaction.

Another important similarity concerns the challenges affecting sustainability. Both cases identified inadequate funding, weak institutional support, and the absence of comprehensive public art policies as major constraints limiting the continuity and effectiveness of public art initiatives in Nigeria. Both cases reveal the importance of stakeholder partici-

pation in achieving sustainable public art outcomes. However, although community engagement was identified as essential in both studies, participatory involvement remained relatively limited in practice. This weakens opportunities for developing strong social capital, community ownership, and collective responsibility toward public artworks. Both cases also suggest that public art development in Nigeria remains largely dependent on fragmented sponsorship arrangements and temporary interventions rather than long-term institutional frameworks. This reinforces the need for structured governance systems capable of supporting commissioning, maintenance, legal protection, and stakeholder coordination.

Despite these similarities, significant differences emerged between the two cases. The Lagos-based House of Bezalel initiative operated through a more structured and professionally coordinated model involving large-scale monumental installations and stronger interaction with formal urban development processes. The projects demonstrated greater alignment with cultural economics theory because of their stronger potential for tourism development, city branding, and economic value creation. In contrast, the Anambra mural interventions reflected a more community-visible and socially interactive approach to public art. The monumental installations in Lagos reflected long-term spatial visibility and stronger integration into formal urban infrastructure, whereas the mural projects in Anambra were comparatively more vulnerable to environmental deterioration, political interference, and property-related disputes.

These findings reveal that sustainable public art development in Nigeria requires the integration of professional artistic coordination, participatory community engagement, institutional policy support, and governance structures. It further indicates that public art initiatives are more likely to contribute meaningfully to urban regeneration when they are culturally grounded, socially inclusive, economically supported, and institutionally protected. Together, these findings underscore the need for a holistic framework that aligns artistic practice with governance, community participation, and sustainable urban development objectives.

Developing Hypotheses

From the case analysis, several propositions emerge. First, influential public art in Nigerian cities requires sustainable operational models and frameworks that address funding and implementation challenges. Second, community engagement is crucial for public art's successful creation, management, and impact. Third, addressing specific challenges, such as iconoclasm, political restrictions, and property rights, is essential for sustainability and the positive impact of public art projects. Fourth, stakeholder involvement particularly that of local and professional artists and local residents, enhances the impact of public art on nation-building and community development.

Comparing with Existing Literature

In agreement with the findings based on the case studies on the need for an operational model or sustainable framework for public art projects in Nigeria, Hunting (2005) identified the need for more mature public art initiatives by adopting research-based objectives, standards, and sound public administration principles. These include developing documents such as public art policy or public art framework, which contain guidelines for funding, implementing, and maintaining public art projects. Many countries that have successful public art programmes have adopted this initiative. Radišić (2007) investigated public art

policy and legal and financial policy instruments considering the United States of America, France, and the United Kingdom. Gesare (2024) observed that the public art process can be lengthy and complex from conceptualization to installation, but with effective project management and a collaborative, transparent approach, it is achievable, offering significant rewards for both artists and the community.

Securing funding for public art can be challenging but it is crucial for any public art programme (Project for Public Spaces, 2019). Public funding plays a vital role in creating and maintaining public art to ensure that the aesthetic, educational, and community purposes it is meant for are adequately met (Wanjiku, 2024). Beyond donations from individuals and corporations, financial support can be obtained through various methods, categorized into four main areas: public/private sector collaborations, percent and non-percent-for-art programmes, developer contributions, and local funding sources (Project for Public Spaces, 2019).

The view that effective community engagement is essential for a public art project to succeed and meet its objectives is supported by many studies (Cheung et al., 2021). Petroniene and Juzeleniene (2022) worked on tackling the challenges of community engagement through public art (focusing on mural art) in three socially disconnected cities, including Heerlen (the Netherlands), Waterford (Ireland), and Kaunas (Lithuania). The study's findings revealed that through community engagement workshops, mural art fosters social interaction and supports sustainable community and urban development (Petroniene and Juzeleniene, 2022).

It is essential to address the issue of iconoclasm, political restrictions, and property rights in public art in Nigeria. Scott (2009) suggested prioritizing awareness (as many public artworks may be vandalized due to a lack of knowledge) and focusing on security enhancements. There is a need to clarify the stance on acts of public art destruction and ensure consistent communication to potential perpetrators that any interference without the consent of the owner or guardian is a criminal act (Scott, 2009). This is because, regardless of the motives behind vandalizing public artwork, such acts undermine the core responsibility to safeguard cultural artifacts for future generations. According to Smith (2016), while property owners generally have the right to destroy their property, when public art is deeply connected to a community's culture, the community's right to preserve it should prevail. However, while communities can use legal measures to protect public art, preservation has limits, given that if a landmark no longer reflects or unifies the community, it might be best to let it go to make room for new creations (Smith, 2016).

Wang and Ma (2017), through empirical and analytical research efforts, offered insights into enhancing stakeholder involvement in public art administration by examining the policy-making patterns for public art-driven urban planning in Hefei, China. As public art evolves, artists must continually reassess the significance of their audience, including aesthetic and moral values, and foster open dialogue between communities (Yang, Jian, and Siu, 2023). By valuing and understanding their audience's experiences and interpretations, public artists can more effectively convey the essence of their work and ensure that public art fully realizes its environmental, economic, and social potential (Yang, Jian, and Siu, 2023).

Theoretical Framework for Public Art Interventions in Nigeria

Theories serve as interpretive tools that can elucidate various dimensions of an issue, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding (Collins and Stockon, 2018). Theoretical explanations of public art interventions in Nigeria can be better understood through the integration of cultural economics, social capital, place attachment, placemaking, and regulatory theories. These theoretical perspectives provide multidimensional insights into how public art contributes to urban regeneration, cultural sustainability, economic development, and social interaction within contemporary Nigerian cities. Grounding these theories within specific Nigerian public art initiatives further strengthens their practical relevance and analytical applicability.

Cultural Economics Theory

The field of cultural economics, also known as the economics of art and culture, examines the interaction between arts and the economy and applies economic principles to analyze the dynamics of the arts and cultural sectors (Frey, 2019). Cultural economics offers a valuable framework for understanding the economic dimensions of artistic and cultural activities. Cultural economics explores the economic aspects of cultural goods and activities, emphasizing the interplay between cultural production, consumption, and value creation (Bille, 2024). Cultural economics theory recognizes culture as a driver of economic growth and innovation. The idea of 'culture-driven urban revitalization' is increasingly becoming the emerging strategy for reinvigorating and stimulating local economic growth in cities, giving rise to the vision of the creative/cultural city (Leng, 2016). Integrating public art into urban development strategies based on the principles of cultural economics theory can facilitate job creation in the creative sector, support cultural tourism, and generate revenue for local businesses. By enhancing the aesthetic appeal and cultural vibrancy of urban areas, public art can spur economic growth and improve the quality of life for residents. Public art can beautify cities, enhance quality of life, and add value to communities and their assets (Cheung et al., 2021). Since rapid urbanization and cultural diversity intersect in Nigeria, leveraging cultural economics theory can provide insights into how public art can contribute to urban revitalization and economic development. Most cities in Nigeria are hubs of cultural diversity and artistic expression, offering fertile ground for applying cultural economics theory to public art initiatives. By leveraging cultural assets, cities in Nigeria can capitalize on their unique heritage and cultural diversity to stimulate economic development and compete in the global marketplace, providing opportunities for inclusive growth, social cohesion, and cultural exchange.

The activities of the House of Bezalel group, which has produced numerous monumental sculptures and murals across Lagos metropolis, demonstrate how public art contributes to urban branding and the visual identity of the city, providing a strong example of this theoretical perspective. Public artworks installed in locations such as Ojuelegba, Falomo Underbridge, and major transport corridors function as visual landmarks that enhance the attractiveness of urban spaces and contribute to Lagos' image as a creative and culturally vibrant city. Similarly, the "Lagos at 50" public sculpture initiatives and artistic installations integrated into Eko Atlantic and other urban renewal projects reveal how governments and private developers increasingly deploy public art as part of broader economic and tourism-oriented urban development strategies (The Punch Nigeria, 2017). The integration of art into commercial and transportation spaces also stimulates employment opportunities for artists, designers, curators, and creative entrepreneurs, thereby reinforcing the economic

dimensions of public art practice in Nigeria. Within this framework, public art becomes both a cultural resource and an economic instrument capable of enhancing the competitiveness and symbolic capital of Nigerian cities.

Social Capital Theory

The fundamental idea behind social capital is that interactions, relationships, and connections within a social or network structure are valuable assets contingent upon the concreteness and quality of these relations (Ali et al., 2023). The social capital theory posits that social networks, relationships, and norms of reciprocity within a community contribute to its combined efficacy and well-being (Cvetanovic, Despotovic, and Filipovic, 2015; Çaliskan and Ezilmez, 2021; Singapur, 2022). It encompasses bonding social capital (within-group cohesion) and bridging social capital (inter-group connections), facilitating cooperation, resource sharing, and collective action (Kopren and Westlund, 2021). The social capital theory highlights the role of trust, social cohesion, and civic participation in fostering resilient, inclusive communities (Çaliskan and Ezilmez, 2021; Singapur, 2022). Drawing on social capital theory, public art installations create opportunities for community members to engage in shared cultural experiences, building social cohesion and trust.

Utilizing social capital through participatory arts is a multifaceted undertaking, influenced by factors including participant responses and the extent to which individuals perceive local community assets and networks as representative of their needs, with bonding and bridging outcomes contingent upon these considerations (Daykin et al., 2021). This theory is relevant because public art projects frequently encourage social interactions and community engagement, building networks and enhancing social cohesion (Chinedu, 2024). Public art projects create gathering spaces where residents and visitors can interact, fostering a sense of belonging and community pride. Social capital theory suggests that vibrant social networks and civic engagement are essential drivers of economic development (Singapur, 2022). Integrating public art into urban development strategies can have positive economic impacts by attracting visitors, stimulating local businesses, and increasing property values. This, in turn, encourages entrepreneurship, cultural tourism, and investment in local amenities, thereby contributing to economic growth and prosperity. Public art initiatives foster social capital by involving collaboration between artists, community members, local governments, and stakeholders while enhancing social cohesion through shared experiences and a sense of belonging (Gesare, 2024). Applying social capital theory to public art projects in Nigeria can help address urbanization challenges, including inadequate infrastructure and social fragmentation, by strengthening social networks, fostering trust, and promoting civic engagement. Initiatives such as community-based public art projects and public art festivals can provide platforms for residents to collaborate, share stories, and celebrate cultural diversity, building social capital and revitalizing urban spaces.

Mural art interventions in Anambra State provide practical illustrations of this theory. Okafor's (2024) study of murals at Bridge-Head Onitsha, Nibo, and Aroma Flyover Awka demonstrates how public murals create opportunities for social interaction, collective memory, and public communication. The murals incorporate locally recognizable cultural symbols and narratives that encourage residents to identify with their environment while fostering community pride and belonging. The social function of mural art is particularly significant in densely populated urban areas where public spaces often experience fragmentation and declining social interaction. Through visual storytelling and symbolic representation,

these murals stimulate public dialogue concerning identity, culture, and urban experience. In this sense, public art functions as a medium for strengthening interpersonal relationships and reinforcing shared social values. Mural and graffiti initiatives in under-bridge spaces and public corridors in major Nigerian cities like Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Kano, Abeokuta, Kaduna, and Calabar encourage participation among artists, residents, youth groups, and local organisations, while also fostering social capital formation. These interactions contribute to the development of informal cultural networks and communal urban engagement. Thus, social capital theory explains how public art interventions can strengthen community relationships and support inclusive urban development in Nigerian cities.

Place Attachment Theory

Space is a place like public art scenes where users conduct activities based on different needs (Zabawa-Krzywicka and Gron, 2020). Public space can either function as a system with defined urban roles or as a shared area shaped by its users, serving as a site for both power consolidation and the emergence of political identities (Tunali, 2021). Thus, the attributes of public art are essential for forming the bond between the users and the space. Place attachment has been defined as a bond between an individual or group and a place, which can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place (Alirhayim, 2023). Place attachment theory posits that individuals develop emotional bonds with specific physical environments based on their experiences, memories, and interactions within those spaces (Purwanto and Harani, 2020; Inalhan, Yang, and Weber, 2021). This theory is crucial for understanding the role of public art in urban development, as it highlights how public art can transform physical spaces into essential elements of a community's identity (Gesare, 2024). It provides a lens to understand how individuals' emotional connections with their environments influence a sense of belonging, identity, community cohesion, and well-being (Jones & Walker, 2023). The theory suggests that people form strong connections to places with personal and communal significance, influencing their behaviour and attitudes towards those areas (Chinedu, 2024).

Attachment to place has been identified as a critical component that imparts meaning and identity to a place (Rutha and Abbas, 2021). Attachment is created as individuals interact with public art projects' social, economic and physical environment. Place attachment is a variable that expresses the meanings people assign to a specific place through their experiences with it. Place attachment theory is particularly relevant because public art projects often enhance urban spaces' symbolic and emotional value, fostering a deeper connection between residents and their environment (Chinedu, 2024). Public art engages people through creativity and beauty in urban spaces, challenging the dominant social order by fostering a more inclusive and dynamic public experience (Tunali, 2021). Public art can strengthen residents' attachment to their neighbourhoods by creating visually appealing and meaningful landmarks, encouraging them to actively preserve and improve their surroundings (Chinedu, 2024). Drawing on place attachment theory to promote public art initiatives in Nigeria can create emotionally resonant spaces that evoke positive feelings and memories among residents. Public art projects can strengthen social ties, encourage dialogue, and revitalize neglected neighbourhoods, enhancing urban livability and well-being.

The mural projects in major Nigerian cities like Lagos, Akwa, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Kano, Abeokuta, Kaduna, and Calabar, strongly illustrate this theoretic-

cal perspective. The incorporation of indigenous imagery, historical references, and culturally familiar symbols within the murals enhances emotional attachment between residents and their urban surroundings. By visually representing local experiences and identities, the murals reinforce feelings of pride, ownership, and cultural continuity among community members. Likewise, monumental public sculptures and memorial installations in Lagos contribute to place attachment by functioning as recognizable urban symbols connected to civic memory and collective identity. Sculptures commemorating political leaders, cultural figures, and historical events help residents establish emotional relationships with urban locations while reinforcing the historical consciousness of the city. Through the lens of place attachment theory, public art becomes an important mechanism for preserving cultural memory and strengthening people's emotional connections to urban spaces.

Placemaking Theory

Placemaking, the enhancement of neglected urban areas, has emerged as a versatile and dynamic approach to engage communities on various subjects, representing a relatively new intervention in urban development (Razi and Ziminski, 2022). According to Mohammed and Saad (2022), placemaking is an overarching concept, a hands-on approach, and a cumulative process that encourages users to reimagine and reinvent their public spaces, strengthening the bond between them and the places they share (place attachment). Public art is a global place-making tool for stimulating urban revitalization and enhancing social capital (Matthews and Gadaloff, 2022). Placemaking theory emphasizes the creation of inclusive, vibrant, and culturally rich public spaces that reflect the identity and aspirations of the community (Huh, 2024). Placemaking transforms underutilized spaces into lively, functional areas that promote social interaction, economic activity, and a sense of belonging. Placemaking theory recognizes the importance of community participation, stakeholder collaboration, and integrating art and culture into urban design (Cheung et al., 2021). Public art plays a crucial role in placemaking by activating public spaces, fostering emotional connections with the built environment, driving urban regeneration, and boosting social capital (Mathews and Gadaloff, 2022). By applying placemaking theory to public art initiatives, Nigeria can harness the transformative power of creativity and community engagement to revitalize urban areas and drive economic development. However, success hinges on sustained investment, collaborative governance, and meaningful participation from diverse stakeholders.

Contemporary Nigerian public art interventions provide numerous examples of placemaking practices. In Lagos, the Falomo Underbridge mural projects illustrate how public art can revitalize infrastructural spaces while improving public perception of urban environments (Osadare, 2017). Similarly, the mural interventions examined in Anambra State transformed visually monotonous urban corridors into culturally expressive environments that encourage public interaction and urban engagement. These projects demonstrate that public art can function as a low-cost but highly effective placemaking strategy capable of improving environmental aesthetics and increasing the symbolic value of urban spaces. The placemaking potential of public art is particularly relevant within Nigerian cities experiencing rapid urbanization, infrastructural pressure, and declining public space quality. Through creative interventions, artists and urban stakeholders are able to reimagine public environments in ways that promote cultural visibility, accessibility, and social inclusion.

Regulatory Theory

Regulatory theory explains why regulation arises, identifies the critical actors involved in its development, and outlines the typical patterns of interaction among these regulatory participants (Morgan and Yeung, 2007). According to Morgan and Yeung (2007), there are three basic categories of regulatory theories, including public interest, private interest, and institutionalist. Public interest theories suggest that legislators and other regulators are motivated by a desire to pursue common goals to enhance the community's general welfare. Private interest theories assume that regulation arises from the actions of individuals or groups driven by self-interest, and any promotion of the public interest is merely coincidental. Institutional theories emphasize the interdependence of state and non-state actors in pursuing both public benefit and private gain within regulatory regimes. Based on this, it becomes clear that people's interests in public art initiatives differ, and these interests drive their emotions toward compliance with the regulatory framework.

Applying this theory provides a comprehensive understanding of the regulatory landscape of public art initiatives by examining how public interest (community goals), private interest, and institutionalist dynamics influence them. According to Drahos and Krygier (2017), a significant issue for regulatory theory involves the causal role of emotions, mainly whether emotions are dependent on beliefs or contribute to forming those beliefs. However, whether implicit or explicit, the use of regulatory tools and strategies by regulators to influence the behaviour of those being regulated is typically based on the assumption of rationality rather than emotions (Drahos and Krygier, 2017). Therefore, responsive regulation theory suggests that regulators should first understand the context and motivations of those they regulate and then tailor their response accordingly (Drahos and Krygier, 2017). Based on this theory, safeguarding interest demands contributing to a robust regulatory network where law, civic virtue, and transparent, accountable defenders of public interests work together (Drahos and Krygier, 2017). In connection with this, stakeholders, including local or professional artists, urban planners, local residents, commercial entities, or any individual (s) advocating for a robust regulatory framework for public art in Nigeria, must ensure it prioritizes public interest over self-interest. Drawing from regulatory theory reveals that in Nigeria, there is a need to develop regulatory frameworks that offer incentives for private investment in public art, such as tax benefits or grants, to balance the interests of private stakeholders with public goals and ensure that projects benefit both the community and the private sector.

Advocating for a Public Art Sustainability Framework in Nigeria

Based on the findings from the literature review, case studies, and relevant theoretical perspectives, this study proposes the adoption of a Public Art Sustainability Framework in Nigeria. The framework is designed to enhance the effectiveness, relevance, and long-term viability of public art in urban environments by integrating social capital, cultural economics, place attachment, placemaking, and regulatory theories, anchoring on five interconnected pillars, including building social networks and community cohesion, unlocking the economic value of cultural assets, deepening emotional connections to place, designing interactive and inclusive public spaces, and ensuring robust policy and institutional support. It aims to position public art not only as an aesthetic intervention but also as a catalyst for community strengthening, cultural expression, economic development, and sustainable urban transformation. The proposed framework as presented in Figure 3.

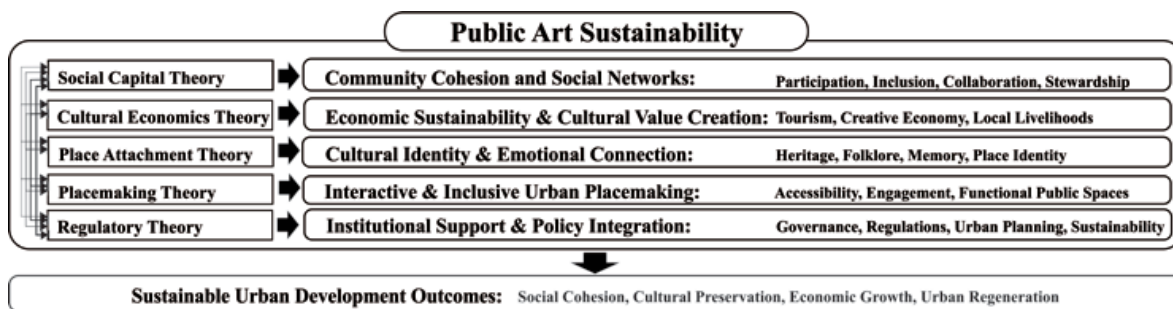


Figure 3. Proposed Public Art Sustainability Framework.

The practicality and applicability of the proposed framework are examined in the following discussion. This assessment focuses on how effectively the framework can be implemented within relevant contexts. It also considers the conditions necessary for its successful adoption and sustainability.

From the perspective of social capital theory, the framework emphasises the strengthening of community relationships, trust, and networks. For public art initiatives in Nigeria to be sustainable, local communities must be actively engaged in their conception, design, and implementation, thereby fostering ownership and shared responsibility. Public art can serve as a connective platform linking artists, residents, businesses, and non-governmental organisations, thereby encouraging collaboration and communal stewardship of public spaces. This can be achieved through inclusive participatory processes such as community forums, and design workshops where stakeholders jointly contribute ideas, resources, and cultural insights. Particular attention must be given to inclusivity by ensuring that marginalised groups, including women, youth, and ethnic minorities, are meaningfully represented in decision-making processes. Through such participatory and inclusive practices, public art becomes a shared social enterprise that strengthens civic trust, enhances social cohesion, and reinforces community bonds within Nigerian cities.

Drawing on cultural economics theory, public art is positioned not only as a cultural expression but also as an economic resource with significant developmental potential. Public art can stimulate local economies by attracting cultural tourism, enhancing place attractiveness, increasing property values, and supporting local enterprises and creative industries. To maximise these benefits, innovative and sustainable funding models are required, including public-private partnerships in which corporate organisations support installations in exchange for social value recognition, as well as crowdfunding mechanisms that broaden public participation in financing art projects. Public art initiatives should prioritise the involvement of local artisans, craftsmen, and artists, thereby strengthening creative livelihoods. When strategically implemented, such projects can contribute to the regeneration of neglected urban areas, transforming them into vibrant cultural and economic hubs.

Place attachment theory underscores the emotional and psychological bonds individuals develop with their environments. Within this framework, public art becomes a medium for strengthening identity, memory, and belonging when it reflects the lived experiences, histories, and cultural narratives of communities. In the Nigerian context, public art should be grounded in indigenous traditions, folklore, and histories, thereby fostering cultural pride and a stronger sense of place identity. Installations that reflect community stories, such

as murals created with local youth participation or sculptures inspired by neighbourhood heritage, can deepen emotional engagement with public spaces. Such artworks enhance residents' attachment to their environment, reinforcing both individual and communal belonging.

Placemaking theory highlights the importance of designing public spaces that encourage interaction, inclusivity, and active use. In Nigerian urban environments, public art can function as a transformative tool for converting underutilised or neglected spaces into vibrant communal destinations. Rather than serving solely decorative purposes, public art should be integrated into the functional design of public spaces to encourage engagement and social interaction. Examples include sculptures that double as seating, murals that invite community participation, or interactive installations that stimulate play and dialogue. When thoughtfully integrated into parks, squares, streetscapes, and civic spaces, public art contributes to creating safe, welcoming, and socially dynamic environments.

Regulatory theory emphasises the significance of strong institutional and policy frameworks in sustaining public art practice, implying that in Nigeria public art could be formally integrated into urban planning instruments such as state physical development plans and city master plans. This requires the establishment of clear regulatory guidelines mandating the inclusion of public art in major infrastructure and urban renewal projects, as well as frameworks that incentivise private sector investment in cultural infrastructure. This approach can further be strengthened by introducing mandatory public art quotas in major infrastructure and housing developments, alongside public-private partnership incentives that encourage developers (such as those involved in projects like Eko Atlantic-style waterfront regeneration schemes) to fund and maintain culturally relevant artworks as part of approved development permits.

The effective advancement of public art in Nigeria requires an integrated and multi-theoretical approach, as captured in the proposed Public Art Sustainability Framework. The proposed framework has a strong practical feasibility and adaptability in Nigeria provided that sustained institutional commitment, inclusive governance, and diversified funding mechanisms are effectively established to overcome existing implementation constraints and ensure long-term sustainability. Its adoption will support an inclusive development by integrating social, cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions towards enabling public art initiatives to simultaneously promote economic development, strengthen social cohesion, reinforce cultural identity, and enhance the livability of urban spaces in a coordinated manner. Public art that is community-driven, culturally grounded, economically sustainable, and institutionally supported will not only enhance the aesthetic quality of Nigerian cities but also contribute meaningfully to their long-term social and urban sustainability.

Practical Implications

Policymakers in Nigeria should reposition public art within existing urban development and infrastructure financing frameworks rather than treating it as a marginal cultural consideration in urban development. Given persistent fiscal constraints, competing sectoral priorities, and dependence on oil-linked revenue allocations, dedicated public art funding should be embedded within state and municipal capital budgets through a statutory earmark tied to urban renewal, transport infrastructure, and environmental beautification

projects. At the federal and state levels, this can be operationalised through an expanded culture or creative economy intervention window within agencies such as the Ministry of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, with implementation aligned to the Public Procurement Act and oversight from procurement authorities to ensure transparency in commissioning processes. To reduce vulnerability to annual budget volatility, legally structured Art Endowment Trust Funds should be established at state level, governed by independent boards comprising government, private sector, and professional bodies, with clear provisions allowing for corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions, diaspora philanthropy, and percentage-for-art deductions from qualifying public construction projects.

Public-private partnership models should move beyond ad-hoc sponsorships to binding concession-style agreements integrated into infrastructure delivery contracts. In practical terms, a percentage-for-art-in-public-works policy can be mandated for major developments such as bridges, airports, transport terminals, and housing estates executed through federal or state tenders, ensuring that a fixed proportion of capital expenditure is reserved for public art components. Corporate participation should be incentivised through targeted tax relief on verified cultural investments under existing tax legislation, while state investment promotion agencies can bundle public art into urban branding packages designed to attract tourism, hospitality investment, and real estate value uplift. However, enforcement must account for Nigeria's bureaucratic fragmentation and weak inter-agency coordination by assigning a single lead implementation unit at state level to avoid duplication, delays, and contractor capture.

Sustainability of public art in Nigeria also depends on institutional clarity and maintenance governance, which are currently weak points in public infrastructure management. Structured maintenance systems are essential to preserve the durability and relevance of public art within evolving urban landscapes. Dedicated Public Art Units should be established within state ministries of works, environment, or culture, with legal mandates covering commissioning, maintenance scheduling, deaccessioning protocols, and vandalism response. Maintenance obligations should be contractually embedded into initial commissioning agreements, with lifecycle costing included in project approval under Bureau of Public Procurement guidelines to prevent abandonment after installation.

Dedicated public art agencies or commissions should be established to oversee commissioning processes, funding allocation, project implementation, and long-term maintenance. Such institutions would ensure alignment with urban development goals while safeguarding the artistic, cultural, and functional integrity of installations. Community participation mechanisms should be formalised through ward-based cultural committees linked to local government structures, ensuring that consultation is not symbolic but tied to approval milestones and siting decisions. Continuous monitoring should be institutionalised through simple but enforceable performance indicators, such as usage, condition rating, and community satisfaction surveys, reported annually to state assemblies to improve accountability.

Policy effectiveness will depend on aligning public art governance with Nigeria's realities of institutional overlap, informal urban economies, and uneven enforcement capacity. Regulatory frameworks should prioritise clarity over complexity by consolidating approval

authority, reducing multi-layered permitting bottlenecks, and integrating public art planning into urban master plans at the design stage rather than retrofitting. Capacity building for local artists, planners, and municipal officials should be linked to existing tertiary institutions and professional bodies to ensure technical continuity. In this way, public art becomes not a discretionary aesthetic intervention, but a regulated, finance-linked, and maintenance-conscious component of Nigeria's urban development system with measurable cultural and economic returns.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by its reliance primarily on secondary sources. The study provides a predominantly theoretical and observatory understanding of public art sustainability without extensive empirical evidence derived directly from key stakeholders, such as artists, policymakers, urban planners, private developers, and community residents involved in public art initiatives within Nigerian cities. Future research should incorporate ethnographic methods and field-based investigations to provide deeper empirical insights into public art practices and experiences within Nigerian cities.

Conclusion

The study found that public art possesses significant potential to support urban revitalisation in Nigeria through its contributions to cultural identity, social cohesion, and economic development. Despite these benefits, the sustainability of public art initiatives in Nigeria remains constrained by institutional weaknesses, inadequate funding structures, and limited policy integration within urban development systems. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated governance frameworks, sustainable financing mechanisms, and stronger integration of public art into spatial planning and urban policy. Drawing on social capital, cultural economics, place attachment, placemaking, and regulatory theories, the study establishes that sustainable public art practice depends on participatory engagement, cultural relevance, inclusive spatial design, and effective institutional support. The proposed Public Art Sustainability Framework therefore provides an integrated approach that combines social, cultural, economic, spatial, and institutional dimensions to position public art as a strategic instrument for sustainable urban development in Nigeria. Its implementation can contribute to more inclusive, culturally vibrant, and economically productive urban environments. The study further highlights the need for collaborative partnerships among governments, artists, urban planners, private developers, cultural institutions, and community groups in advancing sustainable public art practice in Nigeria.

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