

# THE ROLE OF STREET ART AND GRAFFITI IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING. THE ANALYSIS OF THE CITY OF RIGA

*Mg.art. Oskars Goba*

*Alumnus, Latvian Academy of Culture*

## **Abstract**

Creative city discourses have named the arts as a driver of urban change and regeneration. Although governments continue to criminalize graffiti, they have taken part in the creative city discourses [McAuliffe 2012]. Opportunities for graffiti writers to have their graffiti recognised as something valuable have arisen. Meanwhile street art has been recognised as a legitimate urban artistic practice [McAuliffe 2013]. Nevertheless, the strategic urban development planning of the city of Riga does not include street art and graffiti. Meanwhile Lisbon municipality pursues these practices strategically. It has established street art and graffiti as fields of expertise of The Department of Culture Heritage. It is responsible for the institutionalization of street art and graffiti in Lisbon. However, Riga city representatives lack the knowledge and understanding about the positive contribution of street art and graffiti. Initiatives to create legal places for graffiti in Riga have been unsuccessful because the views of the municipality members and the graffiti writers in regard to these territories and their use have differed greatly. Besides, the development planning in the city of Riga is a relatively new practice; therefore, planning in specific fields has not been developed yet. This article will examine how graffiti and street art supports urban development and how these practices are implemented in the cities of Riga and Lisbon.

**Keywords:** *street art, graffiti, public art, urban design, development planning.*

## **Introduction**

Gradually throughout the years perception of street art has changed considerably. Initially considered as vandalism, today street art is also seen as a creative expression. Municipalities and inhabitants of various cities have realized that the creative process they have been fighting against nowadays has the ability to represent and shape their

cities from a new perspective. In addition, in some parts of the world street art and graffiti festivals and various events and contests are organized, thus the street art and graffiti culture has been embraced in the local culture of various cities.

Similarly, in the last few decades the importance of cultural development strategies as a means for economic development has increased. The mindset of cultural expression and its impact on the city has changed as cultural expression is thought less as a socioeconomic practice, but is regarded instead as the motor of the urban economy [Loukaitou-Sideris, Soureli 2016]. Whereas the city walls serve as canvas on which graffiti and street art can provide decorations to the daily life of the city with varieties of colour, meaning and style. Thereby urban artists shape public space into cultural space otherwise non-existent within the urban environment [Gleaton 2012].

Creative city discourses have named the arts as a driver of urban change and regeneration. Furthermore, public art plays an important role in the production of urban space by contributing to the production of innovative and creative environment where creativity can flourish. In regard to urban regeneration, public art contributes to the reputation of places as creative, with transgressive public art, such as graffiti and street art operating as signs that attract rather than reject investors [McAuliffe 2012]. Although state and local governments continue to criminalize graffiti, they have taken part in the creative city discourses. The promise of the creative economy has led to investment in cultural planning mechanisms and public art policies [McAuliffe 2012]. This article will examine how public art phenomena – graffiti and street art support urban development and how these practices are implemented in different cities, especially in the cities of Riga and Lisbon.

### **City branding and its role in urban design**

City image can be one of the key indicators of how a city municipality wants its visitors to experience their city. Furthermore, it can often serve as a means to create a shared vision amongst constituents, which is important in the city image building [Grodach 2009]. Creating a city image requires leadership from city's political leaders. However, they need partnership with the city's power elite: businesses and its citizens. City branding requires effort from local municipality members. They have to create a specifically designed sense of place and promote it. Jon Lang, architecture and urban development and design professor, has distinguished that there are three approaches to city image making: first, changing activities that take place in the city; second, changing its physical attributes; third, changing the image of a city that is presented in the media. Urban design, architecture and landscape architecture are involved in the first two. The third requires word-of-mouth and advertising. The urban design process involves creating a vision of what the city and its spaces have

to be like, and then developing it. The municipality has to encourage the developers to invest in this vision the way it is desired and not in any other way or in a different city. A part of the city image provides opportunities for a better quality of residential, work and recreational life for the city's inhabitants. The focus in urban design is on the public space – the streets, squares and parks – and how they are formed by the buildings that surround them [Banerjee, Loukaitou-Sideris 2011].

City municipalities everywhere are tasked with a difficult challenge, which inevitably comes with the city municipality office. The workforce of city municipality is responsible for the combination of a number of perceptions of the city in a unified message – the city's image. This image encompasses urban, symbolic and economic value of the city, which is further transmitted to city inhabitants and visitors, entrepreneurs and investors, as well as the rival cities, in order to reach objectives set by the city municipality. Urban planning policy, which includes urban design, architecture and landscape architecture, should take into account city's marketing strategies, in order to develop effective general urban planning politics for the city. Urban design requires ability to use knowledge from different fields, in order to shape and adapt the city environment in sustainable ways that contribute to the social, economic, political, spiritual, artistic and technologic demands of the city inhabitants [Zebracki 2013].

### **Public art, street art and graffiti – the intermediaries of urban design**

Spatial organization of the public arena in the city is of great importance in logistic and strategic city planning. Its importance in the city planning lies in the fact that it is not only the product of confining buildings, technical facilities and plantings, but that it also determines their spatial arrangement. Public space is the central component in urban design, even though it was not recognized for a long time during the 20<sup>th</sup> century [Frick 2006]. Urban design is concerned with the physical form of cities, buildings and the space between them. British urbanism expert Rob Cowan defines urban design as “everything to do with planning that is not covered by the Town and Country Planning Acts” [Greed, Roberts 1998]. From this point of view illegal graffiti and street art pieces are also important parts of urban design, since illegal street art and graffiti expressions are often made without authorisation and are not covered in planning acts.

Urban design is the method by which people create a built environment that fulfils their aspirations and represents their values. It allows people to use their acquired knowledge to control and adapt the environment in sustainable ways for social, economic, political and spiritual benefits. However, the built city is an element of people's spiritual and physical culture and, thus is one of the highest expressions of their cultural values [Moughtin, Cuesta, Sarrirs, Signoretta 1999].

Thereby urban design is an interdisciplinary process, which requires the input not only from the fields of design, architecture and landscape architecture, but also the engagement of the society and also collaboration with several other fields, in order to deliberately create and administer urban environment and solve its problems. As such it inevitably is also connected with public art, street art and graffiti expressions.

Public art refers to either permanent or temporary artworks, including art practices which are openly accessible, outside conventional settings such as museums and galleries [Zebracki 2013]. Public art is usually authorized and sometimes financed by the government or an entity administering the respective space or area. However, graffiti and street art can be viewed as *guerrilla* public art [Krause Knight, Senie 2016].

Graffiti includes pieces created in various techniques often without permission with various means: spray paint in aerosol cans, stickers, stencils, photocopies, mosaics, objects and drawings [Sedliņa 2007]. “Although some writers work legally by commissioning their work, the majority start and sustain illegal careers. Illegality is a natural starting point for a new writer. Graffiti is a craft and like any other craft it comes with its own range of techniques, skills and procedures. Suffice it to say graffiti has a steep learning curve which graffiti writers follow and complete often through practical illegal experience” [Macdonald 2001]. Meanwhile street art is a graffiti sub-genre. While graffiti writers are a part of a closed community, street art is open to anyone who is willing to interact and discuss openly through the means of street art. Furthermore, street art is drawn with a pictorial focus rather than textual, and it is rebellious but not purposefully destructive because its original intent is to beautify the urban environment [DeNotto 2014]. The most recognized contemporary street artists are Banksy from the United Kingdom and Shepard Fairey from the USA.

Nowadays street art is recognized as having aesthetic and commercial value in the global marketplace. However, the jurisprudence of street art has begun to raise a lot more questions than when it was seen as an activity with no commercial value. “Public bodies have become increasingly accepting of the distinctions between graffiti and street art but concern about the effect on the urban environment has continued” [Mulcahy, Flessas 2016]. In creative city discourses opportunities for graffiti writers to have their graffiti recognised as something valuable – a manifestation of innovation and creative energy – have arisen. However, street art has increasingly gained validation as a valuable medium. In several cities, which are pursuing creative cities strategies, street art has been recognised as a legitimate urban artistic practice, while graffiti often remains as a transgressive, illegal practice [McAuliffe 2013].

### **Strategic approaches to the expressions of street art and graffiti**

Cities often have different strategies and approaches to the use of street art and graffiti in their urban environment. In 2008 the Tate Modern Museum in London opened the world's first major public museum display of graffiti and street art. Six international artists were invited to decorate its facade with enormous murals. Meanwhile the United Kingdom court had a huge trial in which eight graffiti members were sued for an estimated one million pounds in graffiti-related damages across the country. Adam Cooper, cultural strategy officer for the Mayor of London in the interview with "The Guardian" (British daily newspaper) in 2015 revealed that graffiti was a positive force in its own right. He suggested that the Mayor's office of London could provide more spaces for graffiti [Cathcart-Keays 2015].

Embracing the cultural value that graffiti and street art brings forward can boost city's tourism industry. For example, the festival "See No Evil" in 2012 brought 50,000 people to the city of Bristol; in Stavanger, Norway, the city walls are transformed into a canvas annually for the highly successful festival "NuArt". Even without these events painted walls in several cities are used in tours to entertain tourists. Meanwhile Buenos Aires has been using graffiti as a tool of political communication, resistance and activism for years. Although there are laws prohibiting graffiti, the city has gained worldwide recognition for its urban art [Cathcart-Keays 2015].

Geography doctor at Lodz University Justyna Mokras-Grabowska in her paper "Art-Tourism Space in Lodz: The Example of The Urban Forms Gallery" states that contemporary tourism offers a continuously expanding spectrum of new assets functioning as objects of tourism interest. This helps when cities are seeking new ways of economically activating their city after the collapse of industry. These cities are often regarded as places not worth any tourism interest and often require the creation of new tourism attractions. She feels that activities connected with street art and contemporary art fit into this post-industrial sphere and constitute an alternative to mainstream culture [Mokras-Grabowska 2014]. Thus, Lodz has become recognized as a city of murals. Urban Forms Foundation, which began in 2009 offers Urban Forms Gallery, an exhibition of street art set in an urban space.

In the meantime, in recent years Lisbon City Council has promoted a new policy towards graffiti and street art. This was done in reaction to the dynamics and the growing visibility of these phenomena on the walls of the Lisbon city. The graffiti and street art policy include mechanisms for fighting and controlling these practices in some neighbourhoods, particularly in Bairro Alto neighbourhood, which is the main cultural quarter in the city. Lisbon City Council developed strategies and projects in order to facilitate support and institutionalize street art and graffiti in specifically dedicated spaces. Thus, an urban art gallery was established in the city of Lisbon [Costa, Lopes 2014].

There are also several street art and graffiti examples in the city of Riga. The most noticeable one is the large-scale mural called “Saule Pērkonš Daugava”. This mural incorporates Latvian national symbols and values; thereby it is very meaningful locally. The mural was made during the street art festival “Blank Canvas”, which was one of the events during “Riga-2014”, when Riga city was the European capital of culture in 2014. However, Riga city planning documents do not include public art in its strategies, thereby also street art and graffiti. Therefore, the author wanted to examine the experience of Lisbon city and their urban art policy, in order to offer proposals for further development of Riga municipality’s work in regard to street art and graffiti.

In order to examine the use of public art phenomena – graffiti and street art in urban development plans in the city of Riga and Lisbon in 2017 author conducted 10 in-depth interviews with urban planning experts, street artists, municipality tourism planning representatives and other street art and graffiti researchers. From the data acquired through these interviews the author carried out a comparative analysis of Riga and Lisbon city practices regarding street art and graffiti.

### **Comparison of usage of street art and graffiti in Riga and Lisbon**

As stated previously the strategic urban development planning of the city of Riga does not encompass street art and graffiti. Meanwhile Lisbon municipality, on the contrary, pursues these practices strategically. Lisbon municipality has established street art and graffiti as fields of expertise and its Department of Culture Heritage is responsible for the strategic activities regarding these practices. The Department of Culture Heritage is responsible for the Urban Gallery project (GAU), which was established by Lisbon municipality with a goal to institutionalize street art and graffiti practices and, in doing so, to diminish vandalism and visually enrich the urban environment of Lisbon city. Furthermore, legal street art and graffiti projects in Lisbon city are carried out also by several other associations, entrepreneurs, galleries and museums. Since 2008 the GAU project has hosted more than 400 artistic initiatives from which only 80 have been supported from the GAU project funding given by the Lisbon municipality [Lisbon Urban Gallery project description, received electronically from The Department of Culture Heritage in Lisbon municipality].

Riga city representatives lack the knowledge and understanding of the positive contribution of street art and graffiti, as well as the benefits from these practices. This could be changed through a mediated discussion between the representatives from all parties involved in the process. An NGO or an institution from the culture sector should mediate this discussion, in order to facilitate advantageous progress through dialogue. Up till now Riga municipality initiatives to create legal places for graffiti have been unsuccessful because the views of the municipality members

and the graffiti writers about these territories and their use have differed greatly. It is important that the city municipality understands that the territories given for legal graffiti do not completely eradicate the illegal practice; however, it is one of the means of fighting it. The festival “Blank Canvas” that took place in Riga in 2014, as well as several private initiatives have contributed to the development of legal street art and graffiti practice, thus a way to coordinate legal street art and graffiti initiatives have been vaguely established. The Property Department of Riga municipality carried out a programme through which the education facilities in the city of Riga got their facades renovated. After renovation process these facades acquired visually enriched graphic designs. This can be evaluated as a positive tendency which indicates that Riga municipality can acquire allotted funds and produce high-quality murals in doing so. Historical monumental painting practice in the city of Riga also confirms that wall paintings are a part of the historic identity of Riga.

Development planning in the city of Riga is a relatively new practice which was established in the nineties, therefore planning in specific fields has not been developed yet. So strategic street art and graffiti planning should be established by creating thematic planning for street art and graffiti in the city of Riga. Here an important error that the Lisbon city experience analysis highlighted should be taken into consideration. The Lisbon Urban Gallery project was created to organize only the legal street art and graffiti activities. However, the budget for control of illegal activities is allocated in a different department. This has created difficult situations and problems in communication with graffiti subculture representatives.

Street art and graffiti also serve as evidence of creativity in the urban environment and indicates that a city has a creative environment. Therefore, when Riga city development planning, where creativity is one of the development courses, is carried out, it should be taken into account by cultivating the strategic use of street art and graffiti as means of development of creative infrastructure. Riga municipality should start using street art and graffiti in communication about tourism objects available in the city of Riga, as well as in development planning, especially by establishing regulation for street art and graffiti that enables creative image building.

It is not common to use street art and graffiti in the culture tourism in the city of Riga. It can be argued that there are not enough pieces, in order to establish an offer for tourists regarding street art and graffiti objects in the city of Riga. The image of the city of Riga that is created by the materials managed and made by “Live Riga” – the office of the Riga tourism development. Its materials do not include information about street art and graffiti in Riga. Experts interviewed in the city of Riga by the author revealed that the image of Riga consists of traditional tourism objects – churches, old town, museums, art nouveau etc. The city image made by “Live Riga” consists of the view that the people working in the institution

have about the city of Riga. It could be possible that the representatives of “Live Riga” do not have border vision of the things available and happening in the city of Riga. Meanwhile, Lisbon city offers several street art and graffiti tours. These tours are made both by the Lisbon municipality and private service providers. These tours bring in revenue not only to the organizers, but also contribute to the financial development of the territories where street art and graffiti pieces show up. This confirms the hypothesis that street art and graffiti pieces in the urban environment provide economic benefit to the city.

The experience of Lisbon city shows that street art and graffiti can be seen as cultural expressions, but only if the works possess high visual quality. However, the link between these practices and art is judged critically because street art and graffiti expressions mainly are not approved by the traditional art institutions – museums and galleries. The tendency to create street art and graffiti pieces in a global language that allows them to be admired and recognized by everyone often does not allow the artists to visually express the local culture and incorporate the locals living in the area where the pieces are created. Nevertheless, the experience of the artists is that the involvement of the local people in the process in Riga and Lisbon cities has left a positive impression on the understanding of the process that is taking place in the area where these inhabitants live. Therefore, Riga municipality and the organizers of street art and graffiti initiatives should establish communication between the residents of the area where the pieces are made and the artists making them because this complementary action promotes understanding about street art and graffiti in the society.

Street art and graffiti visually enriches the public space which can change people’s perception of certain locations, even territories. Lisbon city experience shows that neat and organized public space with street art and graffiti pieces can advance the intensity in which the public space is used by the public. However, it depends not only on the actions of the municipality, but also the residents and institutions of the area ought to take responsibility. The increasing growth of street art in public space can cause problems as well. There should be locations and neighbourhoods in the city without street art and graffiti. However, the city of Riga should begin by creating places for legal street art and graffiti. These locations should be created in different neighbourhoods and they should be properly locally adjusted – accessible and visible. The city of Riga should naturally begin by opening one neighbourhood for street art and graffiti initiatives.

Street art and graffiti as public art expressions have the potential to advance urban design development in the city. These expressions could enable different neighbourhoods of Riga city to create their unique visual identity. In many municipalities in the cities of Europe street art and graffiti issues, for example, initiative



development and street art or graffiti festival organization is the responsibility of the members of the municipality. Riga municipality should appoint a structural unit which would administer legal street art and graffiti initiatives. Experts interviewed in the authors' research asserted that the contents of legal street art and graffiti pieces should not be controlled. Yet the prevailing experience in the city of Riga has been diverse – legal graffiti wall initiatives pursued by Riga municipality were aborted because the municipality was dissatisfied with the contents in these areas, however murals made in the festival “Blank Canvas” in 2014 were not coordinated, so as not to influence and change artistic vision of the artists. The control mechanisms suggested for commissioned street art and graffiti are diverse: a competent jury might evaluate the ideas (not sketches) given by the contestants; a precise and measurable assignment could be given and everyone willing to take part could apply with their visual ideas of solutions to the assignment; a contest where a jury evaluates sketches of the idea based upon thematic guidelines; a regulation could be made that creates a certain frame for the pieces that could be made legally etc. It is important to begin with a discussion between the parties influenced by the issue, then decide if the thematic planning of street art and graffiti activities in the planning documents of Riga municipality should be made and afterwards come to an agreement on control mechanisms for the legal street art and graffiti activities.

### **Conclusions**

This article examines how street art and graffiti are and can be used strategically in order to benefit city's urban development. The research carried out by the author gives a perception of the role of street art and graffiti in urban development and its planning, as well as the experience of the city of Riga with these practices in comparison to Lisbon. During the research the author wanted to create suggestions for strategic use of street art and graffiti in the city of Riga.

By analysing theoretical framework, the author concludes that the importance of graffiti and street art in the city's urban environment has increased significantly over the years. Nowadays, especially due to the increasing popularity of creative city discourse, street art and graffiti contribute to promoting creativity and innovation. By analysing theoretical literature, it can be concluded that street art and graffiti can serve as marketing tools for creating and promoting a creative city brand – promoting its image and reputation both at the city level and beyond its borders. Various authors point out that graffiti and street art play a key role in urban regeneration processes. Various studies offer examples where graffiti and street art practices have been used in different cities, creating both privately and municipally funded large-format street art pieces or offering legal places where graffiti skills can be developed legally. While institutional support and local authorities' efforts to adapt the illegal

nature of graffiti and street art have contributed to their commercialization, they have also contributed to their development and increased their importance in urban development and planning.

In his research, the author concludes that the members of Riga city municipality lack understanding of how to use street art and graffiti practices strategically, contrary to the way these practices are applied in Lisbon, where strategic use of street art and graffiti is carried out not only by the municipality, but also by working together with different associations, entrepreneurs, galleries and museums. Riga city municipality members currently lack the knowledge of the benefits from street art and graffiti practices and their positive contribution to the Riga city brand. This could be resolved by having meaningful and mediated discussions between the parties involved – municipality members, city inhabitants, graffiti and street art writers, cultural institutions etc. Previous initiatives to create legal places for graffiti in Riga have been unsuccessful due to disagreement that lacked the basis of discussion prior to creating the legal spaces for graffiti. However, various private initiatives have contributed positively to the development of legal street art and graffiti practices and have created basis for potential development of these practices in the city of Riga. The municipality should reconsider the use of street art and graffiti in both communication about the city of Riga and future development planning, in order to promote both the creative image of the city and the establishment of street art and graffiti regulation in Riga.

### *Sources*

- Banerjee, Tridib, Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia (2011). *Companion to Urban Design*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Cathcart-Keays, Athlyn (2015). Is urban graffiti a force for good or evil? *The Guardian*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jan/07/urban-graffiti-force-good-evil> (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Costa, Pedro, Lopes, Ricardo (2014). Is Street Art Institutionalizable? Challenges to an alternative urban policy in Lisbon. Available: doi: [10.7749/dinamiacet-iul.wp.2014.08](https://doi.org/10.7749/dinamiacet-iul.wp.2014.08) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- DeNotto, Michael (2014). Street art and graffiti. *College & Research Libraries News*. Vol. 75, Issue 4, pp. 208–211. Available: <http://crln.acrl.org/content/75/4/208.full> (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Frick, Dieter (2006). Public Spaces as an Element of Local Identity: On the Notion of Quality in Urban Design. *Ekistics*. Vol. 73, Issue 436/441, pp. 84–92. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43623726> (viewed 04.01.2018.)

- Gleaton, Kristina Marie (2012). Power to the People: Street Art as Agency for Change. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Available: <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/133428> (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Greed, Clara, Roberts, Marion (1998). *Introducing Urban Design: Interventions and Responses*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Grodach, Carl (2009). Urban Branding: An Analysis of City Homepage Imagery. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. Vol. 26, Issue 3, pp. 181–197. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030868> (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Krause Knight, Cher, Senie F. Harriet (2016). *A Companion to Public Art*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lisbon Urban Gallery project description, received electronically from The Department of Culture Heritage in Lisbon municipality. Received electronically on 07.04.2017. from Ines Macahdo.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia, Soureli, Konstantina (2012). Cultural Tourism as an Economic Development Strategy for Ethnic Neighborhoods. *Economic Development Quarterly*. Vol. 26, Issue 1, pp. 50–72. Available: doi: [10.1177/0891242411422902](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891242411422902) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Macdonald, Nancy (2001). *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McAuliffe, Cameron (2012). Graffiti or Street Art? Negotiating the Moral Geographies of the Creative City. *Journal of Urban Affairs*. Vol. 34, Issue 2, pp. 189–206. Available: doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9906-2012.00610.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9906-2012.00610.x) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- McAuliffe, Cameron (2013). Legal Walls and Professional Paths: The Mobilities of Graffiti Writers in Sydney. *Urban Studies*. Vol. 50, Issue 3, pp. 518–537. Available: doi: [10.1177/0042098012468894](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012468894) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Mokras-Brabowska, Justyna (2014). Art-Tourism Space in Łódź: The Example of the Urban Forms Gallery. *Journal Turyzm / Tourism*. Vol. 24, Issue 2, pp. 23–30. Available: doi: [10.2478/tour-2014-0013](https://doi.org/10.2478/tour-2014-0013) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Moughtin, Cliff, Cuesta, Rafael, Sarrirs, Christine, Signoretta, Paola (1999). *Urban Design: Method and Techniques*. Oxford: Architectural Press.
- Mulcahy, Linda, Flessas, Tatiana (2016). Limiting Law: Art in the Street and Street in the Art. Law, Culture and the Humanities. pp. 1–23. Available: doi: [10.1177/1743872115625951](https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872115625951) (viewed 04.01.2018.)
- Sedliņa, Anita (2007). *Rīgas ielu māksla*. Rīga: Raktuve.
- Zebracki, Martin (2013). Beyond Public Artopia: Public Art as Perceived by its Publics. *GeoJournal*. Vol. 78, Issue 2, pp. 303–317. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42006321> (viewed 04.01.2018.)