

How murals helped turn a declining community around

Written by Tony Matthews, Lecturer in Urban & Environmental Planning, Griffith University

The inner-city district of [Shandon](#), Ireland, has a history that dates back to medieval times. Its narrow streets and laneways are an eclectic architectural mix – Georgian, Victorian and modern buildings nestle alongside terraced worker’s cottages. But Shandon had become rundown despite its heritage value.

[Our research](#) examined how, over the last 15 years, community groups in Shandon created public murals as part of a successful process of reversing decades of stagnation.

In the later part of the 20th century, declining local employment opportunities and suburbanisation had prompted many residents to leave Shandon. Part of the Irish city of [Cork](#), the district also suffered from a lack of a coherent planning framework. One of the vehicles for bringing the community together and revitalising Shandon was a mural project called “[The Big Wash-Up](#)”

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Shandon from above. Photo: Kieran Hoare. Reproduced with permission. **Inscriptions on the urban canvas**

Artists working in collaboration with communities to create mural projects can help them publicly celebrate the interplay between their past, present and future.

It’s a way for people to actively participate in civic dialogue. Collaborative mural projects can establish or reinforce a sense of place and distinguish communities from neighbouring areas.

Mural projects are an increasingly popular form of [public art](#) that transforms outdoor spaces [in to public art galleries](#)

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. Our research explored this intersection of public space, public art and public memory through [The Big Wash-Up](#)

The Urban Squeeze: Public Art in Cities. [Tony Matthews/ABC Radio](#) , Author 7.25
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Using a technique called [reverse graffiti](#) , the project created dozens of outdoor murals. Their focus on local themes and characters celebrated community identity, heritage and memory. The process simultaneously honoured community memories while creating new shared memories.

Art as a driver of renewal

The drivers of the project included a couple of key groups: [Cork Community Art Link](#) and the [Shandon Area Renewal Association](#)

Cork Community Art Link (CCAL) is a not-for-profit organisation, which develops public art projects with marginalised community and youth groups. CCAL advocates a fundamental right of access to art as both spectator and participant.

The Big Wash-Up project featured ephemeral murals depicting aspects and characters from Shandon's history. The murals were created using a temporary reverse graffiti technique. This involved painting a black screed onto walls, placing a stencil over it and power washing the area to reveal a monochrome mural beneath.

The Big Wash-Up process.

Over time the images fade away. The ephemeral nature of The Big Wash-Up murals reminds us that cities are constant sites of change in which the present, past and future can co-exist. Contemporary inscriptions on the urban canvas are just one layer of an evolving palimpsest.

Collecting community memories

Community participation was central to the design and delivery of The Big Wash-Up murals. "Memory collection clinics" were organised around Shandon to gather information about the area's unique history. Community members were invited to share their recollections, which

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formed the basis of the mural images.

An intergenerational division of labour formed. Older residents provided memories; younger residents helped design and instate the murals.

The murals included images of *shawlies* (older women who wore lace shawls and ran street stalls), *corner boys* (young men who congregated together for company and gossip) and the *Buttera* (the [Shandon Butter Exchange brass band](#), formed in 1878 and still active). Another mural featured the faces of the young community members involved in the project.



'Shawlies' remembered and celebrated in a Big Wash-Up mural. Photo: Martin Purcell. Reproduced with permission.

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Public art is a catalyst for community

The consultative process underpinning The Big Wash-Up activated the collective memory of Shandon's community, by encouraging residents to share stories and memories of the area. They also got to be both producers and consumers of public art – a unique opportunity for many.

Projects like this offer communities a way to shape communal space by collaborating in the design and creation of public art. Artists are in a strong position to help communities realise this potential by activating their innate knowledge and potential.

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Community murals, designed to represent shared memories and cultural heritage, can forcefully speak to an area's past, present and future identity.

The Shandon memory collection clinics show that participatory art creation can provide opportunities for socialisation and intergenerational recognition. This can enhance community spirit, social cohesion and understanding between groups. It is a way of activating citizenship by allowing people to learn about each other and visually share these understandings with outsiders.

Projects like The Big Wash-Up can also allow communities to invigorate their surroundings with their expressions of self-identity. This can be of particular value in an area like Shandon, which is enjoying a community-led resurgence following decades of decline.

Like all neighbourhoods, Shandon is first and foremost a place for people – something the murals emphasise.

Tony Matthews receives funding from the Australian Research Council for research which examines the nexus between urban planning and climate adaptation. He is affiliated with the Shandon Area Renewal Association.

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