

'BRAKUN LINNUT'

Nature, science and street art project to transform the cityscape with local youth

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ABSTRACT

Here, we present a project where scientific knowledge on how we aesthetically appreciate nature was combined with street art practices to create workshops where local youth and children participated in the design and transformation of the cityscape with bird and conservation-themed art. This is a small-scale local project which took place in Helsinki in 2024 as a collaboration of a scientist, a street artist, and a mural painter. The aims of the project were: 1) To transform the urban area to have more signs of young people's and children's presence and bird species to create a connection to and to appreciate nature, 2) To organise participatory workshops where local young people and families got to participate in the creation of bird-themed street art while learning about the species. The youth learned to design their own birds to be used in street art, learned the process of street art creation, and designed and painted their own electric cabinets into the streetscape in 'Brahen kenttä' region, Helsinki. On event day, families used the designs of the young to create more art. Additional workshops were arranged for children taking part in schools' afternoon activities at Brahe playground: painting the trash bins with bird themes, and expressing their wishes for a larger mural art piece by artist Maikki Rantala. The mural was filled with bright colours

according to the kids' wishes – children's aesthetic can be very different from adults. Also, bird species were chosen based on children's preferences. Overall, 25 pieces of street art transformed the park and streetscape, and gave joy and messaging about the importance of biodiversity to passers-by. This kind of art shows how the urban landscape belongs to multiple users and inhabitants, including diverse human age-groups and non-human species.

BACKGROUND

Societies are dependent on nature's contributions to people for the life-supporting qualities of biodiversity and abiotic environmental qualities such as climate and soil (IPBES, 2019). One of these dependencies is through the aesthetic experiences and observation of nature which are known to give well-being benefits to humans. The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) and IPBES report on Nature's Contributions to People (Brauman et al., 2019) both list aesthetics as key components of pathways for ecosystem services and benefits to humans. Yet, the Anthropocene has seen accelerating degradation of natural ecosystems due to human actions, and despite the knowledge on how nature provides well-being, this trajectory has not changed thus far. Reversing environmental degradation requires transformative action, which motivates people to change to sustainable lifestyles and to connect more strongly back to nature. Environmental art education and public art are tools that can be used to help people reflect, and understand their impact on the environment, to reflect on the aesthetic experiences that nature gives to us, and to tell about and show appreciation to non-human species (e.g. Ylirisku, 2021; Suominen, 2016; Vervoort et al., 2024). Dense urban areas are some of the landscapes that are most transformed by human actions (IPBES, 2019), and even if they host a multitude of non-human species their presence is not always obvious to people who go about their everyday lives. Attention to them can however be directed, e.g. via art.

Street art, a form of public art, refers to artistic works that are most often on building surfaces or other visible structures. Street art ranges from small stencils, stickers, and tags at street level, to large murals that may last for decades. The art form is cyclic and short-lived or leaves long-lasting images and texts into the streetscape. While street art shares roots with graffiti, it typically aims to provoke thought rather than rejection, and contrary to graffiti, most often involves permission and agreements with property owners and municipal authorities. It has been often used to create more colourful, inspiring streetscapes and neighbourhoods (Guetzkow, 2002; Multanen, 2015; Väisänen, 2021; Wikipedia, 2025).

In Finland, street art plays a role in everyday urban life by enriching the visual environment, fostering interaction, and strengthening communal identity. It can highlight local stories, support public dialogue, and shape the "atmosphere" or sense of a place—a multisensory quality formed through interactions between people, objects, and the environment (Multanen, 2015). When thoughtfully integrated into planning, public art can enhance

inclusion, pride, and a distinctive sense of place. Positive encounters with art can generate a reinforcing cycle of wellbeing within a neighborhood (Multanen, 2015; Väisänen, 2021).

Research on cultural practices emphasise the broader wellbeing impacts of art: wellbeing encompasses experiences, habits, and human rights related to cultural participation (Leppisaari, 2025). Artistic activity can meaningfully support emotional life, mental health, body awareness, and a sense of hope, while addressing loneliness, belonging, and life's meaningfulness (Leppisaari, 2025). Also, some work highlights the political dimensions of public space, arguing that art can expose power structures, norms, and commercial expectations, while also serving as a democratic tool that brings people together (e.g. Eriksson, 2016; Jensen, 2018).

Street art has been used for messaging in nature conservation in a few locations around the world. For example, in New York in the U.S.A., the Audubon Mural Project has thus far created 142 murals with 210 different bird species onto the walls of the urban area - they serve as a reminder of these birds' existence, and especially of those threatened by climate change (National Audubon Society, 2025). In Europe, for instance, the PonDerat mural tells about shearwaters and the protection of these migratory birds in Italy (PonDerat, 2025). Many street art organizations and events that focus on themes like bird conservation typically invite or commission professional artists to create their signature pieces. In our case, we aimed for a more participatory approach, following the way participatory practices have become more common in the Helsinki Metropolitan Region in Finland. Transdisciplinary collaborations are crucial in achieving transformative changes for sustainability, and those bridging scientific, artistic, and local knowledge can be especially meaningful (e.g. Mesa-Jurado et al., 2025).

Within these contexts of environmental change, aesthetics and street art, the '*Brakun linnut*' ('the birds of Brahe') -project functions as an environmental art and co-design initiative, weaving together street art methods, environmental education, science communication, and the participation of youth and children. The project's artistic aims center on redistributing the power of messages in public space and creating a more child- and nature-friendly 'atmosphere' around Brahe sports field and playground in Helsinki, Finland — an area marked by both heavy youth and child presence and social challenges. Past collaborations in the area showed promising improvements in child-friendliness (G-Rex, 2025). By engaging young and children in permitted painting, the project teaches agency, strengthens local identity, and explores relationships to bird species in the urban environment.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

'Brakun linnut' - birds as a topic

'*Brakun linnut*' in Finnish translates into 'the Birds of Brahe', a reference to the location of '*Brahen kenttä*' in Helsinki. Birds were chosen as the topic of the project as the connections, or lack thereof, of cultural and societal values with ecological significance makes them an excellent topic to discuss people's relations with non-human species. Birds are an indicator species for environmental changes and at the time of the project globally 49 % of their populations were in decline (Gregory et al., 2005; IUCN RedList, 2024).

The aesthetic perceptions that people hold on birds have been shown to impact various nature conservation issues. For instance, we know that aesthetic value predicts bird species presence in wildlife trade (e.g. Senior et al., 2022; Haukka et al., 2025), and supports well-being of people e.g. via observing birds in nature or at feeder sites (Cox & Gaston, 2016; Fisher et al., 2023; White et al., 2023; Deshpande et al., 2024). There are clear differences in what species have, on average, more positive aesthetic values for people (Haukka et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important that people reflect on their aesthetic perceptions of species, on what they appreciate in birds (be it visuals or vocalisations; Santangeli et al., 2023), and understand the ramifications of the perceptions people hold on the beauty of bird species.'

Location

The '*Brahen kenttä*' region in Helsinki is an area where there is a sports field, playground, a local school, restaurants, a theater, gas station and other urban activities. It is also a central location with a lot of passers-by. On the side of vibrant bar and nightlife culture there is also an existing issue in the area with drug use. The nearby blocks are one of the most concentrated drugs dealing and using hotspots in town, and police surveillance has now been increased in the area (e.g. Ikola, 2025; Lapinkangas, 2025).

The project aims to transform the streetscape through art, making it more child-friendly, and marking the urban space belonging to children and nature as well. The goal is to give children something to be proud of and to look at on their way to school, and at the playground so that they pay less attention to the issues on the street that do not belong in the world of children.

There was a mural painting campaign in the Brahe playground, and the surrounding area's electrical cabinets already in 2016 (G-Rex, 2025). Now the worn out, lost and tagged artworks from over the years were to be replaced. This was done with the proven collaboration model with the surface owners, playground personnel, City of Helsinki Sports Services, and a local

Human-environment relationality

school. Helsinki city's education division agreed on collaboration (streetlight and tram control cabinets); likewise other street side cabinet owners (post office and electricity company).

Science-art collaboration

The design of this project started as a dialogue between scientist Anna Haukka and artist Maikki Rantala. They wanted to create nature-themed street art to communicate conservation issues. As Haukka's research is about people-bird interactions, and especially the aesthetic perceptions people have on birds, this was chosen as the topic for the project. Rantala's work varies from large-scale public art commissions to smaller self-organized art interventions in urban space. Community educator and producer Jenni Väisänen supports and collaborates with the artists in their projects. Together, Väisänen and Rantala develop and test community-based methods for large-scale public artworks with different children and residents' groups. The activities of the SAV Art Collective (SAV Taidekollektiivi, 2025) are based on needs-oriented and community-centered art planning and implementation, where the users of the spaces are involved in the process through empathetic design and participatory art. Common ground of the makers of the project was found in activism to influence our surroundings in the city, and what kinds of messages are shown in the urban space. Additionally, there was the benefit of having collaborated before on a smaller participatory art project. There was an established way of working together, giving space to different approaches to the topic (Halme & Tuittila, 2024).

Participation and agency of locals

We provided young people the opportunity to have agency in transforming the streetscape with bird-themed art. They were, at the time, attending the local '*Aleksis Kiven peruskoulu*' school, in a class that has special focus on visual arts. They created the bird figures to be used as the basis of most of the artistic work in the project. Additionally, local families and children were given the opportunity to participate in painting. The idea was to have all the participants get a new kind of relationship to meaning-making in their local urban area, and to provide emotional resonance between the participants, on birds, and attachment to place. (Figure 1.) Paints used throughout the project were environmentally friendly options. Safety of participants, and their clothes, was guaranteed with protective gear and head masks when necessary.

The main workshop process was to engage the youth. We met them several times through the process, and they co-created the art with the scientist, street artists and the school's teachers. The process initiated with background information on the state of bird species, and on how their aesthetic value to humans has been studied. They also received teaching street art and

transforming the urban landscape. Lastly, the project and the art methods to be used were taught to the participants. Their first step was to choose a bird and to sketch and draw it in a way that was usable for cutting a stencil. The prompt for this task included wording that they could choose whichever bird species they wanted to, and could think if there are specific birds they fancy and admire, or specific birds they thought should receive attention. This resulted in a selection of exotic birds (those not native to Finland, but living in e.g. the tropics or ocean shores), and local birds (those that can be easily observed in the close-by environment of the project). Once the drawings were ready, a local laser cutting studio created the stencils to be used for painting.

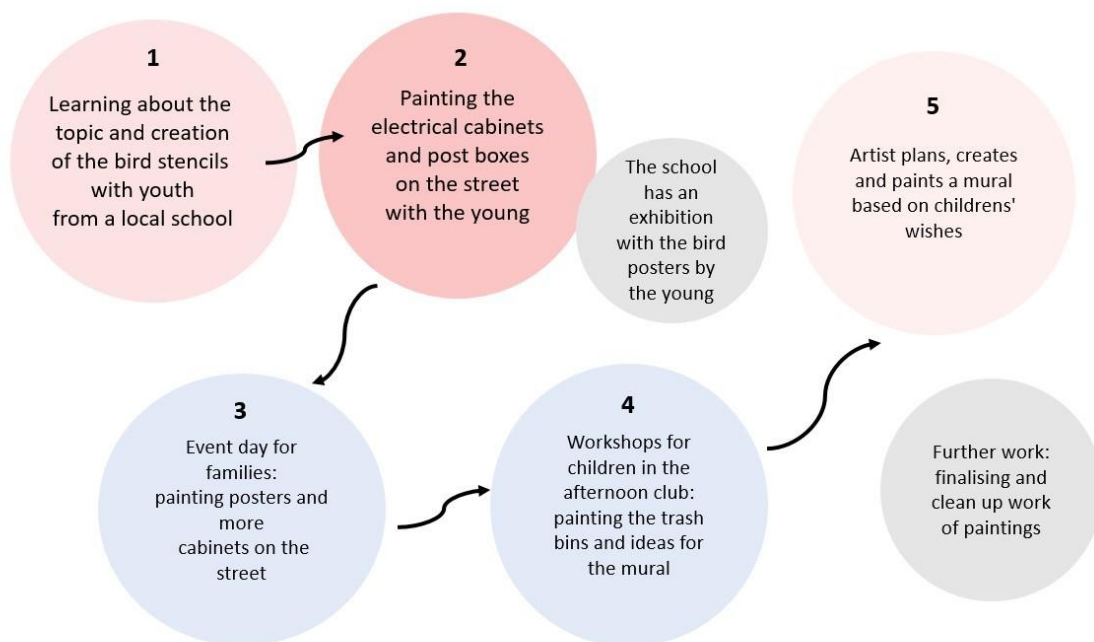


Figure 1

The steps and structure of the participatory street art project

Additionally, we wanted to add conservation-related messaging to the streets. Due to a lack of time, and as suggested by the teachers of the youth, the scientist and artist proposed some pieces of text, and the young voted for which ones they chose to have produced into stencils and to use in their pieces of art. Messages ranged from conservation topics to the meaning of birds in the urban environment.

The second part of the process was to paint the pieces of art on the streets. SAV Arts Collective's artists prepared the cleaning and background colours for the surfaces to be painted, leaving the focus of the work of the young to be that of designing and painting the birds, message texts, and background patterns onto the surfaces. The young worked in groups of 2-4 and the process of painting was facilitated and assisted by the scientist, street artists and the teachers from the school. This allowed us to keep working in the public space of the

streets safe for every group. In total, 10 pieces of street art were produced by youth (Figures 2, 4).



Figure 2

Painting on the streets with the youth⁴

The day of the event in August 2024 was open to families from the area and took place on a Saturday. Anyone could come and take part in using the bird stencils to create a poster to take home, to learn about birds, and to take part in guided painting of more electricity and post cabinets on the streets of the region. Some of the young, who had learned the methods already, took part in the event as assistants and painted further street art on this day (Figure 3).

The Brahe playground’s afternoon program serves early-grade pupils. Over 50 children participate daily. The art project fit naturally into the existing activities, and a small exhibition and workshop space was set up where children explored bird species and street art through images and hands-on tasks. A wish to transform and paint trash bins came from the playground staff. About 20 children joined the planning workshops facilitated by a researcher and an artist.

For the mural, children chose preferred colors from sample folders, and the artist mixed matching tones from recycled paints. The mural’s location in a sports park inspired the theme “moving birds,” leading children to draw imaginative scenes—owls playing basketball, a blue tit running on a track, penguins diving, and more. Their drawings, color charts, and shared

⁴ All photographs by Anna Haukka

design materials were displayed throughout the project. The artist painted the mural over three weeks, with children visiting to observe and discuss.

For painting the trash bins, implementation happened in small groups: each child safely practiced spray-painting and used stencils to decorate waste bins, creating four 'bird bins'.



Figure 3

Workshops for the families and children at the playground

For the mural, children chose preferred colors from sample folders, and the artist mixed matching tones from recycled paints. The mural's location in a sports park inspired the theme "moving birds," leading children to draw imaginative scenes—owls playing basketball, a blue tit running on a track, penguins diving, and more. Their drawings, color charts, and shared

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PROJECT OUTCOMES

Street art

In total, there are 20 pieces of art on electricity or post cabinets produced by this project. Four trash bins on the playground and skatepark now have bird images on them, and the park hosts a mural 'City of children and birds' ('*Lasten ja lintujen kaupunki*'). Figures 4-7 show images of the art in the streetscape. Additionally, the participating school had used an arts class of children to draw birds into the school yard with chalk, creating a temporary street art piece. Also, the posters which the young had made - each with their own bird stencil - had been exhibited at the school's end-of-year celebrations.



Figure 4

Bird-themed street art pieces around Brahen kenttä, Helsinki



Figure 5

Trash bins on the playground, painted with the afternoon club's children

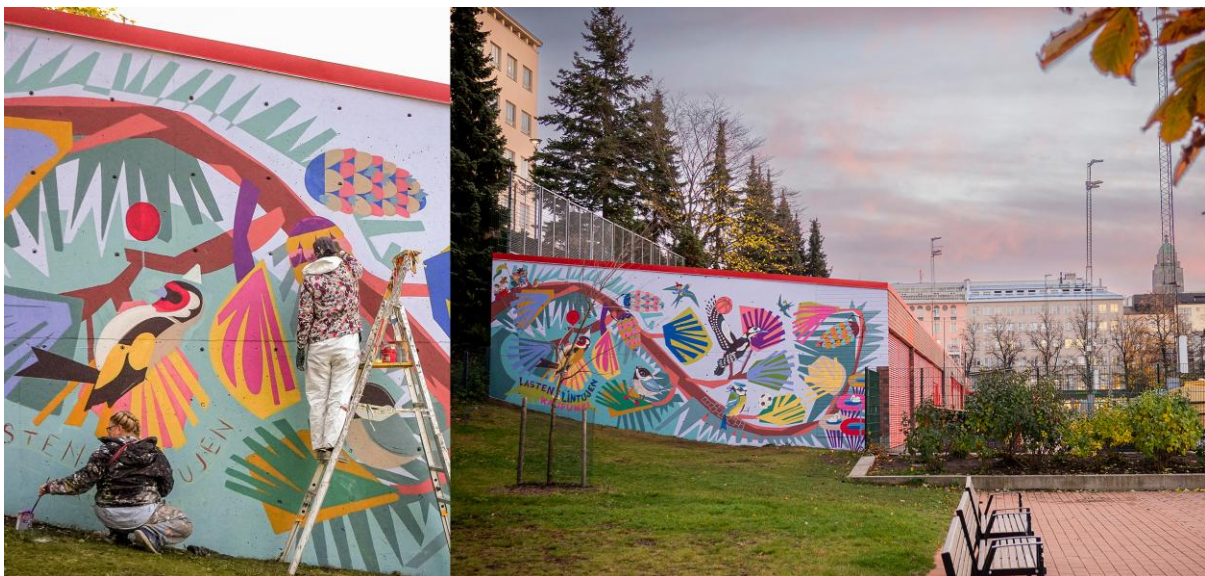


Figure 6

The large mural painted by Maikki Rantala and inspired by colour choices and topic wishes by the children

Learning outcomes for young participants

A brief questionnaire was given to the young participants to understand what they learned from the process. The answers showed that the focus of learning was more on street art methods, whilst not as strongly on birds (although some individuals learned a lot about birds). It would be more interesting to measure before-after project change in perceptions on the participants' own agency in transforming the streetscape, and relations to birds - a lesson for

Human-environment relationality

the scientist for future projects. Overall, the workshops were mostly interesting for the participants.

Whilst it is difficult to quantify what the long-term impacts of such participation to the people are, we can speculate that taking part in such a street art activity can be a way to, in part, transform people's ways of living (e.g. Vervoort et al., 2024). An experience of active participation in changing one's environment can lead to taking part again later, or to using the skills of active participation in another context. Meaningful and slow processes give space to create new ways of participating in positive environmental transformations (e.g. Mesa-Jurado et al., 2025).

Dialogues with children and passers-by as part of the project

Throughout the painting weeks, frequent dialogue was held with the children in the afternoon club regarding birds and art. Conversations were also conducted with adults visiting the playground, covering a wide range of everyday topics. Issues such as urination in the playground, as well as smoking, alcohol, and drug use, were addressed constructively with adults when necessary.

Typical comments were received, for example, about the artwork representing a major change or the positive effect of added colour. Colour was consistently noted as something that evokes positive reactions and emotions. It was also observed that the non-commercial, cheerful, and child-oriented nature of the work was appreciated. One child's specific wish for certain bird motifs was fulfilled.

Extensive discussion was also held with visitors in the playground about local bird species and about the large conifer trees, which were identified as Douglas firs. These trees were noted to host flocks of siskins and frequent visits from great spotted woodpeckers. Because painting the mural took place in October, the trees were producing abundant seeds, attracting many birds and squirrels.

LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM THE PROJECT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Overall, this was a successful project in its breadth: the collaborations were easy to build, and all who took part in or enabled the project were keen to make it happen. Based on observations, it was clear that passers-by had mainly had a positive reaction to the art and the way it brought colour and a new kind of aesthetic to the urban landscape. The makers were also told that the mere sight of the birds does, in a way, bring the joy and voices of birds into the city simply by showing them.

On the other hand, the ways in which the participants learned about birds during the making process of art could have been more influential. While this project involved messaging birds and conservation, their meaning to people, and conservation needs, the way the art was produced was not very deeply tied to the place. One future direction would be to create a similar project, but based strongly on observations, stories and a connection to the species in the location where the art is created - enabling, e.g. stronger multispecies approaches to be seen in the visuals created by people (e.g. Ylirisku, 2021). This would enable directions such as multi-species dialogues and, at least, an even stronger attachment of the art to the place and the nature therein.



Figure 7

Messages both on how birds would need more space, and their meaning to people.
Translations: 'Lähilinnut meidän ilona' = 'Close-by birds bring us joy' and 'Jättäkää meille linnuille elintilaa!' = 'Leave some space to live for us birds too!'

"We look at this bird art exhibition every day with my son on our way to the daycare!"

- Father who passed by

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