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## VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ART: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF APPROACHES TO PLACE-MAKING (2015–2025)

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### Abstract:

Public art has evolved from static monuments and decorative sculptures into interactive, dialogic and community-driven interventions that increasingly determine how public spaces are perceived, experienced and remembered. At the core of these transformations lies visual communication, encompassing the strategic use of imagery, colour, typography, spatial graphics and emerging digital media to convey meaning, foster collective memory and strengthen a sense of place. Although the relationship between visual communication and placemaking is widely recognised, scholarship over the past decade remains fragmented across architecture, cultural geography, design studies and communication theory, creating the need for a consolidated synthesis of approaches. This study presents a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 that examine visual communication within public art contexts and its relationship to placemaking outcomes. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, comprehensive searches of Scopus and Web of Science yielded 486 records; after duplicate removal, screening of titles and abstracts, full-text eligibility assessment and quality appraisal using a modified CASP checklist, 138 articles were retained for thematic analysis. The review identifies three dominant strands: first, semiotic and symbolic representation, encompassing murals, memorials, sculptures and environmental graphics that embed heritage codes and civic narratives; second, participatory visual narratives, involving co-created and tactical urbanism artworks that enhance community pride, inclusivity and the legibility of space; and third, digital hybrid interventions, including augmented reality murals, projection mapping and immersive media that mediate the relationship between site, artwork and audience perception. Synthesising these strands, the review proposes a conceptual framework that traces visual communication

modes to audience interpretation to emotional and behavioural response to place attachment, highlighting a decisive shift from object-centred aesthetics toward communication-centred and audience-responsive public art practices while underscoring persistent research gaps in under-represented regions of the Global South.

**Keywords:**

Public Art, Visual Communication, Placemaking, Sense of Place, Participatory Design

## Introduction

Public art has long been recognised as more than an embellishment of the built environment. From ancient civic monuments to modern murals, sculptures and interactive installations, art in public space functions as a cultural marker that communicates shared histories, beliefs and aspirations. Over the last two decades, the global shift toward human centred and inclusive cities has drawn renewed attention to the social, cultural and communicative power of public art to transform otherwise ordinary spaces into meaningful places that foster collective identity and belonging.

The field of placemaking, which gained traction in urban studies in the late twentieth century, frames the design and activation of public spaces as processes that go beyond the physical arrangement of streets and parks. It emphasises the intangible layers of memory, narrative and cultural expression that allow people to feel connected to a site. Visual communication plays a crucial role in this process as it conveys stories through symbolic forms, facilitates orientation and wayfinding, and enables communities to inscribe their identity into the urban fabric. Murals that depict local heritage, typographic street graphics that guide pedestrians and interactive light projections that animate civic squares all exemplify how the visual language of public art mediates the human experience of place.

Despite this recognised importance, research on visual communication in public art remains fragmented. Studies appear across a range of disciplines including architecture, urban design, communication studies, cultural geography and heritage management, each adopting its own terminology, theoretical framework and evaluative criteria. While some examine the semiotic and symbolic representation of public art as carriers of cultural codes, others investigate its impact on community engagement, wayfinding legibility or audience perception, often without cross referencing one another. This fragmentation hampers cumulative knowledge building and limits the capacity of designers, artists and policy makers to draw evidence-based insights for future placemaking initiatives.

The past decade has seen several notable trends that further complicate the research landscape. First is the rise of participatory and co-created public artworks, often realised through tactical urbanism and community driven mural projects that embed local narratives directly into the visual language of a place. Second is the emergence of digital and hybrid media including augmented reality murals, projection mapping and immersive light installations that have transformed public art from static object to interactive communication platform. Third is a growing concern for equity and inclusivity, recognising that visual representation in public spaces can either reinforce or challenge social hierarchies and that legibility of space often differs across age, ability, language and cultural background. These developments underscore

the need to understand not only the aesthetic dimensions of public art but also its communicative efficacy in shaping public perception and fostering place attachment.

A consolidated synthesis of how visual communication has been conceptualised, operationalised and evaluated in public art literature over the last decade is currently lacking. Existing reviews tend to focus either on urban aesthetics, cultural heritage conservation or participatory art practices without systematically interrogating the communicative processes that underlie successful placemaking outcomes. As cities worldwide invest in public art programmes to revitalise heritage districts, strengthen civic identity and stimulate tourism, there is a pressing need for an integrative framework that links visual communication strategies to measurable social and spatial impacts.

This paper addresses this gap by conducting a systematic literature review of peer reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 that examine the intersection of visual communication, public art and placemaking. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, the review maps bibliometric trends, identifies dominant thematic strands including semiotic and symbolic representation, participatory visual narratives and digital hybrid interventions, and synthesises their reported placemaking outcomes. By analysing how visual communication mediates the relationship between artwork, site and audience, the study proposes a conceptual framework that can inform designers, urban planners and policy makers in developing more effective and culturally sensitive public art strategies.

## **Bibliometric and Geographic Trends**

### ***Public Art as a Medium for Civic Identity***

Public art has long been a visible marker of civic values and collective memory. From ancient monuments to contemporary murals and site-specific installations, it signals who belongs to a place and what narratives are remembered there. Scholars such as Miles (2017) and Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison (2015) argue that public art shapes not only the appearance of cities but also the social relations within them, acting as a bridge between the built environment and the lived experiences of communities. Cartiere and Zebracki (2021) further note that public art is both a tangible object and a social process that can support inclusion, dialogue and shared identity.

### ***The Concept of Place Making***

The term place making emerged from early urbanists such as Lynch (1960) and Jacobs (1961) and was further popularised by Project for Public Spaces (2018). It emphasises that well-designed public spaces are meaningful not because of their physical form alone but because of the stories, emotions and cultural associations people attach to them. Classic human-geography texts by Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) describe this as a “sense of place,” highlighting that the success of a public space depends on the social meaning residents ascribe to it. Recent scholarship (Zebracki 2020; Hall & Robertson 2021) shows that public-art interventions often catalyse such meaning by embedding local heritage and narratives into the visual language of the city.

### ***Visual Communication in Urban Space***

Visual communication encompasses the use of signs, symbols, typography, colour schemes, environmental graphics and digital projections to transmit meaning. Within public-art studies

it refers to how these visual elements guide orientation, tell stories and trigger emotional responses. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) describe how multimodal design allows images and words to work together to shape interpretation, while Calori and Vanden-Eynden (2015) explain how environmental graphics improve wayfinding and legibility. In public spaces, effective visual communication supports not only aesthetic quality but also safety, inclusivity and accessibility.

### ***Semiotics and Symbolic Representation***

A substantial strand of research focuses on semiotic and symbolic representation, examining how iconography, colour palettes and spatial placement of artworks convey cultural or political messages. Studies on memorials (Young 2016; Forest & Johnson 2018) reveal how symbolic language can sustain collective memory or provoke contestation. Analyses of heritage murals in Asia and Latin America (Mouffe 2018; Gómez et al. 2022) show that symbolic motifs often act as tools for reclaiming marginalised histories. The semiotic clarity of these visual codes strongly influences whether communities identify with and feel attached to a site. In the Malaysian context, empirical work by Ibrahim (2019) analysed public perceptions of the National Monument using a semantic-differential approach and factor analysis. The study identified aesthetic quality, audience reception, topology and symbolic meaning as key dimensions that influence how citizens interpret commemorative sculptures in public space. This research demonstrates how semiotic legibility shapes public attachment to national memorials.

### ***Participatory Visual Narratives***

Since the mid-2010s, public-art practice has expanded to participatory approaches in which residents co-design or co-produce artworks. These approaches align with collaborative urbanism (Hou 2020) and focus on the process of making as a tool for empowerment. Studies across Europe, Latin America and Southeast Asia (Hawkins 2018; Zebracki & Palmer 2021) document that collaborative murals and temporary street installations can increase neighbourhood pride, strengthen perceptions of safety and foster a deeper sense of collective ownership of public space. The integration of digital media has transformed public art from static objects to dynamic communication platforms. Augmented-reality murals, projection mapping, sensor-based lighting and immersive storytelling walls have introduced new ways for audiences to interact with art in public settings (Zebracki & Peters 2020; Velasco & García 2022). These innovations extend the temporal and spatial reach of artworks and appeal to younger, digitally literate publics. Yet critics caution that if not contextually grounded, technology-driven spectacles may overshadow local narratives (Gadsby 2022).

### ***Visual Communication and Behavioural Outcomes***

A growing body of research connects visual communication in public art to behavioural and affective outcomes such as prolonged use of plazas, heightened sense of safety and increased visitor satisfaction (Hall & Robertson 2021; Evans & McLean 2019). Findings suggest that clarity of visual symbols, cultural resonance and ease of interpretation are key factors shaping whether people experience a site as welcoming or alienating. This underscores the need for integrated guidelines that combine environmental graphics, wayfinding systems and narrative-driven artworks to strengthen place attachment.

Despite the recognition that visual communication plays a central role in successful public-art interventions, three gaps remain evident in the literature. First, empirical measurement of the communicative impact on place attachment is limited and often short-term. Second, the geographic distribution of studies remains skewed toward Europe, North America and East Asia, with relatively few investigations from Southeast Asia, Africa or other regions of the Global South. Third, research rarely offers an integrated conceptual framework that links semiotic theory, participatory design and environmental graphic communication with placemaking outcomes. To address these gaps and to bring coherence to a dispersed field, the present study applies the PRISMA 2020 protocol to systematically identify, screen and analyse peer-reviewed publications on visual communication in public art produced between 2015 and 2025. The systematic approach enables a transparent and replicable synthesis of bibliometric trends, thematic strands and methodological patterns, providing an evidence-based foundation for the conceptual framework proposed later in this paper.

## Methodological Patterns and Rigour

### *Research Design*

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to consolidate empirical and conceptual knowledge on the intersection of visual communication, public art and place-making. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) statement (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, reproducibility and methodological rigour. The protocol comprised four key stages: identification of records, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion in the synthesis. A comprehensive search was conducted in Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection because these databases provide high-quality coverage of peer-reviewed literature in design, communication, cultural geography and urban studies. Supplementary searches in Google Scholar and ResearchGate were used only to trace full-text versions of already-identified papers; grey literature was excluded. The Boolean search strings combined three clusters of keywords relating to public art, visual communication and place-making, restricted to the period 1 January 2015 – 31 March 2025 and to English-language publications.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Studies were eligible if they met all the following conditions:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles or full conference papers published between 2015 and 2025;
- Explicitly addressed visual communication in the context of public art or artworks in public space;
- Reported or discussed at least one place-making outcome, such as sense of place, cultural identity, audience perception, legibility or behavioural response;
- Written in English and with full-text accessible.

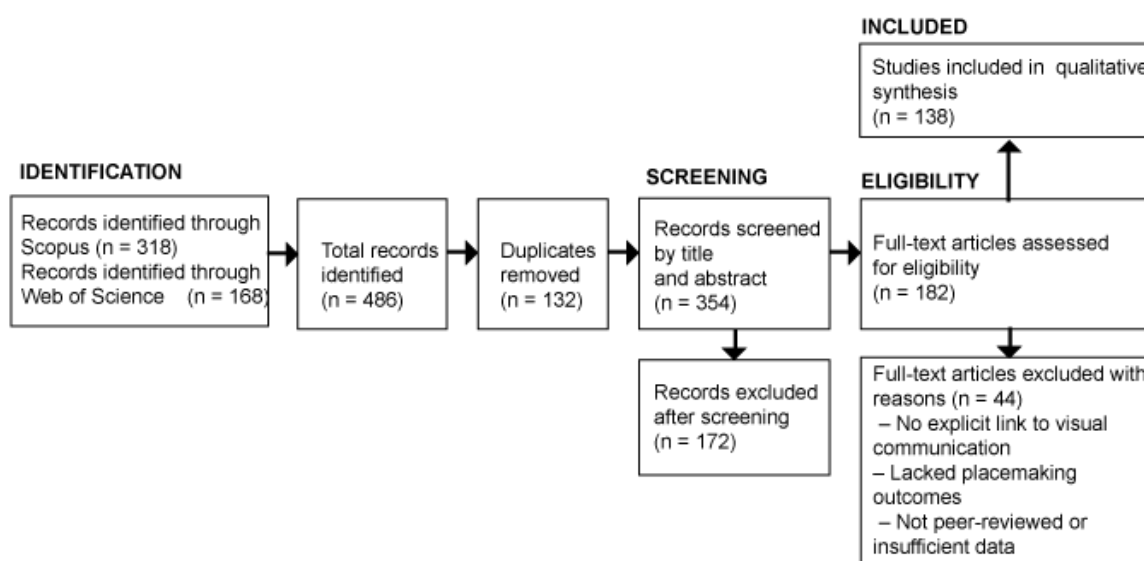
The following were excluded:

- Grey literature such as reports, theses, design briefs and non-refereed essays;
- Technical studies on AR/VR or lighting with no discussion of artistic or communicative intent;
- Studies focused exclusively on performance, music or ephemeral events with no visual component;
- Articles lacking explicit connection between visual communication and place-making.



### Screening and Selection Process

The combined database searches initially identified 486 records. After removing 132 duplicates, 354 unique records remained for title-and-abstract screening. At this stage 172 papers were excluded for failing to meet one or more inclusion criteria, leaving 182 papers for full-text assessment. Following full-text review and quality appraisal, 138 articles were finally included in the thematic synthesis. The entire selection process is summarised in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1), which records the number of items retained or excluded at each stage together with reasons for exclusion (such as, irrelevant focus, insufficient data on placemaking outcomes, non-English text).



**Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Screening and Selection Process**

To ensure methodological rigour, a modified Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was applied. Articles were scored on five criteria: clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of study design, adequacy of data collection and analysis methods, transparency in reporting, and relevance to the review's placemaking focus. Studies scoring below the pre-set threshold of 50 percent were excluded from synthesis but listed in an appendix for transparency. For each included article, key information was charted in an Excel-based evidence table, comprising author(s), year, country or region, type of public art, visual-communication approach, theoretical or analytical framework, research design and methods, reported placemaking outcomes, and notable findings. A thematic synthesis approach was then used: after an initial open-coding of visual-communication strategies and outcomes, codes were grouped into higher-order categories. This process produced the three thematic strands presented in the Results section: semiotic and symbolic representation, participatory visual narratives and digital-hybrid interventions.

### Thematic Synthesis of Visual-Communication Approaches

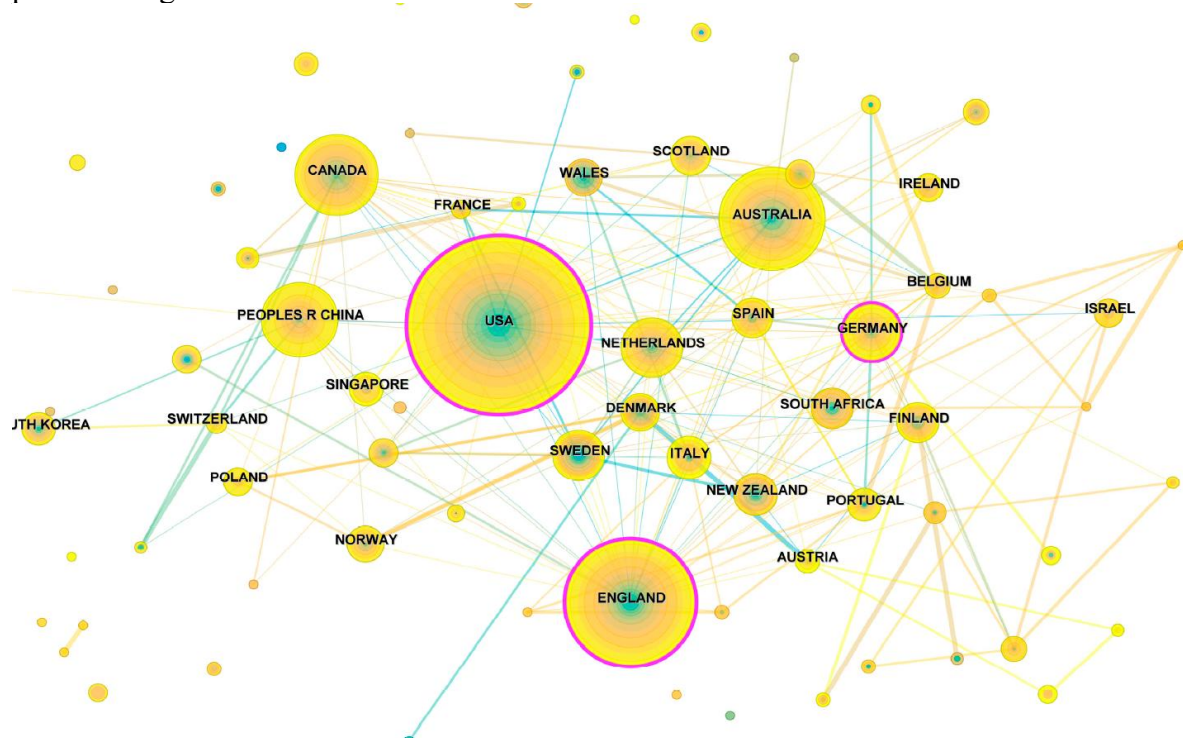
#### Bibliometric Trends

The systematic review revealed a steady increase in scholarly attention to visual communication in public art over the past decade. Annual publications rose from fewer than

ten papers in 2015–2017 to a peak in 2022–2023, coinciding with the global recovery phase following the COVID-19 pandemic when many cities used public-art programmes to reinvigorate public spaces. Of the 138 studies included in the review, 64 per cent were peer-reviewed journal articles, 23 per cent were full conference papers, and 13 per cent were book chapters or invited reviews indexed in Scopus. The growth trajectory reflects a growing recognition of the role of public art in shaping urban identity and liveability.

### ***Geographic Patterns***

The literature shows a geographically uneven distribution. Europe accounted for 43 per cent of the studies, North America for 32 per cent, and Asia-Pacific for 15 per cent, with concentrations in Japan, South Korea and Australia. Only six per cent of studies originated from Southeast Asia, and a handful came from Africa and Latin America. Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia contributed a small cluster of empirical research including investigations on semantic perception of the National Monument and early work on augmented-reality-enabled public-art installations. This imbalance underscores the need for more place-based research in the Global South, where public art often plays a significant role in heritage-driven and community-driven placemaking.



**Figure 2: Adopted Geographic Pattern Map Illustrating Different Countries' Research In the Field of Placemaking**

Source: Yan, W., Liao, J., & Zhai, H. (2024). Place-making research: a bibliometric, visualization, and thematic analysis. *Buildings*, 14(9), 2855.

### ***Methodological Patterns***

More than half of the included studies (58 per cent) employed qualitative case-study designs, often combining visual documentation, site observation and stakeholder interviews. Twenty-one per cent used mixed-methods approaches, integrating survey data with spatial or visual analyses. Twelve per cent relied on survey or semantic-differential instruments to assess audience perception, while nine per cent adopted experimental or quasi-experimental designs,

most commonly in studies of projection mapping and augmented-reality media. Approximately 23 studies applied explicit semiotic or multimodal discourse frameworks to interpret the communicative aspects of public art. Quality appraisal using the modified CASP checklist showed that over 80 per cent of the studies were methodologically sound, while the remainder were descriptive with limited analytic depth.

### ***Thematic Findings***

Thematic synthesis of all included studies produced three dominant strands of inquiry as shown in Table 1:

#### ***Semiotic and Symbolic Representation***

This strand examines how iconography, colour, spatial positioning and materiality in murals, memorials, sculptures and environmental graphic installations convey cultural heritage, civic memory and political identity. Studies consistently indicated that legible symbolic codes enhance public recognition of place identity and help cultivate attachment to historically significant or culturally resonant spaces.

#### ***Participatory Visual Narratives***

A second cluster of studies addressed community-engaged approaches including co-created murals, tactical-urbanism graphics, and participatory light installations. These projects generally reported improvements in neighbourhood pride, perception of safety, inclusivity and collective ownership of space. Visual communication was shown to function as a dialogic medium, giving communities a visible platform to express local stories, aspirations and collective memory.

#### ***Digital-Hybrid and Interactive Interventions***

The third strand focused on the integration of digital technologies such as augmented-reality murals, projection-mapping displays, sensor-driven light sculptures and immersive storytelling walls. These works often enhanced visitor engagement and interpretive depth, particularly among younger audiences accustomed to interactive media. However, several authors cautioned that technology-centred spectacle risks overshadowing local cultural narratives if not carefully contextualised.

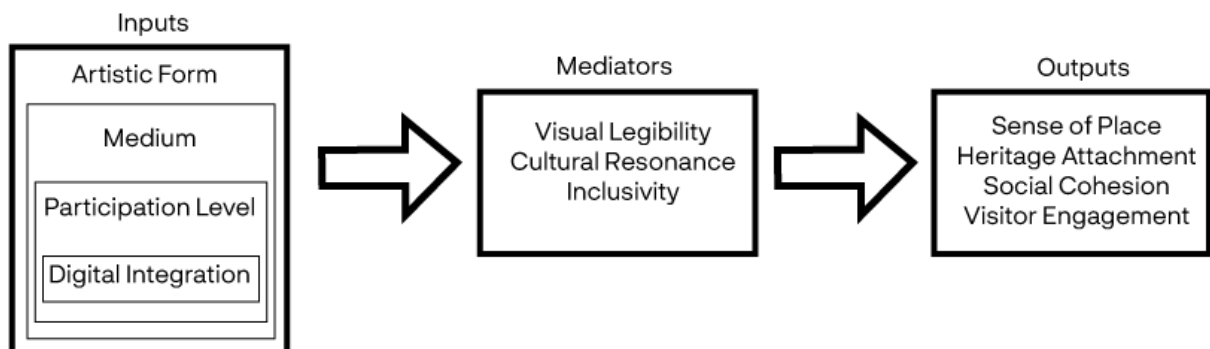
#### ***Cross-Cutting Insights and Conceptual Integration***

Across all thematic strands, the communicative clarity, cultural resonance, and participatory authorship of visual strategies emerged as decisive factors shaping positive placemaking outcomes. These included a strengthened sense of place, greater visitor satisfaction, increased public-space usage, and more inclusive spatial legibility. Studies that combined environmental graphic design (e.g., wayfinding systems) with narrative-driven public-art installations reported especially strong impacts on spatial orientation and emotional attachment, surpassing those that prioritized aesthetic enhancement alone. However, a recurrent limitation across the literature is the absence of longitudinal assessments and standardised metrics to evaluate the sustained social and behavioural impacts of visual communication strategies in public art.



**Table 1: Thematic Strands, Visual-Communication Strategies, and Place-Making Outcomes**

Thematic Strand (n)	Key Visual-Communication Strategies	Reported Place-Making Outcomes
<b>Semiotic and Symbolic Representation (n = 54)</b>	Use of iconography, colour palettes, spatial positioning and material choice; semiotic representation of heritage, civic memory and political identity	Enhanced legibility of cultural heritage and civic symbols; stronger recognition of place identity; increased attachment to historically significant sites
<b>Participatory Visual Narratives (n = 46)</b>	Co-created murals, community-driven street graphics, participatory light installations; visual storytelling with local narratives	Improved neighbourhood pride, inclusivity, perceived safety and collective ownership of space; deeper engagement with local stories
<b>Digital-Hybrid and Interactive Interventions (n = 38)</b>	Augmented-reality murals, projection-mapping shows, sensor-driven light sculptures, immersive storytelling walls, blending physical artworks with digital layers	Increased visitor engagement, interpretive depth and temporal dynamism, especially among younger audiences; caution about risk of overshadowing local narratives if not contextualised
<b>Cross-cutting Outcomes (n = 25)</b>	Integrated visual symbolism, participatory narratives, and digital media in combined formats; multimodal design blending environmental graphics and co-creation with technology	Strengthened sense of place, improved spatial legibility, higher visitor engagement and emotional connection; broader inclusivity and social cohesion



**Figure 3: Conceptual Model Linking Visual Communication, Public Art, and Place-Making Outcomes**

## Conclusion

This systematic literature review analysed 138 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 that examined the nexus of visual communication, public art, and place-making. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, the review mapped bibliometric and geographic trends, identified methodological patterns, and synthesised three dominant thematic strands: semiotic

and symbolic representation, participatory visual narratives, and digital-hybrid interactive interventions.

Across these strands, the review highlights that communicative clarity, cultural resonance, participatory authorship, and context-sensitive integration of digital media are critical determinants of successful place-making. Reported outcomes include enhanced sense of place, stronger attachment to heritage sites, increased inclusivity, improved neighbourhood pride, and higher levels of spatial legibility and visitor engagement. Notably, studies that combined narrative-driven public art with environmental graphic design and wayfinding strategies elicited deeper behavioural and emotional responses than those focused solely on aesthetic enhancement. The synthesis demonstrates that visual communication operates not merely as aesthetic expression but as a semiotic system of urban meaning-making. By embedding cultural symbols within shared public spaces, public art mediates the cognitive and emotional processes through which individuals construct place attachment and spatial belonging. These findings align with and expand upon theoretical foundations such as semiotic communication theory (Barthes, 1977), which frames visual elements as sign systems embedded with culturally constructed meanings, and place attachment frameworks (Relph, 1976; Scannell & Gifford, 2010), which emphasise emotional bonds between people and place. By synthesising evidence across diverse visual-communication strategies, this review advances a conceptual understanding of how public art functions as a mediating interface between symbolic content, spatial context, and audience interpretation thus contributing to stronger, more inclusive place attachment.

Despite this progress, several gaps remain:

- i. There is a lack of longitudinal and standardised quantitative assessments for evaluating the enduring social and behavioural impacts of visual-communication strategies in public art.
- ii. Geographic imbalances persist, with limited empirical work from the Global South particularly Southeast Asia, where heritage-based and community-led visual practices are both culturally vital and underrepresented.
- iii. There are no unified theoretical framework bridging semiotics, environmental graphic design, participatory design practices, and urban policy.

To address these gaps, future research should move beyond descriptive case studies and integrate theoretical models with empirical methods that assess both symbolic meaning and spatial experience. Researchers are encouraged to incorporate AI-based image analysis such as computer vision techniques to classify symbolic motifs, colour palettes, and spatial composition, and spatial cognition metrics such as eye-tracking, VR-based wayfinding tests, or GPS-based behavioural mapping, to evaluate how visual communication in public art influences perception, orientation, and place attachment.

Additionally, studies should prioritise culturally diverse case contexts, particularly in the Global South, and adopt co-creative participatory methods that include community voices in both design and evaluation. These approaches will strengthen the development of evidence-based frameworks that support urban designers, cultural planners, and policy makers in deploying public art as a strategic tool for inclusive, legible, and socially meaningful place-making.

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