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Urban Public Art and Spatial Identity in Algerian Cities: Insights from Laghouat

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Abstract

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This article examines urban public art as a key component of Algerian cities, considering public space as a platform for both formal initiatives led by local authorities and associations and informal, citizen-driven interventions. Using a field-based methodology, the city of Laghouat was selected as a case study to analyze artistic practices across different neighborhoods. A hybrid research approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods was applied, drawing on multiple data sources and supported by the production of location maps and detailed records of public artworks. The findings reveal a significant presence of public art that can be classified through a typology based on legal status, artistic nature, spatial location, and construction materials. The study concludes that effective urban, architectural, and technical supervision is essential to limit the ephemeral and informal character of public art interventions and to enhance their long-term contribution to urban quality and cultural identity.

Key words : Public spaces ; Urban public art; Algerian city; Laghouat.

1. Introduction

Algerian cities are currently undergoing major transformations at urban, demographic, and economic levels (Amireche, 2023; Diafat, 2019). Cities in the north, as well as several in the south, have become sites of profound urban change, whether driven by state-led planning through official programs and regulatory planning instruments, or resulting from spontaneous, unplanned expansions that are often chaotic and non-compliant with urban construction regulations.

The city can be understood as an interconnected system of integrated functional components. Beyond housing and public services, public space constitutes a fundamental element of urban structure. Definitions of public space (Mebirouk, 2013) encompass a set of dimensions situated within social, physical, economic, and political spheres, including streets, public squares, and green spaces.

The concept of public space has evolved across time and context, with its functions and spatial configurations shaped by the specificities of each civilization. Its design reflects prevailing political, social, and economic systems, accommodating both recreational activities and commercial functions. Furthermore, public spaces serve as venues for cultural, scientific, and commercial events, as well as platforms for political and humanitarian expression and the observation of public opinion and social conditions.

Public art represents a form of artistic expression within the urban environment. It is manifest in a public space (Borchi et al, 2023). Public art is a means to express the self-evident values of a city (Bolonaki, 2023). Its modalities are diverse, encompassing any legitimate intervention that assigns symbolic and aesthetic value to public space within the urban fabric. it

has a reinforcing effect on cities at the political and cultural level (Zhu, 2024). This includes graffiti, murals, and various artistic practices. Beyond its decorative role, public art provides a medium for expressing the social status of populations and addressing economic, humanitarian, and political concerns at local, national, and even international scales.

In southern cities such as Laghouat—characterized by a rapidly evolving Saharan urban context—public art is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for strengthening cultural identity and enhancing the quality of public spaces (Korkaz, 2023). However, despite its rich historical heritage and dynamic sociocultural context, the integration of urban art into public spaces in Laghouat remains limited and often marginalized within planning policies.

This raises a critical research issue concerning the need to define urban public art, clarify its role in enhancing the urban environment, and assess both the risks and opportunities associated with its development as a complementary component of public space.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a hybrid methodological approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Fieldwork was conducted through direct in situ observations, enabling the establishment of a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of public art in the city of Laghouat. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with local stakeholders—including residents, artists, and municipal officials—in order to capture diverse perceptions regarding the role of urban art within the city.

In parallel, a spatial mapping of public artworks across different neighborhoods of Laghouat was developed. This mapping allowed for the classification of artworks according to multiple criteria, including typology, physical condition, visibility, and spatial distribution.

This methodological framework enabled an evaluation of the role of public art in activating and structuring public spaces in Laghouat, while also identifying the main challenges and opportunities associated with its development.



Figure 1. Public art discovery process (By Author).

3. Results

Laghouat, the administrative capital of its wilaya, is located along the Algiers–Ghardaïa road axis at an altitude of approximately 750 meters. The city developed along the banks of Oued M’zi, the largest wadi in the Saharan Atlas, and extends over an area of approximately 400 km². It is bounded to the south by a vast pastoral zone extending toward Bordj Tilghempt. The urban fabric is distributed across the northern and southern slopes of Djebel Tizgrarine, and the city remains characterized by residential units traditionally surrounded by gardens.

This agglomeration, combining highland and lowland features, constitutes both a transitional interface and a buffer zone between northern and southern Algeria. Human presence in the region dates back to prehistoric times, as evidenced by archaeological remains attributed to successive Berber, Roman, and Arab civilizations. Following recent administrative reorganization, Laghouat is structured into three main zones: (1) the urban center, (2) an agricultural zone (Bordj Snouci), and (3) a vast steppe area to the north.

3.1 Evolution of Public Spaces in Laghouat

3.1.1 Initial Phase (Pre-1852):

The ksar constituted the original urban nucleus, characterized by a compact morphology with winding alleys and traditional construction materials (Bouchareb, 2013; Rezzoug, 2013). Public spaces were limited in number and scale, structured around communal areas (rahba), such as Rahbet El-Oulama and Gandouz, with defensive enclosures defining the ksar’s boundaries.

3.1.2 Colonial Phase (1852–1962):

Colonial intervention introduced a new urban grid, creating a rupture with the existing fabric and identity. Public squares were integrated along major urban axes, forming structured urban sequences (e.g., Place de l’Étoile, Place Randon).

3.1.3 Post-Independence Phase (1962–1995):

Esplanades were developed in new residential neighborhoods and along newly created roadways, such as those near the House of Culture and Place de la Résistance. This phase is characterized by spatial discontinuities resulting from military installations and unplanned urban expansion encroaching on palm groves and peripheral areas (Benarfa, 2018).

3.1.4 Contemporary Phase (1995–2021):

Urban expansion accelerated with the development of new neighborhoods and large-scale facilities, including university campuses, hospitals, and collective housing programs, typically accompanied by large public squares and open green spaces.

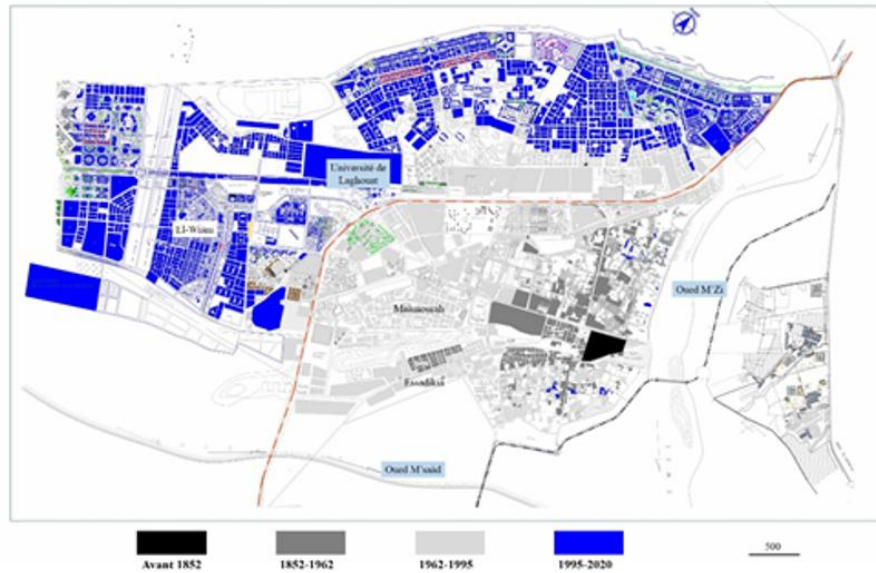


Figure 2. Laghouat city urban evolution (By Author).

3.2 Diagnosis of Public Art in Laghouat

Spatial mapping (Figure 03) reveals a widespread presence of public art across different urban contexts, including the historic center, recent residential areas, major road networks, and popular neighborhoods. The main typologies identified include:

- Monumental sculptures designed and executed by artists around specific themes and located in highly visible sites.
- Informal tags produced mainly by adolescents, often lacking clear meaning or legibility.
- Murals and frescoes, including multicolored graffiti compositions of varying scales and orientations.

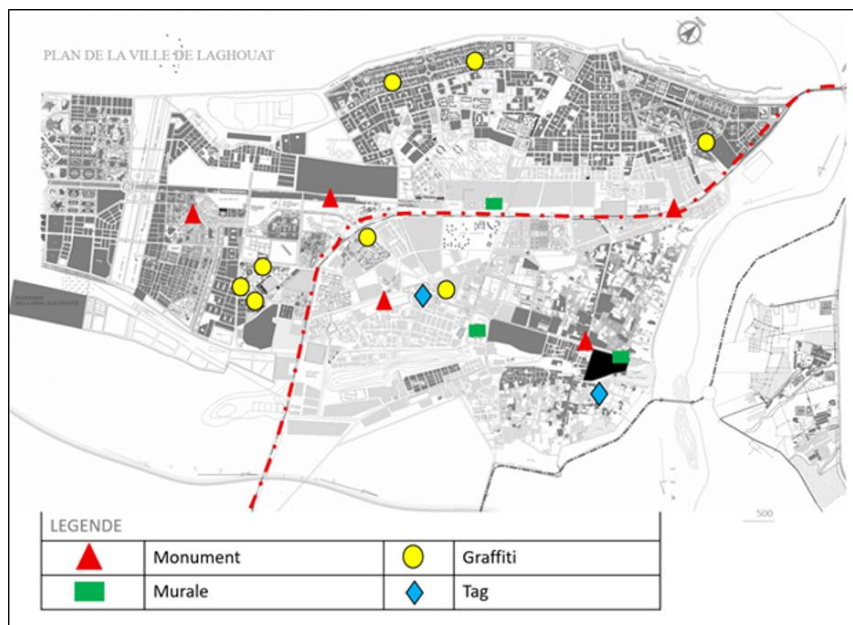


Figure 3. Localisation of public art in Laghouat city (BY Author).

4. Discussion

4.1 Typological Classification of Public Art in Laghouat

Based on field investigations, public art in Laghouat can be classified according to several criteria:

- Authorship: Local, national, and international artists, with a predominance of local production, alongside contributions from Algerian and foreign (notably French) artists, including architects and urban designers.
- Spatial Distribution: Central areas, peripheral zones, residential neighborhoods, and public facilities. Artistic expressions vary across these contexts, with notable presence in roundabouts (as landmarks) and on vertical surfaces such as walls and fountains.
- Thematic Content: Diverse themes, including historical narratives, sporting events, local heritage, and social demands.
- Objectives: Awareness-raising, commemoration, educational purposes, and religious expression. Notably, several works emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the role of healthcare workers, while others commemorate the Algerian War of Independence and celebrate local and national figures.

- **Materials and Techniques:** A wide range of materials and techniques, including mural painting, as well as the use of concrete, brick, ceramic tiles, and metal in sculptural works.



Figure 4. Classification elements of public art (By Author).

4.2 Examples of Public Art in Laghouat

The “Gate of Algiers,” constructed during the colonial period, remained for years a central symbolic landmark. After independence, it was demolished to erase colonial traces, but later reconstructed identically, raising questions regarding authenticity and material continuity.

Local associations have also played an active role, notably through projects expressing solidarity with Palestine, including a commemorative monument and a milestone installation along National Road No. 1 indicating distances to Palestinian cities.

Emerging young artists are also highly active, both physically and digitally, producing works appreciated by local residents. However, many of these interventions are short-lived, often disappearing due to repainting or lack of preservation.



Figure 5. PUBLIC ART (old recent and erased graffiti) (By Author).

4.3 Attributes of Public Art in Laghouat: Stakeholder interviews highlight several key issues:

- **Urban planners and local planning agencies:** Emphasize that accessibility and visibility of artworks are closely linked to site selection, underscoring the importance of integrating public art within comprehensive urban policies.
- **Local association representatives:** Advocate for coordinated national strategies that ensure both symbolic coherence and artistic quality, while highlighting significant urban locations.
- **Artists:** Stress the need for preservation, expanded opportunities for expression, and the use of public art as a tool for cultural and political education, particularly in relation to historical and contemporary struggles.

Overall, interviews confirm the recognized importance of public art, despite notable deficiencies in conceptual depth and representational quality in many works.

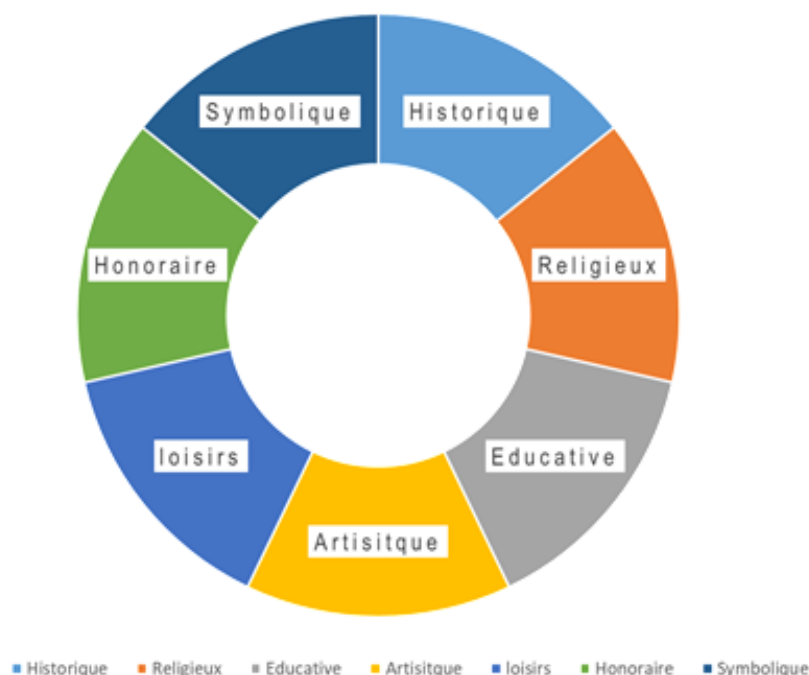


Figure 6. Laghouat public art attributes (By Author).

4.4 Assessment of Urban Public Art in Laghouat

- a. Ephemeral Nature: Many works are temporary, often linked to specific events or festivals, lacking long-term strategic integration into the urban fabric.
- b. Poor Execution and Materials: Limited funding and inadequate supervision result in substandard materials and techniques.
- c. Vandalism: A major challenge, with artworks frequently degraded due to insufficient public awareness of their value.
- d. Disconnection from Identity and Context: Imported artistic models often fail to reflect local cultural identity or environmental context, generating visual dissonance.
5. Lack of Maintenance: Absence of maintenance strategies and dedicated budgets leads to rapid deterioration and disappearance of artworks.

5. Conclusions

Despite the challenges facing urban public art in Algeria, its significant potential—driven by emerging talent and the growing need to enhance public spaces—suggests promising prospects. Achieving this potential requires a shift from viewing public art as occasional decoration toward recognizing it as a strategic investment in cultural production, urban aesthetics, and social cohesion, embedded within a sustainable planning framework that preserves local identity. The development of public art in Algeria ultimately depends on coordinated efforts among governmental institutions, artists, and civil society to transform existing constraints into creative opportunities, thereby enriching public space and strengthening collective identity and national belonging.

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The author report no conflicts of interest.

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All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article

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