

DOI: [10.38027/N202020ICCAUA263705](https://doi.org/10.38027/N202020ICCAUA263705)

Culture of Urban Graffiti: The Importance of Graffiti in Urban Landscape

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Abstract

Culture is a key factor in the fields of architecture and urban design; and designs face different users with different cultures. However, the resultant of urban design, architecture and arts, as different dimensions of design, is found in culture. Graffiti is an artistic movement, which is visualized mostly in the urban texture. In the contemporary era humans still continue to leave their signs in different places. Writing on the walls is an extension of people's willingness to leave a sign in the urban spaces. It is not just countries that people consider as their homes, but they consider streets also as living spaces; and graffiti art is more prevalent in this scale.⁴ According to the concept of graffiti design, this paper includes five parts: first part is theoretical background of graffiti and its graffiti, second part contains definitions of different graffiti types, third part points to graffiti as part of the urban landscape, fourth part, more importantly, graffiti as president of culture in urban scale; and the last part concludes by projecting the importance of graffiti in urban landscape and the meaning of different cultures in graffiti.

Keywords: Graffiti; Culture; Contemporary Street Art; Urban Landscape.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Methodology of the study

This research is based on data collection by literature survey; and its Main focus paper is on the meaning of graffiti in a cultural approach, and the relation between culture and graffiti.

2. Theory of graffiti in different perspectives

Graffiti means scratching. The word graffiti roots in the Italian word "Graffiare", which is mean scratch. "Archaeologists inquire the graffiti to learn more about the history of writing. Graffiti can also be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, the position of the region (Shillington 1989:97)."

"In the past, psychologists, sociologists, linguistics, law enforcement, anthropologists and geographers have studied graffiti. It was examined and interpreted to understand the personality of the teenager, Ancient cultures (Reisner, 1971), sexual attitudes, artistic style (Romotsky & Romotsky 1975 Feiner & Klein, 1982) (Peretti et al 1977). Gender Differences (Stocker et al 1972), behavior, communication, female suppression (Bruner and Kelso, 1980) and territoriality (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974 Alonso 1999). Recently, our company has become more concerned about the criminal label that has been attached to urban graffiti (Maxwell and Porter, 1996 Black 1997), but nevertheless graffiti is rich in information, which can be simply explained as external manifestations of a variety of subcultures".

Graffiti is a common site in all metropolitan areas in the United States. It has even gained popularity in Central and South America and in European countries such as Russia, Spain and Germany. Graffiti is generally perceived as vandalism (Hutchinson 1993:138).¹ Graffiti is a difficult term to speak and write any perspective that directs the speaker or author is based on personal opinion. If the author is linked to the local authority or any form of formal association, it will simply describe graffiti as vandalism and graffiti will be referred to as criminals. This meaning is quite common and most researchers believe it, this generalization does not mean he is quite correct.

It is not easy to write and/or talk about the term "Graffiti"; and what directs the speaker or the writer in this respect is based on their personal opinion. The ones who are related to authorities or any kind of formal institution, will describe it as vandalism by referring to graffiti as criminal tools. This concept is commonly accepted by the researchers; but this generalization won't mean that it is how it is described. On the other hand, when the person describing this term is young with economic issues or social problems, then the opinion will be different. If the person is facing ideological crisis or political problems, then again he/she clarifies this concept differently. Finally, if the referred person is forced to fight to get his basic rights then certainly his viewpoint will be more flexible. Although within the frame of ethical manners destroying the others properties without them knowing is not moral, but in many cases the decision for creating graffiti is not based on rationale. Many of these works are illegally drawn or scratched but they appear to be, most of the time, the only possible way to express the unspoken emotions against the cruelty and injustice in the society.

Stories and debates over the origins and history of graffiti vary. According to Raphael Linzatti (2001, p.1) this term originally came from "ii graffito", an Italian word, which means carved inscriptions on the wall. However, Phillips (1996) claimed that basically graffiti was first created in the ancient Roman architecture; and also the term graffiti has derived from the Greek word "Graphein", meaning as writing, drawing or scabbling on flat surface. There are various definitions and explanations for graffiti, which depend on viewpoints of those who give these definitions and explanations. There

are two groups: first group takes graffiti as vandalism, while the second group describes it as one of the forms of contemporary street art.

local authorities	'Graffiti is considered as criminal harm: a person purposely or irresponsibly demolishes or causes permanent damage to another's property'
Communication	'Graffiti can be interpreted as "writing"; an instinctive human need for communicating'
Artists	'Graffiti is a type of contemporary street art that has connections with design and illustration.' (In this respect, it may be considered as an open gallery for the popular culture of each society); a type of visual communication and sometimes it works as street advertising.

(Abdelrazik. A.M.M, 2013)

Many of those researchers who don't take graffiti acceptable, usually describe it as an illegal activity as case of vandalism and they refer to graffiti by mentioning those who the artists who commit illegal activities. For them the illegal and criminal act of graffiti defaces public and private properties without any permission or agreement from the owner. Graffiti is presented in forms of writing, drawing or scratching on surfaces such as walls, trains, buses and bins using various tools such as paint, chalk, markers and stickers. The major motivation for graffiti vandalism vary from rebellion, peer pressure, competition, frustration, boredom, revenge and anger; (Office of Crime Prevention, 2010, p.4-8).²

Graffiti is not older than 50 years; it appeared first in the United States parallel to the hip hop movement of which language was mostly music and dance. Graffiti was first created due to political issues and also for defining the territories of street gangs; and afterwards it was used to tag expression of individual identities.³

3. Types of graffiti

Regarding the society, each type of graffiti obliges a different function in relation to the society; and they are branches of different subcultures.¹ (Table 1)

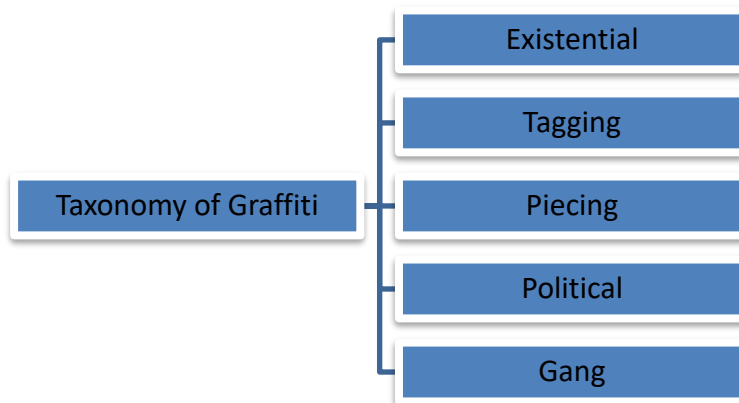


Table 1. Types of graffiti.

3.1 political graffiti

The most open type of graffiti is the political graffiti; and it means that the message of the graffiti is conceivable for all who confront the texts or figures. Political graffiti is placed geographically in busy spots by the writers and this choice will guarantee their work to be seen by the public. This graffiti type takes the general public as its audience in order to communicate ideas against institutions. Political groups use graffiti as a communicative tool for it is the safest and most economic; and it efficiently reaches the desired audience(Raento 1997: 197). Its messages contain pieces of truth (McGlynn 1972:353); or it can be said that political graffiti is rushed summarized facts including themes connected to labor conditions, freedom, unemployment, religious beliefs, freedom and civil rights (Figure 1).¹



Figure 1. Graffiti written in response to the not-guilty verdicts of four Los Angeles police officers, who were accused of beating motorist Rondey King. This photo was taken on April 30, 1992 during the height of the Los Angeles civil unrest.

The Egyptian revolutionary graffiti is presented by several drawings and writings many of which were photographed by “Ahmed Mohammed M Abdelrazik” during a holiday in Cairo, October 2012. Groups of young Egyptian calling themselves revolution’s artists, drew many graffiti, which present and document the protests on walls of the American University in Cairo, an some of the buildings and schools in its surroundings; also on the concrete wall that was later build in Mohamed Mahmoud street; aiming to stop protestors from evolving into the Ministry of Interior building. Interestingly, all artists painted their works in day time in the public sight. ² (Figure 2-7)



Figure 2, 3. Egyptian revolution artists during drawing graffiti.

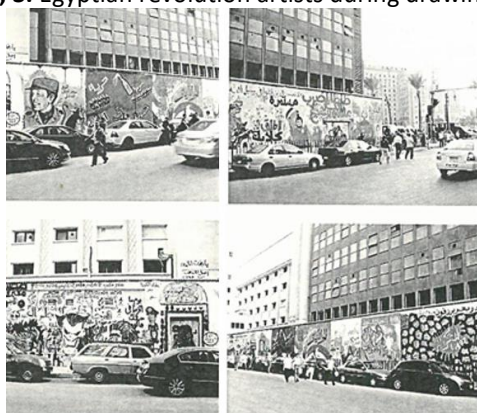


Figure 4-7. Egyptian revolution graffiti on the walls of The American University in Cairo, Mohamed Mahmoud Street.

Egyptians’ irritations were expressed spontaneously through their political graffiti and it was a simple visual method of the Egyptians to protest and to demand their actual needs.²

Apart from the main issue, which is the call for freedom, Egyptian revolution graffiti pursuits many other aims: first and foremost to bring out the names and visuals of those who suffered for freedom and being murdered through clashes; and secondly to be supportive of revolution against the supreme council of Armed’s troops, which was responsible substitute of the Republic’s president; and the third was the claim for free, democratic presidential election. ² (Figure8-11).

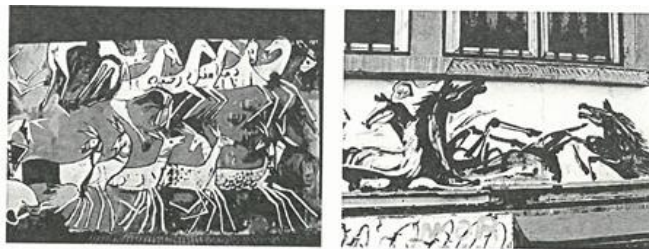


Figure8 and 9. Revolutionaries present themselves as Gazelles and Wild Horses which refer to their real needs of freedom.



Figure 10, 11. Freedom is coming forever.

One of the major aims of Egyptian revolution graffiti is to bring out the names and visuals of those who suffered for freedom and being murdered through Mohamed Mahmoud Street protests (Figure12, 13).



Figure 12, 13. visuals of those who suffered for freedom and being murdered.

3.2 Existential graffiti

The most common category of graffiti is the existential graffiti; it is also preceded in an open system as well as political graffiti. It is also sometimes called expressive graffiti, which generally consists of personal commentaries. It can be divided into several subdivisions based on the content (Table 2). The most common types of existential graffiti are radical and sexual scribbling. It is not possible to follow and identify existential graffiti in by a certain geographical distribution in the urban spaces, but it is fount regularly in public toilets.

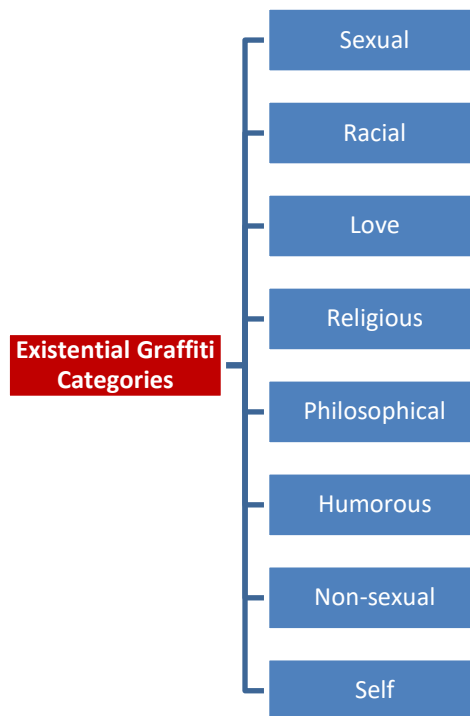


Table 2. Existential Graffiti Categories.

When the content in this type of graffiti is associated with concepts such as love, sex or radical remarks, it represents outdoor indexes of personality. ¹

3.3 Tagging graffiti

The most extensive type of graffiti is tagging, written or painted on walls, buses and trains, which exist in urban spaces. Tagging was first created in the east coast in 1069as a hip hop cultural component, as writers’ stylized signature that has been marked on the environment (figure 14). This graffiti style has drawn the attention of media by its firm growing popularly amongst young generation and since high costs are needed to remove this type of graffiti. Accordingly many strategies have been applied to control tagging. This cultural action grew towards west heading to California by the time that hip hop came out of New York City and went to the major cities all around the world in 1980’s when “Hip Hop” was the popular culture (Gonos et al. 1985: 188).

Graffiti turned into a public issue in Los Angeles by the end of 1980s, like how it was in NYC in the early 1970s. Tagging aims to spread consciousness in as many places as possible; and an important goal for the tagger is to be recognized as a prolific writer. The number of completed tags is determinative of fame and sense of power; power is implemented by the way by which writers make personal assertions to the surfaces that they tag. Also the sense of power is gained by the writer by joining an activity and active culture that has a visible effect on their surroundings (Brewer 1992: 188). The rebellious nature of such activities inspires taggers to continue. ¹ Tagging is known popularly as “dirty, obscene and disease like” (Cresswell1992:333).¹



Figure 14. Different tag stiles ("Dog"; "Crop"; "Serv") in Almada (outskirts of Lisbon)

3.4 Piecing graffiti

This type of graffiti is founded is Los Angeles, which was also deployed by the Hip Hop from NYC, but this type of graffiti is more than simple writing is not just simple tag or signature. Piecing is a decorative appearance of the name that needs art skills of using spray paint (figure 15).

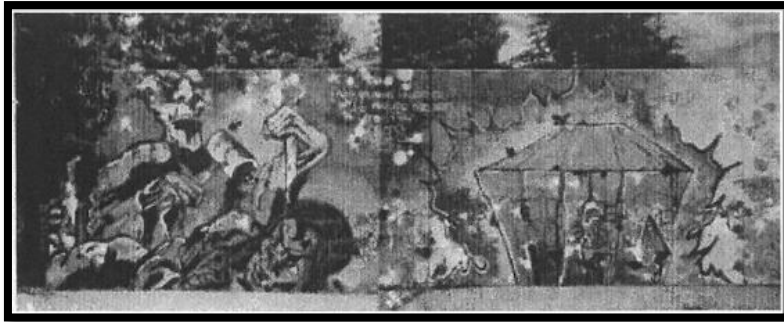


Figure 15: A Piece taking up the entire handball court. The caption in the centers reads: "... the fun and laughter will never happen in Graffiti STOPS." Photo taken in August 1985 in the Williamsburg community of Brooklyn, New York."

"Historically piecing has been associated with Black and Hispanic youths from the ghetto, but today, especially in Los Angeles, piecers are white middle class youths from the suburbs" (Beverly 1996:129). ¹ (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Graffiti piece and politics in Almada (outskirts of Lisbon)

3.5 Gang graffiti

It is another type of written manifestation, which is not challenged as much as other graffiti styles by the leading class. It is not distributed in all parts of the city the way that tagging and piecing did. A quick overlook of the gang graffiti declares that group identity and membership are of the most dominant concerns in it (Hutchinson 1993: 140). ¹ (Figure 17)



Figure 17. A placa of a Hispanic gang that goes by the name of "Twenty Nine" on the east side of Los Angeles in 1996. Notice the large pointed letters and the two colors used.

According to Robert Sack (1986), graffiti answers the capabilities of territoriality. A gang sorts an area based on the geographical association of gang writing within the urban environment. Messages, slogans, and symbols correspond to specific amount of a region and the boundaries spots (Figure 18).

"Some of the symbolism observed uses arrows and hand signs as a way of enforcing control by letting outsiders know that they are alien to a specific "barrio" or "hood." Finally the intentional defacement of a rival's graffiti reifies power, which is an explicit and visible act of supremacy"

(Sack 1986: 32).¹



Figure 18. African-American gang graffiti of the Six Duce East Coast Crips of Los Angeles. Notice the use of the basic lettering style. The spelling of six is done with a "c" to reinforce their Crip identity. The arrow is used among African-American gangs to express territoriality, and in this photo the author is stating that this "hood" belongs to the 62 ECC Crips (1996).

Graffiti in its all shapes presents a vibrant and often unappealing approach into the uncovered side of the society; and yet it also stands for a captivating and significant source of data for the ones who study human behavior (Abel & Buckley 1977).¹ The dominance of cultural respond to secondary groups is visible in the way in which the state tries to eliminate tagging by dethroning the tagger from society by means of incarceration. The geographic dislocation of piecing graffiti was a challenge to remove it from the urban space. Then, after a leading group made effort to remove it from public, the other leading group moved it to the art galleries.¹

3.6 Contemporary graffiti

As (Tanglay, 2005) claimed, the contemporary graffiti art has the ability to transform cities into communication implements. Both modern and eco-graffiti have the natural potential and ability to characterize people’s counter-approaches and dissenting opinions about social incidents, authorities and their friction to natural and cultural values, eco-pollution and so on.

“Political stance of modern graffiti arises from its existence in the spaces which industrial revolution and thus capitalist producing form produced and shaped.”

(Kurt, 2010).⁴

Reverse graffiti

It is a type of eco-graffiti, which roots from the act of writing ‘wash me’ on dirty cars that transformed into real art activity. Generally, it is the act of creating patterns by whipping dirt from surfaces by pressure water. The first reverse graffiti in big scale is a group of skulls drawn on tunnel walls in Sao Paulo by Alexandre Orion at 2006. The artist claimed that he aimed to send a message to public and emphasize on the existing pollution, the things that they tried to forget. (Figure 19).

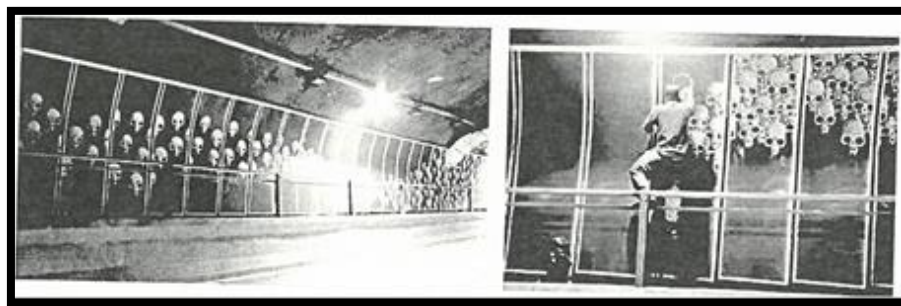


Figure 19. Alexandre Orion of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Laser graffiti

It is a complete product of advanced technology, which is presented on buildings, walls and other segments of a city, by laser systems. Also, it can be considered as one of the types of eco graffiti and is capable of creating various night webs in urban spaces.(Figure 20)



Figure 20. Laser graffiti in Step up 4 Revolution movie.

Stencil graffiti

According to (Erdogan, 2010), this type of graffiti has a political language and is considered also as a social agent in various aspects, which is judgmental, boastful, further than popular culture. Other graffiti artist “Banksy” also associates with this type of graffiti in his work on wall (figure 21). Motivated by political issues, he sprayed some figures on the wall that is built between Palestine and Israel.

“The pieces are meant to encourage people to question why it was built in the first place.” (Werwath, 2006).

4



Figure 21. Art prankster sprays Israeli wall and Banksy at the West Bank barrier .

4. Graffiti as part of the urban landscape

A great tool for understanding the social behavior in any urban environment is the analysis of graffiti works in the city, and it also helps to understand social processes and approaches of different sectors of the same society. Important information can be drawn, from the thematic content of graffiti, about the groups that are not frequently in the public sight within the urban spaces. The popular culture spread a shadow on those subcultures that went against the dominant norms of the society.¹

5. Graffiti as president of culture in urban scale

There are various graffiti types by which knowing reveal the unknown about subcultures of the society; and each type is associated with a different culture type, which serves a distinctive function. Gang graffiti has an important role in knowing such groups in LA, since the graffiti defines the space; and also serves as a communication tool, while it challenges nonstop with the dominant political context of the society. It helps recognizing the social and cultural concept of those outcast groups.

Understanding graffiti by using photos shows different gangs with different ethnic backgrounds assert the space, converse their thoughts and feelings and state their individual identities and group identity.¹

“Graffiti is a reflection of culture at work, and members of the elite are constantly pursuing methods to condemn subcultures for their alleged vulgarity”.

(Jackson 1977:35)

Also (Hebdige, 1977:3) believed that graffiti is an interesting reading, which can be applied to decode diverse youth styles. However, (Jackson 1977: 54) claimed that these groups have a wide range of confrontation tactics, negotiation strategies and struggle and they never achieve dominance through their constant resistance.¹

6. Conclusions

Graffiti is a multidisciplinary terminology; an activity that is considered as vandalism by many authorities and societies. On the other hand, many researchers know it as a form of street art, specifically when it comes to political graffiti. It is a communicative matter and thus it is important to be aware of real reasons by which youth are forced to spray their ideas in this frame all over urban spaces. Accordingly, there are two parallel notions of controlling it: first way is to make strict

regulations and laws and second is to offer legal spots in precise areas to do graffiti. In this respect the second strategy is an appropriate solution, which helped reducing graffiti vandalism in countries such as Germany, France and others.

Among all graffiti, Egyptian revolutionary graffiti is a unique illegal graffiti, which is considered an exception because of the exception of revolution. It brought many apparent messages with freedom as its main goal. According to survey's results 80% of Egyptians consider the revolution graffiti as art. The groups who take it as vandalism are the ones who are depending of the local authorities of the supporters of radical ideologies. Moreover, about 55% - 60% of Egyptians has accepted graffiti as a free form of contemporary street art; and also accepted complete freedom of artists to express themselves in their own way. These people also believed that it is not truthful to manage controlling everything about graffiti. Egypt has lively traditions and thus 90% of Egyptians do not accept those graffiti works, which contain unsuitable texts, signs or incidental words. Also, approximately 85% of Egyptians point to graffiti as a good phrase of their revolution and yet graffiti has a great impact on their current issues. Overall, the majority of Egyptian suggest keeping and preserving their revolution graffiti. According to its nature, graffiti is a communication tool to transfer visual concepts, sincerity and feelings, wrapped up in an urban environment. It suits spaces within architectural patterns and architecture itself, using constructed and compositional surfaces as a distinguished canvas. It tends to be seen completely as an urban street art. Accordingly, in contemporary era, graffiti helps to extend the time that people spend communicating in urban spaces; since it expands the sense of belonging in spaces and also facilitates them. Therefore graffiti helps bringing new cultural mixtures through which people from different societal groups can relate and communicate. It is dominating a kind of personal group space by graffiti artists, against urban capitalism such as urban advertisement. The main point of existence of various graffiti types is to find out different ways to spread a new cultural paradigm with a textual-visual language that is understandable for diverse groups of citizens and even in global scale.

Acknowledgements: This article is provided for the course Arch651, (cities and culture), under the supervising of Prof. Dr. Naciye Doratlı. I would like to my sincerely thanks to my professor, Prof. Dr. Naciye Doratlı, for helping me to complete my Article.

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