

PRESERVATION OF STREET ART IN PARIS. AN EXAMPLE FOR RIGA?

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Abstract

In many cities graffiti and street art is considered as vandalism and is often connected with crime. However, in some cities majority of the population does not agree with such a statement. They see street art and graffiti as decoration of the city. They think the artists deserve a safe space for expressing themselves. It is already a little step towards preserving the street art movement, as, of course, not all the citizens will share this opinion, since place of street art is still a very arguable question in many cities around the world. More and more organisations, associations and projects of different types are being created to promote and protect the urban art. Promotion of street art can be expressed in different ways, for example, panel discussions and workshops, exhibitions and festivals. Several street art and graffiti related spaces are being opened in Paris. Museums, warehouses, walls, schools – every kind of space could be used as a platform for the artists. This is also a nice way to show to the city council how important this culture is to the citizens of Paris. At the same time Riga cannot be yet proud of a thriving street art and graffiti culture. But what if Riga actually took Paris as an example? Could similar organisations in Latvia improve the society's attitude towards urban cultures? Could the safe platform for street art be a solution for its popularization in Riga? The aim of this paper is to introduce organisations which promote and protect street art and graffiti in Paris and to evaluate if street art positions in Paris could actually be an example for Riga. The conclusion is that the bigger amount of such organisations is able to actually change the attitude of society towards the urban art and Riga can surely learn a lot from Paris – creating spaces for graffiti and street artists can not only make their positions better, but also it can have a positive impact for the city's social life and attract a specific type of tourists to the capital.

Keywords: *street art, preservation, graffiti, history.*

Nowadays graffiti and street art are one of the components of the urban space. Tags, murals, stickers, stencils and mosaic are placed on the buildings and lamp posts and catch attention of passers-by. Population of any city where graffiti and street art are popular is usually divided into two parts. One part is against this movement and they try to control it by any means whereas the second part actually supports the artists and try to find legal ways for their expression. While street art is thriving in most of European capitals, why is the situation different in Riga? Riga definitely has some fine graffiti and street artists who are known not only in the country but also abroad. But while in cities like Lisbon, Copenhagen, Wrocław and Paris, street art is protected and promoted by their citizens, majority of Riga's inhabitants seem to be against it. Young generation in Riga often complains about the lack of place where urban artists could express themselves. Would that be one of the reasons why Riga is left behind the street art destinations in Europe? Could it be one of the possible solutions to improve the ongoing situation in one of the Baltic capitals?

Protection of graffiti and street art could be achieved in several ways. It could become protected as a cultural property. The government could guarantee and protect certain rights of the artists. It could protect the artwork – if the artwork were located in a space legally intended for artwork, then no one would have the right to remove it. However, if such an artwork is located on a privately-owned wall not intended for artwork, then no surprise it would be removed from there as quickly as possible. While much of action is awaited from the legislator or at least the city council, it is the citizens who should start putting effort to create their own way of legally encouraging the urban art.

Street art in Paris – past and present

To show how the preservation of urban art can make the city famous for incredible graffiti and street art artworks, let us look at one of the cities where graffiti and street art are impossible not to notice. Paris. The capital of France is famous for street artists like Le Monsieur Chat, Invader, Miss Tic, Blek le Rat, Zevs, to name a few. These street artists have transformed the streets of Paris into their playground. Their works could be found in each district of the capital and even in the suburbs surrounding it. One does not have to go far from the centre to look for it. A famous Salvador Dali mural made by Jef Aérosol, one of the French street art pioneers, is located just next to the contemporary art museum Centre Pompidou. Some of the works date back to the 1990s. Invader started placing his mosaic figures (most commonly known as “Space Invaders”) in the early 2000s. Nowadays there are more than 1000 of them only in Paris. The artist does not stop only by working in his homeland. He shares his art across Europe and even on other continents.

The beginning of French graffiti and street art movement started at the same time as the student protests in May 1968. During the manifestations some of the students started writing on the walls their messages to the government [Ponosov 2013]. Today such an expression of someone's opinion sent to the officials is common between the street artists. The beginning of the movement was also connected with the destruction of Les Halles in 1971, a huge green market located in the heart of the capital of France. When the building collapsed, the ruins did not disappear quickly. Gérard Zlotykamien was one of the people who actually went inside the demolished site and started painting silhouettes of reclining human figures. It was artist's metaphoric depiction of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, which took place in 1945. The 1980s are described as the peak of graffiti and street art in Paris. As these styles became more and more popular, more and more people started experimenting with them. During that period works by such artists as Gérard Zlotykamien, Ernest Pignon-Ernest, Blek Le Rat, Jef Aérosol appeared on the streets of Paris [Kostov 2014]. Miss Tic is also one of the pioneers. She started her street artist's career in 1985 and her artworks always depict ordinary women and incisive sentences. Miss Tic is provocative but at the same time she tries to bring the philosophical layer of herself through her stencils [Miss Tic]. Most of her works have been made in Paris and especially in its Northern part.

Preservation of street art in Paris

It is important for the citizens of Paris who appreciate street art and graffiti to protect the artworks by famous street art and graffiti artists. Even though street art is not legal in Paris, there are still some platforms where the artists can work safely. Lately more and more organisations are being formed in order to support the graffiti and street art movement and to provide space for their expression. The list of such organisations is quite long, but the most famous ones are Le Mur, Art 42, L'Aérosol and Lab 14.

Le Mur, translated as The Wall, was established in 2003. It is engaged in promoting contemporary art, especially urban art. Le Mur is located in the 11th district of Paris. This spot is rather popular in Paris, full of bars, clubs and cafes. The organisation owns a wall of 3×8m, which is situated at the crossroads of Rue St Maur and Rue Oberkampf. The association invites street artists to make mural art on it. All kind of techniques are welcomed, and artists can use any material they want. The association works as an open-air museum – the wall is free of visit and it is located outdoors in the street. In 14 years around 244 murals have been created [Le Mur]. There are four books published by Le Mur. The books contain the murals and some descriptions provided by the artists [Le Mur]. The association have found their own particular way of demonstrating the greatness of urban culture. Not only it provides

artists with a safe space for their art, but it also adds a certain charm to the area. However, due to the fact that the created artworks are removed from the wall later to provide space for a new drawing, this place also demonstrates how fragile the street art can be and how difficult it can be to preserve the artworks.

Another association which is devoted to the preservation of urban cultures is Art 42. The project was created to allow visitors to discover urban art that does not have a permanent exhibition in France. It was created by Nicolas Laugero Lasserre, an art collector whose passion is street art and graffiti. He created a street art museum ART 42 in school 42, located in the Northern part of Paris and providing the first learning programme in computer engineering, which was free of charge. At the museum there are more than 150 artworks by such artists as Clet, Banksy, Obey, Shepard Fairey, Madame and even frescos of MonkeyBird [Art 42]. The artworks (posters, drawings, paintings, sculptures) are located in the museum on its walls or in the hallways, which adds a specific charm to the school itself. Since the museum is located in the school, one can actually observe the students working at their computers.

At the beginning of August 2017, another spot for graffiti and street art admirers was opened in Paris. L'Aérosol, translated as The Aerosol, is named as the paradise of urban culture in France. L'Aérosol occupies the former warehouse belonging to SNCF (French Railway Company) and the surrounding territory. This place offers different activities to its visitors such as graffiti workshops, DJ performances, roller-skating evenings, food and drinks, and museum. In the museum works by Obey, Lush Dagger, Crash, Banksy, Blek le Rat and other worldwide known artists are exhibited. The place has become very famous and it attracts a lot of families, too. Visitors have an opportunity to purchase some air spray paint and actually make their own graffiti in L'Aérosol. On the walls outside the warehouse many Parisian street artists have made their murals [L'Aérosol]. L'Aérosol has been doing a lot to preserve the urban art. It proves how urban and cultural goes together. It shows that urban attracts not only teenagers, but also adults and families. L'Aérosol is a place where society becomes one whole and where social status is of no importance.

One more organisation which has a strong influence on street art and graffiti promotion and protection in Paris is Lab 14. Lab 14 has curated different urban art projects. One of the latest projects took place from December 2016 until February 2017 in an old French post-office in Paris. It occupied two floors of the building and it also had two exhibition rooms. Murals, installations, sculptures, mosaics, tags, stickers are just some of the artworks exhibited at Lab 14's latest project. Unfortunately, the project only lasted for a few months [Lab 14]. Like at L'Aérosol, different people came to visit Lab 14. It was a family-friendly project and people of different ages visited it during the three months.

Unfortunately, the city council of Paris has not provided any legal space to encourage and promote the street art and graffiti artworks. Paris is full of tags, stickers, mosaics, murals, stencils and objects. And many of those artworks have not been demolished thanks to the citizens who respect urban art and urban artists. Some of the inhabitants of the capital of France have formed various groups which later became organisations and associations which are promoting and protecting urban art. Not only they provide a safe space to create art, but they also encourage people to see the bright side of it. If the number of such collectives grows, probably it will have some more significant influence on the legislative processes, and it will make them take a bigger step to preservation of the rich street culture of Paris. At the same time the current development of urban culture in Paris is something Riga could really look up to. If some of the empty spaces or alternative bars were available as a canvas for street artists, the city could change its face not only in eyes of its tourists but also of its citizens.

Promoting street art in Riga

Even though there are few street artists in Riga who use public space for their artworks, the movement is still present in the city. In 2014, Riga was one of the two European Capitals of Culture and many art events took place during that year. One of them was aimed at popularizing street art in Latvia. Street art festival "Blank Canvas: art-ground, play-ground, crime-ground" took place from 13 to 17 May. Its purpose was to raise discussions about place of street art in the city. Curator of the festival Edvards Zvirgzdiņš said that one of the goals was to prove that a dialogue between street artists and society can exist, that it is possible to create qualitative street artworks, especially, if there is a place to do it legally. In curator's opinion, the festival could help with cooperation between the street artists and municipal institutions that are responsible for Riga's outlook [Alksnis 2014]. As a result, various street artworks have been created around the city, not only in the centre. Festival's Facebook page provides addresses to see the artworks. Most of the artworks are still present, they have not been painted over, thus it could be concluded that such events not only attract international artists to Riga like M-City, ROA, but also serve as an example of how to integrate street art into the city in a legal way and ensure that the artworks will be preserved.

Nowadays most of the street artworks in Riga are to be found in Andrejsala, city's port premises. Before this part of the city became a place of fancy restaurants, it used to be a meeting place of various subcultures, which would tag the walls and draw on them. Latvian Museum of Naive Art was situated there as well. Its walls are full of drawings by Latvian street artists. At the beginning of the 2010s Dirty Deal Cafe was also located in Andrejsala. Owners of this place would often organise

various culture events which attracted youngsters to the area. It was possible for the visitors to create their street art or graffiti as the Dirty Deal Cafe strongly supported the street art movement and underground subculture. Unfortunately, none of these places exist today. All what is left is just a few street art pieces and countless tags.

One of the places in Riga that is legal for creating street art and graffiti, is the creative quarter of the Latvian Artists' Union "Kombināts Māksla". This place is situated next to Brasa bridge, which could be called the end of the "far" centre. This area is used for art days or art symposiums. From time to time local and international street artists are invited there and given free spots on the walls for creating their art pieces. "Kombināts Māksla" is not the most famous area in Riga, but it is a to-go place for those who like underground culture. Many of the artworks are located on the walls of garage and workshops, the place looks a bit destroyed but it does have a very strong street art and graffiti atmosphere.

Possible solutions for preserving street art in Riga

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, street art can be most likely preserved if it has been made at a legal place. This could not only help the artists when they are looking for a wall to work on, it could also become an attraction for the citizens, as well as tourists. If such legal areas were spread around the city, the tourists would have a better chance to see the urban art of the city, not limiting themselves to walks in the Old Town and Art Nouveau area. Even though some street art enthusiasts could then argue that creating street art in legal spaces makes the movement lose its charm, it is still a good idea at least at the beginning to prove that this movement was not all about violating the rules. It could also help to slightly improve situation in unsafe areas, as attracting people to such places in the city, does have an impact on better safety. If Riga followed example of Paris, and, for instance, allowed citizens to use premises of old warehouses, it could not only create an environment for artists, where they could apply their imagination and use the empty walls for creation of street art and graffiti, it could also bring the community together and make them change their opinion regarding the street art movement. One of the ways how to follow the Paris example could be through Free Riga movement, as the people behind Free Riga organisation do allow citizens to get empty old buildings for their use [Free Riga]. Free Riga could be a great starting point for graffiti and street art enthusiasts. Another way of preserving street art in Riga would be organising street art and graffiti festivals, similar to "Blank Canvas: art-ground, play-ground, crime-ground". Even with the participation only of local artists, great results could be achieved and once again it would prove that the underground culture has some beautiful consequences – works of art on the walls of the city. However, it might be difficult for a group of street art supporters to create a big festival, there are many

street art enthusiasts working in cultural centres like “Kaņepes Kultūras centrs”, where street art has been amply presented on the walls of its building. Therefore, there is a possibility of discussing a chance of making such an event on their premises. Another option could be addressing Riga City Council. Even though, as seen in Paris example, it does not necessarily guarantee that street art will be completely legalised, there is still an opportunity to find a compromise with the representatives of the City Council which could improve the position of street art in Riga and not only.

To conclude, it is important to understand that street art and graffiti can not only bring a visual pleasure, but it can also make a social impact and open a new path for tourists in the city, as seen from Paris example. It can bring Riga on the map for street art tourists, as well as it can provide the citizens a better understanding of urban cultures, which nowadays is strongly supported by the young generations. Having protected areas for making street art could also make Riga a destination for street artists that live in neighbouring countries like Lithuania, Estonia, Russia and Belarus. It could also make the knowledge-sharing process possible which could be a great addition to the cultural exchange between the above-mentioned countries. Seeing the amount of street art that people from Latvia are posting in social media like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter (for this hashtag #streetartlatvia or #streetartriga should be entered into the search tab when opening any of the above-mentioned application), I have myself created an Instagram account by the name “makslaulic” with a purpose of documenting the street art that I see not only in Latvia, but also while travelling. Digitalisation of art could also become one way of how to keep it safe and available in the future. All these efforts combined can lead the citizens of Riga towards a great experience of underground culture present in the capital and more attention from the tourists which could benefit the city and the country in many ways, but most importantly, it could also make our local street artists famous and make Riga known as a city that supports street culture.

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