

# Youth ARTivism:

## *Fostering Civic Engagement Through Public Art*

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### **Abstract**

The Sustainable Thinking and Expression on Public Space (STEPS) Initiative's Emerging ARTivist program provides a platform for young people from some of Canada's most diverse and low-income communities to animate public spaces in their communities. This program has not only improved the urban experiences of local City of Toronto residents, but has built the capacity of youth as civic leaders engaged in urban design issues; empowered to transform their urban environment.

Alongside their award-winning youth led arts collective (the Toronto Emerging ARTivists), the STEPS Initiative has led the installation of several large-scale permanent art, including the World's Tallest Mural, transforming Toronto's skyline, and a 400 linear foot Fence Reclamation Project along a pedestrian corridor.

This paper will discuss lesson learned by STEPS, in their engagement of youth and residents of all ages in the conception, planning, and implementation of these projects.

**Keywords:** *Public Space, Public Art, Urban Planning, Youth Engagement, Placemaking, Community Engagement*

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## Introduction

Public spaces have an essential role in building communities and mitigating societal polarity. The Toronto based, Sustainable Thinking and Expressions on Public Space (STEPS) Initiative's Emerging ARTivist Program provides a platform for young people from some of Canada's most diverse and low-income communities to animate public spaces in their communities. This program has improved residents' experience in the city, and has taught youth to be civic leaders engaged in urban design issues.

Along with the Toronto Emerging ARTivists (TEA), The STEPS Initiative has led several large-scale permanent art installations in some of Toronto's most dense and low-income neighbourhoods. In 2012, their Fence Reclamation Project, transformed nearly 400 linear feet of fencing along a high-traffic pedestrian corridor in Thorncliffe Park. More recently, STEPS led the "World's Tallest Mural" project, which transformed a concrete apartment building into a vertical canvas. In both communities showcased in this paper, STEPS worked with local young people for over a year to develop these youth-led high impact public art projects. These two case studies, illustrate lessons learned by STEPS in their engagement of youth in these unique public realm projects.

### Giving Context: The City of Toronto, Canada

Canada is the world's second largest country by total area, but over 80% of Canada's population live in urban areas (Statistics Canada 2009). With 3 million people, Toronto is Canada's largest city, and claimed by some to be the most multicultural city in the world (Galanakis 2013; City of Toronto n.d.). According to the 2011 National Household Survey, almost 50% of the population is foreign born. These figures do not account for the vast number of area residents who were born in Canada, but whose parents were born abroad.

With a dense and growing population, it is essential that Toronto's new immigrants ("newcomers" as they are called in Toronto) feel they are reflected in the city's public spaces. However, as recognized by Galanakis (2013) and Hulchanski (2007), that even though Toronto is proud of its rich multiculturalism it is experiencing increased social and spatial polarization between rich and poor residents. Hulchanski's study, based on income change from 1970 to 2005, indicates that central areas well served by public transit is composed primarily of higher income residents, with a diminishing middle class population residing in the city's outskirts, and a growing lower income racialized population in northeastern and northwestern areas of the city (2007). This trend is reflected in the Thorncliffe Park and St. James Town communities that STEPS has engaged in public art projects.

### Why Are Public Spaces Important?

People-oriented public spaces are, in many ways, the heartbeat of people-oriented cities. Accessible and welcoming public spaces allow residents to feel like they are valued members of society. This is the essence and goal of "placemaking" - the transformation of public spaces to have meaning and relevance for the communities that they serve.

City-building practitioners have begun to focus more on the role and importance of “placemaking.” In 2006, the City Repair Project noted the following:

“Placemaking’ has recently become a popular idea because we have few ‘places’—we just have lots of space. It’s the act of creating a shared vision based on a community’s needs and assets, culture and history, local climate and topography. The practice is as much about psychological ownership and reclamation of space as it is about physically building a place. In a context of isolation, placemaking is a reminder that we still share common interests and the power to manifest them. Great places are produced by the people who use them; the community is the expert while professionals are respected as resources (2006,15).”

One of the ways that this can be done is through involving the surrounding community in transforming their public spaces -particularly community members who often have the least agency or decision-making involvement. Resident connection, investment, and involvement in a public space is what makes public spaces meaningful and culturally accessible for the surrounding community (Relph, 1976; Madanipour, 2010; Low, 2000).

#### **Why Are Public Spaces Even More Important For Some?**

As public space is an important venue for civil society, it must cater to the needs of disenfranchised groups such as, visible minorities, new immigrants, or youth (Amin et al, 2000; Mandeli, 2010; Zamani, 2010). Public space provides a venue for groups to organize and to share experiences and stories that are forgotten, overlooked, or intentionally hidden. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that public spaces are designed in a way that reflects the desires of a multiplicity of users. This can be done by involving the community in being active in the planning and revitalization of their public spaces - so that public spaces are visually, structurally, and culturally meaningful to the users’ communities.

#### **Public Art as a Catalyst**

Large metropolitan cities are noisy places - not just physically, but in the sense that there are many competing groups and voices. It is therefore important to find a commonality, where people feel that they are actually recognized members of society; where they feel that they can be a part of the space, and welcomed to participate (The City Repair Project 2006). Public art not only beautifies a city, but as the STEPS Initiative has found, it can also be a creative way to engage people in discussing issues of importance to them.

Community focused public art is an effective way to engage young people. Youth often struggle to find their own space in the city, and might otherwise not be compelled to engage in civic issues. Public art is a medium that inspires them to take action in their own community. This is also reflected in the City of Toronto’s 2006 INVOLVEYOUTH2 report:

“Youth engagement programs and approaches contribute to the development of youth by fostering active citizenship. They instill a sense of social responsibility that

will follow youth into adulthood. Programs achieve these aims by providing opportunities for capacity building and leadership, and by encouraging youth to develop a sense of self-awareness that is connected to a broader social awareness (1).”

STEPS’ youth focused programs has instilled a sense of leadership, and fostered confidence amongst the young people they work with. This work has been recognized by the youth that have been through STEPS’ program, but also by local residents, teachers, community stakeholders, as well as by the City of Toronto and the countrywide arts and culture organizations.



Figure 1. Youth painting the “World’s Tallest Mural”– a public art project in St. James Town. Photo: Vera Belazelkoska.

#### **Introduction to The STEPS Initiative:**

The STEPS Initiative is a community-based organization that bridges the gap between the cultural, social and environmental sectors. STEPS does this by building the capacity of Torontonians to creatively transform public spaces in their communities. STEPS’ community programming provides a platform for urban residents to lead initiatives that physically change spaces in their local community. This process validate their experiences, the community’s cultures, histories, as well as concern for social, environmental and design issues. While STEPS’ programming has not been exclusively limited to youth, the most successful programming has been youth-driven, focussing on lower-income newcomer racialized youth in the Toronto area. This has resulted in positive changes to their neighborhood public spaces, as well as a build up in youth’s confidence and interest in civic issues.

#### **The Emerging ARTivist Program:**

STEPS’ greatest capacity building endeavor to date has been the Emerging ARTivist Program. This workshop and capacity building program for young people has resulted in several large-scale youth-led projects. It has also led to the incubation of an award-winning youth-led arts collective called the Toronto Emerging ARTivists (TEA).



Figure 2. Engaging youth from Thorncliffe Park to discuss local public space issues, locations, public art methods and styles (Photo: STEPS Initiative).

### The Emerging ARTivist Program

STEPS' greatest capacity building endeavor to date has been the Emerging ARTivist Program. This workshop and capacity building program for young people has resulted in several large-scale youth-led projects. It has also led to the incubation of an award-winning youth-led arts collective called the Toronto Emerging ARTivists (TEA).

As part of the program we collaborate with an interdisciplinary group of artists, who work alongside local youth to co-facilitate public art workshops with young children. The artists bring the technical skills, while the youth bring the local knowledge to make the workshops relevant for their younger peers. Workshops have included collage, sculpture, performance, graffiti writing, and storytelling and have included activities ranging from public space walks where children identified areas where they felt safe or unsafe to creating elaborate performances for the wider community on local environmental issues. By the end of the workshop series, both local youth and their younger peers are much more familiar with their local neighbourhood, their neighbours and the role they place in making it a more vibrant place to live. Urooja, a girl aged 16 shares, "Through STEPS, I learned a lot about the history and about the community from other people. I learned a lot of things that I didn't know before."

In addition to having a greater understanding about how they can affect change in their own neighbourhood, this process works to build links between the different youth and children involved. As youth participant Sara, a girl aged 17 expressed, "STEPS really helped me a lot by giving me the chance to meet great people. All these artist and other youth in my school that I never knew but now I know them and I just got a chance to meet a lot of people and I learned from them and I hope that my knowledge helped them."

### Community Profile: Thorncliffe Park, Toronto

Thorncliffe Park has a population of nearly 30,000 people living in 2.6 square kilometers. Most residents are recently arrived immigrant families of South Asian descent, with many being female headed households living on a low-incomes. In densely populated high-rise living quarters, safe and vibrant public spaces are incredibly important, yet there are few in the area (Keung, 2010). These spaces have the potential of encouraging residents to build networks and relationships and to feel they have a space within their new home country.

Thorncliffe Park has one of the youngest populations in Toronto, and arguably North America (Toronto Community Health Profiles 2011; Dempsey, 2012). With such a young demographic, it is important to engage young people, especially racialized newcomers, so they feel that they can contribute to their new community. One area that is often overlooked is the engagement of young women in the community. The need for programs that engage young women in Thorncliffe Park is expressed by Maheen, 20; “We need to do things that encourage women and youth to participate. Art can do this - it can have components that speak to women and youth.” Not only does STEPS’ program engage this demographic, it provides a creative outlet, and proves that young women can play an important role within their community.

### Thorncliffe Pathway Reclamation Project

In 2012, with the help of STEPS, local youth from the Thorncliffe community reclaimed a high traffic but derelict pedestrian corridor. This site was plagued by litter, poor lighting, and a general lack of safety. Even though everyone in the community regularly passes through this pathway, it was clearly neglected, reducing users’ feelings of safety.

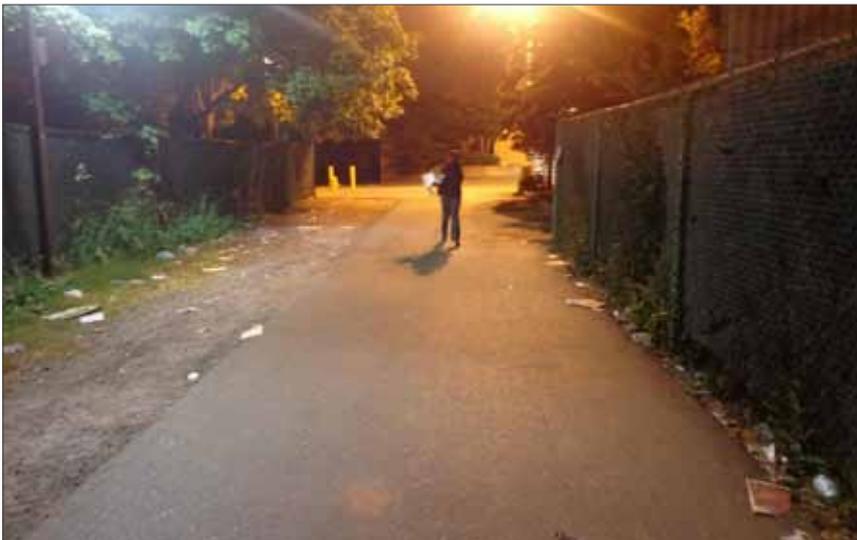


Figure 3. Prior to the Fence Reclamation public art installation, the space looked dark, unwelcoming, littered, and visibly uncared for (Photo: STEPS Initiative).

### The Process

Under the mentorship of two STEPS artists, youth participants led the process of a mixed media public art installation from conception through design and installation. Collectively the youth and artists transformed 400 linear feet of chain link fence. Designs included a celebration of imagery common to textiles found around the world, having primarily drawn inspiration from South Asia, where many local residents originate. As lighting along the pathway and within the park was ill maintained, and environmental stewardship was an important component for the youth, images of trees and light fixtures, that mirrored the area's broken ones were included.



Figure 4. Thorncliffe Park pathway – youth installing art works, left and a section of the art installation, right. Photo: Alexis Kane Speer.

The artwork has since transformed the pathway into a place celebrated by locals. The design also drew attention to the lack of lighting and additional lighting has been installed along the pathway and in the adjacent park. In order to ensure that the project reflected the community, youth incorporated the input of local residents gathered at community events. As a result the project received a lot of favorable feedback and the youth were viewed as positive contributors to the community. As Tavila, a local resident shared, “I love what you guys did to the pathway. It feels cared for. It changes how you feel walking through, it makes it way better, and how the illustrative lighting on the fence made the actual lighting in the park get fixed... it is a great accomplishment.”

This project showcased the importance of youth leaders in the community. As a result these young people were invited by the City of Toronto to provide input to the revitalization that is occurring in the neighbourhood. After the success in Thorncliffe Park, STEPS introduced the program to St. James Town. The broader

community was tasked to develop a public art project that provided youth with leadership skills while improving the community's public space.

#### **Community Profile: St. James Town, Toronto**

St. James Town, like Thorncliffe Park, is an extremely densely populated community, with 30,000 people living in less than two square kilometers. The neighborhood suffers from issues of overcrowding, deteriorating housing stock and a lack of amenities, and has been plagued with violent crime (Toronto Centre Plan, 2005). Low-income immigrant residents and families make up 64% of the population (Sun, 2011), yet it has been applauded as one of Toronto's most diverse neighborhoods with representation from over 50 language groups and many ethnic communities including Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ethiopian, Filipino, Korean, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani, Somali, Tamil and Eastern European. Due to the limitations in space and services, residents are quite involved and desire better quality housing and services, including more quality public spaces, as lacking such spaces can have negative impact on residents' health (Sun, 2011).

#### **St. James Town's World's Tallest Mural**

In the summer 2013 STEPS produced the "World's Tallest Mural" in St. James Town on the high rise building, 200 Wellesley Street East. The building has 800 apartment units with approximately 1500-1700 people living in the building.

#### ***The Process***

In 2012, STEPS brought its Emerging ARTivist programming to St. James Town. In partnership with the local high school, STEPS recruited a group of youth who worked alongside artistic mentors to deliver public art workshops to their younger peers. The following year, STEPS received funding to develop a large scale and youth-led public art project. This project engaged hundreds of local residents over a two-year period, and saw thousands of residents join in celebration upon its completion.

In developing the mural alongside collaborating artist facilitator, Sean Martindale, there was a strong desire to add colour to the many grey high rise towers in St. James Town. The youth settled on visually exploring themes of diversity, accessibility, local knowledge and culture, safety, and happiness. They wanted to bring positive attention to the neighbourhood, capturing the myriad of hidden ethno-cultural stories and creating a space for interaction and engagement for local and residents citywide.

The 200 Wellesley Street East Toronto Community Housing (TCHC) apartment building was selected as the site for the mural for a variety of geographical and social reasons. The location allowed for the creation of an iconic work at a height that is visible from around the downtown core. The building also suffers from a negative history; a significant proportion of its residents live in poverty, many of which live alone while dealing with mobility challenges, or mental health and addiction issues. In 2010, a fire displaced 1,200 residents; drawing attention to the many challenges that residents of the building face.

The mural's design incorporates the image of a phoenix, wrapping around the south facade of the building, starting at ground level and weaving up the entire height of the 32 story tall building. The design emphasizes a feeling of soaring to represent the positive attributes that resonate with the youth's desire to address the negative stereotypes and misconceptions about St. James Town.

While the drafted design was a youth-led collaborative project, the broader community was consulted during several stages of the project's development and creation. The lower sections of the mural were painted by residents showcasing the diversity of the community and their experiences. These portions consisted of detailed images playing with cultural patterns found in traditional fabrics, typography and artworks as well as inspired and designed by local community members during consultation sessions and community paint days.



Figure 5. "The World's Tallest Mural" in St. James Town, Left. Close up of the lower part of the mural with participants reviewing all of their hard work, right. Photo: The STEPS Initiative.

The project has helped to revitalize the neighborhood and to bring positive attention to the community. The youth involved gained valuable experience, developed artistic skills and were exposed to a variety of career opportunities outside of standard cultural professions. Stephen, a local high school teacher noted the impact of this program on the youth, stating:

"STEPS' grassroots approach to building community through teamwork and collaboration as well as harnessing and focusing the creative passions of youth on positive contributions in their own communities is commendable. Consequently, STEPS' Emerging ARTivist Program and its explicit mission to engage our students and provide opportunities for them to take on leadership roles and mentor future generations in the community has our full support."

As with Thorncliffe Park, the skill building workshops, and mentorship that STEPS provided taught youth about the creation, design, coordination, facilitation, and production of a large scale mural project.

The mural continues to have a positive impact on St. James Town and the city by uplifting community spirit among local residents, increasing positive attention to the neighborhood, and creating a high quality public space. The project was motivated by the youth's strong desire to improve their community, both in spirit and appearance. The sheer scale of this mural project has also offered a unique opportunity to “put St. James Town on the map.”

### **Conclusion: The Impact of Community-Led Public Art**

From the feedback we have received from participating youths and the wider communities, these projects have had a profound impact. Not only have these public art projects resulted in increased visual vibrancy in the community's public spaces, but they have also empowered local youth, and increased pride in the wider community for the places where they live.

Youth participants became more confident and interested in being involved in their communities. More importantly the wider community has acknowledged these youth as change makers in their own right. When interviewing community members about the project, we were overwhelmed by the positive reception from the surrounding communities. Sara a girl aged 17 said, “My teacher is really proud and impressed by the work that we did! He told me that we have done something really great for the community.” These changes in public perception shifts how young people are viewed, and sees them as being part of a solution in improving their neighborhood, rather than being a community problem.

Since STEPS supported these projects, the youth from the arts collective The Toronto Emerging ARTivists (TEA), have continued to build their capacity through public art projects within their community. Through the projects that the youth have been involved in, they have become more confident in their ability to take on leadership positions and are less afraid to get involved in other programs, and community initiatives.

“Getting involved with TEA and STEPS, really opened a lot of doors for me, through it I felt more confident in getting involved in other programs, got an internship with Manifesto (another arts organization), and started exploring other options for myself post high school,” says Idris, a boy aged 18.

These projects illustrate that with some support and inspiration, residents can be empowered to discover their own leadership capacity to transform their own communities. It indicates how public art is one tool that can be to articulate the voice of those leaders

STEPS experience shows the value of having embedded programs, within a community to better understand their dynamics and urban planning challenges. With

both communities, STEPS spent over a year within each community identifying stakeholders, holding skill-building workshops with local youth, and participating in community events before the public art installation took place. This gave STEPS a solid understanding of what was important to community, the type of spaces desired, and key concerns of the community. Recognizing the importance of involving young people in city building, STEPS worked with youth to explore the challenges and opportunities of each community's public spaces. STEPS also worked with artists and urban planners under the direction of young people to develop and expand each idea, providing artistic mentorship and expertise.

STEPS process lays the foundation for continued civic engagement. Through the vehicle of public art, young people are shown that their voice matters. Access to extracurricular programs, and networking with local stakeholders, and decision makers such as city councilors, as well as leading public presentations, equip participants with confidence and valuable networks both within their community and externally. Lastly, STEPS' process shows how by community engagement, urban planning projects can better reflect local needs and aspirations, thus making the impacts longer lasting, and more locally relevant.

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