CultureCase

The Social Return on Investment from a public art project

This research was conducted by **Dina Refki and three others** at **University at Albany State University of New York, USA**

Summary

This paper summarises an attempt to measure the Social Return on Investment (SROI) from a public art project in three cities in upstate New York. The project was designed ‘to stimulate dialogue, instigate social activism and induce transformation on issues of urban blight’. The research found that ‘more than $6 million were raised to address the problem of urban blight, and that every $1 invested in the Breathing Lights project, $1.84 were stimulated’. There were other positive impacts too: increased community fellowship and increased awareness of local issues. ‘Over half of survey respondents (56 per cent) reported an increase in interest for supporting public art, most (81 per cent) believed the project had a positive impact on the region’.

The project temporarily transformed hundreds of abandoned buildings into ‘living and breathing entities’

This effect was achieved through ‘pulsating lights that mimicked the rhythm of human breathing’. In addition to the installation, ‘one non-profit in each host city served as a community hub and hosted Breathing Lights events centred on the theme of urban renewal and vacancy’. There were also community ambassadors, workshops, walking tours, and art commissions.

SROI is one way to determine a monetary figure for the value of a project like this

Information for the SROI evaluation took many forms and encompassed the responses of more than 800 people. It included ‘focus group discussion, in-person interviews, stakeholders’ phone interviews, visitors’ surveys, visitors’ interviews, affinity events’ surveys and interviews, online visitors’ surveys, door-to-door neighbourhood interviews, and a policy roundtable survey’. The method asks people to estimate the value and importance of various aspects of the project for certain social and economic outcomes (like inward investment). This gives the SROI method both strengths and weaknesses: it captures a lot that would otherwise be missed, but it is built from people’s subjective opinions.

Keywords

public art **sroi** **USA** **revitalisation** **community**

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