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Urban Art as Political Resistance: Murals, Memory, and Justice in Public Space

Arte urbano como resistencia política: murales, memoria y justicia en el espacio público

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of urban murals as instruments of political resistance and collective memory in post-conflict cities. Focusing on Latin American urban contexts, the research investigates how public art becomes a powerful medium through which marginalized communities reclaim visibility, confront historical erasure, and demand social justice. Drawing on visual ethnography, field observations, and interviews with artists and community members, the study analyzes murals as spatial interventions that challenge dominant narratives and reconfigure public space as a site of historical reckoning. The novelty of this research lies in its framing of muralism not only as aesthetic expression but as a grassroots strategy of memory politics and urban activism in transitional societies. This article contributes to

interdisciplinary debates on memory, justice, and the right to the city by highlighting how art in public space facilitates processes of healing, resistance, and socio-political engagement.

Keywords *Urban art*, *Political resistance*, *Collective memory*, *Public space*, *Post-conflict cities*

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza el papel de los murales urbanos como herramientas de resistencia política y memoria colectiva en ciudades postconflicto. Centrándose en contextos urbanos de América Latina, la investigación examina cómo el arte público se convierte en un medio poderoso a través del cual las comunidades marginadas reclaman visibilidad, confrontan el olvido histórico y exigen justicia social. A partir de una etnografía visual, observaciones de campo y entrevistas con artistas y habitantes locales, el estudio interpreta los murales como intervenciones espaciales que desafían narrativas dominantes y transforman el espacio público en un escenario de memoria activa. La originalidad de este trabajo radica en su conceptualización del muralismo no solo como expresión estética, sino como estrategia comunitaria de resistencia, memoria y activismo urbano en sociedades en transición. El artículo aporta al debate interdisciplinario sobre memoria, justicia y derecho a la ciudad al mostrar cómo el arte en el espacio público facilita procesos de sanación, resistencia y participación sociopolítica.

Palabras clave *Arte urbano*, *Resistencia política*, *Memoria colectiva*, *Espacio público*, *Ciudades postconflicto*

A. Introduction

The contemporary urban landscape is far from a neutral backdrop for social interaction; rather, it constitutes a "contested political arena" where power dynamics are visually and spatially negotiated. Public space serves as a primary site for the manifestation of state authority, yet it simultaneously offers a platform for counter-hegemonic expressions. As Lefebvre (1991) argues in *The Production of Space*, urban space is a social product that is continuously contested by different social groups. In this context, visual culture—specifically urban art—emerges not merely as aesthetic decoration but as a potent medium of resistance and meaning-making. For marginalized populations, the act of reclaiming a wall is an act of reclaiming a voice

within the "polis," transforming the static infrastructure of the city into a dynamic site of political struggle (Mitchell, 2003).

In post-conflict urban contexts, the relevance of art is magnified as traditional political channels are often fractured or perceived as inaccessible. Visual interventions allow for the public articulation of grievances that may be too sensitive or dangerous to express in formal political discourse. Urban art, particularly large-scale murals, functions as a "visual tactic" that disrupts the state's monopoly over the urban narrative (de Certeau, 1984). By occupying highly visible surfaces, artists and social movements force a confrontation between the passerby and the historical realities that the state may wish to sanitize. Consequently, the study of urban art provides a window into the "hidden transcripts" of resistance that define the political life of the subaltern in the Latin American metropole (Scott, 1990).

Latin American urban landscapes have been profoundly shaped by decades of violence, state repression, and systematic erasure. In cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Santiago, the built environment bears the scars of conflict, yet the official history often seeks to impose a "pax neoliberal" that silences the trauma of the past. Struggles over remembrance and forgetting are etched into the very walls of these cities. As Huyssen (2003) notes in *Present Pasts*, the urban fabric serves as a palimpsest where layers of memory are constantly being written over, hidden, or exposed. In post-conflict settings, the state often employs "politics of forgetting" to facilitate national reconciliation, frequently at the expense of victims' rights to truth and symbolic reparation.

Marginalized communities in these cities face a dual burden of physical and symbolic exclusion. While their neighborhoods are often the sites of the most intense violence, their lived experiences are frequently excluded from the national commemorative landscape. This "symbolic annihilation" reinforces the marginality of these groups, rendering their grief invisible to the wider public. However, memory is not a static repository but an active social process. Jelin (2003) emphasizes that "labors of memory" are essential for democratic consolidation, as they allow for the construction of collective identities rooted in the recognition of past injustices. Urban murals, therefore, act as "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) that provide a territorial anchor for the narratives of those who have been systematically erased from official history.

A significant challenge in post-conflict transition is that institutional memory practices—such as state-funded museums and monuments—often exclude or sanitize subaltern narratives. These "top-down" commemorative efforts frequently prioritize national unity

over the messy, conflicting realities of the victims (Stern, 2006). This creates a gap where the state's version of the past clashes with the "grassroots memory" maintained by local communities. Furthermore, there is a notable under-theorization of urban murals as political and spatial interventions within the broader fields of urban studies and political science. Murals are often dismissed as ephemeral graffiti or purely aesthetic "street art," overlooking their role as sophisticated tools of spatial claim-making and political mobilization.

This research identifies the urgent need to bridge the divide between urban studies and memory politics. While urban studies often focuses on the physical and economic transformation of the city, and memory studies focuses on the psychological and social aspects of remembrance, the "spatiality of memory" remains under-explored. In post-conflict Latin American cities, murals represent a fusion of these two fields: they are physical interventions that transform the urban environment while simultaneously serving as archives of collective memory. By failing to account for the political agency inherent in urban art, scholars risk ignoring the most vibrant and accessible forms of justice claims emerging from the urban periphery.

The primary objective of this article is to evaluate how murals function as tools of political resistance and symbolic justice in post-conflict Latin American cities. The research seeks to understand the mechanisms through which visual culture reconfigures public space and challenges the hegemony of official history. To achieve this, the study is guided by three core research questions:

1. How do murals function as tools of political resistance in contexts where traditional political participation is constrained or repressed?
2. In what ways do these visual interventions contribute to collective memory and justice claims, providing a platform for "symbolic reparation" outside of state-led frameworks?
3. How do murals reconfigure public space in post-conflict cities, transforming sites of past violence into spaces of contemporary civic engagement and resistance?

This article offers a multi-layered contribution to contemporary scholarship. Theoretically, it advances the intersection of memory and urban studies by proposing a framework for understanding "territorialized memory"—the process by which social groups anchor their historical narratives to specific urban sites through visual intervention. Empirically, the study utilizes visual ethnography and case studies from Bogotá and Medellín to document the evolving role of murals in the aftermath of the Colombian peace process, providing a rigorous record of subaltern visual resistance.

Conceptually, the article contributes to the "right to the city" discourse (Harvey, 2012) by arguing that the right to the city must include the "right to the memory of the city." It posits that justice in the post-conflict metropole is not only a matter of material redistribution but also of symbolic representation. By centering the experiences of marginalized urban communities, this research challenges the techno-centric and market-led "smart city" agendas, advocating for a "human-centered" urbanism where the walls of the city serve as a democratic canvas for truth, memory, and the persistent pursuit of justice.

B. Literature Review

1. *Urban Art and Public Space*

The evolution of urban art—encompassing street art, muralism, and graffiti—reflects a shift in how public space is inhabited and narrated. While traditional muralism, particularly the post-revolutionary Mexican tradition, was often state-sponsored to build national identity, contemporary grassroots urban art frequently emerges as a critique of state power. Graffiti, once dismissed as mere vandalism, is now understood through the lens of territorial marking and identity signaling (Castells, 1983). Unlike gallery-bound art, urban murals function as a "spatial practice" that bypasses the elite gatekeepers of the art world, establishing a direct line of political communication between the artist and the public (Lefebvre, 1991).

A central tension in recent scholarship is the dichotomy between grassroots urban art and its increasing institutionalization. As cities adopt "creative city" frameworks, street art is often co-opted for gentrification projects and urban branding, leading to what Zukin (1995) terms the "pacification by cappuccino." This institutionalization risks neutralizing the subversive potential of murals by subordinating them to municipal aesthetic codes. However, as Mitchell (2003) argues, the "political" remains inherent in the medium; even when sanctioned, the presence of large-scale visual interventions in public space asserts a claim to the city that challenges the sterility of neoliberal urban design.

2. *Memory, Trauma, and the City*

Urban landscapes are not static entities but "palimpsests of memory" where historical traumas and triumphs are etched into the built environment (Huyssen, 2003). In cities recovering from systemic violence, collective memory is often a site of intense friction. While the state may attempt to impose a sanitized official history, communities often utilize urban art to create counter-memories that challenge the narrative of forgetting. These visual archives provide a platform for "difficult knowledge," allowing for the public processing of trauma that

has been excluded from the national commemorative record (Jelin, 2003).

The concept of sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), popularized by Pierre Nora, is increasingly applied to the urban periphery. In post-conflict societies, these sites are not limited to formal monuments but extend to the walls where victims were disappeared or where resistance was born. Memory politics in these contexts is often a struggle for "symbolic existence." As Stern (2006) observes, the city becomes a theater for memory contests, where the physical permanence of a mural acts as a bulwark against the state's efforts to erase or rewrite the past. These interventions ensure that the urban landscape remains a witness to the lived realities of the subaltern.

3. *Art, Justice, and Resistance*

The intersection of art and social movements is defined by cultural resistance, where visual activism serves as a catalyst for political mobilization. In Latin America, murals have historically functioned as tools for "symbolic contestation," translating complex grievances into accessible visual metaphors that resonate with the local populace. This visual activism is not merely about aesthetics; it is an exercise in agency, where marginalized groups use the city's walls to demand justice and human rights. As Scott (1990) suggests, such art forms are part of the "infrapolitics" of subordinate groups—actions that occur below the radar of formal politics but build the foundation for open defiance.

However, scholars also caution against the limits of representation-focused analyses. While murals provide a platform for visibility, visibility does not always equate to material change or the realization of legal justice. There is a risk that "aestheticizing" trauma through murals can serve as a substitute for substantive political reform, a phenomenon sometimes described as "symbolic closure." Despite these critiques, the consensus remains that visual resistance is a prerequisite for broader social transformation, as it creates the necessary "discursive space" for alternative futures to be imagined and articulated (Rancière, 2004).

4. *Conceptual Gaps*

Despite the wealth of research in individual disciplines, there remains a significant fragmentation between urban art and memory studies. Traditional memory studies often focus on psychological and sociological processes, while urban art studies frequently emphasize aesthetics or subcultural sociology. There is a need for a synthesized approach that views murals as spatialized memory, analyzing how the

physical location and the visual content of an intervention interact to produce political meaning.

Furthermore, there has been limited attention to the spatial justice dimensions of muralism. While the "Right to the City" (Harvey, 2012) is a well-established framework, it is rarely linked to the "Right to Memory." Muralism in the urban periphery is an act of distributive justice—distributing the power to define the city's identity and history. By bridging these gaps, this research seeks to move toward a more holistic understanding of how visual culture contributes to the reconfiguration of power in the post-conflict metropole.

C. Theoretical Framework

1. *Memory Politics and Counter-Memory*

Memory politics is fundamentally concerned with the exercise of power through the control of narrative and historical representation. In the wake of urban conflict, the state often employs "official memory" to consolidate a specific national identity, frequently sanitizing or omitting episodes of state-led violence to maintain social order (Gillis, 1994). This institutionalized remembrance serves to legitimize current power structures by defining what—and who—is worthy of being remembered. However, as Michel Foucault (1977) posited, where there is power, there is resistance, manifesting here as counter-memory.

Counter-hegemonic memory practices emerge from the margins to challenge the "official" scripts of the past. These practices do not merely seek to add facts to a timeline but aim to transform the very logic of how history is told. In the Latin American context, Elizabeth Jelin (2003) describes these as "labors of memory," where social actors actively struggle to ensure that subaltern experiences of trauma and resistance are recognized. Murals serve as a primary medium for these labors, acting as visual archives that preserve the "hidden transcripts" of the oppressed against the state's drive toward institutionalized forgetting (Scott, 1990).

2. *The Right to the City*

The theoretical lens of the "Right to the City," originally articulated by Henri Lefebvre (1968) and later expanded by David Harvey (2012), frames urban space as a central site of political claim-making. This right extends far beyond the mere legal access to urban resources; it is the right of inhabitants to change and reinvent the city according to their needs and desires. In post-conflict settings, the right to the city is intrinsically linked to the right to participate in the production of urban meaning. When marginalized communities paint murals, they are exercising a "right to the surface," asserting their

presence in a landscape that has historically sought to displace or ignore them.

This framework emphasizes that urban citizenship is earned through visibility, participation, and symbolic ownership. By occupying the walls of the city, residents transform "abstract space"—the cold, transactional space of planners and developers—into "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991). This symbolic ownership is a prerequisite for justice; it allows communities to reclaim the narrative of their own neighborhoods. As Don Mitchell (2003) notes, the struggle for the city is a struggle for the right to be seen and heard in the public sphere, making the mural a fundamental tool of democratic spatial appropriation.

3. *Murals as Spatial Interventions*

Murals are conceptualized here as embodied, situated, and collective practices that move beyond mere representation to become physical interventions in the urban fabric. Unlike portable art, a mural is inextricably tied to its location; its meaning is derived from the history of the specific wall, street, or neighborhood it occupies. This "situatedness" allows murals to function as territorial markers, signaling the resilience of a community and creating a protective visual layer over sites of former trauma (Till, 2012). The process of creation—often involving collective labor and community dialogue—further reinforces social cohesion and collective agency.

The impact of murals is also defined by the tension between temporality, permanence, and contestation. While many murals are ephemeral, subject to the elements or state-ordered erasure, their very "staying power" constitutes a form of political defiance. The cycle of painting, whitewashing, and repainting creates a temporal dialogue of resistance. As Saskia Sassen (2014) suggests, in the complex city, even small-scale interventions can "hack" the broader urban system. By refusing to be erased, murals challenge the permanence of state-imposed narratives, ensuring that the urban landscape remains a dynamic site of ongoing historical and political contestation.

D. Methodology

1. *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and multi-sited approach to explore the intersection of urban art and memory politics. By utilizing a multi-sited design, the research moves beyond isolated localisms to identify broader regional patterns of visual resistance in Latin America. Following Burawoy's (1998) "extended case method," this design seeks to extract the general from the unique, situating local

muralist practices within the global shifts of neoliberal urbanism and post-conflict transition.

The justification for focusing on Latin American post-conflict cities lies in the region's unique history of "transitional justice from below." Cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Santiago serve as critical laboratories where the struggle over the "Right to the City" is inextricably linked to the struggle over historical truth. These urban centers provide a rich density of visual interventions produced under conditions of high political stakes, making them ideal for analyzing how "subaltern counter-publics" (Fraser, 1990) utilize the built environment to challenge state-imposed narratives of forgetting.

2. *Visual Ethnography*

A primary pillar of the methodology is visual ethnography, which involves the systematic documentation of murals across selected urban sites. Rather than treating murals as static objects, this method views them as active participants in urban life (Pink, 2013). High-resolution photography and video documentation are used to create a digital archive of interventions, capturing not only the final artwork but also the physical condition of the wall and its surrounding environment.

The analysis involves the interpretation of symbols, themes, and spatial placement. Using iconographic and semiotic frameworks, the research decodes the recurring motifs—such as indigenous iconography, portraits of the disappeared, and local flora—to understand how they function as political metaphors. Crucially, the "situatedness" of the mural is analyzed: a mural located at a site of a known massacre carries a different political weight than one in a high-traffic transit hub. This spatial analysis allows for an understanding of how art "anchors" memory to specific coordinates of the city (Till, 2012).

3. *Field Observations*

Complementing the visual record, field observations provide insight into the "social life" of the murals. The researcher spent extended periods at the sites to observe everyday interactions with the art: how commuters glance at the walls, how residents use the murals as landmarks, and how the state or rival groups react (through whitewashing or defacement). These observations help determine if a mural has successfully transformed "abstract space" into "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991).

Furthermore, the study tracks community engagement and public reception. This includes documenting informal gatherings around mural sites and the ways in which local tour guides or teachers use the art as pedagogical tools. Observing these interactions is vital for

understanding the mural's role in "place-making" and social cohesion, providing empirical evidence of how visual culture contributes to the symbolic ownership of the neighborhood.

4. Interviews

To move beyond external interpretation, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with artists and mural collectives. These conversations focus on the intentionality behind the work: the choice of symbols, the negotiation with local authorities, and the collective process of production. Additionally, interviews with community members and local activists provide a perspective on how the art is perceived by those whose history is being represented, ensuring the research captures the "grassroots" impact of the work.

Conducting research in post-conflict settings necessitates rigorous ethical considerations. As Jelin (2003) notes, memory work can re-traumatize participants or expose them to political risk. This study follows strict protocols of informed consent, anonymization where necessary, and a "reflexive" approach to the researcher's own positionality. The goal is to avoid "extractive" research, ensuring that the narratives of the community are treated with the dignity and political weight they deserve.

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis phase integrates visual and thematic analysis with narrative and discourse analysis. Visual data is coded for recurring political themes, while interview transcripts are analyzed to identify the underlying discourses of justice, resistance, and belonging. By applying Foucault's (1972) concept of "discursive formations," the research analyzes how the murals speak to—and against—national policy documents and official peace narratives.

Methodological rigor is ensured through triangulation across methods. By cross-referencing the artist's intent (interviews), the physical manifestation (visual ethnography), and the community's reaction (field observations), the study builds a "thick description" of urban art. This triangulation prevents a purely aesthetic reading of the murals, instead grounding the analysis in the material and social realities of the post-conflict city.

6. Limitations

The study acknowledges the inherent ephemerality of murals. Unlike traditional monuments, urban art is subject to weather, urban redevelopment, and political erasure. This "temporary" nature means that some data points may disappear during the course of the study.

However, this ephemerality is also analyzed as a political datum in itself—representing the ongoing "memory contest" in the city.

Finally, the research recognizes context-specific interpretations. Symbols that signify resistance in one neighborhood may be interpreted differently in another due to local political allegiances or historical traumas. To mitigate this, the study remains cautious of over-generalization, emphasizing that the "political life" of a mural is always situated within the specific socio-political micro-climate of its neighborhood.

E. Urban Murals in Post-Conflict Latin America

1. *Historical Roots of Political Muralism*

The contemporary practice of political muralism in Latin America is deeply rooted in a continental tradition that views the wall as a site of collective pedagogy and ideological struggle. The foundational "Big Three"—Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco—pioneered the Mexican Muralist movement in the 1920s, establishing the precedent of using large-scale public surfaces to narrate national history from the perspective of the marginalized (Campbell, 2003). This tradition moved art out of the private gallery and into the street, transforming the city into an open-air archive where the struggles of the peasantry, indigenous populations, and the laboring classes were given epic proportions. This historical "didacticism" remains a hallmark of the region, where art is rarely seen as purely aesthetic but as an active participant in the construction of social identity (Coffey, 2012).

Throughout the mid-to-late 20th century, these traditions became inextricably linked to social movements and revolutionary resistance across the region. During the military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina, and the civil wars in Central America, murals served as "clandestine communication" tools. Groups like Chile's *Brigada Ramona Parra* utilized a distinct, fast-paced graphic style to reclaim public space under authoritarian rule, where the act of painting was a high-stakes performance of defiance (Castillo-Sepúlveda et al., 2023). These movements established the mural not just as a static image, but as a "tactic of the weak" (*de Certeau*, 1984), allowing social actors to physically overwrite the state's propaganda with icons of resistance and alternative futures.

This legacy of "militant aesthetics" has evolved into a sophisticated visual language that contemporary artists continue to draw upon. While the ideological focus may have shifted from class-based revolution to human rights and identity politics, the underlying logic remains: the mural is a weapon against silence. As Canclini (2014)

notes in *Art Beyond Itself*, the Latin American muralist tradition persists because it fills the gaps left by a fragmented institutional democracy, providing a visual bridge between the historical grievances of the past and the political aspirations of the present.

2. *Contemporary Post-Conflict Contexts*

In contemporary post-conflict Latin America, murals have taken on a specialized role within the broader landscape of transitional justice processes. In nations like Colombia and Peru, where official peace agreements often struggle to achieve local legitimacy, urban art becomes a form of "symbolic reparation" from below. While state-led Truth Commissions provide a legal framework for justice, murals provide a spatial framework for truth-telling. They allow victims' collectives to "monumentalize" their grief in the very neighborhoods where violence occurred, creating a localized form of justice that is visible, visceral, and unmediated by state bureaucracy (Hite, 2012).

However, these memory-work efforts frequently clash with the neoliberal logic of urban redevelopment and symbolic erasure. In cities like Medellín, "urban acupuncture" and high-tech "smart city" branding often prioritize the sanitization of public space to attract tourism and investment. This process of "aesthetic renewal" can inadvertently—or intentionally—erase the visual traces of conflict to present a narrative of a "healed" city. Söderström et al. (2014) argue that this "corporate storytelling" often views political murals as "vandalism" or "visual noise" that disrupts the polished image of the modern metropole. Consequently, the struggle for the wall becomes a struggle against the physical displacement of memory.

The tension between redevelopment and remembrance creates a "contested palimpsest" on the urban surface. As the state or private developers whitewash walls to "beautify" neighborhoods, local collectives often return to repaint their histories, creating a cycle of visual contestation. This "war of the walls" reflects a deeper institutional struggle: the state seeks closure and a forward-looking "smart" identity, while marginalized communities demand a persistent presence of the past to ensure that justice is not sacrificed for the sake of urban aesthetics (Stern, 2006). The mural thus stands at the intersection of a city trying to forget and a community refusing to be forgotten.

F. Findings

1. *Murals as Acts of Political Resistance*

The empirical analysis reveals that murals in post-conflict Latin American cities function as visceral visual denunciations of violence and injustice. In neighborhoods where the state has historically

maintained a "culture of silence," these large-scale interventions break the hegemony of fear. Unlike traditional political speeches, murals provide a permanent, unmediated presence that confronts the public with the "uncomfortable truths" of state or paramilitary violence. According to Scott (1990), these works represent the "public transcript" of the oppressed, turning the physical skin of the city into a manifesto against impunity.

A primary tactic within this resistance is the explicit naming of perpetrators and honoring of victims. In cities like Bogotá, the "False Positives" scandal (extrajudicial killings of civilians) has been met with a wave of "mural-activism" that identifies specific military units and political figures, effectively creating a "visual trial" in the public square. By painting the faces of the disappeared at a monumental scale, artists force a "re-humanization" of the victims, counteracting the state's tendency to reduce them to statistics. As Jelin (2003) notes, this act of naming is a fundamental component of political resistance, as it prevents the "social death" that accompanies historical erasure.

2. *Murals and Collective Memory*

Murals serve as vital instruments for the construction of commemoration and counter-narratives. While official national histories often prioritize "reconciliation" over "truth," grassroots murals maintain the complexity of the conflict. They act as "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) that do not merely look backward but provide a lens through which to interpret current political realities. These interventions create a "visual archive" for the community, ensuring that the local experience of conflict remains a permanent feature of the urban landscape, even when formal education systems or national museums exclude them.

Furthermore, the research identifies a significant role for murals in the intergenerational transmission of memory. In neighborhoods like *Comuna 13* in Medellín, younger generations who did not experience the height of the violence use the muralist tradition to engage with their community's history. This "pedagogy of the wall" allows for the transfer of values, trauma, and resistance strategies from elders to youth. As Huyssen (2003) suggests, this prevents the "atrophy of memory" in a digital age, as the physical labor of painting creates a visceral, embodied connection to the past, anchoring the collective identity of the neighborhood in its historical struggle for justice.

3. *Reclaiming Public Space*

The presence of political murals fundamentally challenges dominant urban aesthetics. In the neoliberal "smart city," public space

is often sanitized and optimized for consumption, a process Zukin (1995) describes as the "pacification by cappuccino." Political murals disrupt this polished veneer, reintroducing the "messiness" of political struggle into the urban aesthetic. By refusing to conform to municipal standards of "beautification," muralists assert that the city's value lies in its social history rather than its real estate marketability.

Consequently, the city becomes a canvas of political participation for those traditionally excluded from urban planning. Painting a mural is an exercise of the "Right to the City" (Lefebvre, 1968), transforming "abstract space"—the domain of planners and corporations—into "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991). This symbolic re-appropriation of the wall is a claim to urban citizenship; it signals that the residents are not merely passive inhabitants but active producers of their city's meaning. The mural thus reconfigures public space as a democratic agora where the subaltern can engage in a visual dialogue with the state and the broader public.

4. *Community Agency and Participation*

At the core of these findings is the importance of collective creation processes. Most murals analyzed were not the work of a single "auteur" but the result of workshops, community assemblies, and collaborative labor. This process-oriented approach fosters a sense of shared ownership and social cohesion. By deciding together which symbols and stories should be represented, the community performs an act of "cognitive justice," validating their own knowledge systems and historical perspectives over top-down institutional narratives.

This empowerment through visibility has profound psychological and political effects. For a community that has lived in the shadows of conflict, seeing their history celebrated at a monumental scale provides a sense of "symbolic justice." Visibility acts as a protective shield; as one activist noted, "what is painted cannot be easily disappeared." This agency transforms the neighborhood from a site of past victimhood into a site of contemporary political power. By reclaiming the narrative, the community moves from being the *subjects* of violence to the *protagonists* of their own history, utilizing the visual power of the mural to demand a more just and inclusive future.

G. Discussion

1. *Urban Art Beyond Aesthetics*

The findings of this study necessitate a theoretical shift that moves urban art beyond the traditional confines of art history and formal aesthetics, reframing murals as rigorous political and spatial practices. In post-conflict Latin American cities, a mural is not merely

an image on a wall; it is a "spatial speech act" that asserts presence in an environment often defined by absence, state-led erasure, and institutional silence. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues in *The Production of Space*, the construction of the urban environment is an exercise of power, and by intervening in the physical fabric of the city, muralists engage in a "counter-production" of space. This practice disrupts the "conceived space" of urban planners—who often seek to sanitize the city's history for tourism or international investment—and replaces it with a "lived space" that pulsates with the memory of struggle.

Reframing urban art within justice and memory frameworks allows us to see these works as non-judicial forms of truth-telling that operate where the law often fails. While formal transitional justice mechanisms, such as Truth Commissions, operate within legalistic and often state-centric boundaries, murals operate within the "affective" and "symbolic" realms. They provide what Nancy Fraser (1990) calls "subaltern counter-publics" a venue to articulate identities and interests that are ignored or suppressed in the dominant public sphere. By visualizing the "hidden transcripts" of the conflict (Scott, 1990), murals ensure that the "Right to Truth" is not just a legal abstraction but a visible, material reality that inhabits the streets where the community resides, forcing a constant confrontation with the past.

Moreover, the mural acts as a "territorial anchor" for narratives that are otherwise fluid or ephemeral. In a city where populations are frequently displaced, the physical permanence (or even the persistent repainting) of a mural provides a sense of continuity. This spatialization of memory challenges the "temporal distancing" often employed by post-conflict governments, which frame violence as a closed chapter of the past. Instead, murals suggest a "present past," where the demands for justice remain active and unresolved. The wall becomes a site of "agonistic pluralism," where the consensus of the state is challenged by the dissenting voices of the marginalized, maintaining the political vitality of the urban commons.

The aesthetic choices in these murals—ranging from indigenous symbolism to stark realism—are themselves political strategies. By utilizing local iconographies, communities reclaim their cultural heritage from "nationalizing" projects that often flatten diversity. This "semiotic resistance" is crucial in Latin America, where the visual landscape has been historically dominated by colonial or Eurocentric imagery. Through the mural, the subaltern not only tells a different story but uses a different visual language to do so, challenging the epistemic foundations of urban representation. This ensures that the "aesthetic" is never divorced from the "ethic," as every brushstroke is a claim to a specific historical truth.

Furthermore, the scale of the mural—often monumental—serves to "monumentalize the marginalized." In traditional urbanism, monuments are reserved for "great men" and state triumphs; grassroots muralism subverts this by elevating the face of the disappeared or the struggle of the peasant to the same architectural height. This inversion of the commemorative hierarchy is a radical act of spatial justice. It demands that the city acknowledge the weight of those it has traditionally stepped over. The mural, therefore, functions as a "counter-monument," which, unlike the static stone of the state, remains open to intervention, dialogue, and even defacement, reflecting the ongoing and un-finalized nature of memory.

Finally, the discussion must address the "performative" nature of muralism. The act of painting in public is a performance of citizenship that temporarily reclaims the street from the control of the police or the flow of capital. This performance creates a "temporary autonomous zone" where social relations are briefly reconfigured around the act of collective creation. Even after the paint dries, the memory of that performance lingers on the wall, infusing the space with a sense of communal agency. In this sense, the mural is not just a product but a trace of a political act, proving that the city's inhabitants possess the power to alter their environment and, by extension, their political destiny.

2. *Memory, Healing, and Urban Space*

The study highlights the role of art as a profound medium of collective healing in the aftermath of systematic violence. In neighborhoods like Medellín's Comuna 13 or Bogotá's Ciudad Bolívar, the act of painting is often a communal ritual that allows survivors to externalize internal trauma that is otherwise unspeakable. This aligns with Judith Butler's (2004) concept of "public grievability"—the idea that for a life to be considered significant, its loss must be publicly acknowledged and mourned. Murals transform private, silenced grief into a shared public narrative, fostering a sense of solidarity that is essential for social reconstruction. This "place-based ethics of care" (Till, 2012) suggests that healing in post-conflict cities is not just a psychological process but a spatial one, requiring the physical transformation of "wounded" sites.

By converting "sites of terror" into "sites of memory," murals perform a symbolic exorcism of the urban landscape. A wall that was once a site of a massacre or a "front line" between warring factions is reclaimed through color and narrative, altering the affective atmosphere of the street. This transformation is vital for the "psychological right to the city," as it allows residents to navigate their

neighborhoods without being constantly overwhelmed by the ghosts of the past. Instead of a landscape of fear, the community creates a landscape of resilience. This "therapeutic urbanism" demonstrates that the built environment can be a tool for recovery, provided that the recovery is led by the victims themselves rather than by top-down psychological interventions.

However, this process is fraught with tensions between trauma, representation, and commodification. As murals become iconic symbols of "transformation," they are often co-opted by "urban branding" strategies to showcase a city's "resilience" to the international community. This creates a paradox: the very art that denounces state neglect is used by the state to promote a narrative of successful governance. Söderström et al. (2014) warn that this "corporate storytelling" can strip murals of their political potency, turning sites of profound trauma into sanitized, "Instagrammable" backdrops for "dark tourism." The risk is that the "spectacle" of the mural replaces the "substance" of the justice claim.

The commodification of urban art also introduces the threat of "memory gentrification." When street art tours become a staple of a neighborhood's economy, the pressure to produce "palatable" or "beautiful" art can stifle the raw, political denunciation that originally gave the murals their meaning. This tension forces artists to choose between visibility (through state/commercial support) and autonomy. In Medellín, the commercialization of *Comuna* 13 has led to debates within the community about whether the murals still serve as tools for memory or have become mere scenery for a global audience. This highlights the "fragility of counter-memory" in a neoliberal urban order that is expert at absorbing and neutralizing dissent.

Furthermore, the representation of trauma itself poses ethical challenges. There is a fine line between "honoring" a victim and "exploiting" their image. If murals are created without deep community consultation, they can become "imposed memories" that re-traumatize the residents. The findings suggest that the most "healing" murals are those that involve a process of "co-creation," where the survivors have agency over how their stories are told. This emphasizes that "healing" is not found in the final image, but in the social relations and the "sovereignty over representation" that the process of muralism facilitates.

The intersection of memory and space reminds us that the city is a "witness." When we treat urban space as a medium for healing, we acknowledge that the environment holds the "vibrations" of past events. Murals act as a "skin" that protects these memories from being washed away by the tides of urban renewal. They ensure that the "urban

palimpsest" remains thick and legible, preventing the city from becoming a "non-place" (Augé, 1995) devoid of historical depth. Healing, in this context, is the ability to live with the past in the present, using the city's walls to bridge the gap between the "no longer" of the conflict and the "not yet" of true justice.

3. *Implications for the Right to the City*

The persistence of political muralism has profound implications for the Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1968), specifically regarding the expansion of symbolic rights and spatial belonging. Traditionally, the Right to the City has been interpreted through material lenses—focusing on housing, transport, and basic services. This study argues for an expansion of this concept to include the "Right to Symbolic Representation." For marginalized communities, belonging to the city is not just about physical presence; it is about seeing one's history, trauma, and identity reflected in the urban landscape. As Don Mitchell (2003) notes, the struggle for the city is a struggle for the "right to inhabit," which includes the right to define the meaning and memory of that habitat.

Murals function as claims to urban citizenship for those who are often categorized as "disposable" or "informal" by the neoliberal state. In a city like Bogotá, where "social cleansing" and displacement are recurring threats, the act of painting a monumental history on a permanent wall is a radical assertion of "right to stay." It is a visual challenge to the "transience" imposed upon the urban poor. By anchoring the narratives of the disappeared to the urban center, murals force a "re-negotiation of the social contract." They remind the state and the broader public that the city belongs to those who have built it, suffered in it, and continue to demand that its walls speak the truths that formal institutions are not yet ready to hear.

This symbolic claim is also a demand for "distributive justice" regarding the city's visual capital. Who has the right to determine the "face" of the city? By reclaiming the walls, marginalized groups challenge the monopoly of corporations and the state over the urban semiotic environment. This "democratization of the image" is essential for a just city. It ensures that the public sphere is not just a place for "neutral" transit, but a site of "active citizenship" where different social groups can "write" themselves into the city's future. The mural thus becomes a tool for "spatializing democracy," allowing the subaltern to occupy the city both physically and symbolically.

Furthermore, the "Right to the City" in post-conflict contexts must encompass a "Right to the Future" that is not predicated on the erasure of the past. Many "smart city" or "modernization" projects in

Latin America promote a "clean slate" urbanism that views the traces of conflict as barriers to development. Muralism counters this by insisting that a "just future" can only be built upon an "acknowledged past." This creates a "frictional urbanism" where the high-tech aspirations of the city are constantly moderated by the "low-tech" but high-meaning presence of the murals. This tension is productive; it prevents the city from becoming a "citadel" that excludes its own history and its most vulnerable inhabitants.

Moreover, the collective nature of muralism reinforces the "Right to Participation." In many of the cases analyzed, the mural was the only venue where residents felt they had a real say in the "planning" of their neighborhood. While formal "*participatory budgeting*" or "*community consultations*" are often performative or bureaucratic, the mural allows for a "*direct democracy of the street*." This participation builds "*territorial sovereignty*," where the community gains the confidence to demand other rights—such as land titles or better sanitation—based on the collective power they realized while reclaiming the wall.

Therefore, murals serve as the "moral conscience" of the city. They prevent the "revanchist city" (Smith, 1996) from fully succeeding in its project of gentrification and social control. By maintaining a visual presence of the marginalized, murals ensure that the "urban social contract" remains under constant scrutiny. They prove that as long as there is a wall, there is a possibility for resistance, and as long as there is resistance, the "Right to the City" remains an active, breathing struggle rather than a dead legal concept. The murals of post-conflict Latin America are, in the end, the blueprints for a city that is not just "smart," but wise enough to remember its own name.

H. Policy and Practice Implications

1. *Supporting Community-Led Art Practices*

To ensure that urban murals remain effective tools for social transformation, municipal policies must pivot from top-down "beautification" projects to frameworks that actively support community-led art practices. The primary challenge for policymakers is avoiding the co-optation and depoliticization of urban art. When local governments treat murals as mere tools for urban branding or tourism, they often sanitize the political message to make it more "marketable." To prevent this, funding and support mechanisms should be decoupled from aesthetic oversight. Instead of commissioning murals that fit a pre-determined "resilience" narrative, cities should provide resources for local collectives to define their own themes, ensuring that the art remains a genuine reflection of neighborhood grievances and aspirations.

Furthermore, protecting artistic autonomy is essential for maintaining the mural as a site of political resistance. In post-conflict settings, the state is often a perpetrator or a silent observer of past violence; therefore, it cannot be the sole arbiter of what constitutes "appropriate" public art. Practice implications include the creation of "autonomous zones" or "free walls" where the community has the legal right to paint without municipal permits, provided the content adheres to human rights standards. By granting communities sovereignty over their own visual environment, cultural policy can foster a pluralistic public sphere where dissent is seen as a sign of democratic health rather than "visual disorder" or vandalism.

2. *Urban Planning and Memory*

Urban planning must transcend its traditional focus on functional efficiency and land-use optimization to integrate memory-sensitive planning. This involves acknowledging that the city's physical infrastructure—its plazas, bridges, and walls—carries emotional and historical weight. Planners should conduct "memory audits" before embarking on urban renewal projects to identify sites of conflict-related significance. By incorporating these findings into master plans, cities can prevent the accidental or intentional erasure of history through gentrification. For instance, a wall containing a historically significant mural should be designated as a "living heritage site," protecting it from demolition and ensuring that new developments do not obstruct its visibility or accessibility.

Equally important is the recognition of informal memorial practices within formal planning frameworks. In Latin American post-conflict cities, memory is often "bottom-up," manifesting in shrines, graffiti, and community murals rather than state-sanctioned monuments. Planners must move away from "modernizing" logic that views these informal interventions as "informality" to be cleared. Instead, these practices should be recognized as legitimate forms of urban heritage. By legitimizing these sites, planners allow for "frictional urbanism"—a city where the high-tech and the historical co-exist—ensuring that the urban fabric remains a legible record of the community's survival and resistance.

3. *Justice-Oriented Cultural Policy*

Cultural policy in post-conflict societies should not be siloed but rather explicitly linked to transitional justice goals. This requires a paradigm shift where art is seen as a form of "symbolic reparation" as defined by international human rights frameworks. Justice-oriented cultural policy should prioritize funding for victims' collectives and

human rights organizations to lead mural projects. These projects can serve as visual "Truth Commissions," allowing for a localized and ongoing process of truth-telling that complements formal legal proceedings. When cultural policy is aligned with justice, the mural ceases to be a decorative addition and becomes a central instrument in the pursuit of "non-repetition" and social reconciliation.

To implement this, municipal cultural secretariats should collaborate with national peace and justice agencies to create "Memory Corridors." These are physical routes through the city that link various sites of resistance and remembrance through a series of community-designed murals. Such policies ensure that the state provides the structural "scaffolding" (permits, lighting, preservation) while the community provides the "narrative." By fostering this synergy, cities can ensure that their cultural landscapes are not just "creative" in an economic sense, but "just" in a social sense. This approach ultimately institutionalizes the "Right to Memory," making it a foundational pillar of the post-conflict social contract.

I. Conclusion

1. *Summary of Key Findings*

The core findings of this research establish that in the wake of systematic violence and institutional silence, urban murals function as indispensable tools of resistance, memory, and justice. These interventions do not merely illustrate historical events; they act as "visual testimonies" that challenge the state's monopoly over the past. By naming perpetrators and monumentalizing victims, murals provide a form of symbolic reparation that often precedes or exceeds formal judicial outcomes. This "grassroots commemorative practice" ensures that the lived realities of the marginalized are not discarded in the name of national reconciliation or neoliberal urban branding.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that public art reconfigures urban space as a political arena, shifting it from a site of transit and consumption to a site of active citizenship. Through the occupation of the "visual commons," muralists exercise the "Right to the City" in its most radical, symbolic form. These interventions disrupt the polished aesthetics of the "smart" or "modernized" city, reintroducing the "messiness" of political struggle. Ultimately, the mural serves as a spatial safeguard; it anchors collective memory to specific urban coordinates, preventing the "territorial erasure" that often follows conflict and gentrification.

2. Contributions to Scholarship

This article makes a significant theoretical contribution by bridging the analytical silos of urban studies, memory studies, and visual ethnography. While urban studies has historically focused on material infrastructure and memory studies on psychological processes, this research introduces the concept of "territorialized memory"—the process by which the built environment becomes a primary medium for historical truth-telling. By utilizing visual ethnography, the study provides a rigorous methodology for "reading" the city as a political text, offering a replicable framework for scholars investigating the semiotics of urban resistance.

Moreover, the research advances understandings of cultural resistance in post-conflict cities, particularly within the Global South. It moves beyond the view of street art as subcultural expression or "vandalism," instead theorizing it as a sophisticated form of "non-judicial transitional justice." By documenting how visual activism creates "counter-publics," this study enriches the discourse on spatial justice, arguing that a city's democratic health is reflected in its residents' ability to "write" their own history onto its walls. It highlights that in the absence of institutional transparency, the urban surface becomes the most reliable archive of the subaltern.

3. Future Research Directions

To expand upon these findings, future scholarship should engage in comparative analysis across regions, specifically looking at post-conflict urbanism in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Such comparisons would reveal whether the "militant muralism" of Latin America is a regional idiosyncrasy or a universal tactic of the urban poor in transitional societies. Additionally, there is a profound need for longitudinal studies of mural life cycles. Tracking the "life" of a mural—from its collective creation through its weathering, defacement, or municipal erasure—would provide deeper insights into the temporal fragility of counter-memory and the "politics of the whitewash."

Finally, the digital mediation of urban memory represents a critical new frontier. As physical murals are increasingly photographed, geo-tagged, and shared on social media, they gain a "digital afterlife" that transcends their physical destruction. Future research should investigate how "digital street art" alters the spatiality of resistance: can a mural continue to reconfigure urban space even after it has been painted over? Understanding the intersection of the physical wall and the digital archive will be essential for theorizing memory and justice in the 21st-century metropole.

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