

Transforming Contested Space through Street and Sound Art

Community Arts for Peace in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Brief Summary

This policy brief explores community arts in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). While the arts have been a dominant mode of peacebuilding in BiH, they have primarily been engaged as a tool of inter-ethnic reconciliation. This policy brief suggests a more expansive space for the arts. Examining the interventions of the Street Arts Festival Mostar and the Mostar Sound Archive, it shows how the arts contribute to processes of transforming and reimagining space in the city. The Street Arts Festival Mostar curates a series of murals which visually and spatially transform urban space, while the Mostar Sound Archive enables diverse audience to reexperience urban space through the stories of art in the city. The policy brief makes several key recommendations for policymakers engaged in art and peacebuilding in post-conflict spaces:

- 1) Recognition of a broader range of artforms as a source of knowledge on politics and society
- 2) Diversification of funding frames to account for the diverse stories, narratives, and experiences represented within the arts
- 3) Fund small-scale arts initiatives at the community level
- 4) Support production of more accessible art, particularly initiatives which utilise public space

This policy brief:

- Provides a brief overview of the role of the arts after the 1990s war with regard to politics, society and urban space;
- Shows how the arts have been key to challenging and overcoming multifaceted politics of division;
- Introduces key challenges to creating and sustaining arts in Mostar, BiH, focusing on space for the arts and funding;
- Highlights two arts initiatives that re-imagine Mostar's urban space beyond simplistic narratives of ethnonational division.

Background

Mostar has been characterised as a divided city. The Bosnian War (1992-1995) fractured the urban landscape, changed Mostar's demographics, and reconfigured the city along ethnonational lines. In 2004, the Office of the High Representative (OHR) reunified Mostar administratively. Shared governance agreements have resulted in a situation of "political paralysis" (Björkdahl 2013, 210), with profound impacts on everyday life, including opportunities for political and social expression.

In BiH, the international community viewed the arts as an "essential component" of peacebuilding efforts (Zelizer 2003, 64). After the war, there was a proliferation of top-down arts initiatives which supported reconstruction efforts. Initiatives facilitated cross-ethnic dialogue, promoting processes of social inclusion and reconciliation. Initiatives also emphasised economic development, with investment offering means for arts initiatives to flourish.

Local actors have also emphasised the importance of social connection, while challenging conceptions which reduce the arts to mere tools for overcoming division. Instead, local actors emphasise how the arts offer space to tell diverse stories about politics and society. Where engaged in public space, the arts can help to create new forms of community and reconfigure urban environments beyond conflict imaginaries (Dugandzić 2015).

Study methods

This study is based on two community arts initiatives: Street Arts Festival Mostar and the Mostar Sound Archive. Research in Mostar was conducted in September-October 2019 and February-March 2020, with further research carried out online. Research involved interviews with artists and curators, and site observations. This was supplemented by interviews with arts and culture actors in BiH. Desk-based research supported insights into cultural policy in BiH and peacebuilding in Mostar.

Arts Funding

Funding for the arts in BiH is fragmented. Institutional structures established under Dayton leave unresolved tensions around shared culture (Fontana 2013). Currently, culture is managed at the entity level and sometimes funded locally. The state government largely acts as arbiter to ensure equitable access to funding. This funding landscape limits the forms of knowledge that emerge through the arts, legitimising ethnonational politics.

The international community has been an advocate for the importance of arts and culture for social and political development. However, there has been a steady decline in aid provided to BiH, with a 64% decrease between 1999 and 2019 (World Bank 2022), with a decline in arts funding during this period. This had a pronounced impact in Mostar due to the relatively high levels of international support immediately after the war.

International funding is allocated through competitive processes. Acknowledging the efforts of international community actors to demystify their processes, grant applications require a high level of technical knowledge which may not be accessible to all applicants. This results in a largely homogenous artistic landscape where larger and previously successful initiatives run by organisations with existing networks are prioritised. This restricts the ability of community arts initiatives to successfully compete for grant money.

Community arts actors rely on local, national, and international funders to support their activities. This encourages actors to shape interventions around funder aims rather than local priorities. This also forces artistic actors into a competitive market to fund activities. Though many artistic actors value cooperation, this process can act to disincentivise collaboration and knowledge sharing at the local level (Carabelli 2018, 159). Without a stable source of funding, organisations also use alternative funding strategies including crowdfunding and rely on volunteers to support activities. This limits their reach.

Space for Art

In Mostar, cultural institutions are often perceived as promoting particular ethnonational groups. Though institutions offer programmes which represent a spectrum of interests, and dialogue between institutions has been increasingly evident in recent years, their reach is limited by this framing.

Grassroots and community arts spaces aim to bridge the gap. In Mostar, there are several arts and cultural spaces which open to all and encourage community organising. This includes OKC Abrašević and the Street Arts Festival Mostar. These community arts spaces are also impacted by lack of space and access to resources.

Public space has been a productive site of organising. In this context, art can prompt discussions on social and political issues, communicate new ideas, and help to develop alternative imaginations. Public art is often more accessible to wide and diverse audiences.

Street Art Festival Mostar

Initiated in 2012, the Street Art Festival Mostar draws together a diverse community of street artists with residents and visitors. Each year, festival organisers curate murals on public, commercial, and residential walls in the city.

Murals feature striking aesthetics and tell stories about activism, arts and culture, heritage, and nature. Artists use murals as a communicative tool, speaking out about political and social issues in BiH. For example, a piece created by May in 2014 comments: ‘Sokratovo saznanje, znam da ništa ne znam is not available in my country’ – ‘The Socratic knowledge, I know that I know nothing is not available in my country.’

Artists communicate hope for future connection. For example, a mural by Sarajevo-based collective STF Crew depicts a futuristic Mostar where people continue to live in one city. Murals have also depicted local icons. Aleksandro Reis’ mural of Luciano Pavarotti is a nod to the opera singer’s role in establishing the Pavarotti Music Centre, an important space for artistic expression in Mostar. The mural features the colours and patterns of BiH and Brazil, showing how art connects the local and the global.



Pavarotti by Aleksandro Reis. Photo: Lydia C. Cole

Festival organisers curate these messages. Murals which communicate connection have been placed on the residential walls of Šantićeva Street, a formerly mixed neighbourhood on the former frontlines of the 1990s war. Colourful murals and those imagining a connected future have been engaged for the redevelopment of a

disused playground in the city centre, while murals on the Old Glass Bank building, an abandoned bank located on the former frontlines engages with the social and political issues of Mostaris including, experiences of social alienation (Forde 2019, 115), and hopes for the future amidst the legacies of conflict. This curation provides new spaces of connection in the city, and murals play a part in how residents and visitors locate themselves within the city.

The Street Art Festival Mostar shows how arts can be used to communicate messages which reflect diverse communities. The curating of these messages attends to broader community-led processes which seek to reinvigorate social narratives and space. Where engaged collaboratively with local actors, street art can open new spaces for community to flourish.

Mostar Sound Archive

The Mostar Sound Archive was created by Ronald Panza, OKC Abrašević, supported by the Art of Peace project. The archive features sound stories which explore the role of art in making the city. Each sound story is comprised of interview material, informal conversations, spoken word performances, music, and background sounds. These sounds situate and emplace the stories of art within the urban environment.

Each sound story is “immersed” in Mostar’s politics. Produced between 2020 and 2021 the archive is located within broader struggles over the long-awaited elections in December 2020, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the archive is intended as “a faithful and lasting document, a truly critical, uncertain, new moment for the city of Mostar” (Panza 2020).

Sound stories communicate stories about artistic spaces and forms of expression intimately tied to Mostar including, the Street Arts Festival, poetry, rock music, and theatre. A sound story on the Partisan Memorial Cemetery offers a performative reading of architect Bogdanovic’s ‘The City of My Friends’ and guides the listener through the space of the monument. The sound story prompts an encounter with the past, present, and future of this space to prompt audience engagement with its past, present, and future.

Processes of community archiving place emphasis on local knowledge about society and politics. The Mostar Sound Archive makes this knowledge accessible to its audiences. Stories will be made available via the University of Durham data repository, as well as exhibited in public and community exhibition space. In this way, creative processes of archiving can play a significant role in opening physical and imagined space, making urban space accessible to diverse audiences.

Recommendations

- **Recognise artists as important sources of knowledge about politics and society.** Funders take seriously the knowledge produced within the arts to better understand to priorities of communities.
- **Diversification of funding frames to account for the diverse stories, narratives, experiences of community arts initiatives.** Funders should be responsive to local knowledge, seeking feedback from communities.
- **Increase the range of funding opportunities available to community organisations. Small-scale seed funding could be increased to enable artists to test ideas.** Further support could be offered to applicants to navigate funding streams.

Support arts in public space. Public space enables community artists to reach wide audiences and holds significant potential in terms of transforming imaginaries of public space.

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The Project

The Art of Peace examines community-devised arts in peace formation in conflict-affected spaces including, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia, DR Congo, and Lebanon. This briefing is based on research conducted by Dr Lydia C. Cole and Professor Stefanie Kappler, with OKC Abrašević, in BiH. The project was funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, grant number AH/S001484/1).

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