

GentrificARTion:  
The Impact of Public Art on Community and Civic Changes in the RiNo  
District

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On my honor,  
I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

“Artivism,” or art with social justice messages, has gained popularity in the past several years. Activist art is often seen as public art when artists share their messages and work within a community. As a case study, this thesis uses the River North (RiNo) district in Denver, which in the past 20 years has transformed into an arts district, to understand the impact of public art, specifically murals, on the changes that occurred. To understand these changes, artists who are viewed as activist artists, local business owners and managers, and employees of art non-profits in the area were interviewed to better understand the impact of public art on district changes. This thesis reveals that as public art is becoming more popular it adds aesthetic value to a locale, that can result in gentrification. These two impacts of public art provide both a constructive factor by creating community connection and fostering social change and as a destructive factor through being a catalyst for gentrification. These factors have caused significant changes in the neighborhood makeup and resulted in both community members and artists using their platform to combat gentrification by involving the community in public art programming, using art to spread messages of the cultural history and social issues in the area, and using art to create awareness of the impact of development. Using this RiNo case study, the ideas of community involvement and education through public art can be applied to other locations facing gentrification.

Keywords: Public Art, Community, Gentrification, Civic Impact, Activism

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This thesis seeks to explain public art activism's positive and negative effects on creating community and civic change within the RiNo district in Denver. Public art creates positive change by developing community through public art projects and creating conversations. Public art also gives artists a platform to share their identities and spread messages of social justice. It also has civic advantages, as it can help people create a sense of place, add aesthetic value, and be a form of urban regeneration. However, public art can also harm a community and a city by being both a catalyst and cause of further gentrification. The RiNo district and Denver have recently been studied as the area changes significantly. However, the literature about Denver gentrification focuses on the civic historical changes and does not look at the efforts to prevent gentrification. In many discussions, the authors write about how more research needs to be done to address the impacts of public art as it becomes more popular in the public sector. Although prior research has addressed public art in Denver, none of the research queried both civic and community engagement by artists, local businesses, and non-profits through interviews to better understand how public art can be both a constructive and disruptive factor. This paper will seek to answer the question of what the impact of public art is on community and civic engagement in the RiNo district through an analysis of interviews is conducted with artists from the Denver area who consider themselves "activist artists", interviews with community art-based non-profits in the RiNo district, and short interviews conducted with area business owners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Community Impacts of Public Art*

The positive impacts of public art are that it helps create a sense of community through artists by involving the community in the art making process and can also speak to community

members through their messages. One way that public art works with communities is by sharing themes within the community and amplifying the voices of underrepresented community members. Delgado and Barton (1998) look at Latino Murals to see how they spread messages of community empowerment through a perspective of community strengths and assets by examining murals painted by Latino youth. They discuss how Latino murals, primarily in Los Angeles, are outlets for communities who often have few ways to express their public voices. Another way murals foster community is by using symbols that promote racial and ethnic pride, like the Virgin of Guadeloupe or pre-Columbian culture. Using symbols and topics in their art, develops a sense of community with people in their neighborhoods through the murals. Public art can create community through shared messages and contribute to community development by having the community engaged in the art making process. The mural making process involves multiple participants, including muralists, developers, and community members who are part of the shared history of the place. Delgado and Barton (1998) emphasize the importance of working within a community to create messages and provide community members with a voice. Involving the community in public art projects teaches community members how to create murals to perpetuate future art that reflects their community and their essential messages. Community collaboration and representation in public art can positively impact the community. Moss (2010) uses a case study of two murals in Philadelphia to examine how community collaboration and representation on a mural can positively impact the community to understand how they create a cultural identity and serve as a site of cultural negotiation. They talk about how, often in public art projects, artists and community members build relationships that impact the murals' content. The study found that when community members work together and collaborate, the murals reflect the community's visions and positively impact those within it because the community can

see themselves represented. After creating a mural, it becomes part of the community. However, having murals not reflective of the community can cause community harm.

The lack of connection between artists and their community can result in harm as the art piece is in the community long after the artist leaves, thus emphasizing how important it is for artists to involve the community in their art-making process. Palmer (2018) discusses the impact of how art becomes part of a community even after the artist leaves. However, the community must either take ownership of the piece or dismiss it. When the community is not involved in the artmaking process, there can be a disconnect between the artist's intentions for a piece and the public interpretation. Using interviews of actors in the Public Arts scene in Amsterdam, Zabrocki, Van Der Vaart, and Van Aalst (2010) analyze the disconnect between artists and communities when artists focus on sharing messages of social justice that are lost in translation by the public. They found that artists were concerned with the cultural-symbolic and broader social context of their work. On the other hand, city planners focused on the murals' socioeconomic impact to help create urban renewal and decrease vandalism. Like the city planners, investors and participating residents were also interested in the economic capital art could provide but were concerned about the art taking away previous institutions that were important to the neighborhood through development.

### *Civic Impacts on Public Art*

Public art can affect how the community interacts with an area's civic life and development. Hall and Robertson (2001) analyze public art as a form of urban regeneration by creating positive aesthetic advantages for cities. The authors make a list of how public art helps to develop a city by adding to land values, creating employment, attracting investments and



companies, adding to cultural tourism, contributing to the distinctiveness of a place, increasing the use of open land areas, and reducing levels of vandalism while increasing the longevity of buildings. Although public art has many advantages for promoting urban development, it can create harm when artists from outside the community create art. For public art, place-based activism emphasizes supporting local artists by hiring them to work on projects and working in the community to ensure that the art they are creating does not cause further harm. This is essential in public art as many cities hire globally renowned artists to add aesthetics to a place, often displacing or mistreating local artists. Using the Stokes Croft neighborhood in Bristol as a case study, Buser et al. (2013) examine the relationship between creative activism through public art and urban placemaking by showing how a sense of place is vital in mobilizing action through citizen engagement on urban regeneration through murals, public art messages of injustice, and a recent protest that occurred in the neighborhood. They examine how place-based activism at the micro-level can create neighborhood solidarity and help communicate anti-globalization messages while keeping places local. When done wrong, the dangers of urban renewal projects can result in increased globalization which can cause the local community to feel silenced. Enright and McIntyre (2019) present a case study on a festival in the Main Square of Toronto which aimed to revitalize its area through public art and community interaction. They discuss the harmful effects of artist-led urban renewal which is often a distraction from social and spatial injustices. However, there are adverse effects of urban renewal projects due to placemaking which is creating places that improve an individual's life. Having a place where community members and artists can have a public dialogue about a place and interact in places where they are often separate can help to bridge the gap. However, the locals who lived in the community

felt that they were not heard during the creation of the festival, causing a disconnect between the locals and those helping to create urban renewal.

The aesthetic appeal of public art can distract attention from social issues resulting in complicity in social fragmentation. However, public art, if done right, can also contribute significantly to the revitalization of cities by reviving business confidence, enhancing environmental quality, and increasing community participation by drawing community and outside attention to its redevelopment. Involvement from the private sector often causes adverse effects as it increases the values of developments and land (Miles, 1997). Once the private sector commissions art, it brings in outside artists to create artwork that questions a place's identity because the private sector does not often consider a place's history and community; which can result in gentrification. While public art has numerous economic advantages, including parts of effective urban renewal projects, it can also create harm through gentrification and displacement.

Deutsche and Ryan (1984) focus on the negative impacts of public art on civic identity, emphasizing gentrification's dangers. They use the Lower East Side as a case study because it was a working-class neighborhood for 160 years until the 1980s, when art galleries began opening in the neighborhood, attracting wealthy clientele. During this time, the job market in New York City also created 215,000 jobs, which caused a shift from blue-collar industries to white-collar industries taking over the city and resulting in 100,000 blue-collar jobs disappearing. This affected people of lower socioeconomic status who could no longer afford their homes, causing them to leave the neighborhood; this included many local artists. As a result, only galleries with collections from famous artists, primarily from outside the neighborhood, could afford to have art shown in the neighborhood. Deutsche and Ryan (1984)

argue that artists are victims of gentrification as the globalization of more well-known artists displaces local artists to create a gentrified civic identity. They focus on the impact of art on the first wave of gentrification. However, Mathews (2010) argues that since 1984, two more waves of gentrification have occurred. In the early 1990s, there was an increase in the development of more remote areas becoming gentrified as large-scale developers and the state became more involved in the process causing a decline in resistance and activism fighting gentrification. In the 2000s, gentrification continued to become more state-led rather than developer-led, resulting in its characterization shifting to a “global urban strategy” and federally funded gentrification efforts. The changes in gentrification have seen an alteration in where artists create their work as they move to less costly areas to create their work. However, as artists move into these areas, they attract people and developers to the area through the growth of the arts community. The community growth, in return, causes the private sector to seek out areas with a prevalent arts scene as the arts add to the aesthetic value of the neighborhood. This results in developing an area with a large art presence as it is an easy target for regeneration efforts and often causes displacement of the locals living in the neighborhood.

The solution Miles (1997) proposes is to have community and local arts organizations involved in producing public art so they can help define the civic identity of the space they inhabit. Polson (2021) conducted a recent study to investigate the increase in gentrification caused by social media posts related to the murals in the RiNo district. They focus on how the public art in Denver that aims to beautify urban areas can increase tourism through photos of the art posted on social media. The increase in art tourism in RiNo can cause socioeconomic change as tourists visit the neighborhood and contribute to the local economy. Polson (2021) talks about how activist artwork in the RiNo neighborhood had been erased to create murals that added

aesthetic value to the neighborhood. The article provides background information on the changes in the RiNo district due to development and the impact of the murals on the local economy through a digital ethnographic methodology of social media posts to focus on how artwork's aesthetics and digital footprint impact gentrification. While helpful in understanding the impact of public art, Polson's study does not consider the community and artists' perspectives.

The literature examines the relationship between the impact of art on gentrification. When developers use art as a weapon to increase a neighborhood's value and cause displacement, the community is harmed. If artists work with developers and the community, then they can help amplify the community's voice and create a connection. However, the gaps in the literature that they do not address are local businesses' perspectives of the changing neighborhood landscapes caused by the increase of public art, how artists are working within communities that have already become gentrified, and the impact of the label of an arts district on the community.

### *Context*

In 2005, two artists created the RiNo art district, combining Five Points, Globeville, Cole, and Elyria-Swansea. However, the arts district did not take off until 2010, when a local artist created Crush Walls Festival, which gained international success with muralists from all over the world coming to paint in RiNo (RiNo Arts District, 2022). Crush Walls helped brand RiNo as an art district. In 2015, RiNo became a Colorado State-certified "arts district" by forming a property-tax-funded Business Improvement District and General Improvement District, which resulted in an annual budget of \$1.3 million. Arts districts are planned cultural areas created through policy or active public intervention and are often framed as an economic development

strategy (Chapple, Jackson, and Martin, 2010). Many times, formal arts districts result from public intervention or policy. The goal of an arts district is to add value to a neighborhood through conferring legitimacy of artists, networking, and innovation; however, they are sometimes catalysts for development as the planning process includes local artists and stakeholders. In 2020, Crush Walls Festival ended when the founder had sexual assault allegations filed against him (Donahue, 2020), causing multiple new mural festivals to arise. The RiNo district recently released their strategic plan for 2022-2027 in which they emphasize their goals to create a healthy and welcoming art district, cultivate creative programming in the community, increase accessibility for small businesses and creative spaces, nurture the public art realm, and strengthen communication and relationships with the stakeholders (Purpose Aligned Consulting, 2022).

The RiNo district was part of a redlining initiative in the 1930s, which caused an increase in Hispanic migrants moving to the Southwest and settling down (Polson, 2021). This caused the population to move into RiNo, which also, at the time, had a large Black population. In 1929, the RiNo area had 75% of Denver's Black population. However, the percentage decreased over time. From 2000-2017, the number of African Americans in the area declined from 26.3% to 10.6%, while the White population grew from 27.4% to 63.6%. The changes in RiNo are part of a long history of the impacts of gentrification and development in Denver. The Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) implemented the urban renewal project created in 1958. It sought to improve impoverished areas through rehabilitation and the construction of low-income housing (Page and Ross, 2017). However, from the beginning, representatives with financial, real estate, and commercial interests dominated the board of commissioners. The project started in 1964 and aimed to transform the city into an attractive area. In the fall of 1969, neighborhood residents

brought their concerns about being displaced to the public; the fight to save their neighborhood gained support from several activist Chicano organizations as the neighborhood had a sizeable Chicano population. Unfortunately, DURA won the battle, and in the 1970s, it demolished most of the neighborhood, resulting in the removal of residents and businesses. Although the article focuses on the Auraria neighborhood, it was the first of several urban redevelopment projects in Denver that would displace Denver locals. The renewal projects Page and Ross (2017) discussed in the 1960s-70s resulted in displacement from the city center and caused further development in the neighborhoods that now make up parts of RiNo. The Chicano art movement in Denver also gained traction in the late 1960s-70s. Activists painted murals throughout Denver (Burbeck, 2021). As the Chicano population left Auraria due to urban renewal efforts, Chicano artists began to paint community murals throughout Denver to mobilize against gentrification. However, in recent years, the city, businesses, and festivals have hired artists who are either transplants to the city or international artists to add aesthetic value to the city. This has resulted in the community not knowing about the Chicano history of Denver and causing cultural erasure. In recent years the RiNo arts district used the murals to market itself and increase tourism and development.

## METHODS

This study used two different sampling methods depending on the population. The first population was artists who matched a criterion of living in Denver or surrounding areas, having painted murals in the RiNo district, and either marketing themselves online as activist artists or having reputations in the community for activist messages in their work. In contrast, the business population used a convenience sample to find business owners and retail workers in the RiNo neighborhood. To find the non-profit population, a purposive sample was used to find arts non-

profits online and snowball sampling to recruit people who fit the criteria. Fifteen people participated in the study including six artists, seven business owners and retail workers, and two residents who worked for arts non-profits. There were three interview guides used depending on subjects. After all the interviews concluded, they were coded as open codes, axial codes, and thematic codes (Saldaña, 2009) using NVivo for Mac (v 12.0). The thematic codes included positives, negatives, and demographics, with each code containing sub-codes (Appendix 1). However, there are limitations in the research as only one arts district was analyzed causing generalizations, and the research did not examine how gentrification impacts areas outside the RiNo district.

## RESULTS

All study participants focused on public art's positive and negative impacts. The artists talked about the positive ways they use their art to build and create conversations in their community. Although they focused on how they use their art to interact with the community in which they create art, the artists also emphasized how their art included their identity and the social justice issues they feel are essential. After an artist leaves a community and their mural is left, they believed it was vital that the messages that they created positively affect the community. Many community members interviewed had relationships with the artists who were locals in the neighborhood and interacted with the civic community. The businesses also talked about how the murals helped the RiNo district to brand itself as an arts district that brought in business. The murals not only helped bring in business, but they also helped spread messages in the community of both prevalent social issues and brought the community together. Even though the murals had many positive benefits for the community, they also had negative effects. Many

artists had a symbiotic relationship with the neighborhood businesses that commissioned them to create artwork and needed them for their careers. However, some of the commissions altered artists' visions and brought in outside artists that do not represent the community; this caused perceived harm. In addition, the rapid development growth in the neighborhood caused harm by contributing to gentrification by not including what the locals wanted. These combined factors impacted the RiNo community and caused a separation between the community and the city. Many community members also talked about the negative civic changes that occurred since the murals started in the neighborhood, mainly focusing on how there was significant community displacement, a lack of people in the neighborhood contributing to social change, and homelessness being a significant social issue in the neighborhood. Although these adverse effects exist in the neighborhood, there are also people trying to address these issues.

### *Gentrification*

#### *Collective history of RiNo.*

Many of the artists interviewed grew up near the RiNo district. However, none currently live in the area but in different parts of Denver and Northern Colorado. During the interviews, they talked about what the RiNo district was like before the murals began. They described it as an area full of abandoned buildings and warehouses. Many people did not live in the area due to its reputation for being dangerous. However, the people that owned the warehouses sold them to developers, and in return, they converted RiNo into what it is today. Many artists also started buying studio spaces in the RiNo area as the real estate was inexpensive. One artist talked about how the about the growth in the arts community.

There was a couple smaller, studio spaces and like DIY spaces, all throughout this little Brighton area. And it was a tighter group of artists. And we were all kind of together as far as us just trying to find cheap space to live and cheap studio space to work out of. And there was multiple spaces right here on Brighton that we that a lot of people had rented spaces from and there's a couple galleries too. But they see the value and all



the artists and how artists kind of really activate spaces and, create life from nothing...literally that's what an artist does.

The artists at the time were trying to find affordable studio space to create their art.

However, as the Denver community saw value in the artists creating art, their interest in the area grew, resulting in more people moving there. Another artist talked about how they had friends in the neighborhood who had lived in the area for multiple generations but were pushed out and lost their homes due to the increase in development. The story of this artist's friend is not unique, as the area was home to many people of color and significant levels of low-income housing. However, they were all displaced due to development and increasing property values. The increase in property prices has resulted in many artists that were once able to afford studios in the area no longer being able to. One artist said, "It's coming to the point where artists are getting priced out of it...I'm worried that it's going to become kind of homogenized and just too hipster." As the artists in the neighborhood are being priced out, the RiNo district is at risk of losing its reputation as an "arts district."

One business owner who grew up in the neighborhood talked about the erasure of culture in the district.

I see RiNo in general, as an erasure of what was already one of the coolest areas of Five Points was home to some of the nation's first jazz bars, home to some of the beatnik authors, home to the beat movement in general. And so, I find RiNo in general, to be a very unnecessary term. And again, I see those as an erasure of some of the coolest and most meaningful history not just in Denver, but particularly to people of color in Denver.

This person talked about how the rebranding of the RiNo district erased a culture that was prevalent in the area for many years. Like the artists this business owner talked about, another community member also mentioned how the RiNo community has changed over time. This member talked about how they started working in the neighborhood about four years ago. They knew artists with studios working in the area. However, as development has continued, the artists

they once knew in the area no longer have studios. They also talked about how they have noticed more development and condos in the area.

*Community displacement.*

The RiNo district did not exist until 2005 when two artists decided that there should be an arts district in Denver. To create the RiNo art district, they combined parts of five neighborhoods in the area to create the district. During this time, the RiNo district began to change, and gentrification began to increase. One artist talked about the power art has as a weapon for change, both as a positive weapon, as seen with the Chicano Mural Movement, and a negative through using it to create gentrification.

So, they changed the name, you change the art, and you make it palatable to a generic consumer, then it loses everything, then you've lost the community, literally, the people cannot reside there, and the people don't see pictures of themselves on the walls anymore are a reflection of them. Now, it's a reflection of a new people. And it's called a new name. And, you know, there's classism thing going on, as well. So, these are very dangerous things that happen even with the art, the developers are smart, and they'll utilize art in these ways. But art can be used as a weapon. And you know, with the Chicano Arts Movement, that was the power of it, was claiming identity, claiming the streets that we reside in telling our stories, planting seeds, where for the history to be written on the walls, and then pass down to conversation.

Through rebranding the area, there was a large displacement of people, and the community art that once reflected the area changed to reflect the new people who moved in. The Crush Walls Festival added to this displacement of local art by having both local and globally renowned artists paint the RiNo area. In 2018, Shepard Fairey created a mural for the city of RiNo. The city paid Shepard Fairey \$80,000 to paint the mural as it would increase tourism to the area. However, during the same festival, local artists were only paid \$600. Most of the artists interviewed talked about the negative impact that the Shepard Fairey piece had on the community in terms of not supporting local artists and the message that the art piece shared. Some artists discussed how bringing in an outside artist to add aesthetic value to the area caused harm to the local artistic community as it showed that the local artwork and voices were not heard. Other artists discussed how the positionality of having a white man should not be painting

a picture of Angela Davis on a wall speaking about Power and Equality as he is taking over a voice of a black woman and contributing to the silencing of unrepresented voices. When talking about public art initiatives, one artist talked about how they often cause more community harm as they distract from gentrification occurring in the neighborhood.

And the process of these neighborhoods changing and the process of them becoming new communities of people coming in, but the problem is that financially, and on an actual fiscal level, people are still being ousted, and that these public art initiatives are really just to kind of distract people to the fight of what's actually going on.

When people from outside the community are asked to come in and paint without knowing the history or culture of the place, it can cause much harm. When creating a piece of art, even if its meaning is to add to neighborhood aesthetics, it still has social repercussions. An artist used an example of how one muralist in the community has become famous for painting a particular dog breed. Although the paintings of dogs may seem innocent, they reflect the people moving into the area and can afford dogs that look like the ones the artist paints.

So, you know, fast forward, 15 years, and they're doing murals of \$10,000 dogs everywhere. And people are walking around the community and everybody has one of these dogs. That's gentrification. Absolutely, it is. And the artist has the responsibility to have some consciousness around their work and how it impacts that environment. Even if it's something that seems innocent, like painting a dog, it's not. There's an important message to whatever you're putting out there. And all that has to be taken into consideration.

Most of the people in the private sector who were interviewed also discussed the changes in the RiNo community since the murals began.

Another community member talked about how they feel the murals are a distraction from construction in the neighborhood. They said, "I think in RiNo specifically, it is role is to kind of beautify and like make a spectacle out of the area. Especially while construction is happening, like murals are pretty even if it's a huge wall, that's there's like a torn down building behind it. So, it's kind of like a lipstick on a pig effect." The murals are not only a distraction from the increase in development in the community but also the social issues occurring in the RiNo neighborhood.

All the community participants discussed how homelessness is a significant issue in the neighborhood. The increase of people moving into the area has resulted in people who once lived in the neighborhood being displaced and unable to afford the rent. One person talked about how the murals caused community harm as it has made the RiNo district less hospitable, “Maybe for the folks that are being impacted negatively by gentrification, or the many homeless people we see here. I don't think that that artist doing very much for them, except maybe making it more inhospitable...” Another issue in the RiNo neighborhood that adds to making it difficult for many people to live in the area is it is a food desert with no grocery stores, so for residents to have access to food, they either must eat at a restaurant or have the means to go to a grocery store in another part of town. This lack of accessibility to food has made it difficult for people without resources to access food. Two people interviewed talked about since the development of RiNo began, many restaurants have opened in the neighborhood and have worked with artists to create art for them. However, the restaurants in the neighborhood are expensive, and there are few cheaper options for people to go to. One person talked about how the cost of living has increased, and there is a lack of resources for the people in the neighborhood, including accessible food and health care.

But if you talk to, you know, people who grew up here, people of color, you know, they're aware of the cost of living is higher than ever, access to healthcare is worse than ever. This is a food desert. There's no, no local grocery stores or healthy grocery stores. There's no investment in or very little, I should say investment in local businesses and people of color actually having those opportunities. So, again, there's a huge gap between the haves and the have nots...

#### *Implications of gentrification.*

The murals have not only helped the businesses in the district but have also helped to brand RiNo as an arts district and have also helped attract outsiders to the district to view the murals, with one owner saying, “And there's a lot of good in the change in the neighborhood where it's gotten a lot busier and a lot more gentrified, which is good in a lot of ways for businesses, and I

think the art has definitely helped to pull people in, which is great.” The murals have helped the RiNo district distinguish itself from other Denver areas, which has helped bring a lot more business into the area. Another topic discussed was how the RiNo district has changed since it became officially labeled as an art district. The businesses saw positive changes in the types of people and civic growth that came to the neighborhood when the label changed. An owner talked about how the label of an “arts district” brought like-minded people together who shared an interest in the arts. Even though the murals help create a more robust civic identity, they have also helped to create a community in RiNo. The business owners talked about how the murals have helped to grow the RiNo community and bring people to live in the neighborhood. One business owner talked about how since the murals began, it has brought growth to the community and reduced crime, especially tagging. Many of the businesses owners who had been in the area for a long time talked about how dangerous RiNo was before the murals started with one saying,

It went from a relatively poor neighborhood back in the day, like 20 years ago, and was super poor, super rundown. Almost like, post-World War II England, just like torn down and old factories and stuff. And now I think that there's just a lot of money pouring into the community, and people wanting to create their own space here.

They discussed how the increase in gentrification is affecting their ability to continue to operate small businesses as rent has increased in the neighborhood. Some businesses talked about how they have watched as only large corporations or chains can stay in the neighborhood as they have the financial means to pay rent. In addition, most of the businesses interviewed had multiple locations, which made having a shop in RiNo more accessible.

People in the neighborhood also discussed the lack of community involvement when addressing these issues. The locals interviewed did not know about RiNo’s history and moved to the area because it had a reputation for welcoming young people into the neighborhood. When

asked about the social issues, there was a disconnect as many were unaware of the displacement and the globalization of local art. One person in the neighborhood talked about how the Shepard Fairey piece was their favorite as it spread messages in the neighborhood about equality. Another talked about how muralists from outside of Denver have added to the area's tourism because people are interested in seeing murals done by famous artists without considering how it has affected local artists. They also talked about how the piece insulted the RiNo district because it did not acknowledge the history and people who lived in the neighborhood. Another issue with these art pieces adding business to the area is that it gives money to businesses profiting from gentrification. The muralists are paid for their work but do not get any benefits when the businesses start profiting from them. Street art tours have become popular in the neighborhood. However, the people leading the tours are not from the neighborhood and profit from other people's art. One community member described a conversation that their friend, who was a muralist, had with the company,

They're like, hey, you know, we're gonna do a street art tour, and we'd like to be a part of it. And so, he's told starts asking questions and saying, Well, do you make this stuff? No. Or do you live in the community? No. Are you going to charge for it? Yes. Are you going to pay the artists? Yeah, we'll pay them some. But this is a for-profit business. So we're gonna make money off it...and so he essentially says you're a culture vulture. You're profiting off of this culture.

One person discussed how the issues that have arisen due to gentrification were due to the lack of communication between developers and people who lived in the community when the development in the area began. The developers' goals were to make as much money as possible without considering the impact that their capitalist mindset would have on the local community.

As gentrification is becoming more of an issue in the RiNo district, both the district and developers are starting to realize the mistakes that they made in the past and are trying to include more art from artists that grew up in the area and represent voices that were ignored before. One

artist discussed how communities in the gentrification process often ask them to come in and paint pieces that will inspire the community.

I seem to always come in the picture to create some sort of, inspiring imagery that helps people like adapt, or I don't even know that's a great question maybe helps them adapt. Maybe it's inspiring and gives them hope. Maybe it makes them feel like they're not being getting everything taken away? I don't know. But right now...both places [I'm creating murals] are probably experiencing the same kind of movement of gentrification.

This artist did not start painting in the RiNo community until recently when an outside organization commissioned them to paint a mural on one of their buildings. When doing the piece, the artist discussed how they incorporated their Mexican cultural background into the piece and the Mexican heritage that has been prevalent for many years in the Denver and RiNo area. Another artist talked about how businesses in the area are becoming more self-aware of the artists they are hiring. Using artists who are not part of various cultures and subcultures can cause damage to what a brand or business stands for. Businesses often choose artists whose themes and art best represent the message that they are trying to produce. However, there is a negotiation process between the business and the artist, which often results in the artist changing their original idea of what piece they want to produce to create a piece that fits both their vision and what the business wants to represent. Many artists need to be commissioned by the private sector to sustain their artmaking process as artists and community run festivals and events often do not pay for supplies and give artists enough money to make a living. The relationship between businesses and artists is essential, as businesses depend on artists to help them spread their messages. In contrast, artists need them to be able to create art. Although working for businesses often is not an artist's first choice, they must take advantage of the opportunities to get their voices and art out there. One artist talked about how everything people do comes with a price which might include causing gentrification. However, in return, the artist gets to apply their voice, "But it also everything comes with a price or whatever but it's growing rapidly. Everything

is growing rapidly and I'm just trying to take advantage of the opportunities I have so that I can maybe create some sort of history of my art here in the city, you know." Many of the artists talked about how they ask themselves if their public art will cause community harm, what having their art displayed in a neighborhood will add to the environment, and if they are the appropriate artist to paint in the neighborhood. One artist said after asking themselves these questions and seeing the impact of public art on gentrification in the district, they decided to distance themselves from the area as they no longer felt they wanted to be a part of a community that used art as a dangerous weapon. For example, one nonprofit community member talked about how the lowrider culture is essential to Denver's Chicano culture. Many families celebrate the culture on Rosa Parks Day by parading lowriders that locals fix up and decorate. However, in recent years the parade has been met with people complaining about the noise as they are new to the Denver area and do not understand the neighborhood traditions. Both the people in nonprofits also discussed the importance of having policy members who understand the importance of public art activism, community involvement in the arts, and understanding displacement when it comes to civic and community decisions. When it comes to community involvement in the civic, people in the community are often ignored or voiceless so having someone in a position of power who can help amplify those voices through working with local artists and being community members is essential as development continues.

### *Combating And Resistance to Gentrification*

#### *Community involvement.*

All the artists interviewed talked about how they use their art to create connections and conversations within the community where they are creating artwork. Many of the art pieces that displayed in communities highlighted the community. Before putting up art pieces in the



community, the artists often spoke to community members or were invited by the community to create art. Although all the artists lived in the Denver area, they were still aware of their surroundings and the impact that their art could have once they left. One artist talked about how they work within communities when creating a mural.

First of all, I'm always invited, before I show up, I don't just show up, and I don't just force my arm upon a community, I'm invited. And when I'm invited, it's by somebody that understands me and the relevance of what I represent how I keep it real within my own community. And how I put that on my back, and I carry it, they understand that. So that's why I get invited to different communities. And when I step in, we're creating bridges, we're creating conversation about the same things I'm talking about. Because it would be ironic for me to say all this, and then go to other cities and force my art into their communities.

One of the main reasons artists put up art in communities is because their art has messages relevant to what the community is going through. So often, artists go into underrepresented communities causing the artist to ensure that the community feels heard through their art. When the artists work in a community, members often talk about the murals they are putting up. Through artmaking, the artist can have conversations about their experience living in the community. Then they can incorporate the conversations into their artwork. One artist talked about how, when they are doing art for a community, they try to include local artists in their work and teach them about the mural-making process so that after the completion of a mural, the artist within the community can continue to make representational art. Another artist told a story about a memorial mural they made for a friend who passed away from brain cancer.

We did a mural for a friend that passed away from brain cancer. And, you know, part of the mural making process was involving some of her friends and family members to come down and paint some of the leaves on the tree that we had painted. It's like a tree of life...I wouldn't. I think I would never have painted that by myself without having included her friends and family in the process because of like the gravity of what was going on getting people out continue to, to be a part of that process as she's going through her health battle was crucial to the morale of like her, this whole community of people.

In the story, the artist talked about how significant community involvement was when creating a memorial process, as they could showcase the voices of loved ones and create a piece representing their friend's community. Not only is community representation important in creating a mural, but the community embracing it is crucial for its success. Most artists discussed

that they view a mural's success from the community's positive feedback after completion. They viewed the positive feedback in different forms, with some talking about how they see success as the community respecting their art enough not to tag it, having community members come up to them after the completion and telling them how much they enjoy, and the murals causing people in the community to have conversations surrounding their artwork. However, each mural has a different impact on the audience.

There's sometimes the engagement of it makes people uncomfortable. Sometimes it makes them feel right at home. Sometimes it makes them feel I get messages people tell me that what I do and what I say is necessary. Sometimes it just makes people happy. Sometimes it's just aesthetically pleasing. Like, that's important too. And not every mural has to be driving a very strong sentiment. Sometimes it could just be flowers or some butterflies, and it makes somebody feel like 'hey that is pretty'.

These conversations about public art can sometimes create community change through a mural making someone smile, causing people to think about social justice issues, or representing identity.

The local businesses in the RiNo district talked about how through being in the RiNo district, they were able to build personal and civic relationships with the local artists. Many artists create pieces for businesses. They talked about how they commission artists to create pieces that positively impact the area. One business owner talked about how welcoming the community is to public art and how they try to make the artists feel included in the community as a business. Another business owner talked about how the artists also frequent the neighborhood and are patrons of their store, saying, "A lot of artists are part of this community. So, whether it be in terms of their art or as customers to the stores or patrons. I think it definitely is full circle." In the quote, they talked about how the artists come to the neighborhood to create art and build relationships with the people in it.

*Awareness of cultures and social issues impacting the neighborhood.*

Many of the artists interviewed talked about incorporating their cultural identity and social justice themes into their art to share it with their audience. This is important because often newer residents to the RiNo district did not have knowledge about the cultures prevalent in RiNo before it became an arts district and were not aware of the social issues occurring in the area. One artist talked about how they feel art in the RiNo district should come from artists who grew up in the area as they represent Denver culture before gentrification and displacement began.

a constant within my work is that art created in the communities of Denver should be created from within. That's always been constant. Another is just a representation of, the very Denver centric cultures that exist here, and pushing those. Another one is keeping it true to the roots of Latin culture, the cultures that I come from, and representing foundational cultural identities.

One way in which two of the artists expressed their cultural identity was by using Mexican symbols in their art. One artist talked about how they tried to incorporate the pattern of the Serape blanket when they created their artwork, and the other talked about how they incorporated Aztec Codices in their work. Another artist talked about they used cultural folk art in their pieces to reflect their identity. Finally, one artist talked about how they used art to represent the silencing of Chicano culture for a long time in United States history due to cultural gaps that occurred through assimilation.

And that's sad because there's a big culture gap in these generations, that, that we don't know what our culture is, because of that. I think that's what really kind of helped develop the Chicano people in mindset, and, we have our, our educated educators and we have, you know, our students that are learning and now that we know that we do exist, and our people have existed this whole time. You know, they're making it a point to look more into it and, we're coming together.

Using their Chicano identity in their art, they can amplify the voice of their culture and heritage. Chicano street art arose from the Chicano muralists who used public places to share their cultural identity and create community through inclusion in artmaking. An artist discussed how they combined growing up in Chicano culture with the more modern graffiti and hip-hop culture to create art that incorporates both of those themes, as they are both historical art forms that were

able to give the voiceless a voice. One artist compared their heritage to the DNA of their art, and through that manifestation, they are passing along the cultural messages of their ancestors by making the comparison of "my heritage is like the fabric of my art." The same artist, when asked if they consider their art to be activist, they responded by saying,

I wouldn't necessarily classify it as like activist, but I think a lot of the, my base messages in my work have a lot to do with like, creating awareness about nature. Everything regarding nature, you know, spirituality. I speak a lot about that in my work, which a lot of native people do, regardless of, you know their specific native backgrounds can relate to that.

Although artists did not see their art as overtly spreading activist messages, they used art to share important messages and themes about their culture. Through the nature symbols, they can connect to others from a native background and feel represented in a community where they do not have a voice. Another artist talked about incorporating their heritage as part of the Yaka tribe by using their art to conquer fears, including death, and folk-art elements in their work. Although not all the artists incorporated their identity into their art, some artists used their platform to share messages of social justice in the neighborhood. Another artist talked about how, when they go into a community, they do background research on wildlife considered endangered within the area. They then paint murals of that wildlife to create community awareness as its endangerment affects the community.

I researched plants and animals that are considered endangered, or threatened within the area, but also plants and animals that are important to the area, whether or not they're endangered, as well as the landscape. And so just recently, there's a peak, a mountain peak in the area that was private land up until just a few months ago. And it was given to the national park and it's now become the newest national park in the United States. And so that peak is very important because the community forever has been looking at this peak and never actually been able to interact with this peak. And now it's public. It's public land, So I added that piece within the mural.

The artist used their platform to create cohesion between the community and social issues prevalent in the area. The same artist also talked about how when they create in an area, it is essential for the art to have educational value, whether working with the community to put up a mural or using it to teach the public about social justice issues going on around them. Many

artists also talked about how they use their art to share the stories of people who are often marginalized and not given a voice. One artist talked about painting a transgender actress and how the art would never have been accepted by the community years ago, but now that representation in the community can uplift and inspire people. However, the goal of art addressing social issues changes based on the issues where in the community where the art piece is located and the significant issues at the time. One artist talked about how the goal of art is to make sure that the community has a voice in the art piece.

You know, it's different, sometimes. The goal is to give people an artistic outlet, sometimes the goal is to be more radical and speak against certain things that are going on. So, I think the message can change, that's kind of the powerful thing about art is it gives that voice I try not to stick to the same thing, because just circumstances change as to what the message should be.

The artist discusses how no matter the piece's message, it is vital to give people a voice. Often public art does not consider the environment and community, which can cause further harm. Many of the artists also talked about how often they work.

The murals have also helped businesses to connect to the people living in the neighborhood through conversations surrounding the murals and the messages that the murals spread. Many businesses talked about the murals' positive impact, especially with their messages on social justice. Many of the businesses in the neighborhood talked about how powerful the murals about equality, diversity, and the Black Lives Matter movement were to them. Although each mural has a different meaning that is subjective to the viewer, the businesses felt like the murals reflected the social justice and political views many people in the neighborhood share. Many of the business owners also felt empowered by the messages of the murals as some of them highlighted voices of cultures that are often silenced, created awareness about inequality, and gave artists from different cultures a chance to share their culture and identity with the community.

*Strategies for combating gentrification.*

Both the people from the nonprofits talked about the importance of having artist involvement when advocating for community changes. One community member talked about using their nonprofit to have artists come into the community and work with the locals on what they want to amplify. Rather than being directly involved in creating community change, the nonprofit helps the community spread messages.

Community change, the nonprofit, is used to help the community spread their needs.

We call ourselves a social justice organization. I don't love that word, because I feel like it's just a blanket term, and I feel like what's more impactful is being involved with specific moments. But I will say one of our things really says like, we're the megaphone, not the message, which is essentially meaning whatever our youth and artists are interested in and want to get involved in we want to support but we're not necessarily like steering the conversation.

This can be useful as public art is influential in sharing messages, helping to educate people about issues in the neighborhood, and informing people in the community on what social justice issues are prevalent, as there is often a disconnect between the two. Artists are also valuable for spreading information about civic changes that need to occur within the neighborhood and being a voice between the civic and public bodies. One example of this is a nonprofit in Denver that had artists come together to teach the local community about participatory budgeting in RiNo and the surrounding areas. Working with the artist allowed them to train both the local citizen and policymakers on how participatory budgeting works.

They wanted participatory budgeting, which is residents deciding a portion of the city budget. So that is not how Denver has worked. And so, we had talked with the city, with the administration with city council, and by and large, no one was really for it, or maybe a few supportive people. So, we used this art. First thing we did is we figured out we made these machines in a suitcase in one in this big steam trunk. So that when we invited residents, we could explain to them what the hell participatory budgeting was, by using art by using these machines. And then so it was a way of engaging people. And then they were trained, and they would train City Council staff. But then we had as a way of letting more people in the city know about this so we could get more people to put pressure on the city. We made an installation.

Public art within a community can pressure local city officials to create change and as an educational tool. As development continues in many cities and there is a disconnect between the

locals, public art can become a mechanism for the community to understand the changes occurring in the neighborhood and have a say regarding decisions where their voices are ignored. Public art initiatives in cities can also spread cultural awareness. As cultures shift in cities due to gentrification, it is crucial for artists who have lived in the cities to continue traditions and teach the locals about the history of a place. When it comes to community civic involvement, community members are often ignored or voiceless, so having someone in a position of power who can help amplify those voices through working with local artists and being community members is essential as development continues. One of the artists interviewed has an arts nonprofit that works with the community to help hold the developers accountable for their actions and ensure that the people in the neighborhood going through development and change have a voice.

I don't think that the developers before ever thought that that was an important piece in their moving into these neighborhoods. And kind of the platform that I built now is that my organization is one of the lead organizations for this neighborhood, that when they start to move in here, we want to be able to hold them accountable for things that they say that they're going to help the neighborhood for. Sometimes just normal neighbors just getting together to try to do this doesn't always work out.

Often individual action does not create lasting change, as the voices can quickly be shut down. However, working with both the local community and artists amplifies their voices and helps spread their messages so that in the future, as development continues, the effects are not as detrimental. Additionally, artists using their platforms to create community awareness and education about what is going on around them can be an effective message in helping to prevent gentrification as the community is involved in and aware of conversations about development.

## DISCUSSION

The study contributes to the literature by offering additional findings on the impact of public art on civic and community engagement. However, the literature mainly focused on analyses of previous studies and neighborhood case studies with few coding interview data to

find trends. Zabrocki et al. (2010) was the only study to use interview data to see how public art impacted the public. However, they only interviewed the actors and citizens involved in the public art scene, leaving a gap in how local businesses and non-profits felt about public art. The business interviews answered this gap in the research by discussing how they liked public art as it added to the aesthetic value to their workplace. However, many business owners had concerns over how the increase in development will impact their local businesses, especially as large corporations enter the area that can pay the increased rent. There was also a disconnect between the businesses and development, with many businesses not involved in civic decisions. The businesses were also aware of the community displacement occurring in the neighborhood. Although the businesses acknowledged the negative impacts of how public art contributes to gentrification, all the business owners talked about how they had personal and civic relationships with local artists. Many businesses hired local artists to create work for them, fostering a deeper relationship between the businesses and artists. Buser et al. (2013) talk about how local businesses supporting the arts scene in the city is a form of place-based activism as the relationship can create neighborhood solidarity. Most people interviewed talked about how they wished the RiNo district gave more opportunities to local artists as they witnessed the adverse effects in the district of hiring outside artists as it results in globalization.

One significant civic decision that impacted the RiNo district was rebranding the area as an arts district. Two artists spearheaded the effort to change RiNo into an official arts district in the neighborhood. The planning process to create arts districts includes artists who want a designated area and private investors to help develop the area (Chappel et al., 2010). Unfortunately, creating an arts district often excludes the community from participating in the civic decision. Since the decision to rebrand RiNo as an arts district, there have significant civic



changes as it has increased revenue, tourism, and caused outsiders to move into the area. Hall and Robertson (2001) discuss the positives of public art as a form of urban regeneration through its many aesthetic benefits for the district. Many businesses discussed these positive changes as RiNo became an arts district. They saw increased business as wealthier people moved into the neighborhood and art tourism increased. This helped artists and businesses market themselves through the RiNo website and create more clients. However, the rebranding of the RiNo district also had adverse effects as it contributed to more development in the area, causing displacement of the existing community.

A few interviewees talked about how they and others including artists moved out of the RiNo district because they could no longer afford the cost of living. However, as they move out of the area and into other areas, the cycle of gentrification continues. Mathews (2010) discusses how areas become marketed for their art scene; it sparks interest from developers as they see the aesthetic value of an area with a high number of local artists. This causes displacement as the community can no longer afford to live in the area.

The RiNo district is now dealing with the impact of the lack of community involvement that occurred through civic decisions. Miles (1997) proposed that rather than the private sector hiring artists to produce art for their businesses, which can cause community harm. Instead the private sector should work with local artists, the community, and organizations to ensure the community has a voice in the place they live. Non-profits in the RiNo neighborhood are now working with the local community to create art pieces that reflect the community and educate the community about the problems with gentrification. Through using art to create conversations in the community, artists can use their work to give locals a voice and work with policymakers to ensure that both the community and artists are involved in the development process to avoid

further gentrification. If used correctly, public art can spread messages and empower community members.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the research question on the impact of public art on community and civic engagement in the RiNo district was addressed through conducting interviews with artists, non-profits, and local businesses. The interviewees emphasized that public art creates both positive and negative community changes. Many issues with public art arise from a disconnection between the local community and development. This is highlighted in the history of RiNo as it became an art district. The development and rebranding of the RiNo district created community harm as there was a lack of inclusion of locals to participate in conversations about development, which resulted in community displacement. Now the RiNo district is undergoing significant developmental changes as more people are moving into the neighborhood and the composition of the neighborhood is changing. The disconnect between the people moving into the neighborhood and those who once lived there is causing a forgotten history. However, art non-profits and artists are teaching the local community about the changes that have occurred through their art, highlighting their cultural identity and social issues. As development continues in the RiNo district, the people who live in the neighborhood must learn about its impact on the community through education on gentrification. Some of the arts non-profits and artists are using their platforms to educate the community about ways they can become involved in conversations surrounding future development like participatory budgeting or being involved in conversations with policymakers. Through spreading awareness of development, they hope that locals' voices will be heard in the future as development continues throughout Denver and other areas in Colorado. However, The RiNo district is one example of an arts district, and as art districts

become more popular comparisons should be made on the impact they have and how branding a place as an arts district impacts the community and civic body.

Although this thesis focuses specifically on the RiNo district, other parts of Colorado are starting to feel the impact of gentrification. One of the non-profit members talked about how rural communities are starting to face gentrification as people from the city move to more remote parts of the state with cheaper real estate. In the past several years, the population of Colorado Springs has increased as many people from the Denver area and other states are moving to the city. However, the area's growth has increased development. Colorado Springs is only a few years behind in development from Denver. The city has started bringing in artists from Denver to create murals in the cities. This has recently created controversy as people in the area feel local arts should create the art. In the past few months, Colorado Springs started creating an art walk in the downtown alleys. As development continues, it is crucial that the city learns from the mistakes that the RiNo area made and involves the community and local artists in conversations surrounding development

Since the community changes have begun, non-profits and policymakers have been working to protect the local communities and spread awareness about Denver's cultural history. One non-profit organization working to help spread the history of the Chicano murals in Denver and Colorado is the Chicano Mural Project, whose mission is to "protect, promote, and preserve the ongoing legacy of murals with Colorado" (Chicano Murals of Colorado Project, 2022). To achieve this mission, they work with local communities to preserve the visual heritage highlighted in Chicano murals that are threatened by gentrification and urban development. The project includes a variety of community members to achieve their goal of teaching the public about the history of Colorado, which is often erased or forgotten. Since the globalization and

gentrification of the RiNo district, local activists, including the District 9 city counselor, Candi CdeBaca, have been advocating against the displacement of Denver's Black and Brown communities (Denver Government, 2022). Candi CdeBaca has worked with local non-profits and artists as part of her campaign to include the community in conversations about gentrification and displacement. Such community advocates are essential in understanding the resistance to gentrification and how the civic realm and community can unite through public art to prevent harm. Using RiNo as a case study, the ideas of community involvement and education through public art can be applied to other areas that are also dealing with gentrification.

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## APPENDIX

### **Appendix 1.**

#### *Codes for Artist and Community Interviews*

##### *Artist interview codes.*

- Art As a Constructive Factor
  - Community Connections
  - Community Conversations
  - Identity in Art
  - Social Justice Art
- Art As a Destructive Factor
  - Artist's Relationship's to Businesses
  - Changes in Denver Community
  - Community Harm
- Demographics



*Non-Profit and business interview codes.*

- Creating Community Change
  - Non-Profits
  - Policy Makers Addressing issues
- Positive Impacts of the Murals
  - Artist's Relationship to Community
  - Murals as Civic Identity
  - Murals Helping to Create Community
  - Murals Addressing Social Issues
- Negative Impacts of the Murals
  - Businesses Uses Murals
  - Changes in RiNo Community
  - Lack of Community involvement
  - Social Issues in RiNo District
- Demographics