

Diversity in Public Spaces

A transformative Journey for regional revitalization

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Abstract - In the year 2000, the European Union adopted the motto "United in Diversity" to promote cohesion through cultural and artistic richness. While the removal of internal borders has fostered unprecedented exchange across member states, many rural and border regions remain excluded from the benefits of integration. This paper focuses on the Pustec Region in southeastern Albania, located along the borders of Greece and North Macedonia. Comprising nine small villages nestled along Lake Prespa, the region is marked by extraordinary natural beauty, agricultural traditions, and deep cultural layering. Yet despite these assets, Pustec faces demographic decline, geographic isolation, and limited infrastructure—conditions that threaten its long-term viability. This study investigates how public space, when shaped by participatory and artistic practices, can serve as both a symbol and tool for regional revitalization. It argues that diversity in public space is not merely a reflection of demographic plurality but a strategic resource for identity-building, social cohesion, and economic sustainability. Through a mixed-methods approach and comparative analysis of three international case studies—Superkilen in Denmark, the East Side Gallery in Germany, and Favela Painting in Brazil—the paper demonstrates how art-led interventions can activate neglected spaces, support local agency, and reframe peripheral regions as sites of resilience and cultural vitality. In the case of Pustec, creative placemaking offers a pathway to preserve the region's meditative atmosphere while introducing low-impact, high-value cultural initiatives that engage both residents and visitors. Temporary artistic actions—such as murals, outdoor exhibitions, and cross-border cultural events—can evolve into permanent spatial transformations that reflect local narratives. Art becomes a lifeline: not only enhancing aesthetics but reviving community bonds and symbolizing continuity across histories and identities. Ultimately, the Pustec Region presents a replicable framework for rural regeneration rooted in respect for local identity, inclusive participation, and cultural innovation. Its revitalization affirms the EU's foundational ideal that unity can be constructed through diversity, particularly when place-based creativity is positioned as a driver of sustainable development.

Keywords - European Integration, Pustec Region, Cultural Diversity, Public Space Revitalization, Participatory Art

Introduction

At the start of the new millennium, the European Union adopted the motto "United in Diversity," expressing a commitment to openness, cooperation, and cultural pluralism. The removal of internal borders has allowed for unprecedented movement of people, capital, and ideas, fostering a more interconnected and culturally rich continent. However, this process has also revealed persistent geographic imbalances. Many rural and border regions remain excluded from the benefits of integration, facing economic decline, population loss, and infrastructure neglect.

The Pustec Region in southeastern Albania, bordering Greece and North Macedonia, exemplifies this challenge. Composed of nine small villages along the shores of Lake Prespa, Pustec is characterized by its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and strong sense of place. Yet the region has experienced significant demographic decline and limited economic opportunities. Closed borders and minimal investment have deepened its isolation—both socially and spatially.

This paper examines whether and how diversity in public space can serve as a catalyst for revitalization

in such peripheral areas. It argues that diversity should not be viewed merely as a demographic condition but as a strategic and symbolic resource. When reflected in the design and use of public spaces, diversity can support identity formation, social cohesion, and local development. Artistic interventions, inclusive planning processes, and culturally sensitive design approaches have the potential to activate public spaces as platforms for community engagement and renewal.

In the case of Pustec, public art and creative placemaking are proposed not only as aesthetic enhancements but as tools for long-term resilience. By embedding artistic and cultural practices into the fabric of daily life, the region can strengthen social bonds, attract new visitors, and empower local communities. This approach aims to preserve the region's unique character while offering new opportunities for economic and social sustainability. The revitalization of Pustec is not an isolated case but a model for how other marginalized rural and border areas in Europe might respond to the challenges of depopulation and disconnection. Through culture-led spatial transformation, these regions can redefine their roles within the broader European context—not as passive recipients of aid but as active contributors to a diverse and dynamic European identity.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to highlight the role of public space as more than physical infrastructure. It is a stage for collective memory, cultural expression, and future-making—a critical site where diversity can become both visible and valuable.

Defining Diversity in the Context of Public Space

The concept of "diversity" is often narrowly understood as referring to demographic or ethnic plurality. However, within the context of public space, diversity encompasses a broader and more complex set of dimensions. It includes cultural diversity, reflected in the visible presence of multiple identities, languages, and traditions; social diversity, which speaks to the inclusion of various age groups, abilities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds; and functional diversity, referring to the range of activities a space can support, such

as recreation, performance, ritual, education, and rest. Public spaces gain significance when they reflect and accommodate the lived experiences of the communities they are intended to serve. This requires not only symbolic visibility but also meaningful participation in both the design and ongoing use of these spaces. In regions marked by cultural complexity and historical contestation, such as Pustec, public space becomes more than a neutral setting. It emerges as a site of negotiation, where different histories, languages, aesthetic values, and visions for the future intersect and evolve.

Background and Regional Context

Geography and Cultural Heritage

The Pustec Region, located along the shores of Lake Prespa, a transboundary lake shared by Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia, offers a compelling case for examining the intersection of cultural heritage, socioeconomic challenges, and strategies for rural revitalization. Known for its serene landscape and ecological value, Lake Prespa is one of Europe's oldest and deepest lakes and serves as a crucial biodiversity hotspot. The surrounding villages, part of the Pustec municipality, are shaped by a long history of cultural exchange, where Slavic and Albanian influences converge and Orthodox Christian traditions continue to shape local identity. This cultural and environmental richness, however, is increasingly overshadowed by the region's marginalization. Restrictive border regimes, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited economic diversification have contributed to a growing sense of physical and social isolation.

Socioeconomic Challenges

Pustec is experiencing demographic decline, particularly among younger generations who are leaving in search of education, employment, and basic services that are unavailable locally. This pattern reflects broader rural trends observed across the Western Balkans. The lack of job opportunities, limited access to healthcare and education, and the absence of cultural institutions have deepened the region's vulnerability. Tourism remains largely underdeveloped, and public

Aspect	Before	After
Economic Activity	Limited local investment	Increased visibility and cultural tourism
Public Space Function	Underused and generic	Multifunctional and culturally expressive
Cultural Identity	Fragmented or invisible identities	Multicultural presence made visible and celebrated
Community Engagement	Limited influence on urban design	Collaborative selection and planning
Cultural Identity	Fragmented or invisible identities	Multicultural presence made visible and celebrated
Social Cohesion	Ethnic tension, low interaction	Increased civic pride and mutual recognition

Tab. 1. Superkilen - Copenhagen, Denmark - Before and after intervention

Aspect	Before	After
Symbolic Meaning	Wall symbolized division and trauma	Transformed into a site of peace and memory
Public Access	Restricted and neglected	Open to public use and reinterpretation
Cultural Value	Low cultural engagement	Strong national and international visibility
Community Involvement	No initial public input	Space now used for ongoing civic dialogue
Collective Identity	Fragmented due to reunification	Shared narrative of freedom and transformation

Tab. 2. East Side Gallery - Berlin - Germany - Before and after intervention

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investment has been sporadic. As a result, local communities face not only economic hardship but also a weakening of cultural continuity, as traditions become increasingly difficult to sustain when younger generations migrate away.

Between Preservation and Transformation
 There is widespread agreement on the importance of protecting the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage. However, efforts aimed solely at preservation can sometimes hinder necessary development. This study proposes artistic revitalization as a way to reconcile these competing priorities. Rather than treating preservation and transformation as opposing goals, art can serve as a bridge that respects local identity while opening up new avenues for engagement and renewal. By integrating artistic practices into public spaces, residents are invited to participate actively in shaping their environment. This approach fosters a sense of belonging, reinvigorates public life, and offers a low-impact strategy for stimulating economic activity through cultural tourism and community involvement.

A Space for Negotiation and Vision

In regions like Pustec, where diverse identities and historical narratives intersect, public space holds significant potential as a medium for transformation. It is more than just a physical setting; it is also a symbolic arena where languages, memories, values, and aspirations converge. Artistic engagement can help express and navigate this complexity by creating inclusive spaces that reflect and respect local diversity. Through such culturally grounded interventions, rural and border areas can redefine their role within the European context—not solely through economic development, but through cultural resilience and social cohesion.

Tools and Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods methodology that integrates qualitative and comparative approaches to provide both depth and breadth in the analysis. Ethnographic fieldwork forms a central component of the study, involving site visits to all nine villages within the Pustec Region. During these visits, mental mapping and participant observation were used to document spatial practices, architectural features, and emotional responses to specific places. These techniques allowed for a nuanced understanding of how space is experienced and valued by local communities. In parallel, quantitative data analysis was conducted using demographic and economic indicators sourced from both local and national institutions. This provided a broader statistical framework to contextualize the region's socio-economic conditions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, including residents, artists, policymakers, and planners. These conversations offered valuable insights into local perceptions of identity, belonging, and the use of public space. To extend the relevance of the findings, a set of international case studies was selected and analyzed based on their comparability in terms of geographic scale, socio-political context, and outcomes related to cultural revitalization. Together, these methods support a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis, enabling the study to generate context-specific insights while also identifying potentially transferable strategies for other marginalized and culturally complex regions.

Case Studies: International Lessons for Local Application

Superkilen – Copenhagen, Denmark

Superkilen, located in the ethnically diverse

Aspect	Before	After
Symbolic Meaning	Associated with poverty, marginalization, and social neglect	Reframed as a site of creativity, resilience, and cultural expression
Public Access	Limited cultural infrastructure; few welcoming communal areas	Streets and facades became vibrant, shared public art spaces
Cultural Value	Local culture undervalued or invisible to outsiders	Cultural identity visibly expressed through color and narrative
Community Involvement	Residents excluded from planning or aesthetic decisions	Full participation in concept and painting; training provided
Collective Identity	Weak sense of pride or recognition	Strengthened local pride and sense of belonging

Tab. 3. Favela Painting - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Before and after intervention

Dimension	Superkilen (Denmark)	East Side Gallery (Germany)	Favela Painting (Brazil)	Pustec Region (Albania)
Population Diversity	Wall symbolized division and trauma	Moderate international influence	Strong local identity	Bilingual, culturally layered community
Community Involvement	Collaborative selection of design elements	Limited during initial implementation	Deep participatory engagement	Emerging interest in co-creation
Economic Context	Urban, well-funded	Post-industrial, tourism-driven	Low-income, informal settlement	Rural, underfunded, economically fragile

Tab. 4. A comparative overview illustrates key similarities and contrasts with Pustec

Nørrebro district of Copenhagen, represents a pioneering example of how public space can actively express and celebrate cultural multiplicity. Developed through a collaboration between the artist collective Superflex, the architecture firm BIG, and landscape architects Topotek1, the park integrates over 100 objects sourced from various countries, including benches from Brazil, fountains from Morocco, and signage from Russia. These elements were selected through participatory workshops with local residents, ensuring that the spatial narrative authentically reflects the lived experiences of the neighborhood's inhabitants. The result is a vibrant, symbolic landscape that functions not only as a recreational area but also as a visual archive of migration, coexistence, and transnational identity. Superkilen's success lies in its ability to render diversity visible and approachable through artistic form, which has transformed it into a site of civic pride and a model for inclusive urban design. For the Pustec Region, Superkilen illustrates the potential of using public art to represent multilayered cultural identities, particularly the coexistence of Slavic and Albanian heritage, through locally inspired installations, collaborative storytelling, and community-sourced materials.

East Side Gallery – Berlin, Germany

The East Side Gallery in Berlin stands as one of the most significant public art projects associated with political memory and historical transformation. Stretching over 1.3 kilometers, this remnant of the Berlin Wall was converted into an open-air gallery shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, featuring murals by over 100 international artists. The artworks address themes such as freedom, peace, and reconciliation, transforming a former site of division into one of dialogue and artistic expression. Unlike traditional heritage monuments,

the East Side Gallery maintains public accessibility and invites interpretation, serving both as a tourist destination and a dynamic space of civic engagement. For Pustec, which has also been shaped by historical borders and geopolitical fragmentation, this case highlights the potential of reappropriating symbolic or neglected sites—such as former border checkpoints or abandoned buildings, for community-based art that fosters cultural continuity, collective memory, and transnational reflection.

Favela Painting – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The Favela Painting Project, initiated by the Dutch artists Haas and Hahn, illustrates the transformative impact of participatory public art in economically marginalized communities. In collaboration with residents of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, the artists designed and executed large-scale murals that covered entire building facades. Crucially, the local community was engaged throughout the process. Participants received artistic training, employment, and the opportunity to contribute creatively to the transformation of their own environment. The project not only altered the visual identity of the neighborhood but also fostered a strong sense of ownership, pride, and solidarity among residents. It attracted positive international attention and reshaped public perceptions of the area. For Pustec, where economic hardship and youth outmigration are major challenges, a similar participatory approach could promote social cohesion, local empowerment, and symbolic renewal. By involving community members directly in artistic initiatives, Pustec could activate public spaces as sites of connection, resilience, and cultural vitality.

Comparative Summary: Insights for the Pustec Region

The three international case studies outlined above offer distinct but complementary approaches to embedding art within public space. Each model presents relevant strategies that can inform and inspire revitalization efforts in the Pustec Region. Superkilen focuses on the visibility of cultural hybridity through participatory design. The East Side Gallery shows how historically charged spaces can be reactivated through artistic interpretation. Favela Painting demonstrates the social impact of co-creation and skill-building in economically marginalized settings. While the contexts differ significantly, they all offer concrete examples of how art can promote civic pride, strengthen community identity, and stimulate local development. These insights reveal that while Pustec faces unique challenges tied to its rural location and limited resources, the principles of participatory design, symbolic representation, and cultural activation can be adapted to fit its specific conditions. Art, in this context, is not merely decorative. It becomes a strategic tool for fostering resilience, social inclusion, and renewed connection to place.

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Analysis and Discussion

The three case studies examined, Superkilen in Copenhagen, the East Side Gallery in Berlin, and the Favela Painting Project in Rio de Janeiro, highlight the multifaceted impact of art-led revitalization. These examples reveal how artistic interventions can function simultaneously on symbolic, social, and functional levels, offering valuable lessons for rural and culturally layered contexts such as the Pustec Region.

A central finding across all cases is the importance of representation. In regions where identities are complex and historically shaped by conflict, displacement, or marginalization, visual and spatial representation plays a vital role in affirming community narratives. Superkilen, for instance, translated the multicultural background of its residents into a tangible urban landscape, while the East Side Gallery reinterpreted a divisive historical artifact into a shared canvas for collective memory. Similarly, in Pustec, where Slavic and Albanian influences coexist, art can give form to plural identity through installations, materials, and iconography rooted in local culture. Such representation not only validates lived experience but also enhances visibility and pride.

Equally important is the process through which these transformations take place. All three cases demonstrate that meaningful impact occurs when residents are engaged not merely as beneficiaries but as co-creators. In Favela Painting, community members took part in the conceptual, aesthetic, and practical stages of the project, receiving training and compensation. This participatory model fostered a strong sense of ownership, pride,



Fig. 1: Revitalization of public spaces through small interventions



Fig. 2: Pop Up - Art installation in the nature of Pustec Area



Fig. 3: Prespe Lake permanent Public Installation



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and collective responsibility. In contrast, projects that lack genuine engagement risk appearing imposed or disconnected from local needs. For Pustec, which faces outmigration and a weakened civic infrastructure, fostering inclusion through participatory art practices could reestablish local agency and rebuild social trust.

The case studies also reinforce the idea of public space as social infrastructure. Thoughtfully designed spaces serve more than aesthetic purposes; they support everyday life, facilitate social interaction, and anchor shared rituals. In Berlin, the East Side Gallery became not only a monument but a place for gathering and dialogue. In Copenhagen, Superkilen integrated play, rest, and mobility, enhancing urban livability. While Pustec's spatial context differs significantly, even modest interventions in village centers or near former border crossings could establish new focal points for community life and cohesion.

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Finally, these examples illustrate the effectiveness of low-cost, high-impact interventions, particularly in under-resourced areas. The murals in Rio's favelas, for example, required relatively modest funding but yielded profound social, visual, and economic returns. For Pustec, where public budgets are constrained and investment is limited, small-scale artistic actions, such as murals, public sculptures, or temporary installations, could spark momentum toward broader renewal without the need for large infrastructural projects. The integration of these lessons in Pustec could begin with temporary interventions, including murals, outdoor exhibitions, and cross-border cultural events, which can serve as catalysts for visibility and engagement. Over time, these activities may evolve into more permanent installations, architectural adaptations, or full-scale redesigns of public spaces that are rooted in local identity and co-created with the community.

Policy Implications (with Comparative Reflections)

To enable diversity-driven revitalization in regions such as Pustec, several targeted policy interventions should be considered. First, the establishment of EU-supported microgrant schemes specifically tailored to rural and community-led public art initiatives would provide critical financial resources to initiate small-scale, high-impact projects. A comparable model can be seen in the Favela Painting project in Rio de Janeiro, where modest but focused funding enabled the training and employment of residents, ultimately generating wide-reaching social and visual impact with minimal investment. Such funding mechanisms, if adapted to the rural Balkans, could empower communities like Pustec to become cultural producers rather than passive recipients of external development aid.

Second, fostering cross-border cultural cooperation between Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia could strengthen regional ties and create



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opportunities for shared cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions that celebrate the transnational heritage of the Prespa region. While none of the three case studies directly involved cross-border programming, Superkilen demonstrates how the inclusion of culturally diverse elements, in that case, objects from around the world, can symbolize plural identities within a shared space. A similar approach in Pustec but grounded in the real cross-border cultural dynamics of the region, could reinforce shared heritage and dialogue across national lines. Third, increased zoning flexibility would allow for the temporary or adaptive reuse of abandoned buildings and underutilized public spaces for artistic and cultural programming. This was particularly evident in the East Side Gallery, where a former political boundary was transformed into an open-access cultural site. The success of the Gallery lies in its informal, interpretive nature and its openness to public engagement, demonstrating how symbolic and underused spaces can be reclaimed as cultural assets without the need for large-scale redevelopment. Fourth, capacity-building through artist residencies and training programs is essential for ensuring that cultural revitalization is locally embedded and sustainable. This aligns closely with the model used in the Favela Painting project, where local capacity was developed through skill-sharing, mentorship, and paid artistic work. Establishing similar partnerships between artists, local institutions, and NGOs in Pustec could create lasting infrastructure for creative development and empower residents as agents of change. Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks should accompany all interventions. While the three case studies vary in their formal evaluation methods, their impacts, ranging from international media attention and increased tourism to improved community pride, indicate the value of tracking not just economic indicators, but also social and symbolic transformations. For Pustec, indicators such as youth retention, tourism growth, and public perception could be central to assessing the long-term success of art-led interventions. In sum, the strategies observed in Superkilen, the East Side Gallery, and the Favela Painting Project illustrate how cultural policy, when paired with community involvement and symbolic recognition, can activate underused spaces and reshape collective narratives. Applying these lessons to Pustec, adapted to its rural and cross-border context, holds significant potential for inclusive and sustainable revitalization.

Conclusion

The challenges facing the Pustec Region, population decline, geographic isolation, and a lack of public infrastructure, are emblematic of broader patterns affecting rural and borderland areas across Europe. What sets Pustec apart, however, is its unique combination of cultural diversity, ecological significance, and historical complexity. These characteristics, if thoughtfully acknowledged and strategically activated, position

the region not as a peripheral space of decline, but as a potential model for place-based resilience and culture-led development. This paper has argued that diversity in public space must be understood not only as a reflection of demographic plurality, but as a strategic and symbolic resource. By drawing on international case studies—Superkilen in Denmark, the East Side Gallery in Germany, and Favela Painting in Brazil—it has demonstrated that art-led revitalization, when grounded in community participation and local identity, can generate significant social, cultural, and even economic benefits. These examples provide compelling evidence that creative interventions, even at small scales, can transform neglected spaces into inclusive environments of interaction, pride, and continuity. The analysis also suggests that the revitalization of Pustec does not require replicating large-scale urban projects but rather adapting their principles to the region's rural context. Temporary installations, participatory murals, adaptive reuse of symbolic sites, and cross-border cultural programming could serve as entry points for more permanent transformations. Such approaches are not merely aesthetic. They carry political and social weight, reaffirming local agency, preserving memory, and enabling dialogue across generations and national boundaries. From a policy perspective, the findings point to the importance of flexible and inclusive frameworks. Targeted microgrants, zoning reforms, artist training programs, and transnational cooperation mechanisms are not abstract recommendations—they are actionable pathways for translating cultural potential into sustainable impact. When accompanied by robust evaluation and guided by the principles of equity and co-creation, these tools can support rural communities in reclaiming their futures on their own terms. Ultimately, the case of Pustec reinforces a broader insight: that European integration, if it is to be truly inclusive, must extend beyond economic alignment to embrace cultural and spatial justice. Unity, as the European Union's founding motto suggests, does not require uniformity. Rather, it is through the recognition and activation of local difference that shared identity is most powerfully expressed. Pustec, in this sense, offers not just a regional case, but a blueprint for how the values of diversity, participation, and creativity can shape a more inclusive European landscape.

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