

Analyzing the Impact of Local and International Artists in Creating Cultural Identity through Public Art: Case Study of Chicago Public Policies

Authors : Kaesha M. Freyaldenhoven

Abstract : Chicago is a city in the United States whose cultural identity is largely shaped by public art pieces. Quintessential public works created by internationally renown artists – such as Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Millennium Park and 'The Picasso' in Daley Plaza – have historically contributed to developing a shared sense of community. In 2017, the city implemented a policy titled 50x50 Neighborhood Arts Project under the Chicago Public Art Plan. The policy promotes investments in contemporary public art to elevate neighborhood cultural assets and create a sense of place. Exclusively community-based artists were commissioned to accomplish the mission of the policy. Administrators felt only local artists would be capable of capturing the true essence of a neighborhood through art. This paper discusses the relationship between the public art and the culture of its respective neighborhood through close examination of aesthetic formal properties and social significance. Research compares the role of international artists with the role of local artists in cultivating the identity of a city through site-specific artworks in Chicago. Methodology unites theoretical research on understanding art and its function in the public space with empirical research on Chicago-based works. Theoretical frameworks provide an art historical foundation to explore the manner in which physical properties convey meaning through the work itself and its placement in an urban setting. Empirical research that examines policy documentation and press announcements released by the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events investigates project selection processes pertaining to the artists and neighborhoods. Ethnographies and interviews of individuals from diverse social segments in contemporary Chicago society measure impacts of the works on respective populations. Findings demonstrate works created by local artists activate neighborhoods and inculcate a sense of pride among community residents. Works created by international artists garner widespread media attention that frames the city’s cultural identity across temporal and geographic zones. This research can be utilized to inform future cultural policies pertaining to the commission of public art.

Keywords : Chicago, cultural policy, public art, urban art

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