

URBAN RESONANCE: Reconsideration of Public Art and Civic Spaces in Financial Districts in the Post-COVID-19 Era

Shuyu Wang

Architectural Association of Architecture, London.

shuyu.wang@aaschool.ac.uk

Abstract. In the post-COVID era, global financial centers are facing significant transformations, challenging traditional notions of urban space. This paper critically examines the public art and urban spaces of London's Canary Wharf, exploring how new forms of public art can serve as potential avenues for enriching civic spaces within these financial districts. We argue that outstanding public art not only mirrors the dynamic evolution of the urban financial landscape but also acts as a bridge fostering communication between commerce and community.

Keywords: Financial districts; Urban space; Urban spatial form; Public art space; Canary Wharf.

1. Introduction

1.1 Out of the Blue

In the bustling central area of Canary Wharf, there once was an artistic enigma known as the "Big Blue"(Fig. 1). When the public areas of Canary Wharf first unveiled their array of public art, "Big Blue" distinguished itself amongst the multitude with its unique and mysterious style. It is not merely a piece of art but has evolved to become a signature symbol of Canary Wharf, gracefully situated at the heart of the financial district in Canada Square Park. This compelling piece of public art, conceived by the British-Israeli designer Ron Arad, captivates the imagination, evoking visions of a sleek spacecraft piercing through the ground. It intricately links the immaculate public spaces above ground with the bustling underground mall below.



Fig. 1 www.ronarad.co.uk. "Big Blue." Accessed September 23, 2023.
<http://www.ronarad.co.uk/architecture/big-blue/>.

Ron Arad's unconventional creation, "Big Blue " can be interpreted as a subtle and subversive commentary on this location: it portrays the connection between the above and the underground; it exhibits the twisted reflections of corporate skyscrapers; and it even hints at the possibility of surging from the underground mall to the daylight. From a certain perspective, it has gradually become a symbol representing the intermingling and dialogue between different social strata. In essence, its core concept revolves around how the grassroots emerge from the base, twisting and impacting the perceptions and identities of a more elite world. This mysterious blue artwork, with its unparalleled individuality and profound symbolic meaning, has solidified its status as a landmark of Canary Wharf. It manifests a multidimensional aesthetic and philosophical contemplation, acting as a testament to the interaction and integration occurring between different societal layers for viewers and thinkers, providing a visually and mentally stimulating experience that provokes deep reflection.

For reasons unbeknownst to the public, "Big Blue" was removed from Canary Wharf in 2017 (Fig. 2;3). Besides sporadic observations on social media, there is scant documentation or news coverage regarding the of art. The disappearance of this artwork may be elucidated by the existence

of an outdoor bar in its former location now. In a place like Canary Wharf, where money and consumption are the driving forces, the balance between art and commerce seems to have become a norm. This area has now morphed into a symbol of consumerism rather than a sanctuary for art. When money and consumption prevail as the dominant forces, artworks, rich in symbolic meaning and depth, seemingly become trivial. People are more inclined to consume and revel in this place, rather than to reflect upon and appreciate art.



Fig. 2 The Big Blue
 “Big Blue’ by Ron Arad, II.” Flickr, January 1, 2011.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/rogersg/5350045612>.

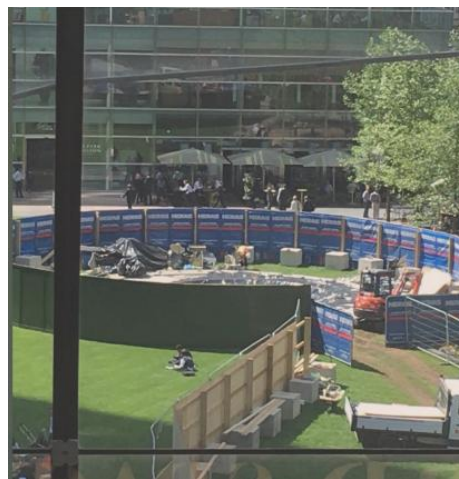


Fig. 2 The Big Blue
 “Big Blue’ by Ron Arad, II.” Flickr, January 1, 2011.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/rogersg/5350045612>.
 Fig. 3 Big Blue was removed from the Canada Square
 (photo from social media platform)

This loss inevitably prompts reflection: Should private capital have the power to control public spaces? Can it determine the curation and operation of public art? At Canary Wharf, the curation of public spaces and art is under stringent control. This control is not only evident in the selection and presentation of artworks but is also accentuated in the limitations and management of spatial use. The ownership model of Canary Wharf stands as a quintessential example of private dominion over public spaces. Though ostensibly open and communal, its management and operations are predominantly steered by private capital.

This paper aims to delve into the relationship between public spaces and public art in financial districts, using the public art of London's Canary Wharf as a focal case study for in-depth critique and analysis. The content is divided into three primary sections: Part I — The Interplay between Public Art and the Public Domain; Part II — Canary Wharf Special Zone: Exceptions and

2. Public Art And Public Domain

2.1 What is Public Art?

Public art, as a sub-category of contemporary art, is according to Tom Finkelpear's perspective, an art form typically sponsored by public institutions and directed at a broad audience. It transcends the boundaries of museums and galleries, aiming to connect diverse populations and backgrounds, while explicitly or subtly addressing class contradictions associated with the term "public." When we refer to "public," it's not merely describing a shared space or public property, but also a concept closely tied to the working classes and marginalized social groups[1]. While "art" is often perceived as a private indulgence and appreciation of the upper classes, its public dimension has the potential to bridge these societal divides, challenging conventional definitions and expectations.

Different types of public art spaces, such as 'community' public art space and 'corporate' public art space, resonate with or are tailored for various segments of society and the political spectrum. The venues of 'corporate' public art, or so-called "corporate public art spaces," refer to those areas on the urban fringes associated with financial districts or metropolitan financial center complexes, such as open spaces, gardens, squares, and courtyards. These places are not confined to the city's central region but can be widely dispersed throughout all corners of the city, including those peripheral areas that often go unnoticed. These spaces encompass both intentionally designed squares, parks, and courtyards, as well as those originally vacant spots that haven't been specifically planned for use.

"Large-scale real estate developers often appropriate the principles and models of urban planning, not as tools of operation to serve public interest, but as means to mold and shape the built environment in ways that yield private, profitable investment."[2], Canary Wharf Group's private curation of public art exemplifies the extreme case of what Murray terms as the "urbanism of exception". Public art in financial hubs typically mirrors the values and cultures of the financial world. Such values and cultures may not always resonate with the everyday lives and sentiments of the broader populace. As a result, such artworks might find greater appeal among financial elites or specific groups, leaving a more tenuous connection with the wider community and public.

In contrast, public artworks in other urban settings tend to be more inclusive and universal. Examples include government-funded landmarks with significant historical narratives, community artworks resulting from collaborative endeavors, and transient or mobile street art arising from spontaneous artistic ventures. In urban settings, curating public art is a nuanced process, encompassing the selection and positioning of the art, sourcing of funds, the choice of artist, and how the piece interacts with the public, among other aspects. The curation and display of public art are influenced by various factors, including land policies, investments, and community engagement. This causes the role and value of public art in urban environments to be in a state of flux. Therefore, the curation of public art must be both anticipatory and adaptable, ensuring it evolves in tandem with urban and societal shifts.

2.2 Urban Conditions for Art

Cities are perpetually being crafted and reshaped. Urban evolution and transformation often mirror the economic and political landscapes, intertwined with population dynamics and mobility. In such a vibrant urban setting, one wonders: Is there an optimal environment cultivated for artistic endeavors and practices? Take London as an illustration. Since the 1980s, while the East End and its adjacent areas in central London have emerged as hotbeds for artistic creation, the emphasis has primarily been on art production rather than public exhibition. In these artistically dense zones, artworks that interface with the public tend to be community-driven initiatives, often of a transient nature, aiming to reinforce or integrate with the community — street assemblies being a notable

manifestation. Conversely, more enduring and widely recognized public art pieces are typically located farther from these art production hubs, adjacent to civic structures, urban plazas, parks, iconic streets, or within the public realms of financial and corporate edifices.

Art is often not only perceived as an aesthetic expression; it also embodies a sociopolitical phenomenon, purportedly shaping urban identity and spatial order[3]. But is such a proclamation beyond dispute? Traditionally, "urban identity" perhaps leans more towards sociocultural forms under urban conditions, while the notion of "shaping spatial order" seems to imply an architectural, regimented planning, contrasting starkly with the evocative and suggestive nature of contemporary art. Art critic Peter Timms once posited: "A ceramic piece that is subversive in beauty is more aptly defined as contemporary art than one that's merely pleasing to the eye." [4] Deviating from traditional artistic norms, contemporary art post the 1960s emerged as a more subversive, critical medium that often derides conventional aesthetic values. Thus, while contemporary art might attempt to converse with the city's sociocultural elements and conditions, it often, with its rich expressiveness and provocativeness, challenges and critiques these urban facets.

Contemporary art seems to exist within a liberated realm, distancing itself from the mundane and functional aspects of daily life, and equally removed from its conventions, traditions, and bureaucratic processes. However, this freedom is not absolute. Behind it, contemporary art indeed intertwines and is constrained by myriad forces, ranging from funding sources, local policies, capital controls, public acceptance, to interactions with community culture and historical contexts. While contemporary art strives to transcend traditional boundaries, its creation and presentation are often profoundly influenced by the urban environment in which it resides. As contemporary art pursues its unique organization and mode of expression, it also adds layers of complexity to the urban conditions of its environment or locale.

2.3 Contemporary Art & The Financial Centre

In "Contemporary art: a very short introduction" by Julien Stallabrass, it is discussed that the evolution of the contemporary art market is intertwined with the changing global economic layout, causing art to often become a game of finance and power[5]. Just as cultural dominance is controlled by certain major countries, similar to economic hegemony, this pattern has a striking resemblance to the workings of the financial market. Hence, the realm of freedom in contemporary art is not entirely independent but interacts with larger economic and political forces. This phenomenon reflects a complex reality: while art may seem detached from the world, it remains tightly bound to the global economic and power structures. The freedom and creativity showcased by contemporary art are in fact constrained by larger economic and political forces.

Looking at major metropolitan financial districts such as Paris's La Défense, London's Canary Wharf, and New York's Lower Manhattan, we find that public art is ubiquitous in their emerging plazas and public spaces. Take Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" as an example. As a bold post-minimalist work, the artist used a static and tilted form to alter the spatial experience of people entering and leaving the surrounding government buildings of Manhattan's Federal Plaza. It aimed to break the rigidity of the bureaucratic matrix and the typical Kafkaesque atmosphere of large enterprises. As per the U.S General Services Administration's plan, "Tilted Arc" was a piece to be retained permanently. However, a decade later in 1989, the GSA, under a petition signed by over 1,300 bureaucratic employees, tore up the contract and ordered its removal (Fig. 4). Overnight, the "Tilted Arc" was cut, incinerated, dismantled, transported, and destroyed. The controversy over "Tilted Arc" was not only about art; it also involved the use and definition of public space. Urban public art originates from the art community, but urban public spaces do not belong solely to the art community. Who decides what is "appropriate" or "fitting" art? Who determines the form and function of public spaces? The way this particular public art was erected and then removed reflects the complex interplay and tension between reaction, and the artist's freedom of expression. The public demanding the removal of "Tilted Arc" are advocates for their rights, and so too are those insisting on its preservation. Put differently, both groups act as infringers upon the other's rights,

while simultaneously defending their own entitlements. At this juncture, the definitions of advocacy and infringement become blurred, with the legitimacy of either stance ambiguously oscillating between the two. While the contention appears to be between the advocates and the infringers, it is, in reality, a dispute between advocates against advocates and infringers against infringers.



Fig. 4 Tilted Arc

Todd Haiman Landscape Design. "TABULA RASA," March 22, 2023.
<https://www.toddhaimanlandscapedesign.com/blog/2011/12/tabula-rasa.html>.

In the 'corporate' public art space, when artworks do not align with the expectations of power structures and capital, their artistic value is not the driving force. Instead, the underlying power dynamics and economic considerations play a pivotal role. Cities and even multinational corporations utilize art to showcase their dominance in public spaces, effectively claiming the sociocultural stage of art. While public art pieces are situated in communal spaces, they, to some extent, no longer feel wholly "public" due to their ties with the corporations or institutions behind them. Such artworks hint at the presence of power, acting as symbols of identity, drawing individuals closer to the buildings and the organizations they house. However, when engaging with them, a gap emerges from the true essence of public domains, exacerbating tensions and disparities in outdoor spaces.

Does this mean that art created solely to satisfy the needs of the government and capital has overshadowed the genuine voice and intentions of the artist? Has it diminished the vigor of artists with a rebellious spirit and a pursuit of true expression? Importantly, are these large-scale public art pieces genuinely catering to everyone, or just a specific group? Those often marginalized are more sensitive and meticulous. Their diversity, their actions based on community, identity, politics, and urban rights, and their simple participation and access to public spaces—do they need to be considered?

2.4 Contemporary Art & The Financial Centre

Under the constraints of the government or capital, public art in the financial areas of London, such as the installations at Canary Wharf and the sculptures in the City of London, reflect a tendency towards compliance. These artworks emphasize the existing order. While they, like grand public sculptures or installations, project a cohesive and complete image of the city, they often sacrifice the public's ability to think and participate as urban stakeholders. These public artworks sometimes become manifestations of political achievements or even reduce "urban beautification" to a display of politics[6]. In this regard, North Korea's public art serves as an extreme case in point. "Political art is pervasive in North Korea, often manifesting in grandiose proportions and delivering unambiguous, hammer-and-sickle-laden messages." [7] Public sculptures typically revolve around monumental portraits glorifying the Great Leaders (Fig. 5). Art, utilized ubiquitously as a propaganda tool, perpetually emanates political signals. Within these public realms, the artist does not represent individuality but belongs to the state. Without exception, public art sculptures relentlessly promote and reinforce the ideology of the government and its leadership. This extreme example provides valuable insights for us to understand the Canary Wharf Group's control over public art.



Fig. 5 Public sculpture in North Korea: In memory of the Great Leader
 Broda Photography. "North Korea," October 14, 2016.
<https://www.brodaphotography.com/blog/2016/4/6/adventures-in-north-korea>.

Public art installations at Canary Wharf are planned, curated, and installed by the Canary Wharf Group. The Canary Wharf Group, originally known as Olympia & York, acquired Canary Wharf from the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). At that time, in a bid to stimulate development growth, the LDDC had packaged up the land for sale to the highest bidder. However, the Canary Wharf Group was not merely an investor; they became the unequivocal overseers of this land. They possess the entire expanse of Canary Wharf, exercising centralized governance and maintenance over it. Illustrated in the accompanying land ownership map of Canary Wharf (Fig. 6), it becomes evident how the Canary Wharf Group, as the sole landowner, exercises control and stewardship over its domain. This concentrated ownership and managerial structure endow the Canary Wharf Group with significant authority and influence in the planning and placement of public art installations. Consequently, the style and messaging of the public art align seamlessly with the group's overarching strategy and vision.



Fig. 6 Canary Wharf Ownership Map
 (created by the author)

Curated public art especially in such a prominent financial center, are not mere decorations; they're deliberate political and economic strategies. They portray the prosperity, development, and international stature of Canary Wharf, serving as tangible evidence of the government or political groups' "efforts" and "growth". However, this international image is entirely disconnected from its surrounding neighborhoods and communities such as Poplar, Bow, and Canning Town, presenting a modern, international image dominated by large corporations. The Canary wharf group try to overshadow the cultural significance of the local community, its values, and its rich history and heritage. The act of Canary wharf challenges the true meaning and function of artistic facilities or artworks, redirecting them from expressions of urban residents' emotions, thoughts, and lives to political showpieces. Although this form of art displays the effects of urban beautification, it sometimes overlooks people's awareness and thoughts as urban entities, neglecting residents' demands for civic life in their daily urban experience.

In stark contrast are the artistic spaces spontaneously generated by Artists Groups, like the graffiti tunnels near Waterloo and street performances. These art forms are termed "Urban-Scale Poverty Art"[8]. Such artistic spaces are rebellious and spontaneous, representing a fluid and unrestricted force. Methods such as graffiti, drama, music, fashion, and media not only showcase people's desire to confront power but also reflect spontaneous creativity. They can imagine alternatives in an inevitable backdrop and persist in an unstable and constantly changing urban

landscape. Another contrasting case to Canary Wharf is Trinity Buoy Wharf, located in London's Docklands. This area was once London's primary nautical survey and cartography center. After Eric Reynolds' regeneration project in the 1990s, it transformed into a thriving artistic and creative community. Reynolds' strategy harnessed the unique history and architecture of the area, providing space for artists, creative enterprises, and educational institutions to foster an open and supportive environment for artists. Offering artists "cheap workshops and studios, all cosily placed next to each other, thereby slaying at a stroke the twin demons that perpetually stalk the urban artist - poverty and isolation." [9] (Fig. 7) Within the community groups at Trinity Buoy Wharf, artists are no longer image representatives of capital and politics but transient clients and beneficiaries. The characteristics of "Lighter, quicker, cheaper" [10] in 'Tactical Urbanism' policies have attracted numerous artists, allowing for free creative expression from a producer's perspective. This innovative method can draw in citizens, respond to urban needs and challenges. However, quick and low-cost solutions might not always be the most sustainable or eco-friendly. Rapid urban interventions may not consider the long-term needs and visions of existing communities, and artists might not situate artworks based on urban geography or conditions. This might lead to tensions between communities and artists, with locals feeling that artists are "used" to serve a particular development or commercial strategy rather than genuinely serving the community.



Fig. 7 Artists' Workshops in Trinity Buoy Wharf

Wharf, Trinity Buoy. "Container City 2." Trinity Buoy Wharf. Accessed September 19, 2023.
<https://www.trinitybuoywharf.com/workspaces/container-city-2>.

To ensure the success and effective presentation of public art, it is crucial to delve deeply into the intricate relationships among diverse communities, curators, and artists. Such relationships are particularly complex in an urban setting, as exemplified by the stark economic disparities between Canary Wharf and its neighboring communities, such as Poplar. In the context of a 21st-century global financial hub, with shifting employment patterns and evolving use of existing commercial buildings, is it possible to reimagine a more balanced and vibrant space and setting for public art to shape the public realm? Public spaces in Canary Wharf are undergoing transformations. Yet, the question arises: Should the Canary Wharf Group move beyond merely being a land custodian and take a more proactive role in guiding these changes, aligning them with their long-term vision for the public domain?

3. In The Zone: The Exceptions Of Canary Wharf

From compliant, government and capital-led public art, to rebellious and spontaneous local artistic practices, London's public art spaces constitute a multi-layered, interactive urban spatial network. Through this investigation, we will not only understand how art shapes and mirrors urban spaces and residents' lives but also delve into the broader social and political roles art plays within public life. Ultimately, we will look forward to future trends of public art spaces in London and how they, along with public art, may transform into new forms of public domain, serving as means to engage, comprehend, produce, and transform urban spaces.

In the 21st century, the concept of the public domain has undergone profound shifts. Drawing insights from the work "In Search of New Public Domain: Analysis and Strategy" by Arnold, Hajer, Maarten & Reijndorp, the term "public domain" is not limited to just physical places within cities. It symbolically extends to a sphere of social relationships that transcend our immediate circles of friends, family, and professional connections. Within this text, they define the 'public domain' as "those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually

occurs." [11] As urbanization progresses, traditional public spaces like streets, parks, and squares are gradually losing their inherent roles and significances. What is sought after are spaces that offer novel experiences, provoke fresh perspectives, and shift perceptions. Such domains are not solely physical realms but crucially serve as arenas that provide an escape from the constraints of personal, familial, and professional relations. Using the public space surrounding the Pompidou Centre as an exemplar, it not only boasts sectional disparities, visual intertwines, and interlocking public arenas, but also showcases a rich tapestry of architectural structures and diverse purposes. It successfully embodies the multifunctionality and multiplicity of the modern public domain, offering a locale for interaction, communication, and experience. Such domains are not merely open arenas; they are nexus points of culture and social convergence.

Martin Murray, in his "Urbanism of Exception," posited that at the dawn of the 21st century, the traditionally public authority-managed urban space rights have been gradually eroded by privatization strategies. This shift resulted in the fragmentation of territorial sovereignty and the emergence of new regulatory paradigms. [12] To increase flexibility for real estate developers, they began advocating for more malleable land-use principles to create mixed-use environments. This transition was accompanied by the privatization and commercialization of public spaces. These areas are not purely the traditional "public" or "private," but are influenced by new forms of private regulation. This point was also touched upon in "In Search for a New Public Domain," suggesting that "traditional urban spaces such as streets, parks, and squares can even be strictly non-public in a sense—like privately-managed collective spaces—but still function as public domains." [13]

Taking China as an example, recent urban development has seen a surge in "gated communities." While these areas are open to the public, they are, in reality, strictly managed and controlled privately. Urban residential areas are generally composed of these enclosed communities, especially upscale ones. Examples include Beijing's "Zhonghai Zi Yu Mansion" and Shanghai's "Greentown Rose Garden." They are often equipped with premium amenities like gyms, swimming pools, and children's playgrounds. These communities emphasize safety and privacy, providing residents with a sense of being in a "safe haven." Not only are there dedicated security personnel, but also surveillance cameras and access control systems.

3.1 Curating Canary Wharf

Canary Wharf, heralded as the "UK's largest repository of public art" [14], undeniably stands at the crossroads of urban development and artistic contention. Behind the scenes of real estate ventures and commercial interests, the Canary Wharf Group endeavors to project a distinctive urban persona - an amalgam of art, finance, and lifestyle. Keith Watson posits, "Art has been at the heart of Canary Wharf from the outset." [15] He further professes that "purchasing, commissioning, or lending public artworks is as crucial as erecting a 50-story building. These sculptures offer an alternate viewpoint to the rigid architectural lines, eliciting sensations of tranquility or exhilaration, relaxation or contemplation." [16] Clearly, there is an intent to disrupt the conventional paradigms of commercial development by intertwining art and business. However, this design philosophy is deeply rooted in the post-modern master plan created by SOM for Olympia & York before its transformation into the Canary Wharf Group. This plan is characterized by its emulation of classical-style plazas, tree-lined avenues, and circuses, yet notably lacks the presence of public art. In subsequent iterations, public artworks were deliberately positioned within these spaces, serving to bridge poorly connected areas, pedestrian tunnels, bridges, and the expansive reception areas of bank headquarters. This approach brings to mind Andy Warhol's unique perspective on "space": "Empty space is never-wasted space. Wasted space is any space that has art in it. [17]"

In Zone A (Fig. 8;9), the public art clearly aims to respond to and celebrate Canary Wharf's sustainability initiatives, seeking to resonate with the surrounding natural and urban environment. However, such efforts seem to be riddled with contradictions. Despite the emphasis on sustainability, it's peculiar that artists in the area seldom employ genuinely eco-friendly, renewable, or recyclable materials in their creations. Take, for example, Helaine Blumenfeld's "Meridiana" and

"Spirit of Life." While she attempts to bestow a distinct identity upon the space through her monumental sculptures, these imposing works contrast starkly with their adjacent natural surroundings, appearing quite discordant. Such design choices do not offer genuine insights or encourage profound contemplation for the viewers, let alone "prompting them to reflect on the present, the passage of time, and our choices in how to harness it to pursue our ambitions."¹⁹ This raises questions about whether, despite the heavy promotion of sustainability by both artists and corporate entities, their efforts are merely superficial, bypassing deeper ecological and social issues. More crucially, as "public" works of art, the audience encompasses the community and urban residents. Does this purported "sustainability" ethos genuinely align with the local community's values and historical context? Or is it merely a tool for corporate propaganda?



Fig. 8: Zone A-Westferry circus
(created by the author)

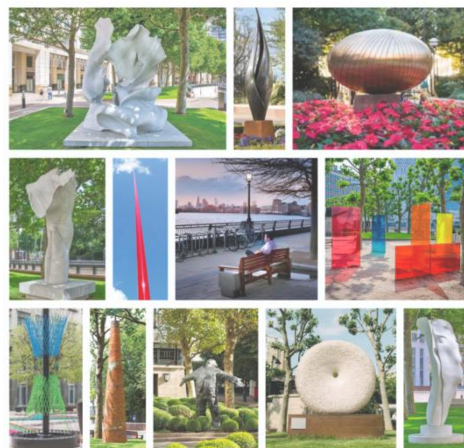


Fig. 9: Artworks in Zone A
(created by the author)

Zone B (Fig. 10;11) is not just confined to the display of art; it represents a fusion of commerce and leisure. However, this blend seems to demote art to a supplementary tool for commercial consumption rather than a pure expression of culture. In such a setting, the core value of art seems to be overshadowed by commercial fervor, rendering it secondary. Take Martin Richman's "Float" as an example. Its art description states that it "transforms an ordinary space into an exhilarating visual experience after dusk."²⁰ But such artistic expression seems more driven to cater to commercial purposes and popular aesthetics than to pursue genuine "publicness" and depth. Through this amalgamation of business and art, Zone B appears to diminish the genuine reflection of community and historical heritage that public art should provide. The essence of public art should be to forge deep emotional and cultural connections with its environment and audience, not to be simplified as a mere ornamentation for a shopping experience. This tight integration of art and commerce might raise concerns about the artist's intent and the independence of the art itself. One can't help but wonder: Has art become a puppet of capital, gradually losing its innate innocence and autonomy?

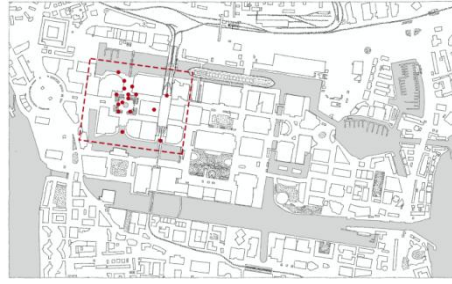


Fig. 10: Zone B-Cabot
(created by the author)



Fig. 11: Artworks in Zone B
(created by the author)

Zone C (Fig. 12;13) is situated at the heart of Canary Wharf, where the art is characterized by its capital positioning as a showcase of diversity. In terms of type, the Canary Wharf Group has installed permanent artworks in the One Canada Square Lobby and also regularly hosts temporary exhibitions in Canada Square Park. As the centerpiece of Canary Wharf, One Canada Square symbolizes business and finance. This may suggest that its public art is driven more by commercial and financial capital than by pure artistic innovation and cultural expression. Moreover, although these permanent public artworks are located in public spaces, the ground floor, which is off-limits to the general public for even photographs, implies that the art here is not only a part of private property but also caters to a selective audience rather than everyone. The inception of these "public" artworks seems merely a commercial ploy to adorn capital. Crossrail Place is not only the home to the Elizabeth Line but also boasts the Crossrail Place Roof Garden. It's designed to intertwine transportation with leisure, art with daily life. While the Roof Garden offers an urban oasis, showcasing flora from both hemispheres, questions arise about its sustainability. Has it taken into account the local climate, soil, and ecosystem? Or is it just a superficial project built for attracting visitors? Is the public art here truly for ecological and community cultural purposes, or merely to lure tourists and consumers?



Fig. 12: Zone C-Canada Square&Crossrail Place
(created by the author)

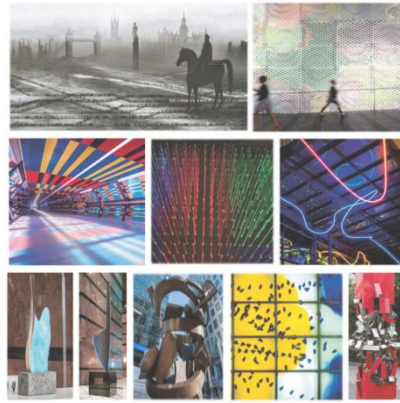


Fig. 13: Artworks in Zone C
(created by the author)

Both Zone D (Fig. 14;15) and Zone E (Fig. 16;17) are designed as leisure oases amidst towering buildings. While both Jubilee Park and Wood Wharf emphasize harmony and tranquility with nature, in such a highly urbanized and commercialized setting, this "nature" might be more of a man-made design and plan than a genuine natural environment. This could cause these spaces to lose the real possibility of connecting with true nature, turning into a form of artificial, superficial greening. Do public artworks genuinely reflect the community's history, culture, and values, or are they merely in place to attract tourists and homebuyers? In this commercial milieu, the authenticity and independence of art might be challenged. The focus of public art seems to fall more on "public" than "art", and the creation of even a brief yet effective open public space might be the most anticipated, if not the only anticipated, aspect of public art. Meanwhile, uninspiring and nonconstructive pieces might just end up being mere fig leaves in these so-called public spaces.

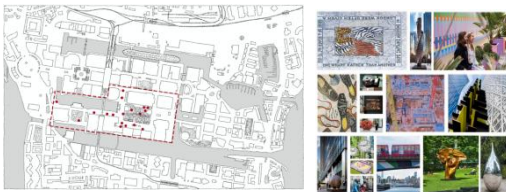


Fig. 14: Zone D-Jubilee&Bank Street
(created by the author)

Fig. 15: Artworks in Zone D
(created by the author)



Fig. 16: Zone E-Montgomery Square&Wood Wharf
(created by the author)

Fig. 17: Artworks in Zone E
(created by the author)

In Ken Worpel's work, "Here Comes the Sun"[18], he highlights the unique form of sculpture gardens as public spaces, with Vigeland Park exemplifying these artistic public spaces (Fig. 18). Although there are varying subjective opinions on the art pieces within them, they are universally acknowledged as successful examples of public art spaces. In contrast, the public spaces surrounding Canary Wharf present a starkly different picture. Here, the imposing edifices of financial buildings dominate the skyline, impossible to overlook. This compels us to ponder: Should we reevaluate the Canary Wharf area with a more critical lens, viewing it as an amalgamation of public space and art exhibition? Or perhaps further, perceive it as a grand open-air art gallery, exploring its potential and capacities in the fusion of public art and urban space?



Fig. 18: Sculptures by Gustav Vigeland in Vigeland Park, Frogner Park, Oslo: an enormously popular mixture of humanist, kitsch and classical figurative traditions.



Worpole, Ken. *Here Comes the Sun : Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2000. Accessed September 19, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

In Canary Wharf, all public art pieces and projects are sponsored and commissioned by Canary Wharf Group who provide all financial support for public art projects with a dedicated team, "Canary Wharf Arts + Events," responsible for planning and managing both permanent and temporary public art projects. When a single company or organization plays a dominant role in an area's public art endeavors (especially a large real estate developer like the Canary Wharf Group) can its choices and preferences in public art truly represent the wishes of the entire financial community and emerging residential communities? It's clear that the Canary Wharf Group has its vision for public spaces and art. Described as a "perfectly gilded city with a hefty price tag," yet lacking the true pulse of urban life, Canary Wharf is centered around efficient, controlled, and modern urban planning, including the public spaces between buildings. This raises the question: In what ways should public art be integrated into the urban public environment?

As a commercial entity, the primary objective of the Canary Wharf Group is profit and asset appreciation. Its unilateral decisions on public art might lean towards pieces that draw more foot traffic, enhance its property value, or strengthen its brand image. If the curatorial team lacks diversity or is driven by specific commercial interests of the group, can public art truly reflect and serve the needs and desires of the community? Art in public museums and galleries exists within a defined enclosed space, and visitors can freely choose whether to enter and to view or not view the artwork. However, public art in Canary Wharf is situated in the open public spaces, presenting itself along the pathways frequented by finance professionals, the parks where leisure-seekers gather, and the malls and plazas where consumers and tourists linger. It both grants people the right to appreciate art and simultaneously denies them the right to opt-out. While urban public art originates from the art community, urban public spaces do not solely belong to the realm of art. Public art inherently exists within the overlapping space of "artistic public spaces" and "general public spaces." If public art in Canary Wharf cannot establish relevance, fail to resonate with the public, or isn't interpreted or eliciting targeted responses, it might become overlooked and lose its essence, rendering it merely as "art" without impactful significance and remain as negative example of urbanism of exception.

4. Empty Spaces: Analysis of art forms and practices against the potential new forms of public art and public space

Canary Wharf and its adjacent areas showcase two distinctly different paradigms of urban development: one characterized by the concentration of power and wealth, the other by rejuvenation infused with vitality and community spirit. Canary Wharf, as the financial hub of East London, is a

dense thicket of skyscrapers, exuding a modern financial workspace juxtaposed with luxurious living experiences. Its art and design often prioritize globalization and commercial merit. While this model brings significant economic gains, it inadvertently lacks the genuine urban essence and human touch. In contrast, Cody Dock, an old dockyard located just east of Canary Wharf at the mouth of the River Lea, was once abandoned and overlooked (Fig. 19). However, in recent years, through thoughtful redesign and revitalization, it has transformed into a vibrant community heart and public space. Here, there's a profound respect for local culture and history. By offering platforms such as exhibitions, performances, workshops, and other cultural events, artists and community residents are encouraged to engage and interact, underscoring the importance of community participation and grassroots leadership (Fig. 20). For instance, community members can learn to craft sculptures or other public art pieces in workshops, subsequently displaying them in shared spaces. Collaborative murals created by community residents and local artists not only beautify the region but also furnish residents with avenues to express themselves and share their narratives.



Fig. 19: Cody Dock in the past

Cody Dock. “Work/Live Moorings,” n.d. <https://codydock.org.uk/moorings/>.



Fig. 20: Activities in the Cody Dock

Time Out London. “Cody Dock Summer Live | Things to Do in London,” May 30, 2023. <https://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/cody-dock-summer-live>.

In envisioning the future, as the post-pandemic era sees a decline in office space utilization, the vibrancy of Canary Wharf's street life may wane. However, this opens up opportunities for nearby entities and stakeholders to re-envision and re-energize the area. At present, the governance and curatorial team of Canary Wharf appears hesitant to collaborate with external community and artistic bodies, largely due to concerns about potential depreciation of their property's rental value. Yet, as urban landscapes evolve, such collaborations might not be entirely out of reach.

However, a prevailing challenge in large-scale developments remains: ensuring inclusivity and accessibility. Local community arts organizations, such as Arts For All, play a pivotal role in supporting underprivileged communities in the vicinity. With increasing vacancies in Canary Wharf, there's immense potential for these entities to transform these voids into beneficial and meaningful community hubs.

4.1 Couple on Seat

Lynn Chadwick is undoubtedly a prolific and influential artist whose works are scattered across the globe, whether in public spaces or private collections. At Canary Wharf, a sculpture named "Couple on Seat" (Fig. 21;22) is strategically placed at the very center of the northern entrance of Cabot Square. This not only highlights the artistic value of the piece but also underscores the high regard the Canary Wharf Group has for this particular work. However, with the abstracted couple sitting on the only available seat it transforms the public space into something a little sinister and bleak... 'we have a seat, you don't!'



Fig. 21: "Couple on Seat" from the official promotional photo
Canary Wharf. "Lynn Chadwick: Couple on Seat." Accessed September 22, 2023.
<https://canarywharf.com/artwork/lynn-chadwick-couple-on-seat/>.

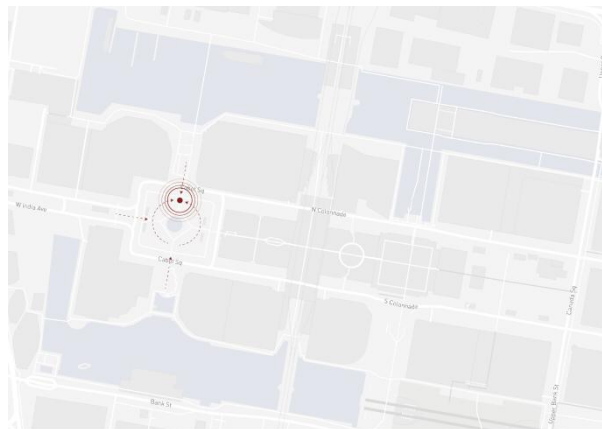


Fig. 22: The location of "Couple on Seat"
(created by the author)

In the rapid pulse of modern cities, the role of public art has evolved. It's no longer just about aesthetics; it now plays a crucial part in conversing with the public and the urban space. It bears the responsibility of enlivening city spaces and imbuing them with meaning. Given the bustling business environment of Canary Wharf, the placement of a piece like "Couple on Seat" prompts deeper contemplation. Is the motive behind its placement to elevate the brand image of the area? Or is it an authoritative statement about the locale? Has the power play behind such a decision overshadowed the intrinsic value of the art itself?

Delving deeper into the relationship between the piece and its surrounding space, the issues become more apparent. While "Couple on Seat" offers a visual element that contrasts with the surrounding modern architecture, its presence in the square feels more like a "decorative" feature rather than engaging in a genuine interaction or dialogue with the space and the public (Fig. 23). Were this artwork to be removed, the overall functionality and form of the square would remain largely unchanged. What does this imply? It suggests that the artwork, in this context, feels more like an isolated object rather than a medium truly engaging with the public and the space.



Fig. 23: The plaza environment surrounding the sculpture

Wikimedia.org. "File:Cabot Square, Canary Wharf - June 2008.Jpg - Wikimedia Commons," June 2008.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cabot_Square%2C_Canary_Wharf_-_June_2008.jpg.

When we discover that there's another almost identical "Sitting Couple" (Fig. 24) sculpture in HongKong, deeper questions emerge. "Sitting Couple," designed by Lynn Chadwick, is situated at the entrance of the Standard Chartered Bank headquarters in Hong Kong, adjacent to the Central Plaza Shopping Center. This location offers the sculpture a unique display platform amidst the bustling city. While "Sitting Couple" presents a visual impact, from a functional and interactive standpoint, it might lack direct engagement with the public. The entrance of the bank is a high-trafficked pedestrian area, and "Sitting Couple" might not be entirely integrated into this environment. It could be perceived as an isolated element suggesting that we slow down, whereas in Canary Wharf the piece excludes us all together and waits for the ground floor of surrounding office blocks to become active grounds with activity, use and flows of everyday life.



Fig. 24: "Sitting Couple" in HongKong

Wu, Ellice. "Lynn Chadwick in Central." Wording Art, August 13, 2016.

<http://www.wordingart.com/2016/08/lynn-chadwick-in-central/>.

Moreover, does public art truly possess a replicable nature? When a piece of art is duplicated and positioned within entirely distinct public spaces, does it retain its inherent significance and value? Before addressing these inquiries, we must first clarify the objectives of public art. Public art is not merely for decoration or for augmenting the aesthetic value of a space. It also serves numerous crucial roles, such as mirroring the culture and history of a community, fostering public engagement and dialogue, or introducing unexpected moments into the mundane urban life. Ideally, public artworks should meld seamlessly with their environment, offering the public an opportunity for deep contemplation, interaction, or simple appreciation. In the case of Cabot Square, site specific art that could act as public function may prove to be instrumentally better for providing public space or public realm that is actually for the public. What would the likes of Poplar Union do with such a specific site? From understanding their previous work there would likely be a range of partnerships and collaborations that would seek softening through planting/gardens, seating areas, informal areas, and a level of care and trust on people utilizing outdoor space – not unlike their approach to Bartlett Park.

4.2 Space for New Forms of Public Art and Active Grounds

The redefinition and repurposing of urban spaces have emerged as an important challenge in a time of urban transformation. The epoch of the pandemic acts as a potent catalyst for this transformation. With the pandemic triggering an extensive shift towards remote work and online business activities, traditional office spaces and commercial areas are experiencing an unparalleled rate of vacancies. In this milieu, the reuse and redevelopment of commercial zones have ascended as critical subjects in urban planning and innovative business models. The metamorphosis from business hubs to art and cultural districts is not an isolated phenomenon. As the sharing economy blossoms and vacancy rates of traditional offices swell, the foundational strata of cities are undergoing discernible changes. An augmentation of public spaces is evident, granting citizens enriched avenues for leisure and interaction. Thus, the emphasis on the utilization of public spaces and research on public art installations is paramount. If one were to hypothesize about integrating organizations, focused more on community and cultural history, into Canary Wharf, supplanting the Canary Wharf Group, what kind of public art might emerge? What cultural interplays might this juxtaposition unveil?

There indeed exists a tension between art and its public nature. A brilliantly designed artwork might inject new vigor and appeal to a public space, but if it fails to truly cater to the public's needs, its intrinsic value warrants profound contemplation. In a recent online discussion organized by PACE Gallery, called “Outside In: Art in Public Space”, public art commissioners, curators and artists opined that public art shouldn't solely be the prerogative of large cities, but rather a collaborative engagement of every community relevant to the urban area. When art is displayed in public venues, the audience might be oblivious or indifferent to the identity of the artist, resulting in an interaction with the work that is direct and unmediated. Within the realm of public art, the aspiration is not merely aesthetic appeal, but a profound connection and utility with the daily lives of the public. For instance, during the Outside In : Art in Public Space discussion, Leo Villareal described his pieces as ‘digital campfires’ -“Despite employing highly technical materials, they resonate with natural phenomena that we universally comprehend, such as the movement of water or sunsets—events to which we are hardwired to respond.”[19] ‘digital campfires’ evoke awe and wonder in ways akin to those natural occurrences. Conversely, public artworks situated at Canary Wharf appear, in certain respects, not to meet these standards. While they serve as a visual centerpiece, whether they truly cater to the masses and foster genuine interactions and connections with everyday life remains a topic of debate.

5. Conclusion

Public art, in today's society, is not merely an adornment for urban landscapes but also serves as a vessel reflecting a city's culture, history, and spirit. Its creation and existence transcend pure aesthetic value, acting instead as a medium to convey specific messages, emotions, and ideologies to the public. This is why a simple sculpture or painting can become emblematic of a city, intertwining itself with the daily lives of its inhabitants. While the Canary Wharf Group, as a commercial entity, might place greater emphasis on its economic value and branding, it raises a pivotal question: What is the true meaning and worth of public art? Public art is not just an object presented before citizens and tourists; it is a medium for communication, emotional resonance, and fostering interaction.

Creating and selecting public art necessitates a close integration with the surrounding artistic communities. This fusion not only catalyzes richer, more diversified creative thinking but also deepens the close ties between art and the community. Revering and maintaining the history and culture of the community are foundational to achieving this goal, ensuring that public art genuinely reflects and responds to the core values and traditional beliefs of the community.

For financial districts like Canary Wharf, the pathway forward should be deepening understanding and respect for community culture, proactively establishing collaborative

relationships with local artistic groups, stimulating public enthusiasm for participating in public space planning, and highlighting the diversity and inclusiveness of art and culture. This is particularly crucial because, in a diverse social environment, everyone should have the opportunity to understand, appreciate, and participate in art, aiding in the establishment of a more inclusive and diverse community. Simultaneously, financial districts like Canary Wharf should adopt a more open-minded approach, catering to the cultural needs of different populations, and not being confined solely to traditional and commercial frameworks. The inclusiveness and diversity of art and culture are not merely superficial; they need to penetrate into the hearts of the people, becoming a part of community culture and shared spiritual wealth constructed and shared by community members. Through these efforts, we can transform Canary Wharf into a modern financial district that truly reflects community culture, integrates diverse arts, and is inclusive of all perspectives.

References

- [1] Finkelpearl, Tom, and Acconci, Vito. *Dialogues in Public Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001. Accessed August 20, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. Fangfang. Research on power load forecasting based on Improved BP neural network. Harbin Institute of Technology, 2011.
- [2] Murray, Martin J, and Cambridge University Press. *The Urbanism of Exception : The Dynamics of Global City Building in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge ; New York ; Port Melbourne ; Delhi ; Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- [3] Ren, Julie. "Envisioning Art Spaces." In *Engaging Comparative Urbanism: Art Spaces in Beijing and Berlin*, 1st ed., 29–54. Bristol University Press, 2021.
- [4] Peter Timms, *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?*, UNSW Press, 2004, p17. ISBN 0-86840-407-1.
- [5] Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary art a very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- [6] Zhang, Hongyan. *Urban Cultural Capital Theory*. 2nd ed. Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2010.
- [7] Hays, Jeffrey. "ART in NORTH KOREA: GIANT STATUES, PROPAGANDA and MANSUDAE STUDIO | Facts and Details." factsanddetails.com. Accessed September 19, 2023. https://factsanddetails.com/korea/North_Korea/Arts_Culture_Sports/entry-7337.html.
- [8] Loukaki, A. (Ed.). (2020). *Urban Art and the City: Creating, Destroying, and Reclaiming the Sublime* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367132972>
- [9] "Reynold's Law." *The Telegraph*, March 30, 2002. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/property/3300326/Reynolds-law.html>.
- [10] Maciver, Megan. "Eric Reynolds, Master of Low-Cost, High-Return Public Space Interventions in London and NYC." RSS, August 8, 2010. <https://www.pps.org/article/eric-reynolds-master-of-low-cost-high-return-public-space-interventions-in-london-and-nyc>.
- [11] Hajer, Maarten A, and Arnold Reijndorp. *In Search of New Public Domain*. Nai010 Publishers, 2001.
- [12] Murray, Martin J. "Setting the Stage." Part. In *The Urbanism of Exception: The Dynamics of Global City Building in the Twenty-First Century*, 21–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- [13] Hajer, Maarten A, and Arnold Reijndorp. *In Search of New Public Domain*. Nai010 Publishers, 2001.
- [14] Canary Wharf. "Art & Culture," n.d. <https://canarywharf.com/the-estate/art-culture/>.
- [15] Canary Wharf. "Art Map," 2022. <https://canarywharf.com/artwork/art-map/>.
- [16] Canary Wharf. "Art Map," 2022. <https://canarywharf.com/artwork/art-map/>.
- [17] Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: from A to B and back again*. Penguin, 2017.
- [18] Worpole, Ken. *Here Comes the Sun : Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2000. Accessed September 19, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- [19] www.pacegallery.com. "Pace Gallery | Outside In: Art in Public Space," n.d. <https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/journaloutside-in-art-in-public-space/>.