

Heerlen Murals: summary of the good practice

The problem and proposed solutions: Heerlen Murals' context in a city of transition

Heerlen is a former mining town that suffered largely from the collapse of the mining industry in the second half of the 20th century, resulting in a loss of economic and social attractiveness, growth in unemployment, urban abandonments and social deviation. Since 2001 the city of Heerlen engaged into a path of transition to counter socio-economic deprivation in the city and the region.

An important step was taken in 2008, when culture, especially the community art forms, were labelled as tools for building social cohesion. By doing so, Heerlen evoked a 'cultural spring' that led to the development of its strong bottom-up community art movement. Since that point, community art is seen as an important catalyst for social and urban development within its multi annual cultural agendas. Hereby, the city of Heerlen acts as a facilitator.

The mural street art movement in Heerlen started as an autonomous bottom-up movement picked up and nurtured by the city of Heerlen to be turned into a tool for urban and social regeneration. A number of initiatives arose working on mural works in interaction with society. Hereby, the Street Art Foundation, supported by the city of Heerlen acts as a knowledge centre on mural arts and its links with urban development. Others to be mentioned are S*PRAY and a number of initiatives by autonomous groups that continuously pop up.

Timeframe of activities, main outputs and results achieved

Heerlen Murals was formalized in 2013 by the Street Art Foundation during the annual Cultura Nova Festival in Heerlen, a festival on contemporary art supported by the city. Heerlen Murals' major outputs since 2013 are:

- Mural events by Street Art Foundation during the Cultura Nova Summer Festival since 2013;
- 67 mural art works spread out over the city, created through community involvement;
- Refurbishment of 5 public squares using mural works to enhance social cohesion and liveability;
- Touristic mural routes in cooperation with the Tourist Information Centre and the Street Art Foundation;
- Bottom up creation of mural related activities such as workshops, projects with schools and a mural app;
- Housing corporations and businesses providing properties for mural work creation;
- Mural 'Heerlen Herlon' created by crowdfunding, raising 13.000 EUR in a few weeks;
- A mural in the Heerlen Hospital, realized by a group of cardiologists raising over 8.000 EUR to create it;
- The Tourist Information Centre noted a rise in tourist numbers to Heerlen, with a few thousand visitors more to the city in 2016 than in 2013;
- Liveability monitor Heerlen shows increase in citizens' valuation of their physical surrounding (2012 – 2014): <http://bit.ly/2nqCY6O>;
- In 2016, the city won the Dutch Street Art Award, confirming it the 'mural capital' in the Netherlands;

- Parkstad Region won the Tourist Tomorrow Award in 2016, in which Heerlen Murals played an important part;
- Documentation of mural art works via the websites.

The mural works revolve around the idea of co-creation and co-ownership to build social cohesion and improve the liveability and sense of well-being in the city by building local identity. Each mural work is created by an artist on raw walls and abandoned buildings that are selected together with local citizens. Most murals reflect local contexts of people, neighbourhoods and the city's history. In order to create the murals, local enterprises, housing corporations and businesses engage in the process by providing financial contributions, equipment, as well as providing space for new murals. Moreover, a large number of murals related activities are initiated from bottom up.

From an economic perspective, Heerlen Murals adds to the beautification of urban areas and puts the city nationally and internationally on the map as a unique 'Mural Capital', sparkling new light also into the city's tourism industry. Moreover, an active participation in the creation of Mural works makes small businesses able to better position themselves in the city and build new entrepreneurial initiatives, especially those located along the Mural walking routes.

Monitoring is provided through the culture monitor of the province of Limburg, collecting data on cultural participation in Heerlen and other cities in the Parkstad region.

The link to the specific strategy

The Heerlen Murals is closely interlinked with an integrative regional and local policy objective to enter the city of Heerlen into a process of transition. The fundament was laid down by objectives within the 'Operatie Hartslag Programme' of 2001 that led to a social development plan to tackle the large-scale social problems resulting from economic deprivation. In 2005 an objective to spatially redevelop deprived neighbourhoods was added. In 2008 Heerlen put cultural engagement to a top-level priority. One of the major focuses was to give room for the development of a bottom-up community art scene, as a means to engage local communities and to position Heerlen as a unique cultural city in the Parkstad region. The Cultural Agendas of 2013-2016 and 2017 -2020, as well as the cultural agenda of 2018 - 2020 took cultural participation and outreach as fundamental pillars. Hereby, the objective is to transform Heerlen into an 'open air stage' for community art.

Potentials for re-usage

As a self-creating and bottom up form of cultural expression, street art uses any surrounding as an incubator. Therefore, it does not need large amounts of spatial interventions to pop up. Projects revolving around street art are relatively low in costs to develop. Instead, cities need to find the right type of facilitation for them to develop, using their specific social and urban circumstances. The Heerlen Murals good practice therefore forms an easily re-creatable and low cost means to tackle issues of social and urban deprivation.