

## Greg Mews: Play and Public Art

By Greg Mews and [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) | Section: [Interviews](#) | Series: [Street Art, Science and Engagement](#)

*Abstract: This interview paper with Greg Mews explores the interconnected roles of street art, public space, play and urban design in fostering more lovable places in the context of cities in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Drawing from personal motivations that led to a focus on urban design and placemaking, Greg delves into the importance of play as a catalyst for enhancing the urban experience. Furthermore, the integration of street art within urban spaces is discussed as a means to encourage meaningful community engagement, creativity, and a sense of place. Through this multifaceted and nuanced approach, the interview highlights progressive strategies for urban designers to cultivate more vibrant, inclusive, and playful urban environments.*

**Greg, what a pleasure to welcome you to the online journal w/k! You are a researcher and teacher of Urban Design and Town Planning at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. Additionally, among many other roles, you are a Co-Founder of the Australian Institute of Play, a Council Board Member of City Space Architecture, a Co-Leader of the Community of Practice Urban Health at the International Society of City and Regional Planners and an Advisory Board Member of the *Journal of Public Space*. Your latest book, [Transforming Public Space through Play](#) (Routledge, 2022), explores the concept of play as a form of spatial practice in urban public spaces. All of this is of great interest to our “Science, Street Art and Engagement” series in w/k. In this conversation, we want to explore your thoughts on how exactly public art and play are (or can be) intertwined in urban spaces, in order to better understand how public art can enhance the vibrancy and well-being of us and the environment in a city. It is a delight to be able to address the “engagement” aspect of the research-public art interface of our series with you, Greg.**

Lovely to be here. Thanks for creating a space for conversations.

### **Public Space, Play and Public Art**

**Greg, I know you are a researcher and teacher of Urban Design, but you also have an art background. Please tell us more!**

Before we go into that I'd like to disclaim that there is a creative artist's undercurrent flowing forward, which, to a degree, is covered up by an academic shell. There is a genealogy of artists and teachers in my family, which led to a decision earlier in my life to study fine art in Michigan, USA, and then later run an art studio practice in Berlin, Germany. Eventually, urban planning and design space became the more dominant narrative in my life, but the particular focus on *Städtebau* (urban design) and planning in the international context allowed me to venture around the world, collecting formative experiences, including many creative ones from 54 countries.

**Urban Planning and Design are research fields taught at universities that explore and envision public space(s). What kind of knowledge/s do these research fields and areas examine and/or create? And how are they taught exactly?**

Urban design and planning are interdisciplinary applied sciences aimed at shaping the built environments at different scales. Research can occur in a wide range of areas, such as urban theory, heritage, sociology, visualisation and simulation, public policy, economics, environmental protection and public health. We create knowledge and teach it through theoretical but also very practical, hands-on experiences, such as studio design projects, the development of new frameworks that allow us to solve complex problems on key infrastructure provisions, housing development, and open public spaces to enable a better quality of life for all people. Personally, I focus on urban health in public spaces and have developed a range of different frameworks that allow us to gain a different understanding of issues related to spatial justice and wellbeing. Subsequently, I hope that these frameworks can assist us in solving some systemic challenges in the way we currently produce environments for people.

### **How do urban designers and planners - and you in particular - research urban space and placemaking, and why?**

I've always aimed to nurture the nexus between people's practices as part of everyday life through environmental design and urban health. Here, street art is situated within the area of tactical urbanism, do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism or place-making, which are some ways in which people can modify materiality to demonstrate and enact compassion and care for a place and each other in creative ways. Attending to your question, there are diverse and dynamic ways urban designers can research urban space and art as part of place-making. For example, to strengthen the value and, subsequently, the possibilities for, creative expression at the grassroots level, action research provides insights. However, this can go one step further. For example, in my book *Transforming Public Space through Play*, mentioned above, I've developed a framework called the *City-Play Framework* that allows the user to develop a situated awareness through direct observation in which they can realise the full potential of public spaces for joyful encounters, including interaction with street art. Beyond established research methods, an exciting journey starts for me. Especially when working with diverse and creative research methods, one can push conventional approaches and test the boundaries of social norms and cultural conventions. I can think of imaginative methodologies and different ways of storytelling about places and encounter, including visual stories, mural art of industrial areas in urban post-industrial landscapes, guerilla gardening, flash mobs, installation art or other forms of tactical urbanism. Bosselmann's (1998) walking method, and sensory or visual ethnographic diaries, can complement text-based research. Time-lapse or videos can be embedded in action research reflecting on the processes associated with place-making practices in public spaces and, in combination with interviews or surveys, can examine changes in subjective well-being that other researchers tend to describe as happiness.



Street art that critiques the human condition in relation to urban development. Photo: Greg Mews (2015).

**In one of your publications, you explain that public space is defined as all spaces that are publicly owned or used (Mews et al. 2022, 382). What do you think the role of public art - particularly street art - is in the public realm?**

You might be referring to my co-created definition of the concept of public space specifically tailored to the socio-cultural context in Sierra Leone, West Africa. This is important, as I only created the conditions that allowed for underprivileged young people who reside in informal settlements (slum communities) to develop a shared understanding of what a public space might be for them. Many of them were previously unfamiliar with the concept. Of course, one might argue and question what publics we are talking about and who is really using such spaces. In that project, I examined the development process and the state of wellbeing of the young people right at the start and then later when we introduced them to place-making and art. As land tenure is always highly contested in the context of informal settlements, the young people decided to co-create community centres - which is, arguably, a particular form of third place that, if accessible to all, is a public space. Here, public art is a fundamental ingredient to enrich and empower underprivileged user groups, such as the young people who call these communities their home. Urban designers and planners tend to build the argument up through the creation of a sense of place or spirit of the place. Embedded in the process of place-making, public art, and especially street art, can be a strong signifier and artifact enriching the place function for diverse

users.

In the informal communities in Sierra Leone, resources are very scarce, meaning that material for such art is a conscious and curated act subject to procurement and very targeted use. Here, public art has multiple functions; it can serve as an educational tool sharing messages on how to treat each other with respect and enact compassion (see images below). Alternatively, it can function as a tool to make a place unique and appealing. It generates a sense of shared ownership when created by the end users themselves. Of course, in other places that are situated within the socio-cultural context of resource-rich minorities, public art can be commissioned in service of the dominating neoliberal paradigm or even be quite transient if messages are deemed undesirable by contesting the social norm and politics of the place. As Sierra Leone is one of the resource-poor nations on the planet, the latter type is not apparent.

In summary, I'd say public art, especially street art, as it is found in the public space reminds us of what matters. As Donna Haraway ([2016](#), 12) points out: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." At its best, public street art overrides dualism, which our current neoliberal mainstream is suffering from; it touches the heart and invites us to ask deeper underlying questions about the human condition, so let's stick with the trouble. If it's playful – even better.





Young people sketching their collective dreams for place making including street art for urban beautification. Photo: Greg Mews (2022).



Result of co-created street art with young people for urban beautification and education in Kono, Sierra Leone. Photo: Greg Mews (2022).

**You are very interested in play. What are the functions of play in public spaces? Why is play important?**

Well, that is a big question. I think the easiest way to answer you is to point towards my recent book *Transforming Public Space through Play* in which I examine the role of play in public space. The core of the argument presented in the book is play matters more than many people might think. For me and within my disciplinary context, play is situated on the ambiguous border between the irreducible metaphysical realm of philosophy, the oeuvre, the moment when life itself becomes art and the materiality of place. In this sense, play is a journey, an adventure nested in the presence. Others might call it a dance that manifests in diverse and dynamic forms, for some political, for others joyful. Without it, we can easily forget what makes life worth living.

**From your perspective on urban design and planning, would you say that play and public art are closely related?**

Yes, let me explain. With the *City-Play Framework*, I aimed at creating and articulating an empirical window that – admittedly, in a reductionist way – enables the researcher or user to develop a highly-conditioned eye in the process of observing play as part of everyday life in public spaces. Within the book, there are practical checklists that can assist in keeping track of diverse types of observable play activities in public spaces. Thus, the performative process of public art in the form of street

performance, even artefacts, no matter how small or large, can be investigated. In summary, public art as a *process*, as a *way of being* or as a *material artefact* is very much part of the oeuvre and, subsequently, an integral part of the play.

### **Street Art and Play in the City**

**Greg, on your social media profiles you describe yourself as a “curious scholar of the human condition in space & time” (X [@GregMews](#)), and as someone “transforming spaces into healthy communities - through research and action for rich experiences in cities” ([LinkedIn](#)). How can street art enrich our city experiences?**

Let us start with the X profile. The first part refers to my now-professional level of curiosity about social space that relationality connects people with the larger ecology of place - here referred to as *space and time*. The other profile focuses on a description of what I do while walking the surface of the earth. Here, street art is a useful example as it touches the hearts of others. At the same time, the production process creates a social space and leaves traces in larger narratives that make cities political places. Therefore, it can shape communities and the culture of places and enrich everyone who has an open heart to let play in. Research on the action itself can reveal nuanced insights and advance our shared understanding of experiences in cities.





Street art on the walls of the dream centre in Makeni, Sierra Leone. Photo: Greg Mews(2022).

**You wrote that your vision for more liveable cities would include more “encounter[s] with nature in public space, and design for connected play spaces for all” (Mews et al. 2018 , 196). Do you see this being associated with environmental street art?**

With that statement, I'd like to highlight that while human-centredness or anthropocentrism can bring us humans closer together, it does not go far enough. As we are living through an age of meta-crisis – to name a few diverse impacts: higher greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere contribute to extreme weather conditions; overpopulation; excessive resource grabbing; environmental pollution of air, water and land; micro-plastic pollution; biodiversity loss etc. – we urgently need to evolve and develop adaptive capacities that we can use to sustain the diversity of life (including us) on this planet. Even here, place-making and street art can play an important role in cities. In order to evolve, conviviality, joy, level of care and stewardship between the human and more-than-human worlds will become the decisive factor in determining the fate of not just our existence, but also other species that co-exist with us.





More-than-human encounter at the Dream centre in Makeni, Sierra Leone with street art messages. Photo: Greg Mews (2022).

**To what extent can street art enable a deeper understanding of the urban environment (a city)?**

As public street art can reach many of us in open and accessible ways, I encourage artists and scholars to collaborate in the act of mainstreaming science at a level that touches the heart and allows us to become species-beings. In the case of Sierra Leone, street art has a practical function: to educate others and enable road safety and wayfinding (see image below). Of course, street art can do much more – even becoming a destination itself where a particular subculture can express themselves in various ways.



Practical and creative street art with an educational component to create safer spaces in Kono, Sierra Leone. Photo: Greg Mews (2022).

### **Can street art improve collective wellbeing in a city?**

I would say it has the potential to improve collective wellbeing, if we choose to start overcoming mind-body dualism. While dualism was useful to establish causality, it also is a heavily reductionist approach and the more I learn about recent breakthroughs and advances, the more I believe we need to move on and explore different ways of understanding. For example, every time we examine something closer, we end up figuring out that it is way more complex and nuanced than it appears at the surface level. While street art is physically situated outside of our body, it needs to be perceived and appreciated. The coexistence of different artistic styles, techniques and diverse themes within the same space can enrich a place and make it more inclusive, where people can feel empowered. Especially when it is practical, joyful and creative, it touches many souls, and contributes to what urban designers call a *sense of place* or *genius loci*. Personally, I arrived at a point where I embrace openness, complexity and situated ecological awareness. As wellbeing, play and public space are a highly complex matter, I would say that street art is a fundamental part of spatial-material configurations of social worlds and subsequently, shapes not just our wellbeing but collective interspecies wellbeing in unforeseen tangible and intangible ways (if done well).

### **The Future of Street Art in Urban Places**

**Envisioning our (ideal?) future cities, you wrote that “new public experience needs to be immersive, experiential and sensual”, providing a “setting for activities, imagination, creativity and ultimately play” (**



**Mews et al. 2018, 196). I wonder what role you see for street art in this context, and how public art can encourage the exchange of ideas (another aspect you would welcome). What do you think?**

Relationality and agency found in realism are key here. Rather than running for a never-ending pursuit of an ideal utopian vision, I advocate for a form of realism that can be experienced with a sense of immediacy. For example, anyone who has made it their goal to create new knowledge knows how hard it is to develop something novel. In many respects, it is rare that something has not been thought of before by someone else. It is much more tangible to realise something in the moment when encountering something unexpected, cut off from the ordinary in a voluntary and joyful manner. A deeply-immersive bodily and spiritual experience can shift how a person relates to others. Multi-sensorial spatial experiences, even only for a moment, create an opening that elevates the human condition, a temporary escape from the everyday, and (re)turn to something little different. Street art, especially when it is co-created, is one of those potent vehicles by which just such a paradigm can be actualised.



Co-created street art by young people for young people in Makeni, Sierra Leone. Photo: Greg Mews (2022).

**If you had an unlimited budget and could decide what kind of street art a medium-sized city should create or install, what would it be?**

Oh, I would love to pay employers the wages of underprivileged young people to compensate for their

time and attach them to street art project grants with one condition. This condition is that they need to be willing to create and perform radical, compassionate acts of kindness and joy in diverse forms and ways directed towards the more-than-human, informed by science and translated into spatial everyday life practices. If they partner up with people who have learning disabilities or suffer from mental health challenges, they would get bonus points and access to a global gold standard club with an annual forum where they can come together and scale projects up internationally. At the same time, I would use the *City-Play Framework* as a post-occupation evaluation tool to see which street art project successfully transforms public spaces and the life within the city.

**Thanks for this wonderfully enriching conversation!**

Picture above the text: Greg Mews: *Awe and wonder while exploring the real* (2022).

### **Tags**

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