

ROLE OF STREET ART AND GRAFFITI IN CONSERVING CULTURAL BUILT HERITAGE IN HISTORIC PRECINCTS - A SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THREE CASE MODELS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Art and aesthetics illustrate the cultural traditions and often define the identity of urban space that evolved through time. Street art and graffiti are underrated and condemned to negligence among the society residing in urban cities. Street graffiti is one such art form that represents the creative expression of suppressed minds. Architecture and street façade in historic urban spaces has become a canvas for their ideas and emotions, expressed as street art and graffiti. The question we face in policy-making is whether this accounts as vandalism or a public display of creativity and whether we accept it as a dynamic layer of heritage. The paper aims to examine the socio-cultural impact of graffiti and street art in historic precincts by assessing three selected case models in India. The article also discusses the role of street art and graffiti in society and their impact on urban heritage. This study will contribute to forming a policy for rejuvenating such heritage streets.

Keywords

Street art, graffiti, urban heritage, historic site, vandalism, urban conservation, heritage, socio-cultural well-being

1. Introduction

“A turquoise scooter with one tire is painted on the background of pride hues. Attached to the bike is a golden gramophone horn with a white dove flying out. This striking artwork, titled ‘Pride Ride’, is among the most popular wall paintings on Kozhikode’s Gujarati street, near the city’s beach area. Created by the Chupply twins back in November 2019, ‘Pride Ride’ was made as an ode to the LGBTQ+ community and has been attracting attention for one year now. But earlier this week, the artwork was vandalized by unknown men, who stuck posters calling for the trade unions’ nationwide strike on November 26, 2020.” (Jayarajan, 2020)

Street art, a term coined by Allan Schwartzman in 1985 (Lewisohn, 2008), was considered an artistic expression that has derived and evolved with its roots from ‘graffiti culture’, which has the urban fabric as its backdrop and the urban elements as its canvas.

The depletion of street art and graffiti is not only an issue in India but can be seen in countries

worldwide. Globally, street art and graffiti are part of what defines historic cities and neighborhoods. Artists engage in street art to express their opinions on the issues they are facing in their communities. Whether gentrification or austerity measures, street art often emerges as a way for these artists to voice their injustices. Though being an artistic conception of its own, Street art has seldom been able to equally share the limelight with the ‘elite’ art domain. More often, it has been underrated and condemned to negligence by the public and government authorities. The term “Street Graffiti” is an adopted word that emerged from the idea of graffiti done on urban streets. The concept of “graffiti” does have geographical and regional variations, and the term is widely used in different contexts. Though widely seen and appreciated for their popularity among various disciplines, street art and graffiti is yet to acknowledge within the domain of heritage (MacDowall, 2006). However, there is a need to redefine the concept of street art and graffiti to clarify its vague nature of artistry and act of crime (Gómez, 1993; Halsey & Young, 2006).

This paper explores the socio-cultural significance of graffiti and street art in historic urban precincts. The paper argues that graffiti and street art must be examined in their dynamics to their context and perceived as a tool that can voluntarily and involuntarily aid in the conservation of urban heritage assets in heritage areas by associating it with the socio-cultural well-being of local communities residing in these areas. This study will contribute to policy-making for rejuvenating heritage streets and reducing crime and other anti-social activities through street art and graffiti.

2. Street Art, Graffiti and Heritage Vandalism

Graffiti, through the decades, has evolved in terms of definition and purpose. Graffiti has always been perceived as vandalism, but many have argued that it can transform our cities. It is a form of expression that has helped redefine cultural identity in many parts of the world. Different academic disciplines categorize graffiti differently.

The domains of archaeological and historical studies treat graffiti as an act of human intervention and consider it analogous to the rock-art practice of 'language' and 'identity markers' (Baker, 2002; Keats, 2008). Daniell (2011) used the term 'calligraph' to acknowledge the historic artwork of writings and drawings. Studies show that disciplines such as criminology categorize street art and graffiti mostly under "an act of vandalism" (MacNaughton, 2006; Wilson, 1987).

The extent to which street art is considered to be seen as vandalism is always a dilemma one faces. A two-fold definition based on two aspects-Place and Content was adopted to define what heritage vandalism is.

The former considers "acts of vandalism that affect the existing built cultural heritage that has cultural significance", while the latter considers "acts of vandalism that embody cultural significance"(Merrill, 2011). Figure 1 shows a street art themed 'Vandalism', by Goon and Chick (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987).

Rob White (2001) enlists and briefly describes certain types of graffiti, such as political, protest, art, tagger, gang, and public. The nature of the graffiti, whether it is perceived as 'good' or 'bad', is determined by the socio-cultural implication and

legitimacy of the graffiti (White, 2001). Additionally, where the graffiti is produced also weighs its nature and relevance (Carrington, 1989). There are debates regarding street graffiti art as a heritage asset with significance and cultural value (Boulton, 2003).

UNESCO adopted a treaty that focuses on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in 2013 but seldom discusses preserving street art or graffiti (Albro, 2005). Arguments are made concerning the relevance of graffiti as a part of the culture or cultural heritage and whether it should be considered a tangible or intangible form of culture (MacDowall, 2006).

Some graffiti studies are associated with a particular community's culture, thus making it a part of their local culture (R. Ellis & Turner, 1975; Rennie Ellis, 1985).

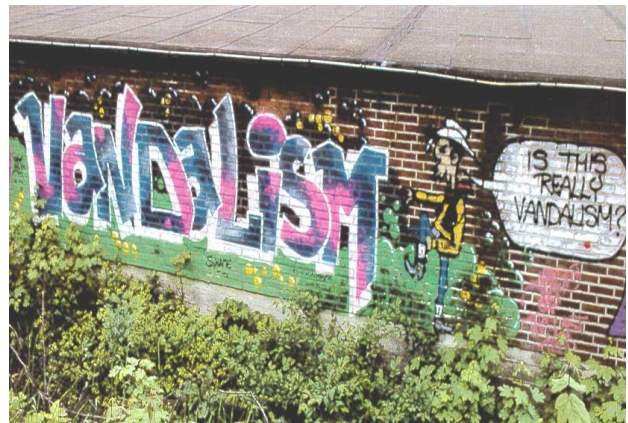


Fig. 1: 'Vandalism' by Goon and Chick. Source: (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987)

3. Street Art and Graffiti in the 21st century India

Street art and graffiti are not new concepts in India, and they saw their prominence when 'street culture' emerged in Indian cities. Art has been evolving through different forms and manifestations. The message and purpose behind the act was the dynamic factor supported by the changing art style. In recent decades, there has been a dramatic shift in street art and graffiti in Indian metro cities. Street art and graffiti have become mainstream urban tools to revitalize urban streets and transform neighborhoods¹. Cinema posters and advertisements were seen as vandalism over street art for various groups in

¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/evolution-of-street-art-in-south-india/article33740316.ece>

society. On the contrary, another portion of the society, among the Indian public and bureaucrats, considers the art form an act of vandalism over government property. In terms of user age groups, the teen population are majorly on the streets along with commissioned professional artists too.

Art is a product of every individual's artistic expression, a form of visual communication for the Indian audience. Political parties in India have also activated 'graffiti' as a tool to showcase and promote their political campaign and agendas. Certain groups engage with the art form as a platform to raise socio-political statements. Due to this, though the art form brings communities together, at certain times, it becomes causes to create socio-political rifts between communities in India due to their sensitive nature. Certain groups engage with the art form as a platform to raise socio-political statements².

In Indian historic urban precincts, street art and graffiti are seen in diverse forms depending on which part of the country and the residing community. Traditional art and artistic expression have been translated into street art or graffiti work as mural art, showing the intangible richness of these historic precincts. The tourism sector in India also benefits through promoting heritage tourism in these historic urban precincts. A common trend in Indian urban cities is that the intervention in neglected and anti-social areas is intervened with street art and graffiti to make the area positively engageable for the general public while preventing crime and anti-social activities.

4. Materials and Method

The paper is devised from primary qualitative data through observational procedures, including semi-structured and unstructured interviews and secondary literature, including newspaper articles.

The qualitative analysis of three case studies, as three different models, are taken from India: (i) The Lodi Art District, New Delhi; (ii) Kochi-Muziris Biennale at Fort Kochi, Kerala; and (iii) Gujarati Street at Calicut, Kerala.

The case studies studied were chosen because of their relevance to the theme of art and architecture in heritage streets.

The literature study and interview focused on sub-themes that could help determine the socio-cultural impact of the three models and

understand the influence of graffiti and street art in heritage precincts. Identifying the socio-cultural indicators and detailed statistical analysis of survey data is beyond the scope of the paper. Online published data and news articles were also used to support the analysis.

5. Socio-Cultural Indicators

With the focus on the study's objective, content analysis from published literature and expert opinion was performed to derive eight socio-cultural indicators that can assess the impact of street art and graffiti on the socio-cultural fabric of the heritage precinct. The identification and derivation of the indicators specifically focus on aspects that hold significance to the built environment and the welfare of the community and stakeholders.

The built environment is determined by heritage character, safety & security, infrastructure, and waste management. The community welfare was determined by understanding the impact on the local economy through the provision of employment opportunities; community engagement to build social cohesion; heritage awareness among the community and public to educate the heritage values associated with a place, and tourism boost to promote responsible tourism and generate income within the community.

Figure 2 shows the list of indicators identified to serve the purpose of the research objective.



Fig. 2: Socio-cultural indicators (Source: Author)

² <https://thespace.ink/cover-story/street-art-in-india/>



Fig. 3: Glimpses of street art work at Lodhi Art District 2016, New Delhi. (Source: St+art Foundation)

6. Case Models

6.1. Lodi Colony art district, New Delhi

The Lodi Colony Art District in New Delhi is an initiative by the St+Art Foundation in the year 2014 and was finally created in 2016 with a vision to bring the Indian community closer to street art and culture. St+art is a non-profit organization founded in 2014 that focuses on bringing the public more approachable to art by transcending socio-cultural barriers. Instead of restricting art within art galleries and museums, the idea was to use the streets as a medium for interaction to spark between the public and the art.

The Lodhi Colony is historically significant with its pre-independence heritage value. The British built the colony in the late 1940s and used it as a government housing estate. The character of the streets is surrounded by solid facades of the built structures, which had a blend of Indo-Euro architecture. These facades stand out with a balance with their minimalistic wall and bold symmetrical openings. The façades were dilapidated due to lack of maintenance and had a scope to become the canvases for the St+Art project.

The team collaborated with the CPWD to work with walls in the stretch between Khanna Market and Meherchand Market. Figure 3 shows glimpses of the street artwork in the Lodhi Art District in New Delhi.

6.2. Fort Kochi and the Biennale, Kerala

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is an international contemporary art festival hosted by the Kochi Biennale Foundation and initiated in 2012 with support from the Government of Kerala. The foundation, a non-profit charitable trust founded by artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, primarily promotes art and culture in India. The foundation is contributing to the conservation of heritage properties and the upliftment of traditional art and culture. The Biennale has completed 4 editions-2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

The venue of the Biennale is centered on the Fort Kochi Heritage Zone. The art exhibits are displayed within and on the heritage properties in the area. For the whole purpose of the art exhibition, the heritage properties and urban heritage in and around the area were conserved and adapted accordingly. The dilapidated heritage properties were creatively used as a canvas and venue. Figure 4 shows a series of street photos of artwork on building facades of residences and shops with heritage characters abutting the streets of Fort Kochi. Figure 5 shows the Aspin Wall at Fort Kochi, one of the heritage structures in the area, and has been actively used as a venue for the Biennale. Figure 6 shows a wall of one of the heritage structures along the streets of Fort Kochi being used as a canvas for displaying a form of collage street art with posters. Is this art or vandalism?



Fig. 4: Street photos of artwork on building facades abutting streets, Fort Kochi. (Source: www.cochinblogger.wordpress.com)



Fig. 5: Aspin wall House, Fort Kochi. (Source: Kochi Biennale Foundation)



Fig. 6: Poster collage street art during Fort Kochi Biennale. (Source: Thulasi Kakkat; George E, 2019)

Tanya Abraham, the curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018 edition, says that the Biennale has had a positive impact on the community and would culturally influence the thoughts of future generations (George E, 2019). This event has helped preserve the region's cultural values by conserving the urban heritage that includes the streets and abandoned properties.

6.3. Gujarati Street (Calicut), Kerala

Gujarati Street in Calicut is one of the oldest streets along the medieval trading coastal stretch of Kozhikode district, Kerala. The street is located between the historic precincts of Kuttichira and Valiyangaadi. The name of the street was derived due to its historical significance, with the settling of Gujarati merchants and their families in the area for trade. The street radiates the essence of the early historic cross-cultural character of the trading town. The other old streets are the Big Bazaar Road, Silk Street, Kuttichira Road, Halwa Bazaar street, Copra Bazaar street, Gunny Street, Mint Street etc. Gujarati Street interconnects with the other streets, connecting the Calicut south beach in the west, Valiyangaadi (big bazaar) in the north and the Kuttichira settlement in the south through narrow lanes.

Many of the streets' structures are double-storied. The ground floor street abutting areas accommodate the commercial business and the rear portion for residential spaces. The first floor is also used to store goods or house the workers. Architecturally, there is a blend of styles in the overall built fabric. The artwork along Gujarati Street has initiated a dialogue between the abandoned buildings and the local community tangibly and intangibly. In the past five to six years, there has been an increase in business along the street. New shops and food outlets have opened, inviting the public into the streets. Abandoned properties are mostly adaptively re-used, thereby continuing the life of the building.

The street abutting walls of the go-downs and shops, which has a heritage character and value, are seen to be used as a canvas for graffiti and street art (shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8).



Fig. 7: Graffiti art on the go-down walls of Gujarati street, Calicut. (Source: Author)



Fig. 8: Street art on godown walls near Gujarathi Street, Calicut. (Source: Author))

Wedding photographers and the ‘Gen Z’ youth actively use these walls as a backdrop for photoshoots to showcase in their social media accounts (Figure 9). Some of this artwork has boosted new businesses in the area. Figure 10 shows an artwork used on the storefront wall, which involuntarily promotes the business.



Fig. 9: Street art as photography backdrops in Gujarati street, Calicut. (Source: Author)



Fig. 10: Graffiti art used for business promotion in Gujarati street. (Source: Author)

Though the initiative by creative artists, primarily students, has transformed the space into an inviting street, existing tenants who own shops along the street find it hard to prosper their business. The public appreciation of the street as a heritage street has indirectly created a barrier to inviting incongruous additions in the name of development. Mohanlalji, an *agarbattis* business trader, says that the restriction of development in the area has affected his business in terms of logistics.

Through time, the streets networking extending from Gujarati Street would develop the same character by utilizing the abandoned heritage structures. Currently, there is a sharp distinction in architectural character when abandoned private properties come along the street with large boundary walls (Figure 11).



Fig. 11: An abandoned wall along Gujarati Street. (Source: Author)



Fig. 12: Waste dumping along the side of Halwa Bazaar Street. (Source: Author)

Waste dumping has been seen evident in front of abandoned properties abutting the street (shown in Figure 12). Despite having warning signage, the blank walls are still being vandalized without any surveillance.

6. Analysis

The identified set of 8 indicators, i.e. heritage retention character; local community involvement; local employment; tourism boost; promoting heritage awareness; crime prevention;

waste management; and infrastructure upgradation, were assessed based on the questionnaire survey and interview with the public separately for each case. The indicators were given equal weightage to understand the weak points for each case model. The overall score ranged from 0 to 3 based on qualitative assessment, with '0' implying 'no impact' and '3' implying 'high impact'. The impact suggests the beneficial aspect of the particular indicator. Figure 13 shows the radar chart analysis of the three case models for the eight socio-cultural indicators.

As per the qualitative analysis, we infer that the Lodhi art district model strongly influences the built environment by retaining the heritage character and maintaining the surroundings devoid of visual clutter through proper waste management. The artwork follows a theme that suits the architectural features of the existing structures. However, there is no scope to enhance the local economy through job opportunities for the locals, the model suits in positively attracting revenue indirectly through tourism. With a new 'vibe' within the environs, the residents and general public have a 'sense of safety and security'.

From the analysis, we can also infer that the Kochi-Muziris biennale model is a crucial model for boosting tourism. The Kochi-Muziris biennale model generates high tourism revenue with the influx of local, national and international tourists due to its marketing and diverse collaboration in art and architecture.

The venues and their surroundings are well maintained and managed during the biennale period, creating a safe and clean environment for

the locals and tourists. Even though heritage structures are used as the platform and canvas for art installations, there is a compromise in the retention of the authenticity and integrity of the structure. The area transforms into an active public spot, thus preventing anti-social crimes, especially in the heritage structures.

The Gujarathi Street model is an average attempt to support the identified factors. Though there is a revival and appreciation of heritage aesthetics with the upcoming street art, it vaguely justifies the authenticity of the precinct's built heritage character. The street serves as a canvas to display creative street art by artists of various age groups but seldom invites or promotes the local talent to get involved, thus lacking community engagement.

7. Discussion

The study focused on the socio-cultural analysis of the three case models through a primary and secondary survey. The intent was to explore and understand whether street art and graffiti invite other acts of vandalism or not and look into the model's scope to serve the community from a socio-cultural perspective. Models such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and Lodhi Art District are fundamentally handled and overlooked by their respective foundations and organizations. A Fort Kochi model of inviting more art into the historic streets can be similarly seen in Gujarathi Street in Calicut. This is seen to have a constructive impact on urban heritage conservation. Out of the three models, the Gujarathi street model is a creative initiative seldom carried



Fig. 13: Socio-cultural impact analysis (Source: Author)

out by any organization or foundation. Local artists, art and architecture students, and art enthusiasts have taken the upper hand to bring life to space to revive and respect the urban heritage indirectly. Despite variation in the analysis, there is an overall beneficial balance for heritage precincts through street art. It contributes towards the awareness and conservation of urban heritage. Social discussions and commentary are seen to sprout out within such art-rich spaces.

8. Conclusions

International art festivals such as the Biennale and the art district concept helped revitalize the urban heritage, including the heritage properties, streets, and public spaces within historic precincts. It has endorsed the local community to appreciate the forms of street art, such as murals and graffiti, and the urban heritage by engaging them in these spaces. Rather than isolating the art's reading, it is best to appreciate along with the urban heritage, provided it does not tamper with the authenticity and associated heritage values.

Regardless of the various coined definitions of graffiti and street art as acts of vandalism, most academicians and researchers can seldom draw a clear-cut line between what is considered vandalism and what is not. The socio-cultural and political dynamics should be examined and explored rather than perceiving graffiti and street art as a problem to be rectified. The selected case studies have illustrated the impact of street graffiti on the community's well-being and its socio-cultural benefits. The way one would look at street graffiti art is very subjective, as its value varies from person to person. The study discusses the complexity of value assessment and the demand for its accountability to be documented rather than tarnished.

With street graffiti art, there is a unique urban experience created within every individual, which leads to shared memories among the community. The urban heritage of historic precincts and their values play a significant role in imbibing these memories. Street art and graffiti are underrated assets and should be seen and appreciated as intangible urban heritage assets. Heritage conservation and urban development proposals must consider the socio-cultural dynamics of the existing graffiti and incorporate it efficiently by

taking responsible actions and measures to prevent it from being vandalized rather than seeing it as an act of vandalism. Vandalism on street art and graffiti that holds a social message or compliments the social value of an area must be looked upon more critically. Studies and discussions on how to legally balance the act of vandalism through graffiti ought to be taken forward. Sometimes, heritage sites and their immediate vicinities are better left untouched. In abandoned properties and dead streets in historic precincts, they tend to lead to encourage anti-social activities. Street art and graffiti can help acknowledge the negligence of urban spaces and invite the public to use the space interactively. The legitimacy of graffiti and street art ought to be considered by mainstreaming this medium and motivating the skill and talent of street artists.

The paper attempts to open a discussion among the concerned about how street art and graffiti can be more appreciated as a tool to prevent vandalism of urban heritage elements and anti-social activities in dead urban spaces. The assessment of the identified set of 8 indicators, i.e. heritage retention character; local community involvement; local employment; tourism boost; promoting heritage awareness; crime prevention; waste management; and infrastructure up-gradation, aids in evaluating the impact of interventions in historic urban precincts. A high score for all eight indicators would showcase street art's positive impact within the historic urban precincts. The study invites further research to analyze attributes that govern the identified socio-cultural indicators, yielding more focused decision-making and policy-oriented solutions to tackle the issues and challenges in the area due to street art and graffiti.

To conclude, graffiti and street art are not a scourge to be removed but a significant part of many heritage precincts. A guide on the role of graffiti and street art in heritage conservation in historic precincts needs to be prioritized for further research publications. Through this article, the study encourages future research to explore how these disparate disciplines can be used to maintain and revitalize the fabric of our heritage precincts; it also inspires researchers and practitioners to explore more about how graffiti and street art can enhance your heritage precinct environs.

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