

Editorial

Art as an

Urban Lifeline:

Mental Well-Being in Times of Crisis and Conflict

Bussakorn Binson⁺ Executive Director

Cities across the world are increasingly defined by pressure – conflict, disaster, displacement, economic uncertainty, and a growing sense of social fragmentation. These forces shape not only the physical fabric of the city but also the inner lives of its residents. As urban populations endure chronic stress, fear, and emotional fatigue, the question of how cities support mental well-being has become urgent. In this context, art has emerged not as cultural decoration, but as a profound psychological lifeline: a medium through which individuals can process trauma, reconnect with their communities, and recover their sense of humanity.

The emotional volatility of urban life is well documented. Even in stable times, city living exposes individuals to elevated stressors – noise, crowding, insecurity, precarity, and the erosion of social networks. In moments of crisis, these pressures intensify dramatically. People often lack language for their distress; even when words exist, they may feel unsafe or too overwhelmed to speak. Art offers a way through this silence. Whether through drawing, movement, music, or collective creative rituals, artistic expression helps reduce stress, regulate emotions, and foster connection among diverse groups of people (Stuckey and Nobel 2010).

Today, we see cities relying on art-based interventions as informal yet powerful networks of care. After natural disasters, community murals help residents reclaim streets scarred by loss. In conflict-affected neighborhoods, community music-making rebuilds trust and restores a sense of hope, especially among young people who have grown up in environments marked by fear (Jones and McFerran 2020). In schools, art activities help children express anxiety that they cannot articulate verbally. In hospitals and shelters, simple creative practices allow individuals to release tension stored in the body and to reconnect with their own emotional rhythms.

⁺ Bussakorn Binson, Executive Director JUCR, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
email: bsumrongthong@yahoo.com. website: <http://pioneer.chula.ac.th/~sbussako/index.html>.

Research consistently shows that shared creative activities create belonging and emotional safety – two conditions essential for mental recovery. Group singing, for instance, has been shown to strengthen social bonds, improve confidence, and sustain psychological well-being across age groups (Clift and Hancox 2010). This matters profoundly in cities where isolation and fragmentation are rising. Art not only brings people together; it restores the sense that healing is possible.

In disaster and emergency contexts, art-based interventions play a strategic role. They provide non-verbal channels for trauma release and stabilization at times when communities are overwhelmed and formal mental-health services are stretched thin. A growing body of international evidence shows that creative arts programmes support emotional recovery after disasters, enabling individuals to regulate fear, make meaning of traumatic events, and reconnect with others who share similar experiences (Thompson and Neale 2016). These interventions are cost-effective, culturally adaptable, and capable of mobilizing local participation – qualities that conventional services often lack.

For cities, the implications are clear. If mental well-being is essential to urban resilience, then art must be recognized as part of the urban mental-health infrastructure. This begins with integrating art-based approaches into schools, community centres, hospitals, emergency shelters, and municipal disaster preparedness plans. Cities could develop “creative emergency response teams” – artists, therapists, musicians, cultural workers – trained to support communities during crises. Mobile art units, public art healing hubs, and participatory creative programmes could function alongside formal services to provide emotional first aid during and after emergencies.

Art also strengthens what might be called the “emotional commons” of the city. Public creative spaces – festivals, murals, interactive installations, and community performances – create opportunities for collective expression that counteract fear, loneliness, and division. Cities that invest in these shared cultural ecosystems not only enhance their aesthetic identity; they cultivate resilience, empathy, and social cohesion.

As the world becomes more unpredictable – with climate instability, political conflict, and social anxiety affecting millions – the need for culturally grounded, accessible mental-health strategies has never been clearer. Art provides precisely this: a way to bear witness to suffering, transform pain into expression, and rebuild the bonds that crisis tries to break. More importantly, it reminds us that even in moments of extreme tension, the human capacity for creativity remains one of our most powerful tools for survival.

As JUCR moves into its new online chapter, this editorial is a call for deeper inquiry into how art can help cities endure, adapt, and heal. The journal will continue to support research that bridges culture, community practice, and the lived experiences of urban residents. In a world of conflict and uncertainty, art is not a luxury. It is a lifeline – and cities must learn to embrace its transformative power.

References

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