

Space Pads: Unifying Public Art and Public Health

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BACKGROUND

Ranging from the Renaissance's incorporation of art and science to President Roosevelt's push for art programs during the Great Depression, societies have long acknowledged the importance of the connection between art and health. Roosevelt's 1930's New Deal Arts Programs not only served as a form of federal relief for artists, but also as a form of a psychological boost for citizens suffering during the Great Depression (Roosevelt University, n.d.). Not only would this avoid putting artists on the "dole", a derogatory term for direct cash relief, but the creations stemming from this program would also help elevate the morale for ordinary viewers and remind the nation that the arts still existed in bleak times.

These times exist today. When we look around ourselves, we are hit with an invasion of yellow, garish signs that loudly proclaim for passersby to wear masks, wash their hands, and maintain social distance. Incessantly advertised on the news and media, it seems almost impossible to shake the depressing neon presence of the pandemic no matter where we go. It's understandable that they are necessary in unprecedented times such as these, yet make us wonder whether there are more effective ways to capture people's attention in regards to pandemic health guidelines through art.

For the inhabitants of Philadelphia, a city beleaguered with high risk warnings of Covid-19 transmission, a local arts program known as Mural Arts Philadelphia has found an effective alternative solution: Space Pads.

Figure 1

Space Pad at a Bus Stop



Note. From Vital Strategies, 2020.

These painted, large vinyl square tiles are purposely set 6 feet apart in the city's public spaces - stuck on supermarket floors, hanging on walls, and even placed at bus stops - to remind individuals of the importance of safely distancing themselves (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2021). They're vibrant, positive, and catch the attention of the city's inhabitants, teaching individuals that public art can elevate health through different means. Made by a variety of artisans from the city, some of these tiles even help combat racial disparities through the incorporation of a variety of languages and depictions of individuals from diverse backgrounds, creating more public art representation for minorities and subsequently helping break down barriers (Vital Strategies, 2020). This intersection of health, art and race is ultimately an important issue that Space Pads elevates; in fact, the segregated climate of Philadelphia has led to significant health disparities for minorities, which will be touched upon later in this paper (Lai & McCrystal, 2021).

Yet there are also many issues that arise with the efficacy of such non-digital forms of public art during the pandemic, as not many individuals care to venture outside under these extreme circumstances and thus may have more limited interactions with these art pieces. Even after the lifting of restrictions, there has been a noted increased presence of digital communication in our lives that may settle into a permanent aspect of our modern culture. Furthermore, another important debate relating to public art during the COVID-19 pandemic revolves around the theme of inducing anxiety versus reassuring individuals. For citizens who regularly wear masks and comply with social distancing, these signs are meant to affirm their beliefs and practices. On the other hand, constantly reminding individuals of the pandemic potentially causes anxiety for members of the community. The implications of all of these potential obstacles to the effectiveness of Space Pads will be explored further in future sections.

THE MEASURABLE CONNECTION BETWEEN ART AND HEALTH

Before touching upon the relationship between public art and health qualitatively, it proves important to define the quantitative measurables that support their correlation, since one of the most effective ways that public health elevates art lies in its ability to numerically support the impact of its messages through statistics and research studies. This also helps establish what constitutes public art and public health, which must be explored in order to eliminate possible confounding variables.

The research article, “Creative Arts as a Public Health Resource: Moving from Practice-Based Research to Evidence-Based Practice” by Stephen Clift, provides interesting statistics on the efficacy of public art on health. One of the studies that Clift examines showed evidence for physical improvements - better morale, reductions in loneliness, less falls, doctor visits, and medication use - when older individuals regularly engaged in community singing (Clift, 2012). The significance of this finding lies in that researchers discovered the correlation between art practices and mental and physical improvements in the elderly population, which creates a foundation for proving a connection between the medical and artistic field. It should be duly noted that although the author focuses on a scientific study involving community singing, which generally may not be what comes into mind when discussing public art, it contains the essential aspects of representing a form of art and engaging the public through community participation.

Similarly, the article “The Impact of Public Art Projects on Public Health” by Kate Cathey discusses studies by neurologist Colin Ellard, who focuses on the way that people’s brains and behavior shifts in the presence of public art. Not only did he discover that public art pieces physically slow people down and prompt them to examine their environment, but that it also evokes positive emotions. When offering skin conductance bracelets that measure alertness to walking commuters near bare buildings versus those with artworks, Ellard discovered that:

Around bare buildings he notes, “These people were bored and unhappy. When asked to describe the site, words such as bland, monotonous and passionless rose to the top of the charts. [...] At the livelier site, they were animated and chatty, and we had some difficulty reining in their enthusiasm.”(Cathey, 2018).

This research indicates that art physically alters brain function and chemistry to prompt better mental health. It also helps establish that public art, even when viewed at a glance or unconsciously, provides benefits to all who pass by.

While these two sources both approach the idea of proving a relationship between public art and public health from a statistical standpoint, they do present profound differences as well. The most significant takeaway of their divide would lie in the type of artistic medium explored: Clift’s article focuses on community engagement through

singing, while Cathey's mostly discusses visual art in the form of murals and frescoes. Together, they help suggest that public art in any form can contribute to improving the mental and physical health of the public through a quantitative, scientific lens. The next section will expand more upon the implications of this study in regards to defining public art and community engagement.

DEFINING PUBLIC ART AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As discussed in the previous section, there are many ways that public art and community engagement may be defined. For the purposes of this argument, public art encompasses all forms of community-engaged artistic practices, including both works that have permanence and non-permanence. While community singing performances may last relatively shorter for the participants than viewers of park statues, it still holds importance in that it fulfills the broad definition of public art as, "a reflection of how we see the world – the artist's response to our time and place combined with our own sense of who we are," (Lozano-Hemmer & Ewing, 2021). In other words, it does not matter what form it presents itself in, but rather how it serves as a vehicle of collective community expression. Both murals and community singing involve the integral practices of cooperation, skill, and creativity for the sake of enhancing public environments, which make them more similar in practice than expected. Just as how the definition of art has evolved over time, from realistic practices to Banksy's graffiti, what encompasses public art similarly changes according to society's whims. The case study and its creators at Mural Arts Philadelphia therefore constitute as members of public art not only due to their physically present nature in the city, but also due to their expressive and historical ties with the neighborhood of Philadelphia, as will be discussed in later sections.

SPACE PADS CONNECTING PUBLIC ART AND HEALTH

As the research article "Creative Arts as a Public Health Resource: Moving from Practice-Based Research to Evidence-Based Practice" by Stephen Clift reminds readers that in order to find solutions for inquiries on the acceptability and personal responses to artistic health interventions, it proves important to pay attention to qualitative elements that gain "a rounded account of the potential value of creative arts interventions," (Clift, 2012). Therefore, the other half necessary to establish a provable connection between public art and health would be through examining qualitative sources.

Enter Space Pads, a public art project affiliated with Mural Arts Philadelphia and centered within Philadelphia's diverse city. Located on walls, floors, and along streets, these decorated vinyl tiles are set at six foot

intervals as a nod for citizens to follow COVID-19 regulations. They are covered with affirmations, creative drawings, and commentaries on society; some excitedly proclaiming “SOAP SOAP SOAP” or “We’re in this together”.

In a time where the pandemic has isolated individuals and caused anxiety to pervade through society, looking at these cheerful yet useful signs have proven to be a far more effective method to portray public health messages. They serve to remind people not only to protect their physical wellbeing, but also of the detrimental impacts of the modern age on their mental fitness.

Figure 2

Space Pad at a Bus Stop



Note. From Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2021.

“Space Pads” by Mural Arts Philadelphia - a page in the official Mural Arts Philadelphia website - proves especially helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the project’s purpose (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2021). It discusses the impact that the vinyl pieces have had in the community, as well as the partnerships with it that aim to spread public-health related messages in a variety of environments. One such partnership, Step Up to the Plate, utilizes Space Pads in restaurants and eateries where patrons often take masks off. This goes to prove how useful and necessary such works of art are in fighting for safe practices. The true scope of the project’s impact is further elevated by the article, “A Dream Come True” by Mural Arts Philadelphia, which presents an interview with Symone Salib, one of Space Pad’s creators. Within it, Simone discusses her personal inspirations, visual elements she incorporates, and challenges related to the project. For instance, she comments on the fact that, “to see something that is visually stimulating and joyful can go much farther than the anxiety produced by the 24-hour news cycle” (Vital Strategies, 2020). As her personal take on what the project represents, it shines a light on the way that public art can decrease anxiety in unprecedented times and aid

the mental health of the community. She also expands on the uniqueness of these creations, stating, “I see people paying attention to the Space Pads in a way that dry public health warnings fail to do.”. Given that one of Space Pad’s main purposes lies in presenting a more engaging way of informing the public of health-related guidelines, it offers further support to how effective this case study is.

ANXIETY VERSUS NECESSITY

As seen in Symone Salib’s interview, a common theme that has been brought up amidst all of the 24/7 news cycles proclaiming Covid-19 dangers is the constant anxiety it produces for audiences who are reminded of it every waking day. As such, it begs the question of whether public art pieces such as Space Pads would provoke their audiences by adding onto this burden rather than creating a sense of community as it intends to do. However, it is important to recall that one of the most important aspects of public health is balancing anxiety and necessity. Although it may be stressful for some to be constantly reminded of the pandemic, the steady decrease of safe health practices among U.S. adults suggest that they should be given a certain degree of anxiety in order to push them to social distance and wear masks (Saad, 2020).

Additionally, the impact of Space Pads lies in not only creating new signs that direct people to taking action, but instead replacing the impersonal and derivative posters created by public health departments with cheerful visual rhetoric to strike a balance in favor of psychological health.

Figure 1

Space Pad at a Bus Stop



For instance, this image showcases an effective example of the partnership between Mural Arts Philadelphia and the public transit system SEPTA (Vital Strategies, 2020). Placed at bus stops all over the city, this particular space pad depicts two smiling toast characters that remind individuals that they can still be ‘together but 6 feet apart’. Its incorporation

of humor with a reassuring message, as well as cute characters that appeal to viewer's emotions, proves Space Pads' utmost attempt to relax its audience while teaching them useful information. Audiences who wear masks will most likely be glad to have their safe practice confirmed, while those who do not may feel more inclined to join the two characters in helping keep the city safe. These reminders are a necessity, but not perhaps an 'evil' one.

PUBLIC HEALTH DISPARITIES IN PHILADELPHIA

In the context of the pandemic - which Space Pads was created for - it proves important to examine how the community of Philadelphia impacts the true importance of these works. Keeping in mind the diverse population of this city, as well as its rampant segregational issues, the measures that Space Pads have taken to address the specifics of their audience serve to show how the public art project effectively addresses public health in the context of its chosen community of underserved populations. Before discussing the beneficial impact of those practices in depth, however, it is important to provide context on the racial and public health disparities in Philadelphia.

Considering Philadelphia's plurality population of African Americans, about 44.1% compared to 35.8% White Americans, many of the newest Covid-19 study results seem illogical (Choi, 2020). According to the Philadelphia Department of Health, as of January 16, 2021, "Nearly 120,000 white people have been vaccinated compared to fewer than 4,000 African Americans,". The Philadelphia Inquirer recently discovered that for every 21 doses of vaccine given to a white person, only one person of color received a dose at Rite Aid, despite that particular distributor being the second-largest in the city. Furthermore, African Americans accounted for over 56% of positive cases, while caucasians were only at 26%. Considering the demographics of this city, it seems that people of color constituted an unjustifiably large percentage of Covid-19 patients.

Unfortunately, these statistics highlight only the most recent instances of racial disparities in the healthcare system of the city. As a whole, research has shown that, "Health disparities persist across Greater Philadelphia, with low-income, nonwhite populations often disproportionately impacted by higher incidences of preventable diseases," (Shields, 2019). This has led to an overall 20-year decrease in life-expectancy for neighborhoods in Philadelphia where most minorities reside. It is therefore not surprising that the city has a disproportionately low integration-segregation index score of -12.9%, which labels Philadelphia as the 4th most segregated large city in America. Based on a study by Jonathan Silver, the founder of FiveThirtyEight Politics Podcast, the disparities reflected in this score is further highlighted by the city's overall diversity score of 65.6%; not far off from Sacramento's 73.8% that has a significantly higher corresponding integration-segregation score of +10.1% (Silver,

2015). The evidence of segregation and its correlation with health inequity highlights Philadelphia’s need to rehabilitate its healthcare system.

THE IMPACT OF SPACE PADS AND MURAL ARTS PHILADELPHIA

In the progress towards this goal, utilization of public art can not only elevate public health, but also combat its limitations of discriminatory practices through representation and collaboration. Beyond Space Pad’s correlation with public health, its broader significance lies in its messages of connection between communities. Not only do creators associated with the project come from a variety of backgrounds, they incorporate images of individuals that represent a range of nationalities. Symone Salib, a Cuban-Egyptian painter, describes her work as, “Highlight[ing] the lives and stories of the people of Philadelphia, especially people of color,” (Vital Strategies, 2020).

Figure 3

Space Pad by Symon Salib



Note. From Visual Strategies, 2020.

One of her more prominent tile decorations depicts an African American woman and child, who carry signs that encourage viewers to take action in promoting the safety of the community during the pandemic. Through this, she not only represents minorities in a positive light, but also directly appeals to African American viewers to take heed and relate to the public art that they see. As a way to promote widespread inclusion, the project has also, “Placed 646 Space Pads and 235 posters in over 80 locations, and in seven languages: English, Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic, Russian and Vietnamese,” (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2021). Despite

potential barriers brought up by Philadelphia's segregation dilemma, these space pad locations range all across the city: South Philadelphia, North Philadelphia, and at bus stops stretching from one end of the community to another. Accessibility of this project for many different minorities and the largest demographic populations of Philadelphia provides a role model for public art all over the globe.

In addition, the Mural Arts Philadelphia program itself has deep rooted ties with ostracized groups, having been created in 1986 to rehabilitate graffiti artists and offer them more empowering creative outlets. They also encompass many programs aimed at populations with similarly disproportionately high groups of color. One of the largest programs, Porch Light, collaborates with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services to, "Uplift public art as an expression of community resilience and a vehicle of personal and community healing," (Ansell, 2014). Considering that Philadelphia itself has a plurality of African Americans, and that about half of individuals with mental health issues are minorities, it resonates with the purpose of Space Pads (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). While pursuing public health related projects that address issues such as incarceration, mental disabilities and COVID-19, they also ultimately aid with addressing racial stigmas that have created disparities within Philadelphia.

By creating an atmosphere of acceptance and putting issues in the public eye, projects such as Space Pads and Porch Light create acknowledgement of the need for equal opportunities. Their missions of inclusiveness and equity inspire fields such as health to also look within and rehabilitate xenophobic practices that deny minorities adequate treatment. They also bring about awareness and make it more difficult to ignore prejudiced community practices ranging from unequal vaccine distributions to ignored mental health treatment. Representation matters - and it is important that public art reflects the diversity of the population it serves.

THE DIGITAL SOLUTION

Yet in light of what Space Pads and Mural Arts have accomplished towards improving the public health divide in Philadelphia, the fact that most of their projects are non-digital restricts potential coverage. During this era where quarantine is common and individuals refrain from traveling outside their houses for non-necessities, it seems that the amount of commuters who view the work would be limited. Social distancing guidelines also prevent the creation of effective discourse on Space Pads, lowering its chances for widespread efficacy on topics of racial injustice in health. Even in space where social distancing is no longer mandated, there has been a marked increase of online communication and at-home work. Furthermore, converting to an effective digital form would allow individuals in segregated and prejudiced communities such as Philadelphia to have access to the beneficial works by Mural Arts Philadelphia. Additionally, considering how movements such as BLM and #metoo have

been taken online, it seems detrimental to stick to merely physical forms of public art when the traction of similar protests could help bolster this issue as well.

One wall that this particular case study hits in addressing this problem, however, lies in that Space Pads hold significance in their size and placement (6 feet apart) that indicate their connection with pandemic guidelines. Therefore, converting it to a formal online form seems to risk accurately portraying its message. However, when examining this debate and the response of the general public to Space Pads, the conversation turns to social media posts on Instagram in the absence of article sources that examine such feedback. On the account of @muralarts, the official Instagram account of Mural Arts Philadelphia, many users have commented on Space Pad artworks with various statements on what it means to them (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2020). Most are various affirmative statements praising the creativity of the project: “They are so beautiful and a great touch of happy color when we need it most!”. Others comment on how they’ve seen them all over the city: “Love the ‘spread hope not germs’ one. I spotted them at ShopRite and outside of South St. Ritas,”. These praises and confirmation of viewers help demonstrate the efficacy of public artworks that promote public health, even in a mixed method of incorporating both digital and non digital forms.

Therefore, while Space Pads retains its physical piece aspects, the choice of its creators to incorporate an online presence in social media and their website has been shown to allow it to reach a wider audience effectively. This is also especially important when considering the demographics of its target audience: the city of Philadelphia. Made up of a majority of African American minorities and created in a city with severe segregation issues, it has been addressed earlier in this argument that many citizens lack access to adequate healthcare or priorities in medical access. Studies have additionally shown a negative correlation between neighborhood safety and percentage of minority inhabitants in the US as a whole: “Predominantly African-American neighborhoods (those that consist of more than 70% African-American residents) averaged five times as many violent crimes as predominantly white communities,” (HUD USER, n.d.). As venturing outside presents more risks for minorities and those who live in violent neighborhoods, it seems more likely that they would miss the opportunity to view public artworks such as Space Pads - despite benefiting their impact the most. Having access to a digital space to view projects like these from the safety of their homes would help ensure the efficacy of their community impact.

It would prove worthwhile for programs such as Mural Arts Philadelphia to invest in converting art pieces such as Space Pads to formal online form, where the larger digital audience can take part in the same experience that those in Philadelphia streets have access to. In order to view how this could be implemented, looking at the work of “Hostile Terrain 84” by Undocumented Migrant Project serves as a good role model

(Undocumented Migration Project, n.d.). Originally a purely physical public artwork made up of the body tags of deceased undocumented migrants, the creators have taken note of the recent pandemic conditions and are working towards creating virtual reality exhibits that could be remotely viewed. Instead of using merely gallery pictures, their choice to utilize VR helps create the most accurate viewing experience possible. By incorporating this into projects like Space Pads, their physical utilization of space can remain relevant while more people can be exposed to their important messages.

LOOKING FORWARD

Public art and health share a unique bond that elevates benefits and combats detriments in one another: art contains qualitative aspects that help add personal touches to health, while the quantitative elements of health ground public art within the realm of measurable evidence. For two fields often marked by eclectic differences, Space Pads have combined them into something bigger in the context of Philadelphia's diverse community. They also represent a fair balance between creative beauty and potentially stressful necessities, which teaches its audience that there is more than one way to find a solution.

Taking from that lesson, when considering that the pandemic limits the population of in-person viewers of public art, social media and the internet offer possible alternatives that should be more explored by artists and art organizations. As touched on before in this discussion, public art is less about the form it presents itself in, but more about what it does and what it intends to do for its community. For individuals, such as my peers who may not be involved in such large-scale projects, we can involve ourselves through sharing the public art pieces we see and discussing them with our social networks. Not only does this strive to make these projects widely accessible, they also prompt us to think about their meaning and be inspired to perhaps create similar works one day.

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