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Street Art as Participatory Infrastructure and Community Mental Health: The Case of the Stramurales Festival of Stornara Life APS

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Abstract: This study analyses the international street art festival *Stramurales* of Stornara, a small agricultural municipality in Puglia Region, Southern Italy, as an innovative participatory public health intervention for mental wellbeing through democratic urban transformation. Drawing upon frameworks from environmental psychology, resilience theory, and *EnvironMental Health*, we examine how community-led artistic interventions constitute health infrastructure addressing social determinants of mental health in economically marginalised contexts. Stornara represents a paradigmatic example of structural violence afflicting rural Southern Italy, where youth emigration, infrastructural deterioration, and collective despair constitute interconnected public health crises. Structural violence manifests in Stornara through economic marginalisation, inadequate public services, and systematic exclusion from political decision-making—conditions that directly produce elevated rates of psychological distress, social isolation, and community-level learned helplessness. The *Stramurales* model operates through three democratic mechanisms via *Stornara Life APS* (an open-membership association) founded by its President and Artistic Director, Maestro Lino Lombardi: voluntary participation of property owners, democratic content selection—defined here as the process by which residents collectively determine the themes, narratives, and visual language of the murals through annual community assemblies—and transparent governance preventing appropriation by local governmental élites. Drawing on comparative evidence from participatory street art in the Global South, particularly Colombia, South Africa, and Brazil, we situate Stramurales within an international body of practice that deploys art as social reconciliation and community resilience. Demographic data from *ISTAT* reveal that youth out-migration from Stornara declined markedly following the festival's establishment, from approximately 180 annual departures per 1000 young adults in 2017 to 112 per 1000 in 2022—a pattern consistent with, though not causally attributable solely to, the intervention. We contend that democratically governed street art constitutes economically sustainable, accessible, and viable mental health infrastructure, offering replicable lessons for communities confronting structural marginalisation worldwide.

Keywords: participatory street art; Stramurales street art international festival; community mental health; environmental psychology; democratic governance; social determinants of health; community empowerment; Stornara Life APS; Global South; structural violence; social prescribing

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1. Introduction

The convergence between environmental deterioration and mental health crisis represents one of the most pressing—yet surprisingly under-examined—challenges in contemporary public health [1]. Mental health research receives merely 2.3% of overall funding from the *British National Institute of Health*, despite overwhelming evidence that our environments—both natural and constructed—fundamentally shape our psychological wellbeing. The emerging field of *EnvironMental Health* underscores how the deterioration of built environments correlates significantly with elevated stress, social isolation, and worsening mental health outcomes. Understanding the specific mechanisms through which environmental conditions translate into psychological harm is, we argue, as clinically urgent as developing new pharmacological treatments.

Environmental psychology has identified several pathways through which built environments exert their effects on mental health. Chronic exposure to degraded, aesthetically impoverished, or unmanageable environments elevates allostatic load—the cumulative physiological toll of prolonged stress—through sustained activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis [2]. At the cognitive level, environments lacking complexity, coherence, or 'fascination' [3] fail to support attentional restoration, contributing to cognitive fatigue and diminished capacity for self-regulation. At the social level, deteriorating public spaces reduce opportunities for informal interaction, eroding social capital and the sense of collective belonging that constitutes one of the most robust protective factors against depression and anxiety [4]. Finally, at the identity level, environments that reflect exclusion, neglect, or historical trauma—as in many post-conflict or structurally marginalised communities—communicate to residents that they are not valued, reinforcing internalised narratives of worthlessness and hopelessness.

These mechanisms do not operate independently; they interact and amplify one another. A community confronting economic decline witnesses its built environment deteriorate; deteriorating environments reduce place attachment and social interaction; reduced social capital weakens collective agency; weakened agency accelerates emigration; emigration further degrades the environment. This feedback loop constitutes what we term an 'environmental-psychological spiral of decline'—and it is precisely this spiral that arts-based participatory interventions have the potential to interrupt.

Specific environmental factors linked to mental health crises in structurally marginalised communities include: the visible deterioration of public infrastructure (crumbling buildings, abandoned commercial premises, unmaintained public spaces), which communicates governmental abandonment and reduces community pride; the absence of green or aesthetically restorative spaces, which denies residents access to the attentional restoration afforded by natural and engaging visual environments [3,5]; physical and social isolation consequent on population decline and inadequate public transport; the loss of intergenerational transmission of cultural identity, as younger residents internalise emigration as inevitable; and the chronic experience of political voicelessness, wherein communities feel unable to influence the decisions that shape their lives. Each of these factors independently predicts elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; their co-occurrence, as in rural Southern Italy, compounds their effects substantially.

Recent research has drawn attention to 'social prescribing'—the referral of patients to non-clinical, community-based interventions—as a strategy for addressing precisely these social and environmental determinants of mental health. [6] demonstrated, in the context of Tokyo, that social prescriptions incorporating green spaces, urban design, cultural ecosystem services, and therapeutic landscapes produced significant improvements in health outcomes, including mental health indicators. Their findings underscore the importance of integrating environmental and cultural dimensions into health promotion strategies—a logic that the Stramurales intervention operationalises through street art. The mechanisms they identify—increased social connection, enhanced sense of place, reduced isolation—map directly onto the pathways we document in Stornara.

Rural communities of Southern Italy embody the environmental-psychological crisis paradigmatically. Between 2002 and 2017, the region lost approximately two million residents to migration, predominantly young adults aged between 15 and 34 years. This exodus has created what Johan Galtung [7] described as 'structural violence'—systematic arrangements preventing communities from realising their potential. Unlike direct violence, structural violence is embedded within social structures and manifests through unequal power and consequent unequal life opportunities. The toll upon mental health manifests not merely in individual diagnoses, but in collective despair, erosion of social capital, and communities witnessing the literal emigration of their futures.

In June 2018, we witnessed firsthand something extraordinary in the central square of Stornara, a small agricultural municipality in Puglia. Local artist Lino Lombardi was facilitating a spirited discussion amongst residents regarding which urban murals ought to adorn the town's deteriorating walls. What struck us was not the art itself, but rather the transformation we observed in the eyes of people who, merely months earlier, had described

their hometown as a place from which to flee. These were individuals reclaiming their narrative, voting upon their future, literally painting over decades of decline.

2. Situating Stramurales: Street Art, Post-Conflict Reconciliation, and the Global South

To understand what Stramurales achieves—and why its democratic structures matter—it must be situated within a broader international literature on street art as social intervention. This literature reveals both significant precedents and crucial distinctions.

The relationship between art and post-conflict or post-crisis reconciliation is well established. Organisations such as the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) have documented dozens of cases in which artistic practice has been deployed to process collective trauma, reconstruct social trust, and negotiate contested identities [8]. In the aftermath of political violence, muralism in particular has functioned as a technology of memory and identity—from the Republican and Loyalist murals of Belfast to the Zapatista-inspired visual culture of Chiapas. These precedents share with Stramurales an understanding that public walls are not merely surfaces but arguments about who belongs, what is remembered, and what kind of future is imaginable.

The Global South offers the richest and most directly comparable body of practice. In Colombia, street art has been central to processes of social reconciliation following decades of armed conflict. The work of collectives such as Casa Kolacho in Medellín's Commune 13—a neighbourhood once controlled by paramilitary and guerrilla groups—demonstrates how community-led muralism can transform spaces associated with trauma and fear into sites of civic pride and collective memory [9]. Importantly, Casa Kolacho operates through participatory structures that bear close resemblance to those of Stramurales: community members determine themes, local artists collaborate with international practitioners, and the murals explicitly narrate the neighbourhood's own history. The psychological outcomes documented in Medellín—reduced anxiety, increased place attachment, improved collective efficacy—parallel our findings in Stornara, suggesting the generalisability of participatory muralism as a public health intervention across markedly different national and cultural contexts.

In South Africa, post-apartheid mural projects have similarly been deployed as instruments of identity reconstruction and community healing in townships confronting the long psychological aftershocks of racial violence and economic exclusion [10]. Brazilian favelas have hosted internationally renowned graffiti festivals—notably the work of Os Gemeos and collaborating artists in São Paulo—that have reframed previously stigmatised urban environments as sites of cultural production and community pride. Across these diverse contexts, the literature converges on a common finding: when street art is produced in dialogue with communities rather than imposed upon them, it functions as a form of symbolic reparation—a public acknowledgement that these communities possess histories worth commemorating and futures worth investing in.

However, it is precisely here that crucial distinctions must be drawn. Not all street art is alike, and the differences are theoretically and ethically significant. Banksy's interventions in the United Kingdom—perhaps the most globally recognised form of contemporary street art—operate through a fundamentally different logic. Banksy's work is produced without community consent or participation, by an anonymous individual whose identity and agenda remain opaque, in service of a critical discourse primarily intelligible to educated, urban audiences. Whatever the aesthetic or political merits of individual works, the relationship between artist and community is one of imposition, not dialogue. The community whose walls are appropriated plays no role in determining what appears, what it means, or who benefits from the resulting attention. This distinction matters enormously from a mental health perspective: it is participation itself—the exercise of collective agency—that generates many of the psychological benefits we document, not merely the presence of art.

A further distinction must be drawn between participatory community muralism and graffiti produced in contexts of political repression or social marginalisation. When individuals in authoritarian states draw on walls or produce graffiti as acts of resistance, this constitutes an important form of political self-expression—but one characterised by clandestinity, individual rather than collective action, and the constant risk of state suppression. The psychological dynamics of such practice differ fundamentally from those of community-sanctioned muralism: the former may provide catharsis and political voice for individuals, but it cannot produce the collective efficacy, social cohesion, and community-wide narrative reconstruction that Stramurales generates. It is the specific combination of democratic governance, community ownership, transparency, and integration with local identity that distinguishes Stramurales from both celebrity street art and individual acts of visual resistance—and that renders it genuinely replicable as a public health intervention.

3. The Context: Stornara and Structural Violence

Stornara exemplified the predicted negative pattern with particular acuity. In 2017, this municipality of approximately 6000 residents confronted the following negative spiral: economic contraction exacerbating youth emigration, accelerating infrastructural deterioration, fuelling further decline. Walls crumbled. Commercial establishments shuttered. Community hopes evaporated.

Galtung's [7] concept of structural violence provides the essential theoretical framework for comprehending Stornara's situation prior to the Stramurales intervention. Structural violence refers to systematic social arrangements that harm people by preventing them from satisfying fundamental needs. Unlike direct violence, which is visible, immediate, and perpetrated by identifiable actors, structural violence is embedded within social structures and manifests through unequal power and consequent unequal life opportunities. Its harms are diffuse, cumulative, and frequently rendered invisible by the very normalisation of the conditions that produce them.

In Stornara, structural violence operated through several specific and interconnected mechanisms that collectively constitute its public health crisis. Economically, decades of agricultural policy prioritising large-scale industrial farming—frequently dominated by interests external to the municipality—progressively eroded the smallholder agricultural economy that had sustained the community. Young people, unable to find dignified employment locally, confronted a structural choice between emigration and underemployment. This was not a matter of individual initiative or aspiration but of systematically constrained opportunity.

Infrastructurally, the community experienced the compound effects of underfunding that characterises many rural Southern Italian municipalities: deteriorating roads, inadequate public transport connectivity with regional centres, an ageing and undermaintained built environment, and limited digital infrastructure. These deficits were not merely inconveniences but direct determinants of economic opportunity and social participation—conditions that the literature consistently associates with elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and substance misuse [11].

Educationally and culturally, the absence of local higher educational provision, combined with the orientation of cultural policy towards larger urban centres, meant that young people seeking educational or cultural advancement faced an apparent binary: stay and forgo development, or leave and forfeit community. This structural dilemma—wherein the satisfaction of individual developmental needs appeared incompatible with community membership—produced what psychologists would recognise as a chronic approach-avoidance conflict at a population level, contributing to pervasive ambivalence, anxiety, and, among those who remained, the internalisation of failure narratives.

Politically, Stornara's marginal position within regional governance structures meant that municipal priorities were systematically subordinated to urban and industrial interests. Community members consistently described a sense of political voicelessness—the experience of having no effective channel through which their preferences could influence decisions affecting their lives. This experience of political powerlessness constitutes, in Seligman's [12] terms, 'learned helplessness' at a collective level: the repeated experience of uncontrollable negative outcomes produces, over time, a generalised expectation that effort will not produce change.

The mental health consequences of this structural configuration were visible in aggregated indicators even before formal measurement: elevated rates of consultation for anxiety and depressive disorders in primary care; increased alcohol misuse documented by regional health services; the distinctive quality of social interaction that long-term residents and returning migrants described as 'collective resignation.' These are the symptoms of a community experiencing what the epidemiological literature on social capital [13] identifies as systematic erosion: the progressive dissolution of the networks of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement that enable communities to act collectively on their own behalf.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis of secondary data sources, and comparative analysis of demographic indicators. Fieldwork was conducted in Stornara during June 2018, coinciding with the annual Stramurales International Street Art Festival community assembly.

4.1. Ethnographic Observation

We conducted participant observation during the community voting process, documenting interactions amongst residents, artists, and organisers. Observations focused upon patterns of participation, decision-making dynamics, and expressions of community sentiment. Field notes captured both formal proceedings and informal conversations, providing insight into the social processes underlying the festival's democratic structures.

4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

We conducted interviews with fifteen participants, including property owners, festival organisers, local residents, and visiting artists. Interview protocols explored perceptions of community change, experiences of participation, and psychological impacts of the festival. Interviews were conducted in Italian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed and translated. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns related to empowerment, collective efficacy, and mental wellbeing.

4.3. Documentary Analysis

We analysed Stornara Life APS organisational documents, including financial reports, governance structures, and festival archives. Additionally, we examined demographic data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) regarding migration patterns—specifically annual out-migration rates among young adults aged 15–34 years before and after the festival's establishment—alongside economic indicators and population trends for comparative context. Migration data spanning 2014–2022 enabled comparison of pre-intervention trends (2014–2017) with post-intervention trajectories (2018–2022), allowing tentative assessment of whether the festival's implementation coincided with changes in population mobility patterns. These figures must be interpreted with caution: migration is determined by multiple structural factors, and the festival represents one intervention within a complex social ecosystem.

4.4. Theoretical Framework

Our analysis draws upon three intersecting theoretical frameworks: environmental psychology, particularly theories of restorative environments and place attachment; resilience theory, focusing upon community-level protective factors; and critical public health perspectives addressing social determinants of health and structural violence. This interdisciplinary approach enables examination of how artistic interventions operate simultaneously at individual, social, and structural levels. We additionally draw on the social prescribing literature [6] and on comparative studies of participatory street art in the Global South to situate our findings within a broader international discourse.

5. Results

Our findings reveal multiple pathways through which the Stramurales festival functions as mental health infrastructure, operating through psychological, social, structural, and demographic mechanisms.

5.1. Demographic Impact: Migration Patterns before and after the Festival

ISTAT data reveal a measurable change in out-migration patterns coinciding with the festival's establishment. In the three years prior to the first Stramurales assembly (2014–2017), Stornara experienced an average annual out-migration rate among young adults (aged 15–34) of approximately 175 per 1000, consistent with regional trends and reflecting the structural pressures described above. In the five years following the festival's establishment (2018–2022), this rate declined to approximately 118 per 1000—a reduction of approximately 33%. Whilst we cannot attribute this change solely, or even primarily, to the Stramurales intervention—regional economic conditions, national policy changes, and the global disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic all influenced migration patterns during this period—the coincidence of the trend with the intervention's implementation is noteworthy.

More revealing, perhaps, than aggregate migration statistics are the testimonies of young people who explicitly cited the festival as influencing their decision-making. Six of the fifteen interview participants were young adults (aged 18–30) who described having considered emigration seriously prior to the festival's establishment and having revised that decision—at least in the short term—partly in response to their engagement with Stramurales. Their accounts suggest that the festival operated not primarily by improving material conditions (which remained structurally constrained) but by altering the experiential and narrative relationship between young people and their community—transforming it, in their accounts, from a site of inevitable departure to a site of active becoming.

5.2. Affective Regulation and Environmental Restoration

Participants consistently described the transformed urban environment as producing positive emotional responses. One property owner remarked: 'Before, I would avert my eyes when walking past these walls. Now I

stop to look, to show visitors. It changes how I feel about being here.' This aligns with Ulrich et al.'s (1991) stress recovery theory, wherein aesthetic improvements to build environments facilitate emotional regulation. However, the Stramurales effect transcends mere aesthetic pleasure. The art depicts narratives specific to Stornara's history, agricultural heritage, and collective struggles, creating what [3] termed 'fascination'—effortless attention that permits mental restoration. Crucially, the affective response to the murals was not generic appreciation of visual beauty but a specific emotional engagement with content that participants recognised as their own.

5.3. Democratic Content and Cognitive Engagement

Central to the Stramurales model is what we term 'democratic content selection': the structured process by which residents collectively determine, through annual public assemblies, the themes, narratives, and visual vocabulary of each year's murals. This is not a consultation or advisory process—residents possess actual decision-making power, and artistic proposals that do not receive community endorsement are not implemented, regardless of their aesthetic merit. The definition of 'democratic content' thus encompasses both process (transparent, inclusive deliberation) and substance (the selection of themes that reflect community identity, memory, and aspiration).

This process engages residents in active deliberation about their community's visual identity in ways that proved therapeutically significant. As one participant explained: 'For years, we spoke only of leaving. Now we discuss what should remain, what should be remembered, what we want to become.' Recent research by [14] demonstrates that cultural identity and environmental perception exert chain mediating effects upon community resilience through place attachment. The Stramurales process strengthens precisely these connections, transforming passive inhabitants into active stakeholders.

5.4. Social Cohesion and Collective Efficacy

Perhaps most significantly, the festival catalyses social interaction across generational and socioeconomic divisions. The annual voting assembly brings together individuals who might otherwise rarely interact. Festival organiser Lino Lombardi observed: 'The murals give people something to discuss beyond their complaints. They become ambassadors for Stornara.' This phenomenon reflects what [13] termed 'social capital'—networks of relationships that enable collective action. Research demonstrates that social capital constitutes a protective factor against mental health conditions, particularly in economically disadvantaged contexts [4].

Moreover, the demonstrable success of collective decision-making enhances what psychologists term 'collective efficacy'—the shared belief in a group's capacity to achieve desired outcomes. When residents witness their votes translated into tangible changes to their environment, they experience concrete evidence that collective action produces results. This proves particularly therapeutic in contexts characterised by learned helplessness, wherein prolonged exposure to uncontrollable negative circumstances produces resignation and passivity.

5.5. Narrative Transformation and Identity Reconstruction

The murals depict Stornara's agricultural traditions, historical figures, and cultural heritage alongside contemporary global artistic movements. This juxtaposition enables what narrative psychologists term 'autobiographical reasoning'—the process through which individuals construct coherent identity narratives connecting past, present, and future. One elderly participant reflected: 'These walls tell our story, but differently. Not as victims, but as people with something worth painting.' This reframing proves therapeutically significant. Research demonstrates that the capacity to construct coherent, empowering narratives about one's community constitutes a protective factor against depression and anxiety [15].

Several young participants described how the festival altered their relationship with Stornara, transforming it from 'a place I must leave' to 'a place engaged in becoming something.' This shift from fatalistic to agentic narrative orientation represents, we argue, a clinically significant change in the cognitive schemas through which individuals evaluate their situation and future prospects—precisely the kind of cognitive restructuring that therapeutic interventions aim to produce.

6. Discussion

Our findings illuminate how democratically governed street art functions as mental health infrastructure through multiple interconnected pathways. This section develops an analytical account of these mechanisms, asking not merely what the Stramurales intervention achieves but why it achieves it—and what conditions are necessary for such achievements to occur elsewhere.

6.1. The Specificity of the Mechanism: Why Democratic Governance Is Not Incidental

A central analytical question posed by this case concerns the relationship between democratic governance and therapeutic outcome. Is the democratic structure of Stramurales merely a desirable procedural feature—an ethical enhancement to an essentially aesthetic intervention—or is it constitutive of the psychological benefits the festival produces?

Our evidence strongly supports the latter interpretation. The psychological mechanisms we document—affective regulation, collective efficacy, narrative reconstruction, place attachment—are not produced by the murals alone but by the process through which the murals come into being. The same mural, imposed by a governmental authority or produced by an internationally celebrated artist without community consultation, would almost certainly fail to generate the same outcomes. The reason is that what the community experiences is not merely a transformed visual environment but a transformed relationship to that environment—and to one another. The walls become evidence of collective agency, not merely objects of aesthetic appreciation.

This analysis illuminates why Banksy's interventions, however politically incisive and aesthetically sophisticated, cannot produce the community mental health outcomes we document in Stornara. When Banksy appropriates a wall in Bristol or Bethlehem, he (or they) asserts control over a public space on behalf of a private artistic vision, however sympathetic. The community receives a gift it did not request and did not shape. Whatever pleasure or reflection the work provokes, it does not constitute exercise of collective agency, and it therefore does not activate the psychological mechanisms—perceived control, collective efficacy, social capital formation—that the Stramurales process generates.

Similarly, graffiti produced in authoritarian contexts, whilst potentially important as individual political expression, operates through fundamentally different psychological pathways. The clandestinity of such practice precludes collective deliberation; the risk of state repression forecloses open community participation; and the absence of institutional support means that such interventions cannot sustain the longitudinal social processes—repeated assemblies, cumulative narrative reconstruction—that generate durable psychological change. Individual acts of visual resistance may empower individual producers, but they cannot constitute community mental health infrastructure.

6.2. The Mechanisms Linking Environment to Mental Health: A Synthesis

Integrating our findings with the broader environmental psychology and social prescribing literature [3,5,6], we propose a multi-level model of the pathways through which participatory street art interventions affect mental health outcomes.

At the neurobiological level, the transformation of aesthetically degraded environments reduces chronic low-level stress activation, lowering allostatic load and creating the physiological conditions for attentional restoration [2]. At the cognitive level, the introduction of visually complex, culturally meaningful environments supports the effortless attention that Kaplan terms 'fascination', enabling the cognitive recovery that depleted attentional resources require. At the affective level, the experience of environments that reflect one's own identity and community narrative generates positive emotions—pride, belonging, curiosity—that broaden the individual's repertoire of thought and action [16].

At the social level, the participatory process generates opportunities for informal interaction and deliberation, rebuilding the social networks that constitute social capital and that represent one of the most robust protections against mental health conditions. At the identity level, the production of community murals that narrate local history and express collective aspiration provides residents with symbolic resources for constructing coherent, empowering narratives about their community and their place within it. And at the structural level—the level most systematically neglected in clinical mental health discourse—the exercise of genuine decision-making power over a significant aspect of community life challenges the experience of political voicelessness that constitutes the most psychologically toxic dimension of structural violence.

These mechanisms interact and reinforce one another. Positive affect facilitates social engagement; social engagement builds collective efficacy; collective efficacy supports narrative reconstruction; narrative reconstruction sustains engagement. The result is a virtuous cycle that, if the initial intervention is adequately designed and sustained, can counteract—though not eliminate—the effects of the structural conditions that produced the original crisis.

6.3. Stramurales and the Global South: Comparative Implications

The comparative evidence from participatory street art in the Global South both validates and contextualises the Stramurales findings. The experience of Casa Kolacho in Medellín's Commune 13 demonstrates that participatory muralism can function as mental health infrastructure even in communities confronting significantly

more severe structural violence—including the direct trauma of armed conflict—than rural Southern Italy. The psychological mechanisms we document in Stornara appear to operate across markedly different socio-political contexts, suggesting their generalisability.

However, the Global South comparisons also reveal the importance of contextual adaptation. In Colombia, the reintegration of former combatants into community art processes required specific attention to transitional justice principles; in South Africa, the racialised geography of apartheid-era spatial planning shaped the symbolic significance of murals in specific locations in ways that required careful community navigation [10]. The elements of the Stramurales model that appear most structurally transferable—voluntary participation, democratic content selection, transparent governance, integration of local and global artistic references—must in each case be adapted to the specific historical, cultural, and political context of the community in question.

For communities in the Global South confronting the convergent pressures of rapid urbanisation, post-conflict reconstruction, climate-driven displacement, and systematic underfunding of mental health services, the Stramurales model offers a particularly relevant template. The intervention's minimal infrastructure requirements, its reliance on community knowledge rather than external expertise, its capacity to produce visible results with limited financial resources, and its integration of cultural expression with health promotion all render it well-suited to contexts where clinical mental health infrastructure remains severely constrained. The critical variable, as our analysis demonstrates, is not the art itself but the governance structures through which it is produced.

6.4. Why Should Others Care? The Transferable Logic of Stramurales

A legitimate analytical challenge to any case study is the 'so what?' question: why should policymakers, practitioners, or communities elsewhere be interested in the particular experience of a small municipality in Southern Italy? Our response operates at two levels.

At the empirical level, the coincidence of measurable demographic change with the festival's implementation, combined with the qualitative evidence of psychological transformation documented through interviews, provides a sufficient basis for treating Stramurales as a plausible model worthy of systematic evaluation and contextual adaptation. We do not claim that the Stramurales model will work everywhere, or that it can substitute for structural changes addressing the root causes of community marginalisation. We do claim that it represents a promising, low-cost, community-centred approach to mental health promotion that warrants serious attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

At the theoretical level, the Stramurales case illuminates something important about the conditions under which environmental interventions can constitute genuine mental health infrastructure: they must involve not merely the transformation of physical environments but the transformation of communities' relationships to those environments through genuine participatory governance. This insight, whilst grounded in a specific case, has broad implications for how we conceptualise the relationship between urban design, cultural policy, and public health.

6.5. Theoretical Contributions

These findings extend existing theory in several directions. Firstly, they demonstrate how environmental psychology principles operate in contexts characterised by structural violence. Whilst restorative environment theory emphasises natural settings, the Stramurales case illustrates that thoughtfully designed built environments—particularly those reflecting community identity and values and produced through participatory processes—can generate comparable psychological benefits.

Secondly, our findings illuminate the specific mechanisms linking participatory governance to mental health outcomes, addressing a lacuna in the literature that [17] identified: whilst numerous studies document associations between arts participation and improved wellbeing, fewer specify the causal pathways. Our analysis identifies affective regulation, cognitive engagement, social cohesion, narrative reconstruction, and collective efficacy as discrete yet interconnected mechanisms—and demonstrates that democratic governance is not merely a procedural feature but a constitutive element of the therapeutic effect.

Thirdly, this research contributes to the social prescribing literature by providing a detailed mechanistic account of how a specific community-led cultural intervention produces health outcomes, complementing the population-level evidence synthesised by [6] and others.

6.6. Psychologists' Roles

These findings suggest expanded roles for psychologists in community health initiatives. Beyond traditional clinical competencies, psychologists possess theoretical frameworks and methodological tools valuable for designing, implementing, and evaluating participatory interventions. Specifically, psychologists can contribute

through rigorous evaluation of psychological outcomes, ensuring interventions produce intended benefits; facilitation of participatory processes, applying group dynamics knowledge to support authentic engagement; advocacy for community-centred approaches within policy discussions; and integration of psychological principles with urban planning, public health, and community development disciplines.

However, psychologists must approach such work with humility, recognising that clinical expertise does not automatically translate to community development competence. The Stramurales success derives primarily from community members' knowledge, commitment, and agency—not from external professional intervention. Psychologists can support but not substitute for community leadership.

6.7. Limitations and Future Research

This study possesses several limitations warranting acknowledgement. Firstly, our qualitative approach, whilst providing rich insight into processes and experiences, precludes definitive causal claims regarding mental health outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal quantitative designs measuring specific psychological indicators—including standardised measures of depression, anxiety, collective efficacy, place attachment, and social capital—before, during, and after intervention implementation.

Secondly, our focus upon a single case limits generalisability, and the demographic data, whilst suggestive, cannot be attributed to the intervention without more rigorous quasi-experimental designs. Comparative studies examining multiple participatory arts initiatives across different national and cultural contexts—including, critically, Global South settings—would illuminate which features prove essential versus contextually dependent.

Thirdly, we did not systematically examine potential negative consequences or unintended effects. Gentrification, wherein aesthetic improvements trigger property value increases displacing long-term residents, constitutes a documented risk of urban art interventions. Whilst Stornara's economic circumstances make immediate gentrification unlikely, this warrants monitoring as the festival gains prominence. Future research should also examine the differential impact of the intervention across demographic groups—particularly those, such as elderly residents or individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, who may engage differently with participatory processes.

Future research should investigate: which elements of the Stramurales model prove most therapeutically significant; how impacts vary across demographic groups and cultural contexts; what conditions facilitate or impede replication in different contexts, including Global South settings; how psychological benefits change over time; and what role digital platforms and social media play in amplifying or mediating effects.

7. Conclusions

Observing Stornara residents voting upon murals that June afternoon, we witnessed individuals exercising a fundamental human capacity too often denied within our field: the power to shape their own environments and, through that shaping, to heal. The Stramurales festival demonstrates that this capacity is not merely symbolically important but psychologically constitutive—that the exercise of collective agency over the visual environment of one's community activates mechanisms of affective regulation, social cohesion, and narrative reconstruction that constitute legitimate mental health infrastructure.

Perhaps this constitutes the most vital lesson Stramurales offers environmental psychology and public health: that occasionally the most therapeutic intervention is not administered by clinical mental health professionals but spontaneously created by local communities claiming their collective agency. The mechanisms through which this occurs—and the democratic governance structures that make it possible—are transferable. Communities confronting structural marginalisation in rural Italy, post-conflict Colombia, or the Global South more broadly share the fundamental human need to exercise agency over their shared environments and to construct coherent, empowering narratives about their collective identities and futures.

The Stramurales model already offers a scientifically replicable case, as confirmed by our previous research Street Art as Public Health Infrastructure published in the Harvard Health and Human Rights Journal. Its essential elements—voluntary engagement, democratic content selection, transparent governance, strategic integration of local narratives with global artistic practices, and sustained community ownership—are adaptable across contexts whilst preserving the democratic structures that generate their therapeutic effects. International frameworks, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, include rights to health and cultural participation, and state obligations to preserve, develop, and disseminate culture should support community-led cultural initiatives demonstrably impacting health outcomes.

The question Stramurales poses to global health policy is ultimately simple but profound: if communities given genuine agency over their shared visual environment demonstrate measurable improvements in wellbeing,

migration retention, and social cohesion, what does this imply for how we allocate public health resources, design urban environments, and conceptualise the relationship between culture and health? The answer, we suggest, requires not merely adding 'arts and health' as a supplementary programme alongside conventional clinical services, but reconceiving the governance of public space as itself a domain of health policy—one in which democratic participation is not merely a procedural nicety but a therapeutic intervention in its own right.

Author Contributions

L.M.S.: conceptualisation, methodology, fieldwork and ethnographic observation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—reviewing and editing; M.M.: conceptualisation, theoretical framework development, methodology, data curation, writing—reviewing and editing, supervision, validation. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study on the grounds that it constitutes non-interventional qualitative social-science research involving consenting adult members of the general public, with no collection of sensitive personal, clinical, or biological data, and poses no foreseeable risk of harm to participants.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were informed of the research purpose, the written-recording of interviews, and the use of anonymised quotations in academic publication prior to their participation. As no participant is individually identifiable in the published text, written informed consent for publication was not required.

Data Availability Statement

The demographic and migration data analysed in this study are publicly available through the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) at https://www.istat.it. Qualitative data generated during fieldwork—including written recordings, interview transcripts, and ethnographic field notes—are not publicly available, as participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as a condition of their consent to participate. Requests for access to anonymised excerpts of the qualitative data by competent researchers may be directed to the corresponding author, subject to ethical and legal constraints.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

No AI tools were utilised in the preparation of this article.

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