

## Article

# Community Engagement via Mural Art to Foster a Sustainable Urban Environment

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**Abstract:** Community is a key element in a sustainable urban environment and possesses a capacity to become a major contributor in the development of it. Therefore, it is essential for communities to be active and engaged. The concept of a community and its engagement via mural art is addressed in this article. The aim of the research is to investigate the impact of mural art on community engagement and the contribution of communities to a sustainable urban environment. The research was based on materials obtained during the implementation of the “Murals for Communities” project. The aim of the project was to address the issues of community engagement in three cities with social disconnection: Waterford (Ireland), Heerlen (the Netherlands), and Kaunas (Lithuania). The engagement of the communities through mural art creation was initiated through community engagement workshops where the communities were encouraged to participate in collaborative actions resulting in the improvement of the urban environment and the strengthening of the communities themselves. In total, 54 community engagement workshops were organized and 18 murals were created in the three partner cities. The entire process of community engagement was a well-coordinated and structured framework of actors and events, where each of them played a significant role. The results of the research revealed that community engagement workshops were used as a successful tool for community bonding and strengthening. Hence, mural art is a successful tool for sustainable community development, and the process of mural creation with its various stages enables community members to be active participants of social interaction and developers of both a sustainable community and a sustainable urban environment.

**Keywords:** capacity building; community engagement; murals; social disconnection; sustainable community



**Citation:** Petronienė, S.; Juzelėnienė, S. Community Engagement via Mural Art to Foster a Sustainable Urban Environment. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 10063. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141610063>

Academic Editor: Wann-Ming Wey

Received: 28 June 2022

Accepted: 11 August 2022

Published: 14 August 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural representation [1,2], identity creation [3], community murals, impact on communities [4,5], community reconnection [6], and identity negotiation [2]: these are all related to murals and their meanings, what they represent, how they are perceived, and how they are created, developed, and sustained in various communities. The process of the creation of a mural, when it is implemented with the involvement of the community of the residence, is complex and multifaceted. It is not only very much related to the artist himself/herself, but also to the relationship between the artist and the community, the community itself, and the cultural and historical heritage of the site. The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of mural art on community engagement and how the community fostered the sustainable urban environment. The research was based on the project Murals for Communities implemented under the EU Creative Europe program in 2019–2020 in three European cities: Kaunas (Lithuania), Waterford (Ireland) and Heerlen (the Netherlands). Since the three cities all faced issues of social disconnection, the mural art form was selected as a tool for building community engagement. Working with the artistic know-how of an international team of mural artists, the main objective of the project was to build community engagement through the creation of mural art works.

Therefore, the research investigated the factors that play a major role in the community engagement process, as well as the impact of mural art creation on the development of a sustainable urban environment. Mural art as a visual art form that is directly applied to a wall or a surface in public spaces has developed as a niche within street art, an art form that is created traditionally by an unsanctioned creative process, and which uses its spatial surroundings as an incubator. Due to its interconnectedness with public spaces, this particular art form is able to react quickly to its social and spatial surroundings and convey its messages. Mural art is the visual representation of street art. Applied by skilled artists, it typically involves various painting, spraying, and drawing techniques, which often stem from graffiti art forms.

The creation and impact of murals is widely acknowledged and researched through various aspects and across cultures emphasizing cultural [2,7,8], political [9–12], and social [13,14], as well as economic [15] factors. However, despite all the positive aspects, great challenges are also identified in creating murals, as they can often ignite conflicts among all stakeholders such as policy makers, artists, communities, and owners [16]. Since the issue is addressed diversely, it is interesting to explore and analyze it from a number of perspectives.

The goal of the project “Murals for Communities” was to capture the social and cultural expressions of local communities through murals, using the art form’s high potential to convey messages that are part of a mural’s surroundings. By doing so, the murals express a local intangible cultural heritage (e.g., local histories of communities, social practices and representations, and situational factors, as well as community-based feelings) of communities within an art work that they have actively participated in the creation of by providing their social, cultural, and situational inputs. Artists used these inputs and translated them into murals—visual representations of community heritage, skillfully created by painting and drawing techniques to produce works of art with a message that connects communities more closely.

Urban areas that experienced a decline in economic or social development were left to face the issues of the “shrinking city phenomenon” [17], which among others included such aspects as industrial regression, unemployment, out-migration, and decreased birth rate, and left the cities to deal with abandoned houses, offices, industrial structures, etc. The impact of this decline was observed in Europe in numerous post-socialist cities and metropolitan areas, as well as cities with relocated industry [17]. In Australia, it was observed in mining cities, and waterfront and harbor areas, while in Latin America the decline was impacted by socio-economic inequality. Moreover, in the United States of America, the decline occurred because of regional development, urban planning, and the loss of population. Furthermore, mining communities both in North America and in Canada (alongside hinterland areas undergoing globalization in Canada) were affected by a similar decline [17].

The phenomenon of shrinking cities has a very strong social aspect related to it, and one of key variables of this is the concept of community. There are several definitions of community, and an analysis of 90 of them [18] identified that there was one common element in them, i.e., people. Apart from that, notions such as geographic area, common ties, and social interactions were the most frequent variables in the definitions of community. The ambiguity of the definition is related to the diversity in classical and contemporary manifestations of community [19]: the classical mainly being related to geographical location, social interaction, and shared ties; the contemporary includes more abstract associations, i.e., scientific community, gay community, etc. [19], which help to match such phenomena as virtual community as well. The definition and the question of community can be regarded in relation to different aspects: geographical proximity, common social and/or institutional affiliation, common identity, and common beliefs and practices [20]. However, at the center of the concept of community is the idea of belonging.

The categorization of communities is also diverse and can be based on various criteria: interaction and communication with internal or external actors (closed/open communi-

ties), contact or distant communication (real/virtual communities), formal or informal recognition (formal/informal communities), etc. [20]. Furthermore, communities can be distinguished by a very general understanding: by territory and by interest. With regard to territory-related communities, the issue of well-being of community members is key [20] and they are encouraged to actively participate in the creation of that well-being to create a sustainable urban environment.

In the case of this research, the definition of community is defined as a group of people who are united by the place of their residence: a country, an area, a city, a street, etc. When this place of residence is impacted by unfavorable social and/or economic conditions and factors, the local community itself is impacted as well. The change in relationship of the members of the community is observed as a result of that impact: the lack of communication, the loss of the sense of communality and meaningful relationships, the need for care of the neighborhood, etc.

In relation to the care of the neighborhood, the notion of a sustainable city or a sustainable urban environment emerges. The definition and understanding of the notion of a sustainable city, or sustainable urban environment, even though a rather popular concept, is still under discussion [21]. It is considered that sustainable city development can be achieved only by posing and implementing various policies (i.e., “urban rehabilitation, urban land use, urban transport systems, urban energy management, urban architecture and conservation policy, and urban cultural policy” [21] (p. 295). The complex sustainability policies are defined by Finco and Nijkamp [21] and the focus, according to them, is on the need to ensure economic, social, and ecological sustainability now in the short term, as well as in the long term. Successfully implemented policies not only attract new investments, but also contribute to employment, i.e., increased quality of life. However, there are three key determinants impacting the implementation of these policies: “institutional factors (management and organization of the urban energy sector, public–private modes of cooperation, etc.); attitudes and behaviour of citizens (lifestyles, mobility patterns, environmental awareness etc.); urban structure and morphology (population density, urban form, transportation networks, etc.)” [21] (pp. 295–296). Thus, attitudes and behavior of citizens, i.e., communities, play an important role in the creation and fostering of a sustainable urban environment.

Therefore, when the sustainability of the city and sustainable relationships are discussed, the concept of an ideal community comes to mind, one where the members of such a community share common goals and have common means of reaching these goals [22]. In defining community, the six elements are: common goals; means of intercommunication; mechanisms of engagement and information distribution; the genre of communication; the lexis of communication; and relevance to the community [22]. In the case of groups of people united by the area of residence, not all the elements are applicable or of equal importance.

Another aspect relevant to a sustainable urban environment is the importance of a sustainable community. A sustainable community is defined as “a community that uses its resources to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations. A sustainable community seeks a better quality of life for all its residents while maintaining nature’s ability to function over time by minimizing waste, preventing pollution, promoting efficiency and developing local resources to revitalize the local economy. Decision-making in a sustainable community stems from a rich civic life and shared information among community members. A sustainable community resembles a living system in which human, natural and economic elements are interdependent and draw strength from each other” [23] (p. 99).

The issue of a sustainable community is addressed by numerous researchers and in different fields of research. While some emphasize sharing and commitment as the fundamental aspect of a sustainable community, others indicate geographical location, human scale, belonging, obligation, and social relations [19]. Sustainability is within the scope of investigation and is positioned in terms of three aspects: the economy, the environment,

and society [24]. According to Turvey [24], to maintain a sustainable community, it is important to create favorable conditions in the sense of spatial urban areas, economic growth, environmental friendliness, cultural environment, and social relations. Moreover, to construct and/or regenerate a sustainable community, it is vital to create an environment with various community resources, public art included [25]. Art, when exhibited in public spaces, not only engages community members into communication but also contributes to the uniqueness of the urban environment. Therefore, it can be claimed that an active and engaged local community is a major contributor to the development of a sustainable urban environment.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Many cities in Europe, similar to the Murals for Communities project partners Waterford, Heerlen, and Kaunas, share issues of deprivation related to the social disconnection of communities, (e.g., as a result of unemployment and immigration). A large number of EU cities also face issues related to migrant communities living in relative social isolation and disconnection. These issues remain a continuous or worsening problem (e.g., as the result of events such as the migrant crisis of 2015). Many cities seek actions to combat these issues of community disconnection, and work toward injecting new life into depressed neighborhoods, and to reconnect with disconnected community groups. Murals for Communities focused on how mural art, as an increasingly popular form of street art, could aid the development of community engagement through the co-creation of mural works by artists and local communities. However, as mural art usually develops outside the context of traditional art and cultural infrastructures and is usually associated with unsanctioned art forms such as graffiti art, its potential to aid community building is usually undervalued or used in a fragmented manner. By cooperating on a European level, the project was able to synthesize approaches to using murals as a means to increase community engagement through learning from, and addressing the project partners' local artistic, cultural, and social contexts. Consequently, the project was able to transcend and improve actions carried out at local and regional levels. Such actions addressed disconnected communities, and provided transferable models of the mural art form, allowing it to be available for use as a tool by a wide range of European cities facing similar issues related to social disconnection of its communities. In doing so, the project was able to underline the European socio-cultural position of the mural art form as a tool for community engagement.

Waterford (Ireland) was in decline since the crisis of 2008 and, thus, faced challenges related to social disconnection, high migration rates, and poor representation of its buildings. As an established facilitator of its vibrant street arts culture, it was able to make use of the city's bare walls and surfaces and their potential for cultural participation. Waterford City and County Council (WCCC) worked with other partners in the project. The WCCC is the strategic owner of Waterford Walls (WW), which, before the project began, had created 25 murals using community involvement formats and renowned street artist groups. Moreover, Waterford Walls was the organizer of a yearly Mural Festival and regularly experimented with residency programs for the mural arts with joint workshops for artists and local communities.

Heerlen (the Netherlands) was a city in decline, and one that faced issues of social disconnection among its communities before the project started, with the municipality nominating arts and culture to be a key tool to bind its communities. Thus, mural art was used as an important catalyst for social and urban redevelopment. The Street Art Foundation (SAF), established in 2013 and financially supported by the municipality, was the main organizer of mural art activities in the city. The city's main goal was to create murals and nourish co-creation and co-ownership between local communities, public institutions, and experienced artists, all of which would add to the rejuvenation of Heerlen. Before the project began, a total of 67 murals had been made, reflecting on the local context of people and districts by internationally renowned artists. In addition, the foundation

established collaborations between mural artists and businesses (e.g., housing corporations), adding to the self-efficacy possibilities of artists and the art form in general.

Kaunas (Lithuania) was a city facing issues related to the deprivation of its communities; thus, the project of mural art was used as a tool for community engagement, the target of which was to establish a better mural art climate in the city. Community engagement activities were coordinated by the Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities (KTU) in cooperation with Innovative Creative Projects (ICP). KTU, as an important actor in the field of academic research on inter-cultural communication linked to cultural expression forms, has engaged in numerous projects that interlinked arts and science. Moreover, before the project began, KTU had facilitated the creation of murals at its campus site and ICP had managed the Small Walls project and artistically developed a mural festival. ICP aimed to incorporate methods of social regeneration via mural art and to inject new life into neglected areas of the city, enabling a closer community engagement.

The partner organizations were located in three non-bordering countries—Ireland, the Netherlands, and Lithuania—and cover a wide European area, ranging across north-western, western to eastern parts of the EU. Moreover, the partners' countries are spread over three distinct geographical regions, respectively the Atlantic archipelago, the Benelux, and the Baltics, which all represent highly differing areas in terms of their economic and political position, their cultural history, heritage, and language, as well as their societal structuring. The criteria described above were the indicators for these particular countries and cities to be involved in the partnership.

The project's rationale for implementation was based on a logic consisting of three layers that define the type and timing of the activities. The three programs in the Murals for Communities project form a package of interrelated tools aimed at transnational mobility and an increase in the artistic and professional skills of mural artists, the creation of murals, and community engagement of mural artists. The two project levels—the Transnational Knowledge Exchange Level (TKEL) and the Doing and Learning Level (DLL)—defined a distinction between (a) activities related to the joint transnational preparation and evaluation of the three Murals for Communities programs (TKEL) and (b) the actual implementation of mural activities at each partner level (DLL). The two levels also ensured the proper implementation of the project's research-based process. The preparation and the intermediary review phases offered the possibility for project partners to effectively engage in the knowledge sharing and transfer process of the TKEL. As all partners jointly prepared, evaluated, and built upon each other's experiences at this level, they were able to better implement and improve activities during further project phases that were linked to the DLL.

Although the project implemented different but connected programs (the Community-Based Artist-in-Residency program, the Community Engagement program and the Innovative Capacity-Building for the Mural Arts program), the focus of the research was community engagement through the creation of mural art and the impact of community binding to the development of a sustainable urban environment. The level of community engagement was evaluated through the level of participation in community engagement workshops, the feedback on the mural creation process, and the final result in the form of a discussion between the community members and the artists implementing the murals. Consequently, the higher the level of community engagement achieved, the higher the impact on the development of a sustainable urban environment.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Community Engagement Process

The results of the research were based on the following deliverables of the project: the creation of 18 mural art works (six per partner city) by traveling mural artists and local artists who, guided by local mural mentor artists, co-created these works with local communities in the partner cities. The co-creation of murals was implemented through 54

community engagement workshops in three cities during 2019–2020 (for detailed information, refer to Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the three project partners involved in the Murals for Communities activities.

No.	Characteristics	Site of Engagement		
		Kaunas	Waterford	Heerlen
1	Participating mentors	1	1	1
2	Participating artists	6	6	6
3	Supporting artists	2	2	2
4	Local communities for engagement	6	6	6
5	Wall owners	6	6	6
6	Local business involved	6	7	4
7	Community engagement workshops	18	18	18
8	Murals created	6	6	6

Key characteristics are indicated in Table 1 and it is clear that they represent the same criteria for the implementation of the project. Each partner targeted the same number of communities, organized the same number of community engagement workshops, created the same number of murals, and the same number of artists and mentors participated in the implementation of the project. The only variable that differed was the number of businesses involved in the workshops. In many cases, this was dependent upon the possibilities to attract local businesses to the project with the aim of financially supporting the artists. The number of community members is not indicated in this table as it varied depending not only on the city, but also on each community engagement workshop.

Following a community engagement methodology, mural implementation included several phases: pre-implementation, implementation, and post-implementation. The pre-implementation phase included targeting the urban location and the community, artists meeting with community members to initiate the process of “learning about the community and the site”, and workshops with the communities, during which ideas on the mural art were generated. To approach the communities, its leaders were first identified and then contacted. Different communities were targeted in the three cities: Kaunas communities were defined by the area of their residence; Waterford communities represented ethnic groups and members of certain social environments (residents of social houses); and Heerlen communities were gathered from their education institutions, i.e., the students of certain schools. To call for a successful dialog and discussion in the form of a workshop, each artist tailored the preparation of the meeting on the specifics of the community.

During the community engagement workshop, the artist and community got acquainted with each other, as well as with the cultural, social, and historical environment of the location. In unison, the community reflected on itself, its place of residence, its cultural and historical heritage, background, environment, and interests. During the follow-up workshop, the artist presented to the community a conceptualized sketch of the mural (i.e., a very detailed and precise draft of the planned mural). Community members acquainted themselves with the sketch and were expected to participate in the discussion with the artist to approve the sketch. After approval of the sketch, the implementation phase started and the mural was created on the chosen site. The post-implementation phase included dissemination workshops during which local and business communities provided feedback on the mural. The communities were provided with opportunities to bond and strengthen their relationship throughout the process of mural initiation and implementation. This three-phase process targeted communities to achieve further sustainability, though this was dependent upon the strength of the community and the specifics of it. Some communities did not consider themselves as communities before this initiative; other communities were related to their ethnicity or to their field and place of education. The communities targeted in the project were diverse and engaged on different levels; thus, different engagement results were achieved with different communities. The level of engagement was measured statistically by evaluating the initial number of community members participating in the



first, second, and third (final) workshops and also on the feedback from community members in the form of a discussion. Table 2 considers all data representing the three phases of the program implementation, and the participants of 18 different communities in all three cities (six per country and coded with a number) during three levels of implementation.

**Table 2.** Participants of community engagement workshops.

No.	Site of Engagement	Communities	1st Community Engagement Workshop (Pre-Implementation Phase)	2nd Community Engagement Workshop (Implementation Phase)	3rd Community Engagement Workshop (Post-Implementation Phase)
1	Kaunas communities	1st	26	21	34
2		2nd	31	16	36
3		3rd	32	20	33
4		4th	18	15	21
5		5th	35	24	36
6		6th	36	15	39
7	Waterford communities	1st	5	4	5
8		2nd	7	6	7
9		3rd	9	7	10
10		4th	7	7	7
11		5th	8	5	9
12		6th	9	8	8
13	Heerlen communities	1st	8	8	8
14		2nd	9	9	9
15		3rd	7	7	7
16		4th	7	5	7
17		5th	8	6	8
18		6th	6	6	6

As presented in the table above, the number of community members involved in the community engagement program varied. The biggest number of community members was observed in the communities of Kaunas, which were related to their place of residence. The levels of engagement were measured by the attendance of the participants during the three phases of implementation of the program: the higher the number of participants, the higher the level of community engagement. The tendency of lower engagement is observed during the implementation phase (consider the decreased number of participants in the second workshop, Table 2, lines No 1–9, 11–12, 16–17); however, the levels of engagement increased (Table 2, lines 1–6, 9, 11) or reached the pre-implementation phase level (Table 2, lines 7, 8, 10, 13–18) during the post-implementation phase (the number of participants in the third workshop, Table 2); and one of the communities was less active during the post-implementation phase (Table 2, line 12). The decreased community engagement level during the second workshop could be explained by the specifics of the mural creation process, which lasted several days on each site (although communities were aware of the possibility to visit the site and to observe the process of mural painting). The increased level of engagement during the post-implementation phase could be explained by the specifics of the workshop during which the community provided feedback on the whole process and also celebrated the final result of the created mural and its public opening. The overall feedback on the community engagement program, expressed through the form of discussion, was wholly positive in all three cities and all 18 communities.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the process of community engagement via mural art was successfully implemented. Moreover, the workshops for business involvement added to the self-efficacy processes of the art form. The project led to the creation of a handbook and project partner action plans. Aided by transnational knowledge exchange meetings, these concretized the project into a program transferable to other EU cities.

The activities of the Murals for Communities project addressed two primary and four secondary target groups and followed the main objectives of the project. The first primary target groups were economically and/or culturally disadvantaged communities in need of better social integration. These target groups were reached via the community engagement program (targeted communication activities, community engagement workshops, and

community events). The second primary target groups were mural artists in need of new ways to develop their art, to interlink with their social surroundings, and to increase their self-efficacy. This group was reached through the community-based artist-in-residency program, the community engagement workshops, and the workshops for business involvement. The four secondary target groups involved were: audiences—who sought to learn more about the artistic possibilities of mural arts; decision makers, cultural, and civil organizations—who sought to address issues related to social disconnection and to expand the forms of cultural expression used for the benefit of local societies; businesses and wall owners—all needing new methods to build business identity and attract new customers; and academic life and art academies—who sought to increase knowledge on methods by which art murals and communities could interact with each other.

These mural creation activities led to a short-term impact for mural artists (participating in the residency program) and the targeted local communities. The mural artists increased their transnational mobility and artistic and professional skills on techniques to develop their art making, interlink with their social surroundings, and increase their self-efficacy. Local communities benefited from an increased community cohesion and engagement, resulting in a higher level of sustainability. Moreover, public awareness of disadvantaged communities was raised, as was the artistic results of all co-creation activities. The action plan and the community engagement handbook created a transferable program package consisting of an implementation methodology, scenarios for financing, and activities capable of strengthening social cohesion using mural arts. The package on the use of mural arts as a tool for community engagement led to an increased awareness by decision makers, cultural and civil organizations, as well as academic life. Thus, in the medium term, the project could become a source for inspiration for other cities keen to address issues related to social disconnection using artistic and cultural methods. The long-term impact of the project was framed by the transfer and implementation of the above program package in the context of other EU cities. This in turn led to increasing the work possibilities of mural artists and the positive perception of the art form, and to ultimately to becoming a widely accepted tool for the fight against social disconnection in cities/districts.

### 3.2. *The Partners and Their Roles in the Project*

The partnership shared the commonality of (a) being an actor in a city facing issues related to social disconnection of communities, (b) being an actor in a city that went through a process of social and economic transformation, (c) seeing mural art as a major tool to increase social cohesion through cultural participation, (d) being an actor in a city that was a considerable breeding ground for mural artists, (e) being well-capable of artistically facilitating mural artists in their creation process, and (f) agreeing on the need to strengthen the position of mural arts and artists in Europe, based on a high potential to connect with similarly afflicted communities dealing with social disconnection. Based on these commonalities, all three partners were active as formalizers of methods that stimulate community engagement through mural arts. All partners were positioned in different parts of the artistic and professional value chains needed to create, implement, and benefit from these methods. Each partner brought in a specialized set of management related skills and artistic experiences: WCCC (Waterford, Ireland) as a strategic partner of the artistically active WW in the facilitation process of community engagement through mural arts; KTU (Kaunas, Lithuania) as an active partner in interdisciplinary research in the fields of culture and (social) science, and in collaboration with the artistically active ICP; and SAF (Heerlen, The Netherlands) as an initiator of innovative programs that interconnect mural artists with communities and methods to build self-efficacy of the art form. By joining efforts, they managed to build synergies to effectively cooperate in all activities and strategies and reach the project objectives.

Although the partners shared these commonalities, the social disconnection process took place because of differing urban, societal, and cultural reasons, and in relationship to



specific geographic locations: Waterford's issues with social disconnection mostly related to the economic difficulties of Ireland resulting from the crisis in 2008; Heerlen's social issues related to the collapse of its mining industries over the second half of the 20th century; and Kaunas' issues of social disconnection resulted from the city's struggle to regain economic, social, and urban renewal momentum after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Consequently, the project was able to draw from differing social inputs, resulting in differing methods to engage with communities, as well as differing artistic traditions related to the mural creation process that were especially highlighted by the art form's sensitiveness to the cultural, urban, and social environments in which the works were created.

WCCC (Ireland), as an important actor of Waterford City and County, ensures the common welfare and interests of the city and provides public services for the benefit of its population. Thus, it considers the development of a strong cultural climate as fundamental to increasing the general sense of well-being, and the presence of an established cultural-creative industry as a key economic driver in Waterford City and County. For this reason, WCCC was the lead partner of the Murals for Communities project and was responsible for the overall financial and operational management of the project. It also managed the provision of amenities, facilities, and services related to cultural and artistic activities, as well as those that help to enhance the quality of life and well-being of communities. WW coordinated the artistic and thematic lead in the Murals for Communities' participation and connected the activities of the project programs to the Waterford Walls Festival. WCCC and WW jointly coordinated the community-based artist-in-residency program.

SAF (the Netherlands), as a contributor to the activities that relate directly and/or indirectly to street art and culture, the quality of public spaces in the city, the cultural climate in Heerlen, and the development of a positive image for the city of Heerlen, stimulates artists who take exceptional artistic paths in art creation within public spaces and have a value-added role in the development of the street arts genres. The foundation focuses on the development of street art in general and mural arts in particular, and also uses the potential of mural arts to give a positive stimulus to bare and abandoned public spaces and to add to a better social climate within the city. SAF builds upon the potential of skilled mural artists who are well-capable of using their artistic creativity to capture the heritage, culture, and feelings of communities and express these in mural works. Thus, SAF coordinated and created a methodology for the Innovative Capacity-Building for the Mural Arts program, as well as implemented it into its festival activities. It also hosted a knowledge exchange meeting and facilitated the creation of murals during the project.

KTU (Lithuania) is a contributor to the academic field, as well as to the development of society and culture by the means of research, knowledge, innovation, and technology. Thus, KTU coordinated and created a methodology for the community engagement program, focusing on tools to effectively engage with community groups, to collect data, and to provide possibilities for (transnational) evaluation activities. KTU's role was defined by its high-value experiences in the development of research-based and interdisciplinary projects that link scientific approaches and artistic projects. ICP, as associate partner, linked the Murals for Communities programs to its Small Walls project and provided a Kaunas-based testing ground for mural creation and communication activities.

### *3.3. Programmes of the Project*

The project implemented three interlinked Mural for Communities programs: the Community-Based Artist-in-Residency program, the Community Engagement program, and the Innovative Capacity-Building for the Mural Arts program. Community engagement was the main thematic focus of the project and the focus of its core program. The program acted as a vehicle for community involvement in city districts that face issues of social disconnection and that interconnect communities with and through mural arts. Using research-based methods framed by the community engagement program, the program thus contributed to the creation of a sustainable community, as well as to a sustainable urban environment. The artist-in-residency program increased transnational mobility through

the establishment of transnational mural artist groups (TMAGs) that co-created murals in all three cities. The community-based artist-in-residency program stimulated capacity building through mentoring activities by the Local Mentoring Mural Artists (LMMA), who acted as a bridge between local communities/local artists and the TMAGs. The workshops of both the community engagement and innovative capacity-building programs ensured interaction and learning possibilities between mural artists, community representatives, and local businesses, respectively, building both artistic and business-minded capacities of mural artists. Capacity building was also ensured by the transnational knowledge exchange processes that lead to the continuous and joint improvement of the project's methods and actions.

The project took place on two levels: the Transnational Knowledge Exchange Level (TKEL), and the Doing and Learning Level (DLL). The TKEL defined the common vision setting and exchange of experiences, as well as preparatory and evaluation activities by all project partners for the Murals for Communities programs. The TKEL enabled the international team to create and to agree upon the three different but related programs and the implementation procedures for them. The TKEL also provided the possibility to jointly develop the community and self-efficacy building activities—both underlined by a research-based approach. The DLL focused on the actual implementation of the created Murals for Communities programs. Thus, the project focused on the implementation of mural activities, as well as on (research-based) activities to prepare and evaluate this process to address the overall priorities of the project in a multi-faceted and sound manner.

Within this framework, the community-based artist-in-residency program provided an innovative approach to the artist-in-residency program format and was a fundamental part of the project's implementation, preparation, and evaluation process. It transcended the mere possibility for artists to learn, work, and increase their mobility. All communities, with their diverse cultural, historical, social, and ethnic backgrounds, provided the possibility for artists and mentors to apply their knowledge and experience to work and cooperate in diverse environments and engage different types of communities. The Community Engagement and Innovative Capacity for the Murals Arts programs added a multidimensional layer to the artist-in-residency program. The focus on co-creation of murals by communities and artists, improving community engagement and the exchange of artistic and professional skills through co-creation and mentoring, all came together to create measurable and research-based results that could be well-documented.

#### 4. Discussion

The Murals for Communities project was ensured by the project's research-based approach defined by a research-based methodology for community engagement. The methodology set standards for the collection of qualitative sociological indicators such as feelings and opinions related to the murals, along with interaction models for the community engagement workshops. It described the methods to collect, document, and evaluate qualitative data and results (e.g., video recordings and standards for analysis) and quantitative figures (e.g., community representation numbers).

Dissemination to wider circles ensured that the project's results (e.g., murals created, interaction processes through workshops, and the effects of murals on communities) as well as the project's program package and methodology were delivered to a wider group of local, regional, national, EU, and program-level decision makers and stakeholders. The creation of a handbook for community engagement through mural creation ensured that all of the project's results were collected, documented, and shared in an easily accessible format.

The project sought to evoke a substantial change in thinking on the potential of mural arts, as well as to create a model that could be easily transferable to other EU cities. Moreover, the action plans drafted by each partner (aimed at local city-level decision makers, cultural professionals, and mural artists), also included methods and strategies to continue the mural creation activities, with a specific focus on community engagement and the continuous development of their sustainability.

The initiatives of the project enabled different communities to foster their cultures and to become responsible owners of their areas of residence (in the case of Kaunas), i.e., a city, a specific area within a city, a street or a specific building, which actively shared their cultural and historical heritages. On the other hand, the cases of Waterford and Heerlen revealed that the place of residence did not have much influence, and the idea of the community became of the highest importance. The project enabled the communities to raise awareness about their existence in specific urban areas. It is expected that the engagement of communities empowered them not only to bond but also to solve issues and challenges ensuring that the results of their actions positively impact on their current environment and on future generations. The ultimate aim of engaged and, hence, sustainable communities is a better quality of life and participation in decision making—especially to the development of a sustainable urban environment. Newly opened communication channels among community members are expected to help creatively solve infrastructural, social, and cultural challenges now and in the future.

It can be stated that an active and engaged community is more involved in collaborative actions that lead to the improvement and well-being of its members, as well as to the well-being of the city; thus, it can be considered as an important part of a sustainable urban environment. The process of mural creation can be considered a positive intervention both in the community and in the city. Community engagement impacts not only communities, but it also helps to reduce the level of social disconnection and contributes to the creation of a more attractive and positive atmosphere of the site and, consequently, the city itself. Murals as a publicly accessible form of art attract visitors, local and international tourists, and possible business investments, and thus creates a more economically stable environment, enhancing the value of the city in the process. The contribution of engaged communities to the development of a sustainable urban environment is evident and valuable.

However, the limitations of the project are that it is not definite if the results of the project are not used by other parties. Moreover, the level of community engagement could be identified by more specific and detailed focus group interviews and individual interviews, and the long-term impact of sustainable communities could be measured with follow-up research. In addition, future research could focus on the ultimate impact of community engagement activities on specific communities, and on changes the communities might overcome in a longer-term perspective with respect to a sustainable urban environment.

## 5. Conclusions

The implementation of mural art is a multilayered process that includes not only pre-planned and coordinated activities, such as the organization of community engagement workshops and artist-in-residency programs, but also various actors, such as professional artists, mentors (preferably with experience working with communities), wall owners, local businesses, and communities. During the pre-implementation phase, it is important for the artist to get acquainted with the local area and the community. For the dialog with a community to be productive and successful, the artist initiates a workshop relevant to the specifics of the community and the local area. After a sketch for a mural is produced, further initiatives of this phase can be challenging, especially if the sketch is not accepted or fully approved by the community. Therefore, the ability of the artist to flexibly adjust to the specifics, the needs, and the visions of the community is of key importance. The role of the community leader, as an active mediator between the community and the artist, is of significant importance as well. The phase of implementation plays an important role in the process of community bonding, since the process of mural art creation lasts several days and the community members are able to visit the site and, thus, to communicate not only with the artist, but with other community members as well. The process also enables the community members to become active both in short-term and in long-term perspectives, as they consider themselves contributors to the mural and, thus, to the development of the urban environment. The post-implementation phase can be regarded as a reflection of the

results of the entire process since artists, wall owners, communities, and local businesses gather to celebrate the opening of the mural as a part of urban development. Therefore, the three-phase process assures that the initiation of community engagement is followed by community bonding through the creation of a mural, which consequently becomes a part of urban environment. The impact the communities have on the creation of the mural is acknowledged by the communities and the artists, and this awareness of the ability to be an active actor in the development of a sustainable urban environment both from the perspective of the creation of the mural and from the possibility to contribute to the sustainability of the community, enables individual community members to proceed in the direction initiated by the creation of the mural art. Hence, the creation of murals initiated the revival of areas and communities in Kaunas, Waterford, and Heerlen. Project results reveal that mural art can be used as a tool to ignite community engagement, as well as to reduce social disconnection and, therefore, to contribute to the development of a sustainable urban environment. Community engagement workshops are a successful tool for community binding and consequently for community building. As a result of collaborative work between artists and the communities, the created murals provide a long-term product that impacts not only the community but also the urban environment and, as such, can be regarded as a social code for community representation.

**Author Contributions:** This article was conceived, written, and revised by both authors, S.P. and S.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors appreciate the involvement and the contribution of the partners and participants of the “Murals for Communities” project.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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