



How Urban Fountains, Furniture, and Street Art Can Shape the Soul of Cities

In the heart of every great city, beyond the towering skyscrapers and bustling streets, lie the subtle yet profound elements that define its character and livability: urban fountains, street furniture, and public art. These components, often overlooked in broader urban design, play a pivotal role in creating vibrant, welcoming, and aesthetically pleasing environments. They are not mere decorations; they are instrumental in shaping the social and cultural fabric of urban environments. In this article, we will explore how fountains, furniture, and street art in the urban context, can shape a vibrant, beautiful, and sustainable city.

The origin of fountains, street furniture, and urban art.

Urban fountains have historically served as focal points for public life, offering aesthetic beauty and practical benefits. They provide soothing sounds that mask urban noise, create microclimates by cooling surrounding areas, and serve as gathering spots for social interaction.

Many ancient historians agree that urban fountains draw their origin from the 6th century BC in Athens, Corinth, and other ancient Greek cities. However, in 79 AD, ancient Romans expanded the engineering to an extensive system of aqueducts running from mountain rivers into baths, and Roman architectural fountains. Roman engineers invented the jet water system, and that technology extended throughout Europe until it reached King Henry the IV of France in 1600. It is around this era that fountains

became a decorative piece of architecture in urban environments.

Street furniture, namely benches, bus shelters, bollards, litter bins, bike racks, and more became popular in Roman cities. In the 19th century, cast iron benches as well as gas energy street lights, were introduced in Australia and other cities worldwide. This solidified Australia's leading position in modern day architecture, as it sets the tone in street furniture and lighting worldwide, today.

Urban art (also known as Street Art or Public Art) saw its popularity emerge through Egypt, Italy, and Greece over 2,000 years ago. Street art emerged as a form of protest with graffiti often posted in marketplaces, and public buildings. As contemporary urban art entered city spaces in the 70s, art has since become

the anchor of the mainstream art markets, and a strong representative of popular culture in urban centers around the world.

Over the course of time, urban planners have infused varying combinations of fountains, street furniture and art to

How Urban Fountains, Street Art, and Furniture are Being Used to Foster City Success

City leaders are acknowledging the idea of introducing diverse open spaces and public spaces kitted with fountains, art, and outdoor furniture pieces. In cities like Rome, the presence of fountains such as the Trevi Fountain has become synonymous with the city's identity, attracting millions of tourists each year. The soothing sounds and visual appeal of these water features contribute to the overall sensory experience of urban life.

Contemporary examples include Chicago's Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. Designed by artist Jaume Plensa, this interactive fountain combines LED screens with water features, encouraging public engagement and offering a dynamic space for relaxation and play. The fountain's innovative design underscores the potential of urban water features to integrate art, technology, and community interaction.

Well-designed street furniture is enhancing the usability of urban areas, encouraging people to linger, socialize, and enjoy their surroundings. Effective street furniture design prioritizes ergonomics, aesthetics, and durability. In Copenhagen, the design of street furniture reflects the city's commitment to bicycle-friendly infrastructure, with integrated bike racks and seating that accommodate cyclists' needs. This thoughtful approach not only supports sustainable

design aesthetically appealing, and vibrant public spaces. These often overlooked assets have contributed to significant upward shifts in city and integrated community economies.

transportation but also fosters a sense of community and convenience.

Additionally, the strategic placement of benches and seating areas is significantly impacting positive social dynamics. A study by Project for Public Spaces found that the presence of ample and well-designed seating is a key factor in encouraging social interactions and fostering a sense of belonging in public spaces. These findings highlight the importance of considering human behavior in the design and placement of street furniture.

Urban art is a vital and complementary component of urban aesthetics and cultural expression. It is being used to transform mundane urban spaces into inspiring environments, reflecting the identity and values of the community. Public art ranges from murals and sculptures to installations and performance art, each contributing to the city's unique character.

Incorporating public art into urban planning is invigorating communities while stimulating economic development. The city of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, for example, has produced over 4,000 murals, turning the city into an open-air gallery and attracting tourists while

fostering local pride and creativity. This initiative demonstrates how public art can serve as a catalyst for urban revitalization and community engagement. Public art is also addressing social issues and fostering dialogue. The "Fearless Girl" statue in New York City, standing opposite the iconic Charging Bull, has become a powerful symbol of gender equality and female empowerment. Such artworks provoke thought and inspire change, underscoring the role of public art in shaping public discourse and influencing societal norms.

Urban aesthetics stand strong as a key strategy for city leaders and planners when it comes to attracting residents, consumers, and visitors into city districts. Art, fountains, and furniture have proven their use in incubating and growing social activity in downtown areas, and themed districts. These assets should be used to catalyze engagement, drive consumers and residents into city spaces, and boosting entertainment and people participation in city activities and initiatives. In the next two decades, cities will see rapid and significant change in the use of urban aesthetics in driving

economic activity and directing sustainability agendas.

Enhancing experiences through technologies is a viable future channel. The projected increase in the adoption of Artificial Intelligence, Non-Fungible Tokens, Gamification, and Social Media technologies and platforms are set to accelerate social interactions with urban aesthetics around fountains, art, and furniture. The future driver of social engagement with urban aesthetics will undoubtedly be social media where selfies, photos and video content are the order of the day. Examples of these selfie magnets include the "*Perceiving Freedom*" Nelson Mandela Glasses in Cape Town, the Cloud Gate "*The Bean*" in Chicago, the "*Wings of Mexico*" in Dubai and the "*The Thinker*" in Paris, France. Examples of Fountains include the "*Bellagio Fountains*" in Las Vegas, the "*Magic Fountain of Montjuic*" in Barcelona Spain, The "*Fountain of Wealth*" in Singapore, and the King Fahd's Fountain, (Jeddah Fountain) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

City leaders and planners of the future will find integrating art and design and Urban Planning a fruitful strategy.

To fully harness the benefits of fountains, street furniture, and public art, cities must integrate these elements into their urban planning processes. This integration requires collaboration between artists, designers, urban planners, and the community.

Participatory planning approaches, where community members are involved in the design and decision-making process, ensure that the resulting public spaces reflect the needs and desires of the people who use them. The "Making Space in Dalston" project in London exemplifies this approach. By engaging local residents in workshops and discussions, planners and designers created a public square that meets the community's needs while enhancing the area's cultural and social life.

Innovative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and community crowdfunding, can also support the development of these urban features. In cities like San Francisco, the use of 1% for Art programs, which allocate a percentage of construction budgets to public art, has successfully integrated artistic elements into new developments, enriching the urban landscape.

The Future of Urban Aesthetics

As cities continue to evolve, the thoughtful integration of fountains, street furniture, and public art will remain essential to creating vibrant, livable urban environments. Advances in technology, such as interactive and kinetic art, smart street furniture, and sustainable water features, offer new opportunities to enhance urban spaces.

However, the true value of these elements lies in their ability to connect people, foster community, and reflect the unique identity of a place. By prioritizing the human experience in urban design, cities can create spaces that are not only functional but also inspiring and inclusive.

In conclusion, urban fountains, street furniture, and public art are not mere accessories to urban development; they are fundamental components that shape the soul of a city. As we envision the future of urban living, let us embrace these elements as essential to building cities that are not only smart and sustainable but also beautiful and humane.

About Group Shumba

Group Shumba is an innovation and investment firm that builds value-add ecosystems around cities, corridors, and integrated communities to solve real life problems. This article is part of a thought leadership series addressing urbanization and economic development in Africa.

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