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Decoding the role of graffiti and street art as a safety tool in public spaces of Bengaluru, India

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Abstract

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Art is getting infused in our everyday spaces and demonstrated itself as social commentary to various narratives and diverse experiences. Street art and graffiti is considered synonymous to vandalism or crime in public opinion earlier but recently commissioned as well as uncommissioned urban art is considered as a radical and alternative way to create safer urban spaces and contributing to urban inheritance. A similar spirit is reverberated in the streets of Bengaluru which is transforming the city with the provision of safer access to the plurality of the city. This paper investigates the role and works of Street art. It employs qualitative research methods including detailed surveys, depth interviews and visual recordings. It explores embodied research methods to generate tools to evaluate safer urban spaces. The study aims at finding the contribution of street art and graffiti as a permanent discourse in creating safer urban spaces and tries to understand its role in urban inheritance.

Keywords: Street Art, Graffiti, Public Spaces, Safety, Urban Inheritance

1. Introduction

Urban public spaces in rapidly expanding metropolitan cities such as Bengaluru are undergoing profound transformations as a result of both formal planning initiatives and informal cultural interventions. Traditionally, urban safety has been addressed through physical infrastructure such as street lighting, surveillance cameras, traffic management, and policing. While these strategies remain essential, they often focus primarily on measurable and technical aspects of security. Contemporary urban discourse, however, increasingly recognizes that safety is also an experiential and perceptual condition shaped by social activity, visual quality, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging. Public spaces that are vibrant, visually engaging, and socially inclusive tend to be perceived as safer than spaces that are monotonous, neglected, or disconnected from community life.

1.1 Background And Context

Among the emerging tools that contribute to these qualitative dimensions of urban safety, street art and graffiti have gained significant attention. Historically, graffiti was associated with vandalism, territorial marking, and social disorder. For many decades, urban authorities and the public viewed painted walls and unsolicited visual interventions as signs of neglect and insecurity. Over time, however, academic research and urban practice have re-evaluated street art as a powerful medium of expression, place making, and socio-spatial transformation. Commissioned murals, community art projects, and artist-led interventions are now recognized as effective means of activating underutilized spaces, strengthening neighborhood identity, and fostering public engagement.

In Bengaluru, this transformation is particularly evident. The city's dynamic cultural landscape and rapidly changing urban fabric have provided fertile ground for the growth of street art. Murals along metro corridors, painted underpasses, rejuvenated conservancy lanes, and artist interventions in neighborhoods such as Malleswaram, Church Street, Yelahanka, and Lingarajapuram have transformed previously neglected urban surfaces into visually compelling public interfaces. These interventions not only enhance aesthetic quality but also attract pedestrians, increase dwell time, and encourage social interaction. As more people occupy and engage with these spaces, opportunities for passive surveillance increase, contributing to a stronger perception of safety. Street art also plays a broader cultural role by reflecting local histories, collective memories, and regional narratives. In doing so, it contributes to what may be described as urban inheritance—the evolving body of cultural and spatial values passed through the city over time. Murals depicting music, mythology, environmental themes, and everyday life reinforce connections between residents and place, helping transform anonymous urban environments into meaningful cultural landscapes.

1.2 Objectives and Significance

This paper investigates how street art and graffiti in Bengaluru influence perceptions of safety, spatial engagement, and urban inheritance. By examining selected case studies and employing qualitative and mixed research methods, the study positions street art as more than an aesthetic intervention. It argues that urban art functions as a legitimate and cost-effective design strategy capable of activating neglected spaces, fostering inclusivity, and enhancing the experiential quality of public environments. In doing so, the research contributes to a growing body of knowledge that recognizes cultural expression as an integral component of safer and more resilient cities.

2. Literature Survey and Theoretical Standings

The relationship between public space, urban safety, and social behavior has been widely examined in urban design, environmental psychology, and cultural geography. Foundational theories by (Jacobs, 1961), (Newman, 1972) and (Lefebvre, 1991) provide the principal conceptual framework for understanding how street art and graffiti can contribute to perceived safety and spatial activation in contemporary cities.

(Jacobs, 1961) Influential concept of eyes on the street remains central to urban safety discourse. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs argued that vibrant and well-used streets are inherently safer because they are subject to continuous informal observation by residents, shopkeepers, and pedestrians. Mixed land use, active frontages, and diverse patterns of occupation generate natural surveillance that discourages antisocial behavior. Jacobs' theory is directly relevant to street art because visually engaging murals attract pedestrians, encourage people to pause, and increase the density of social presence, thereby strengthening the observational capacity of the street.

(Newman, 1972) in *Defensible Space*, extended this discussion by proposing that design can reduce crime through territoriality, natural surveillance, image, and milieu. According to Newman, environments that communicate ownership and collective care are more likely to be monitored and protected by users. Murals and graffiti can reinforce territorial identity by transforming blank or neglected walls into meaningful public surfaces that signal attention and stewardship. This reduces the visual cues associated with neglect and disorder and encourages greater community ownership.

(Lefebvre, 1991) Theory of the production of space offers a broader socio-spatial perspective. Lefebvre argued that space is socially constructed through the interaction of physical form, symbolic representation, and lived experience. Public art becomes significant within this framework because it inserts narratives, memories, and cultural meanings into urban environments. Street art does not merely decorate surfaces; it redefines the social and emotional significance of space, enabling previously anonymous or underused places to become sites of collective identity and cultural expression.

(Whyte, 1980) Further demonstrated that people are drawn to spaces offering visual interest, opportunities to linger, and social interaction. His observational studies of plazas showed that successful public spaces support sitting, watching, and informal encounters. Similarly, Sharon (Zukin, 2010) emphasized the role of cultural expression and authenticity in shaping urban identity, while (Ferrell, 1993) interpreted graffiti as a contested but politically meaningful form of urban communication.

Contemporary scholarship has advanced these theoretical foundations through the concept of creative placemaking. (Gadwa, 2010) Describe how arts and cultural practices can revitalize neighborhoods, strengthen social cohesion, and stimulate civic participation. Public art interventions are increasingly recognized as tools for improving inclusivity, comfort, and psychological safety, particularly for women and marginalized groups (UN Women, 2017). These studies suggest that visual interventions function not only as aesthetic enhancements but also as forms of social infrastructure.

In India, academic work on street art is still emerging but is gaining momentum. Studies and reports document how mural initiatives in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru have transformed underutilized urban surfaces into expressive and community-oriented spaces. Projects such as the Aravani Art Project and Gode BLR in Bengaluru demonstrate how public art can foreground gender, identity, and social inclusion while improving the experiential quality of streets. Nevertheless, few studies have quantitatively or qualitatively linked these artistic interventions to structured indicators of urban safety. This research addresses that gap by integrating classical urban theory with empirical fieldwork to evaluate how street art contributes to perceived safety, social activation, and urban inheritance in Bengaluru

3.1 Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to examine the role of graffiti and street art in shaping perceptions of safety in the public spaces of Bengaluru. The study investigates how artistic interventions transform neglected or underused urban environments into more visible, inclusive, and socially engaging spaces. It also explores the relationship between street art, gender, visibility, and accessibility, with particular attention to women's experience of movement through the city. In addition, the research examines how murals and graffiti contribute to urban inheritance by embedding collective memory, local narratives, and cultural identity within everyday public environments.

3.2 Research Objectives

The study is structured around four primary objectives:

1. To examine the role of graffiti and street art in shaping perceptions of safety in Bengaluru's public spaces.
2. To analyse how artistic interventions contribute to reclaiming neglected or unsafe urban environments.
3. To investigate the relationship between street art, gender, visibility, and accessibility.
4. To explore the contribution of street art to urban inheritance and collective memory.

These objectives position street art not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a socio-spatial strategy capable of influencing behavioural patterns, emotional responses, and long-term cultural meaning.

3.3 Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research framework supported by selected quantitative measures. The methodology is based on the premise that urban safety is both measurable and experiential. Some dimensions of safety can be observed through tangible physical and infrastructural characteristics, while others are shaped by emotional perception, psychological comfort, and embodied experience.

Accordingly, the research develops a dual framework of objective and subjective indicators to assess how street art influences the quality and perceived safety of public spaces.

- Objective indicators focus on physical, spatial, and infrastructural conditions that can be directly observed and documented.
- Subjective indicators examine emotional responses, feelings of comfort, perceived security, and lived experiences of moving through the city.

This integrated approach combines multiple methods to capture the complexity of urban experience. The research methodology includes:

- Spatial observation
- Visual analysis
- Ethnographic engagement
- Semi-structured interviews
- Questionnaire surveys
- Embodied mapping techniques

Together, these methods allow the study to analyse both the visible transformation of public spaces and the less tangible psychological and social effects produced by artistic interventions.

3.4 Theoretical Foundations for Indicator Development

The indicator framework is adapted from four complementary theoretical traditions:

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)

CPTED emphasizes natural surveillance, territorial reinforcement, maintenance, and access control as key principles for reducing fear and enhancing safety.

Feminist Urbanism

Feminist urbanism highlights how gender influences spatial experience and stresses visibility, inclusivity, and equitable access, especially for women and marginalized groups.

Placemaking Theory

Placemaking theory views public spaces as socially constructed environments shaped by community participation, identity, and meaningful activity.

Sensory Ethnography

Sensory ethnography emphasizes embodied and multisensory experience, recognizing that perceptions of safety are formed through visual, emotional, and sensory interactions with place.

These theoretical foundations ensure that the study addresses both the material and experiential dimensions of urban safety.

3.5 Research Study Areas

The study focuses on six representative locations in Bengaluru that exhibit different forms and intensities of artistic intervention:

- Church Street
- Hosur Road (Graffiti for Hope corridor)
- Yeshwanthpur metro corridor
- Richmond Circle underpass
- Indiranagar public walls
- Unpainted service lanes used as control sites

The study also references local initiatives such as the Aravani Art Project, Gode BLR, Graffiti for Hope, community mural workshops, metro pillar artworks, and feminist stencil practices.

3.6 Data Collection Techniques

1. Visual Recordings

Systematic photographic documentation captures mural characteristics, spatial context, lighting conditions, pedestrian activity, and before–after transformation.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are conducted with:

- Street artists
- Women commuters
- Urban planners
- Vendors
- Students
- Pedestrians
- Residents

These interviews explore motivations, interpretations, and lived experiences of safety.

3. Questionnaire Surveys

Surveys measure:

- Perception of safety
- Emotional response to artwork
- Frequency of public-space use
- Awareness of street art
- Gendered experience of movement

4. Embodied Mapping

Participants trace movement paths and annotate zones of comfort, fear, attraction, and avoidance, producing experiential maps of the city.

5. Spatial Observation

Researchers document footfall, dwell time, visibility, and behavioural patterns throughout the day and evening.

3.7 Objective and Subjective Indicators

To evaluate the impact of graffiti and street art on public-space safety, the study employs ten indicators divided into objective and subjective categories. This dual framework acknowledges that urban safety is shaped by both measurable environmental conditions and lived human experience. Objective indicators capture physical and infrastructural characteristics that can be directly observed and documented, while subjective indicators reflect emotional perception, psychological comfort, and social meaning. Each indicator is assessed using field observation, survey responses, interviews, and embodied mapping, and is scored on a five-point scale for comparative analysis across all study areas. Together, these indicators provide a holistic understanding of how artistic interventions influence visibility, activity, inclusivity, and perceptions of safety.

Objective Indicators

1. Pedestrian footfall
2. Visibility and sightlines
3. Lighting quality
4. Maintenance and cleanliness
5. Diversity of activity

Subjective Indicators

1. Perceived safety
2. Psychological comfort
3. Emotional response to artwork
4. Sense of belonging
5. Inclusivity and accessibility

3.8 Analytical Process

This methodology provides a robust framework for understanding how street art influences both the measurable and experiential dimensions of urban safety, while also contributing to collective memory and urban inheritance in Bengaluru. The analytical process integrates qualitative interpretation with structured indicator-based assessment to understand how graffiti and street art influence perceptions of safety, accessibility, and urban meaning in Bengaluru's public spaces. The analysis begins with the organization of field observations, photographic documentation, interview transcripts, survey responses, and embodied maps into thematic categories. Visual recordings are examined to identify recurring spatial characteristics such as mural scale, color intensity, thematic content, visibility, and the physical condition of surrounding environments. These observations are then compared across study sites to understand how different artistic interventions alter the visual and social character of public spaces.

Survey data are coded using a five-point Likert scale and analysed to generate average scores for each objective and subjective indicator. Interview transcripts are subjected to thematic analysis, focusing on narratives related to safety, gendered movement, ownership, and emotional responses to artwork. Embodied maps are overlaid to identify zones of comfort, attraction, avoidance, and perceived risk, revealing how participants experience space through movement and sensory perception.

The ten indicators are synthesized into an Urban Safety Index (USI), allowing comparative evaluation of all case study locations. Radar charts, comparative matrices, and correlation analysis are used to identify patterns between visual activation, pedestrian behaviour, and perceived safety. This analytical process provides a comprehensive framework that captures both measurable and experiential dimensions of urban safety, demonstrating how street art contributes to safer, more inclusive, and culturally meaningful public environments while strengthening collective memory and urban inheritance in Bengaluru.

The research process follows these stages:

4. Data Analysis and Key Findings

A total of 126 respondents participated in the questionnaire survey conducted across six study locations in Bengaluru, including art-integrated spaces such as Church Street, Indiranagar, and the Graffiti for Hope corridor on Hosur Road, as well as non-art control sites consisting of unpainted service lanes and underused streets. The dataset combines demographic information, perception-based survey responses, behavioural observations, and embodied mapping, enabling a robust comparison between spaces with and without artistic interventions.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The respondent group was intentionally diverse to capture a broad range of urban experiences and perceptions.

Category	Percentage
Women	52%
Men	44%
Non-binary/Other	4%
Students	39%
Working Professionals	41%
Residents	20%

4.2 Gender-Based Findings

Women respondents reported strong positive associations between visually active streets and feelings of safety and confidence.

Statement	Women Responding Positively
Felt more comfortable in visually active streets	72%
Reported reduced fear during evening movement in art zones	68%
Preferred routes with higher pedestrian and visual activity	74%

These findings demonstrate that artistic visibility contributes significantly to women's perception of safety. Murals and public art appear to reduce the sense of isolation associated with blank walls and inactive streets while encouraging greater confidence during evening movement.

4.3 Perception Survey Results

Participants were asked to evaluate the influence of street art on visual quality, safety, inclusivity, and urban engagement.

Survey Question	Positive Responses
Street art improves the visual quality of public spaces	91%
Murals make streets feel more active and safer	84%
Feminist street art increases inclusivity	76%
Graffiti attracts greater pedestrian engagement	81%
Public art encourages longer street occupation	69%
Poorly maintained blank walls feel unsafe	88%
Street art should be integrated into urban planning	93%

The strongest agreement (93%) was for integrating public art into urban planning, indicating widespread support for recognizing street art as a legitimate design and policy tool rather than as a temporary cultural intervention.

4.4 Behavioural Mapping Analysis

Behavioural mapping was conducted at three mural-intensive sites and three non-art control sites. Observations were recorded during morning, afternoon, and evening periods.

Comparative Behavioural Differences

Parameter	Art-Integrated Spaces	Non-Art Spaces
Average pause duration	3.8 minutes	0.9 minutes
Group interaction frequency	High	Low
Photo documentation activity	Very high	Negligible
Women pedestrian presence after 7 PM	Moderate to high	Low
Informal street gatherings	Frequent	Rare
Vendor activity	Active	Minimal

These observations suggest that street art significantly increases micro-social activation. People not only pass through art-integrated spaces but also pause, converse, photograph murals, and engage in informal social activities. Such behaviours contribute to natural surveillance and enhance the perceived vitality and safety of the street.

4.5 Comparative Interpretation

The contrast between art-integrated and non-art spaces reveals a clear pattern. Public art transforms walls from passive boundaries into active interfaces that attract attention and social use. Longer pause durations and more frequent interactions indicate that murals generate curiosity and encourage occupation of public space. Increased vendor presence and informal gatherings further support street vitality.

Women's greater presence during evening hours is particularly significant. This suggests that visual activation and social occupancy foster a stronger sense of comfort and confidence, even in areas previously perceived as unsafe.

Comparative Analysis Matrix (Scores out of 5)

Study Area	Footfall	Visibility	Lighting	Maintenance	Activity Diversity	Perceived Safety	Psychological Comfort	Emotional Response	Belonging	Inclusivity	Urban Safety Index
Church Street	5.0	4.6	4.3	4.4	5.0	4.5	4.4	4.6	4.3	4.4	4.5
Hosur Road – Graffiti for Hope	3.8	4.1	3.9	3.8	4.0	4.0	3.9	4.2	3.8	4.0	4.0
Yeshwanthpur Metro Corridor	4.2	4.3	4.1	4.0	4.1	4.1	4.0	4.1	3.9	4.0	4.1
Richmond Circle Underpass	3.0	3.1	2.8	2.9	2.7	2.9	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.7	2.9
Indiranagar Mural Streets	4.8	4.7	4.4	4.5	4.8	4.6	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.6	4.6
Unpainted Service Lanes (Control Sites)	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.9	2.0					
Study Area	Footfall	Visibility	Lighting	Maintenance	Activity Diversity	Perceived Safety	Psychological Comfort	Emotional Response			
Church Street	5.0	4.6	4.3	4.4		5.0	4.5		4.4		4.6
Hosur Road – Graffiti for Hope	3.8	4.1	3.9	3.8		4.0	4.0		3.9		4.2
Yeshwanthpur Metro Corridor	4.2	4.3	4.1	4.0		4.1	4.1		4.0		4.1
Richmond Circle Underpass	3.0	3.1	2.8	2.9		2.7	2.9		2.8		2.7
Indiranagar Mural Streets	4.8	4.7	4.4	4.5		4.8	4.6		4.5		4.7

Unpainted Service Lanes (Control Sites)	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.9	2.0
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5. Key Findings

An Urban Safety Index (USI) was developed to comparatively evaluate public spaces based on weighted subjective and objective indicators.

Urban Safety Index Formula

$$\text{USI} = (\text{Objective Indicators} \times 0.5) + (\text{Subjective Indicators} \times 0.5)$$

Each parameter was scored on a scale of 1–5.

Study Area	Presence of Street Art	Average Pedestrian Activity	Night-time Comfort Rating	Women's Perception of Safety	Public Interaction Level	Overall Safety Score (USI / 5)
Church Street	High	Very High	4.3/5	High	Very High	4.5
Hosur Road – Graffiti for Hope	Moderate	Moderate	3.9/5	Moderate to High	High	4.0
Yeshwanthpur Metro Corridor	High	High	4.1/5	Moderate	High	4.1
Richmond Circle Underpass	Low to Moderate	Moderate	2.8/5	Low	Low	2.9
Indiranagar Mural Streets	High	High	4.4/5	High	High	4.6
Unpainted Service Lanes (Control Sites)	None	Low	2.1/5	Very Low	Very Low	2.0

Interpretation of Key Findings

High-Performing Art-Integrated Spaces

- Indiranagar (USI = 4.6) and Church Street (USI = 4.5) recorded the highest safety scores.
- These areas combined strong visual activation, intense pedestrian activity, and high levels of social interaction.
- Women respondents reported greater confidence and comfort, especially during evening hours.

Moderate-Performing Spaces

- Yeshwanthpur Metro Corridor (4.1) and Graffiti for Hope on Hosur Road (4.0) demonstrated that even corridor-based or infrastructure-oriented art can significantly improve perceptions of safety and engagement.

Low-Performing Spaces

- Richmond Circle Underpass (2.9) performed better than control sites but remained constrained by limited activity and weak social occupation.

Control Sites without Art

- Unpainted service lanes recorded the lowest score (2.0), confirming strong associations between blank, poorly maintained walls and perceptions of insecurity.

Overall Conclusions from the Matrix

1. Greater street art presence corresponds with higher perceived safety.
2. Women's perception of safety improves in visually active and socially occupied environments.
3. Artistic interventions increase pedestrian activity, pause duration, and informal social interaction.
4. Public art supports collective ownership and encourages longer use of public space.
5. The Urban Safety Index provides a reliable comparative tool for assessing the impact of cultural interventions on urban safety.

The matrix demonstrates that street art is not merely decorative; it is a measurable urban design strategy that enhances safety, inclusivity, and social vitality while contributing to the cultural identity and urban inheritance of Bengaluru.

6. Discussions and Recommendation

The findings of this study demonstrate that graffiti and street art function as far more than aesthetic embellishments within the urban environment. In the context of Bengaluru, artistic interventions were shown to influence both the measurable and experiential dimensions of public-space safety. The Urban Safety Matrix and the Urban Safety Index (USI) reveal a strong relationship between visual activation, pedestrian occupation, and perceived security. Sites with extensive and well-maintained murals—particularly Indira agar and Church Street—recorded the highest overall safety scores, while unpainted service lanes and visually neglected spaces consistently scored the lowest.

The study also highlights the role of street art in urban inheritance. Murals encode local narratives, environmental themes, and cultural memories, allowing everyday spaces to become repositories of collective identity. This expands the understanding of safety beyond crime prevention to include belonging, recognition, and emotional connection to place.

7. Recommendations

1. **Integrate Public Art into Urban Planning:** Municipal agencies should formally incorporate murals and community art into street redesign, mobility projects, and neighbourhood renewal programs.
2. **Prioritize Gender-Sensitive Art Programs:** Artistic interventions should address themes of women's safety, inclusivity, and accessibility and involve women and marginalized groups in the design process.
3. **Target Underused and Unsafe Spaces:** Blank compound walls, underpasses, metro corridors, and service lanes should be prioritized for art-based activation.
4. **Support Community Participation:** Workshops and collaborative mural programs can strengthen local ownership and long-term stewardship.
5. **Ensure Maintenance and Curation:** Public art should be accompanied by regular upkeep, lighting improvements, and environmental management.
6. **Adopt the Urban Safety Index:** The USI can serve as a practical evaluation tool for planners and designers to assess and compare the impact of cultural interventions.
7. **Encourage Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Partnerships among artists, residents, planners, academic institutions, and municipal agencies can enhance both the quality and sustainability of interventions.

8. Conclusions

Overall, the study positions graffiti and street art as legitimate and effective urban design strategies capable of reclaiming neglected environments and promoting safer, more inclusive, and culturally resonant cities. For rapidly growing metropolitan contexts such as Bengaluru, integrating public art into planning and policy offers a cost-effective and participatory approach to improving public-space quality. Future research may expand this framework to other cities and employ longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of artistic interventions on urban safety and social behavior.

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