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Mural: The Contestation of Urban Space

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Introduction

Contemporary cities increasingly function as visual landscapes in which architecture, media, and public art continuously interact in shaping collective perception. Many urban environments display progressively homogeneous and difficult-to-distinguish characteristics as a consequence of globalization processes and mass culture (Harvey, 2012). Within this context, muralism and street art have emerged as significant forms of urban expression capable of redefining the relationship between citizens and public space. Beyond their decorative dimension, or their use for concealment and the ideological education of the masses, as was often the case in totalitarian regimes, murals function as visual narratives that materialize social tensions, historical memory, political commentary, and collective aspirations (Miles, 1997).

These forms of expression employ the wall as a public surface through which visibility is granted to individual and collective thought. The wall itself functions as a separating and delimiting element of space, defining the boundary between the interior and exterior, and the private and public realms. In this sense, it becomes a form of "urban skin" mediating the relationship between one, architecture, and collectivity. Reconnecting with Lefebvre's thoughts, we can argue that the wall, as a surface exposed to the public gaze, cannot remain neutral; rather, it becomes a symbolic territory upon which the narratives, conflicts, and memories of the city are projected (Lefebre, 1991).

The relationship between the wall, visual representation, memory, and collective consciousness has historically shaped the development of urban cultures and public communication. From the prehistoric drawings of the Lascaux caves in southwestern France to contemporary street art and urban graffiti, muralism may be understood as a recurring urban practice through which familiar visual gestures are reinterpreted within changing architectural and social contexts. Within this framework, mural painting constitutes a particularly significant example, since the act of leaving a mark upon the wall represents one of humanity's earliest and most recurrent artistic gestures, a gesture that simultaneously articulated an awareness of the self within space (Wacławek, 2011)

This paper approaches muralism as both an architectural and cultural phenomenon situated between decoration and artistic gesture. Focusing particularly on the urban context of Tirana, the study examines the ways in which murals contribute to the production of urban identity in cities shaped by transition, informality, and accelerated transformation. At the same time, the article analyzes how public art mediates the relationship between architecture and everyday life, transforming walls into platforms for dialogue and participation.

Only the use of murals beyond purely decorative purposes possesses the potential to transform the wall into a non-static public space, one that becomes contested by viewers and inhabitants alike. Within this framework, murals function as layered urban palimpsests that reveal the temporal tension between permanence and ephemerality, institutional space and public appropriation, collective identity and individual expression (Lefebvre, 1991).

The article employs a theoretical and interpretative approach that draws inspiration from urban studies, architectural theory, and analyses of visual perception. Historical references to mural traditions are combined with reflections on contemporary street art and the urban transformations of Tirana. From this perspective, muralism is conceived not simply as artistic representation, but as an active spatial process, intertwined with the social production of the city.

From Cave Paintings to Urban Walls

Since antiquity, humanity has sought to express itself and leave traces of its creativity. The origins of mural painting may be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings, where wall imagery reflected human experiences and perceptions of reality. Significant testimonies of this awareness are represented by the parietal paintings created during the Late Paleolithic period in the caves of Altamira and Lascaux. These representations demonstrate the human capacity to observe the surrounding world, to become conscious of it through visual perception, and to translate such experience into images intended to document and communicate one's relationship with reality. Understood in this way, mural painting materializes not merely as an aesthetic act but as an experience aimed at leaving traces and constructing collective memory An important factor already evident in these early paintings is spatial perception, which is connected to the individual's awareness of their own existence as a subject observing the world beyond the self. This perception demonstrates the capacity of human beings to understand themselves as bodies situated within space and in relation to the external environment. In response to this need to represent space, mural painting gradually developed the use of perspective as a means of creating spatial depth and the illusion of three-dimensionality. According to art historians, Greek painters of the fifth century BCE are considered among the first to employ linear perspective in theatrical scenography, a technique they referred to as "skenographia" (Kleiner, 2009). The use of perspective later appeared in more articulated forms within Roman art. One of the most renowned examples from antiquity is Room B of the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale, near the ancient city of Pompeii. Decorated around 50–40 BCE, this space presents a sophisticated use of architectural perspective intended to create the illusion of spatial expansion beyond the actual walls of the room (Bergmann, 2010). Nevertheless, mural painting, frescoes, graffiti, and acts of inscription upon walls were already widespread and highly familiar practices within the Roman Empire, where the coloring of sculptures in temples and the writing upon walls embodied a social need for expression within shared spaces. In the Boscoreale villa, as in many Roman villas of the pars urbana (as well as in spaces such as the Lararium and the Vilicus) (Hodges, 2004), mural painting served to narrate ancestral histories, depict owned lands, represent scenes associated with fertility, mythology, and education, among other themes. At the same time, graffiti on the walls of the Empire functioned as a means of protest and public expression. These markings represented more than decorative acts; they operated as mechanisms of memory and communication connecting individual existence with collective identity. Throughout history, mural representation evolved alongside political and architectural transformations. Ancient civilizations integrated murals into temples, palaces, and public buildings as instruments of ideological and religious authority. During the Paleochristian and Byzantine periods, mural painting privileged predominantly religious themes, while the human figure gradually lost its physical characteristics and became simplified into more symbolic forms. Similarly, in Islamic art, mural representation was reduced primarily to decorative and floral motifs. It was during the Italian Renaissance that the fresco technique established a close relationship between architecture and visual narrative, intensifying the spatial experience of interior environments through illusion and symbolism. Following the trompe-l'œil phase, characterized by illusionistic backgrounds and columns between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, mural painting regained significance at the beginning of the twentieth century, no longer centered on religious themes but increasingly oriented toward social content. Muralism acquired a new political dimension through El Muralismo, the Mexican mural movement led by Los Tres Grandes: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. Following the Mexican Revolution, murals were employed as instruments of public education and social transformation, relocating art from elite institutions into urban spaces accessible to the broader public. According to (Cockcroft, 1998)

Mexican muralism established a model through which public art could simultaneously

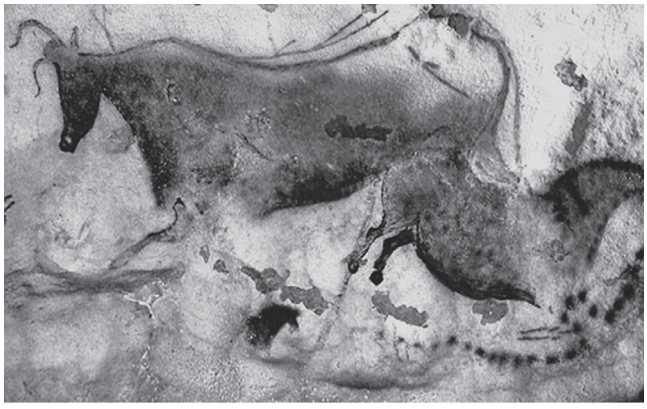


Figure 1 Red Cow & First Chinese Horse, Lascaux Cave. Retrieved from Bradshaw foundation,



Figure 2 Fresko, Dhoma H e Viles se P. Fannius Synistor, in Boscoreale. Retrieved from the Met Museum.

function as cultural memory, political critique, and collective pedagogy.

Subsequently, the Mexican example was adopted in the United States, where muralism developed into an aesthetic practice closely connected to public space, the social dimension of art, and urban identity. Unlike in Europe, muralism in the United States assumed the character of an intervention situated between socio-cultural activism and public art.

A similar development emerged in Eastern countries following the October Revolution in Russia. Initially, murals, posters, and artistic production in general were dedicated to revolutionary ideals and collective struggle, while later they became instruments of imposed art intended to educate the masses ideologically. The wall was selected precisely because its visibility to passersby was unavoidable.

The emergence of graffiti and street art at the end of the twentieth century further transformed mural practices by challenging institutional concepts of authorship and public space. Unlike monumental murals commissioned by institutions, graffiti often occupied neglected urban surfaces and peripheral, unauthorized areas, affirming visibility within environments characterized by inequality and exclusion (Wacławek, 2011).

Contemporary street art continues this tradition through interventions that combine political commentary, graphic experimentation, and architectural engagement. Artists such as Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and JR use urban surfaces to address themes such as surveillance, migration, consumerism, and social justice. Their works demonstrate that murals function not only as visual objects, but also as urban events capable of transforming public perception (Miles, 1997).

Murals and the Production of Urban Identity

Public art plays a significant role in the construction of urban identity because it mediates the relationship between space, memory, and social experience. Murals possess the capacity to transform anonymous architectural surfaces into collective points of reference. Through their scale, visibility, and accessibility, they become integrated into everyday urban life, gradually constituting an essential component of the spatial context of public space.

According to Lefebvre (1991), urban space is not a neutral physical structure but rather a social product constructed through political, economic, and cultural relations. Within this perspective, murals may be understood as practices that intervene directly in the symbolic production of the city. Similarly, Lynch (Lynch, 1960) argues that urban identity is formed through visual elements that generate orientation and collective memory within the experience of the city.

In Tirana's post-socialist context, visual culture assumes particular importance due to the rapid urban transformations that followed the 1990s. The transition from a centralized system toward market-oriented urbanization produced fragmented spatial conditions characterized by informality, intensive construction, and continuously shifting urban identities. Within this reality, the character of interventions in public space carried out on walls remains ambiguous and insufficiently examined. Nevertheless, not every mural intervention succeeds in establishing meaningful relationships with the urban context or collective memory. Many remain at the level of superficial aestheticization and decorative embellishment of the city.

As mentioned previously, mural interventions and street art



Figure 3 Diego Rivera, Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Park, 1947. Fresco, 51 x 15 feet. Hotel del Prado, Mexico City. Photograph by bridgemanimages.com.

practices have assumed different forms, ranging from the institutional aestheticization of urban facades to critical and spontaneous interventions by artists and independent collectives. The works of the collective Çeta, through interventions such as Vojokushi, Tone, and Sulkuqe mbi Mur, as well as the use of the facade as a narrative surface in contemporary projects, demonstrate that the wall continues to function as a terrain of negotiation between institutional control, collective memory, and the public appropriation of space.

Nevertheless, even today, numerous mural interventions continue to be categorized indiscriminately as murals, often without contextual distinction or clear hierarchy, and are therefore reduced within public perception to mere "decorations." At the same time, it cannot be denied that murals in Tirana, excluding the political slogans of the communist period, have generated debate and controversy since the interventions undertaken during the early editions of the Tirana Biennale in the early 2000s. According to Liam Gillick, these interventions aimed to transform the gray surface of the city and diminish the traces of the former communist identity through the use of color, thereby reshaping the perception of public space and producing a new visual identity (Sala, 2003). Several of these interventions on the facades of Tirana's apartment buildings were undertaken by artists such as Liam Gillick, Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among others. Their objective was to communicate with the broader public by employing facades as large-scale media while simultaneously altering the perception of public space. Such interventions generally did not derive directly from the immediate social realities of the country, but rather adopted a more global approach, although interventions on the facades of Tirana were also carried out by Albanian artists such as Helidon Gjergji and Anri Sala.

Although these murals may initially appear as purely decorative forms, they in fact function by interacting with the viewer and transforming them into an active participant within public space itself. In the case of the work located near the Zogu i Zi area, "These Are Things We Are Fighting For" by Rirkrit Tiravanija places the viewer before an affirmation and responsibility that compels participation. Similarly, the intervention on the facade of the formerly red apartment building marked with white squares by Anri Sala constitutes a clear reference to visual pollution and the ever-growing necessity of air-conditioning units on the facades of the Albanian capital. In this case, the facade no longer functions as a neutral architectural support, but rather as a surface materializing the city's economic, aesthetic, and social transition.

More direct approaches emerging not from top-down institutional structures but rather from the opposite direction can be identified in the guerrilla actions of the collective Çeta and the artist Diversanti. Their interventions do not seek permission from state institutions, nor are they officially approved or subsidized. Instead, through graffiti, stencils, and substantial doses of irony, they appropriate public space and transform the wall into a platform for dialogue.

One such intervention on the walls of Tirana consisted of an altered stencil version of Kolë Idromeno's painting Motra Tone. Rather than holding her veil with her hand, as in the original image symbolizing the restrained emancipation of late-nineteenth-century Albanian conservative society, the figure is depicted holding a headset and microphone, accompanied by the inscription: "Pronto, sono Tone." The work acquires meaning precisely through the debate surrounding the call-center economy and the social transformations of post-socialist Albania.

In different parts of the world, street art, murals, and graffiti have contributed significantly to the formation of urban imagery, from the painted subway trains of New York City to the Berlin Wall and numerous other cases. Similarly, in Tirana, artistic interventions in public space have contributed to the city's aesthetic redefinition while also generating debates about authenticity, memory, and urban spectacle. In this way, murals become part of broader negotiations concerning the right to shape the visual identity of the city (2012).



Figure 4Sala's intervention on Tirana's facade. Photo, courtesy of the author. 2026.



Figure 5 Slogan in Tirana facade "These are the things we are fighting for.", Rikrit Tiravanija, | retrieved by



Figure 6 Painted facades by the municipality of Tirana in the area of the former Shqiperia e Re film studio. photo courtesy of the author. 2026.

The Wall as a Territory of Negotiation

In the contemporary neoliberal city, murals are frequently absorbed into the logic of urban spectacle and the economy of the image. Within this process, public art risks being reduced to an aesthetic instrument of urban "beautification," thereby losing its critical and conflictual potential (Zukin, 1996). For this reason, the distinction between the mural as decoration and the mural as spatial practice remains essential in the interpretation of contemporary urban interventions. In the first case, the mural merely outlines and embellishes urban space as ornamentation, whereas in the second, it transforms the wall into public space through processes of appropriation and contestation, as described by Lefebvre in his reflections on the production of public space.

The works discussed in the previous sections, particularly those realized in Tirana, demonstrate how murals and facade interventions have assumed different forms, oscillating between aesthetic institutionalization and the appropriation of public space. Some of the interventions produced during the Tirana Biennale and the urban projects of the early 2000s, such as those by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, approached the facade as a medium of public communication and an instrument for transforming the perception of the city. In these cases, the wall no longer functions solely as a decorative surface, but rather as an element activating the relationship between the viewer and urban space, a relationship in which the facade, as the carrier of the artwork, assumes the role of activator, particularly in Tiravanija's inscription These Are Things We Are Fighting For. The viewer is directly transformed into a reader and active participant, positioned before a statement that simultaneously operates as a form of questioning and testimony. The public is invited to read and, through reading, to provide affirmation.

A similar mechanism operated in the inscriptions and graffiti found on the walls of Roman cities in antiquity, acts often associated with dissent and transgression, which nevertheless affirmed collective mentalities and social positions. On another level of communication emerges writing itself, materialized in the form of graffiti or mural text. Michel Foucault addresses a comparable issue in his reflections on the relationship between text and image in painting, particularly in his discussion of René Magritte's work La Trahison des Images (Foucault, 1988). Foucault argues that the written caption destabilizes the presumed equivalence between affirmation and resemblance, insisting that the painted pipe is merely the representation of an object and not the object itself.

This affirmation by Magritte resonates with the practice of On Kawara in his «Date Painting» (Poli, 2006), where writing alone reaffirms the existence of the artist through the act of inscription. The appropriation of space is equally evident in the experiments of hip-hop culture in the United States during the late 1960s, particularly in the work of figures such as Darryl McCray. Together with his peers, McCray began writing his pseudonym across the walls of Philadelphia, an act functioning precisely as a mechanism of territorial demarcation. In a similar spirit, the phenomenon of "Taki 183" in New York City involved the continuous reproduction of the author's signature throughout the city, symbolically marking presence and territory (Focus, 2017).

Such acts of appropriating public space and questioning the boundaries between what is considered public and what may transform a place into public space have appeared repeatedly within the international artistic arena. These practices extend from the textual interventions of Bruce Nauman, realized on relatively small surfaces intended for audiences within art institutions, to the works of Jenny Holzer, who employs billboards and illuminated neon or LED texts. Through these interventions, Holzer confronts the public with critical reflections on contemporary society and the position of women within it. Although these two cases cannot strictly be categorized as muralism or murals, they share the use of text and a comparable strategy of reactivating the wall as an active space in which memory, collective experience, and public space itself are continuously questioned.

Within this framework, one may also mention Banksy, whose works consistently offer counter-responses to mechanisms of social control and surveillance. One of his interventions, What Are You Looking At?, may serve as an analogy to Tiravanija's intervention in Tirana, insofar as it challenges public perception and interrogates the relationship between the individual, space, and authority.

Similarly, interventions such as the facade realized by Anri Sala interpret the wall as a symptom of Tirana's post-socialist transformations. References to visual pollution, air-conditioning units, antennas, and the overload of facades with various infrastructural objects transform architecture into an indicator of the city's economic and social transition. Ultimately, this logic informed the entire facade project developed during the Tirana Biennale period, where the painting of facades aimed to reactivate society through color and, as noted by Liam Gillick (Sala, 2003), to alter the identity of the city itself, based on the metaphorical assertion that a gray city could not continue to exist. Here, "gray" referred less to a literal chromatic condition than to a metaphor for stagnation and social inertia. The murals produced within this project were predominantly composed of geometric forms

intended to establish a degree of interaction with the viewer, as in the works of Sala, Tiravanija, and others.

On this basis, additional murals were later realized through subsidies from the Municipality of Tirana or through the Municipal Decoration Enterprise, consolidating the presence of this artistic form within the city's public space. Simultaneously, mural production evolved into a broader trend, whereby construction companies themselves began painting newly completed facades with motifs, figures, and textual elements. At first glance, this development may appear positive. Nevertheless, these "works," if they may indeed be called such, largely remain decorative interventions with primarily aesthetic functions, often sliding toward a kitsch sensibility. In most cases, the content they present is devoid of deeper artistic or critical significance. Furthermore, the fact that these works are commissioned by public institutions implies that they are products of controlled processes in which subject matter, message, and forms of expression are determined within the limits of institutional acceptability. It cannot be denied that they contribute to the creation of atmosphere and break the homogeneity of repetitive urban buildings; however, their purpose remains decorative rather than oriented toward activating the wall as public space.

In contrast to these institutional interventions, financed and supported primarily by public or private structures, the guerrilla practices of artists and collectives such as Çeta or Diversanti operate through graffiti, stencil techniques, and urban irony, appropriating public space without institutional mediation. In these cases, the wall becomes a space of dialogue and public contestation. Such interventions frequently occupy the ambiguous boundaries of legality precisely because they target decision-makers through provocative and critical messages. Here, the wall functions as a communicative medium capable of addressing the viewer directly, whether passive or active.

Guerrilla interventions of this kind have historically been associated with the oppressed, with the epic struggle of the small against the powerful, and of the dominated against domination itself, as in the works of John Heartfield, Ben Shahn, Tomi Ungerer, and many others. These interventions



Figure 7 NYC subway with Taki183's slogan, retrieved by Wikiart.

are not graffiti in the strict sense of the term, but rather posters and printed images attached to walls. In this context, the wall becomes a site that directs the gaze, demanding to be seen and interpreted.

As previously mentioned, similar interventions may be identified in other urban contexts as well, ranging from the graffiti-covered subway trains of New York City to the Berlin Wall, where murals and street art have functioned as forms of collective memory, protest, and urban identity production.

Conclusions

As widely documented in this text, mural painting goes beyond the aesthetic-decorative dimension as a practice that directly intervenes in the production and visual perception of public space. From mural paintings to contemporary street art, the wall has continually functioned as a communication surface where collective memories, social tensions, and power relations are articulated. In this sense, public space, which comes to us in the form of signs on the wall, does not present itself as a neutral territory but as a field of ongoing negotiation between institutions, citizens, and various forms of urban appropriation. Murals and graffiti intervene precisely in this process, transforming the wall from a passive architectural element to an active medium of dialogue and protest.

If we embrace this statement, it is natural to say that interventions on the walls of Tirana, as a case study, can effectively produce public space. However, at the same time, the case of Tirana demonstrates that not all mural interventions



Figure 8, Banksy – What are you looking at? photo retrieved from Datapanik, 2026.



Figure 9, Çeta, "Pronto sono Tone. Sticker. Tirana, Albania. Imag courtesy of Çeta Collective. 2026.

on walls can effectively produce public space. While some institutional muralism remains limited to controlled urban beautification, spontaneous and guerrilla practices are more often able to activate the relationship between the viewer and the city, transforming the wall into a place of interaction, reflection, and collective debate. For this reason, contemporary muralism should be seen not only as urban decoration but also as a spatial practice that questions the very meaning of 'public' and the way the city is produced and experienced by its inhabitants.

In conclusion, Tirana requires more spontaneous, organic artistic interventions (murals). This approach transforms the wall into a contested space, allowing for equal experiences and ultimately establishing it as a public space.



Figure 10, Çeta, "Smash the Walls of Privilege (Remember the 1st of May)," 2016. Sticker. Tirana, Albania. Image retrieved from artmargins, 2026.

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