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PAINTING THE CITY: THE ROLE OF STREET ART AND GRAFFITI IN BUCHAREST'S URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Abstract. This paper examines how street art and graffiti influence urban regeneration, community participation and cultural identity in Bucharest. Using a qualitative approach that combines field observations, photographic documentation, and literature review, it analyzes the transformation of public spaces across both central and peripheral neighborhoods. The study emphasizes the interaction between urban art, education, and tourism, as well as its growing role in the hospitality sector. Findings show that street art acts as both a catalyst for aesthetic revitalization and a potential agent of gentrification. Mural projects enhance cultural vibrancy and neighborhood image but may displace long-term residents when not supported by inclusive policies. The article also highlights the ephemeral character of urban art and its gradual institutionalization through festivals and cultural programs. Ultimately, it argues for a balanced urban policy that recognizes the cultural and social value of street art while ensuring equity, authorship, and preservation within Bucharest's evolving creative landscape.

Key words: street art, graffiti, urban regeneration, Bucharest, ephemerality

Introduction

In recent decades, urban art, including street art and graffiti, has evolved significantly from a marginalized and often controversial form of expression into a widely recognized tool for urban regeneration and cultural development. In the context of Bucharest, a metropolis marked by diversity and architectural contrasts, urban art has emerged as a crucial mechanism

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for aesthetic reconfiguration and the revitalization of public spaces. It has played a key role in transforming negative perceptions of certain neighborhoods and in strengthening community identity and cohesion.

Street art generally refers to any form of artistic expression displayed in public spaces, particularly on exterior walls, buildings, streets, and other urban structures. Unlike traditional graffiti, which often consists of quick tags or text-based markings, street art is typically more elaborate, planned, and increasingly incorporated into community projects or official cultural events. It can take many forms, including murals, stencils, posters, urban installations or collages, and its purposes range from aesthetic or social commentary to overtly political or identity-driven statements (Mcauliffe, 2012).

Recent scholarship has emphasized the complex role of street art in processes of urban transformation and place-making. Studies show that mural projects may simultaneously attract investment and foster cultural participation, while also triggering debates about gentrification and urban equity (Cercleux, 2021; Colomb, 2012). Other research highlights the ephemeral character of urban art and its tension between heritage-making and transience (Cercleux, 2022; Young, 2014). Beyond institutional perspectives, public perceptions play a key role in legitimizing or contesting urban art, as explored by Zebracki (2013). In the case of Bucharest, recent work has further demonstrated how collaborations between artists, businesses, and communities can rebrand neighborhoods and stimulate socio-economic activities (Pavel & Cercleux, 2024; Cercleux, 2023).

Through public art interventions, areas like central Bucharest (Arthur Verona Street and Grădina Icoanei), Calea Griviței but also some marginalized neighbourhoods like Ferentari have experienced notable transformations, reflecting positive shifts in the city's socio-cultural and economic dynamics. Recent studies highlight how urban art can enhance neighborhood attractiveness, boost cultural tourism, and consolidate local identity, essential aspects in the face of modern urban challenges (Cercleux, 2025).

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on case study analysis, field observations, and literature review. Primary data was collected through direct observation of street art installations in various Bucharest neighborhoods during 2024–2025. Key sites include Arthur Verona Street, Calea Griviței, Berzei Street, and the Ferentari district. The most of the photographs were taken by the author of this study. Secondary sources include academic journals, municipal reports, and curated online platforms such as Un-hidden Romania and Street Art Cities.

Results

Arthur Verona Street, central to the Street Delivery Festival, exemplifies street art's ability to reinvigorate urban areas. The festival, hosting local and international artists such as IRL0, Pisica Pătrată, and Saddo, has turned the street into an iconic artistic landmark. These murals, rich in ecological and socio-political themes, attract significant pedestrian traffic and international attention, fundamentally altering both public interaction and commercial vibrancy in the area.

Prominent murals in Bucharest's city center, including "United Colors of Bucharest" and reinterpretations of Romanian historical icons, reflect urban art's transformative influence on cultural dynamics. These works, documented in scholarly literature, have catalyzed entrepreneurial ventures such as cafes, galleries, and boutique shops, revitalizing previously underutilized spaces and enhancing urban liveliness and cultural vibrancy (Cercleux, 2021).

Street art in Bucharest is not limited to public walls, it has also entered the realm of education, influencing schools both as a form of artistic expression and a tool for social engagement. This article explores the relationship between street art and educational institutions in Bucharest, analyzing its role in student creativity, urban aesthetics, and community projects.

Schools have also played a catalytic role in promoting urban art within the Ferentari neighborhood. Here, particularly in the areas surrounding

Trompetului and Bachus streets, several collaborative projects have been undertaken between educational institutions, urban artists, and local authorities. A notable example is Special Secondary School No. 9 (Figure 1), whose project significantly benefited both students and the local community, addressing issues of marginalization and inclusivity. Similarly, George Călinescu Middle School exemplifies good practice in this neighborhood, having commissioned a large-scale mural on the school's exterior wall, portraying the well-known Romanian writer after whom the school is named.



a)



b)

Figure 1. Mural paintings at Special Secondary School Number 9, Trompetului Street, Bucharest by Serebe (a) and Alexa Lincu (b) (2021)
Source: Un-hidden Romania

The urban art project implemented at Special Secondary School Number 9 is quite complex, featuring three large-scale murals. The work is part of the Un-hidden Romania project and involves a multidisciplinary artistic intervention created for children, school staff, and the public space. It was co-produced by Alexa Lincu (mural painting) and Xandru (audio composition). The school is located at 34 Trompetului Street, and the artwork is visible from Sulfinei Street. By scanning the QR code incorporated into the artwork, urban explorers can listen to the audio composition created for this piece by the artist Xandru.

The area with the highest density of urban art in Bucharest is the perimeter defined by Arthur Verona Street, General Eremia Grigorescu Street, Grădina Icoanei, and Piața Romană. Here, some of the most well-known murals in the Romanian capital can be found, many of which particularly attract art-loving tourists. This area, along with others in central Bucharest, has seen a growth in urban art projects. While some works have disappeared since the beginning of this phenomenon, the number of artworks that can be categorized as urban art has increased significantly since 2015-2016. These have also contributed to beautifying the streetscape, as many of the buildings had fallen into disrepair in recent years. At the same time, the graffiti phenomenon has also expanded considerably, often having a more negative impact by defacing building façades (Cercleux, 2022).

One of the defining characteristics of street art is its inherent ephemerality. Unlike gallery-bound works, murals and urban interventions exist in a dynamic, often temporary dialogue with their environment (Cercleux, 2022). This transient nature is exemplified by the mural "Make a Point" on Eremia Grigorescu Street, created in 2015 by the Sweet Damage Crew (Figure 2). The artwork, depicting a woman drawing her own universe, became one of Bucharest's most iconic and photographed murals. However, in 2024, the wall underwent a transformation, giving rise to a new creation: "Homage to Brâncuși" a collaboration between artist Felicia Simion and the original crew.

These cycles of renewal are not unique to this location. Throughout Bucharest, street art is continually being overwritten, refreshed, or removed, either by the passage of time, urban development or new commissions. While this reinforces the medium's vibrancy and relevance, it also poses challenges for preservation and historical documentation. As such, the

ephemerality of urban art serves as both a symbol of creative freedom and a reminder of its fragility in the urban landscape.



a)



b)

Figure 2. The mural on 12th Gen. Eremia Grigorescu Street, Bucharest:

a) "Make a Point" by Sweet Damage Crew (2015-2024);

b) "Homage to Brâncuși" by Felicia Simion and the original crew (since 2024)

Source: author's photos, 2023 (a) and 2025(b).

It is important to observe how urban art has contributed to the revitalization of old neighborhoods in the city center, while in other areas of the city, such as the Ferentari district, it has played a role in casting a positive light on this marginalized periphery, which has often been seen as unfavorable for investors. Additionally, the connection between urban art and the development of various businesses in the HoReCa sector is quite evident, particularly in Bucharest's historic neighborhoods (Cerdeux, 2021).

Integrating street art into both the interior and exterior design of businesses allows them to craft visually engaging spaces that appeal to both tourists and locals. These artworks help establish a distinct identity and set the venue apart from competitors. Moreover, by supporting local artists, such businesses actively contribute to the cultural vitality of Bucharest, reinforcing its image as a dynamic artistic center. A relevant example is Heavy Yard, a restaurant situated in the historic area of Bucharest on Vasile Lascăr Street. In June 2024, a group of young local street artists created a large-scale mural covering the façade of an old house, adding both character and cultural value to the location (Pavel, 2024).

In areas like Lipscani, Arthur Verona, or the Uranus neighborhood, the interplay between new cafés and street art has supported urban regeneration. Murals often serve as landmarks, encouraging foot traffic and increasing the attractiveness of surrounding real estate, both commercial and residential. This reflects a wider European trend seen in cities like Berlin or Lisbon, where art-led regeneration supports both hospitality and tourism economies (Colomb, 2012). Moreover, some HoReCa venues capitalize on street art by turning murals into brand assets – printing them on menus, merchandise, or packaging. This not only reinforces the venue's identity but also offers artists wider exposure.

In recent years, the street art phenomenon has also become an important branch of urban tourism in Romania's capital. This is evidenced by the growing number of cultural events, guided tours, and festivals dedicated to urban art. Perhaps the most prominent example is the Outline StreetArt Festival, launched in 2019 by the E.D.I.T Association and Sweet Damage Crew, with the aim of systematically creating a series of mural paintings, initially in Bucharest's Sector 2, with plans to expand to other areas of the city. The festival became well known in 2022, when 20 artists completed 15 large murals on gray infrastructure, transforming gangways, heating stations, parking garages, and apartment buildings. At that time, the mayor Radu Mihailescu praised the festival's impact, stating that the project beautified the sector, turning dark gangways into vibrant spaces (Asociația E.D.I.T., 2022).

The October 2022 edition, with its theme "ARTOGETHER", encouraged local feedback (Figure 3). Festival coordinator Loredana Bărdăș emphasized how residents shifted from skepticism to gratitude as murky buildings gained color. Guided mural tours continued into November, underscoring the event's role in educational outreach and creative placemaking (Asociația E.D.I.T., 2022).



Figure 3. The event poster for “ARTOGETHER,” organized by the Outline StreetArt Festival, featuring a selection of the murals included in the project, October 2022

Source: Outline StreetArt Festival website

The 2023-2024 edition of the festival featured murals honoring Romanian icons like Olympic champion David Popovici and brought new life to major boulevards. There have been also other cultural events and festivals promoting street art in Bucharest, such as Street Delivery Festival and Bucharest Street Art Festival (former Stickerz Festival).

These festivals collectively have the objective to amplify community cohesion through local engagement and public dialogue and drive socio-economic activation in neglected neighborhoods, aligning with broader European urban art strategies (Colomb, 2012). They also serve as platforms that balance ephemerality and preservation, capturing the temporal essence of street art while encouraging archiving and curation. These street art festivals are very important because they create collaborative spaces where artists, architects, urban planners, educators, and local entrepreneurs intersect, sparking creative synergies that can influence city policy, spatial design, and community-driven development (Cercleux, 2021). This interdisciplinary dynamic transforms festivals from mere cultural showcases into experimental urban laboratories.

Street art has become a subtle yet powerful tool in the regeneration of urban spaces in Bucharest, often serving as a visual and cultural signal of neighborhood revitalization. In areas such as Lipscani, Arthur Verona,

and Calea Moșilor, the presence of large-scale murals and curated street art has helped reposition formerly neglected or decaying spaces as vibrant, walkable, and aesthetically attractive zones. These artistic interventions not only improve the visual landscape but also attract foot traffic, events, and creative entrepreneurship. For instance, Cercleux (2021) note that urban art projects can “produce new urban identities” and generate economic activity by boosting local businesses, particularly in the HoReCa sector.

However, the cultural regeneration enabled by street art is not without its complexities. In some cases, these interventions contribute to processes of gentrification, where the artistic revitalization of a space precedes rising property values, displacement of long-term residents, and a shift in neighborhood demographics. An illustrative case is the transformation of parts of Carol Park's vicinity and the Uranus neighborhood, where murals and cultural hubs attracted new investments and boutique developments. While these changes often signal progress, they also risk eroding the social fabric of communities if not coupled with inclusive urban policies (Colomb, 2012). In this way, street art both beautifies and complicates the urban narrative, functioning as both a catalyst for positive change and a potential driver of exclusion if left unregulated.

Graffiti plays a controversial yet deeply embedded role in the urban landscape of Bucharest. Found along railway corridors, abandoned buildings, and underpasses, graffiti often expresses dissent, identity, and territoriality. While many residents perceive it as visual pollution, especially when it covers historical façades or public signage, others see it as a genuine expression of subcultural creativity. In some areas, such as Gara de Nord or beneath the Basarab Bridge, graffiti has become part of the city's informal heritage, reflecting youth culture and underground movements in a way that contrasts sharply with more institutionalized art forms.

In Bucharest, graffiti is particularly visible along train lines, abandoned buildings, and underpasses. While some of these expressions are dismissed as vandalism, others have gained recognition as part of the city's visual identity. Collectives such as Nom Crew have created pieces that blur the line between graffiti and street art, combining technical skill with social commentary. Nonetheless, widespread tagging has also drawn criticism from residents and city officials, especially when it affects heritage buildings or newly renovated façades.

The main distinction between graffiti and street art lies in intent, execution, and public reception. Street art is often planned, aesthetically driven, and socially engaged, frequently realized with permission or within festivals like Outline or Street Delivery. Graffiti, by contrast, emphasizes immediacy, anonymity, and resistance to institutional norms. In Bucharest, these differences influence how each form is regulated, preserved, or erased, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward public space, authorship, and legitimacy (Zebracki, 2013; Young, 2014). As both continue to shape the urban fabric, a nuanced understanding is essential for policymakers and cultural stakeholders navigating the fine line between control and creative freedom.



*Figure 4. Graffiti on an abandoned building in central Bucharest
(Nicolae Golescu Street)*

Source: author's photo, 2025

A representative example of the complex visual and cultural impact of graffiti can be seen at 8th Nicolae Golescu Street, in the central area of Bucharest. The building's façade, covered in bold, unauthorized lettering and layered tags, is further marked by boarded-up windows, signs of urban decline that coexist with vibrant visual interventions. As shown in Figure 4, this juxtaposition reflects the duality often associated with graffiti: while it may be perceived as vandalism or a signal of neglect, it also serves as a raw form of territorial marking and artistic presence. Such locations raise important questions about the line between cultural

expression and urban degradation, particularly in zones undergoing transition or awaiting redevelopment (Young, 2014). The image underscores how graffiti can simultaneously act as both a visual symptom of abandonment and a form of resistance within contested urban space.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that urban art – especially in the form of street art – plays a multifaceted role in the regeneration of Bucharest's public spaces. Through spatial beautification, community engagement, and the activation of underutilized infrastructure, street art helps redefine the urban landscape, especially in post-socialist contexts where rapid change and uneven development have produced zones of aesthetic and social tension. As highlighted by Cercleux (2021), mural interventions in areas like Arthur Verona and Eremia Grigorescu Street not only attract tourism and commercial activity but also contribute to symbolic placemaking, reinforcing local identity and cultural continuity in a city marked by historical discontinuities.

At the same time, the research reveals complex socio-economic effects tied to urban art. While murals can support the revitalization of marginalized districts such as Ferentari, especially when tied to educational and participatory project, they may also contribute to gentrification pressures when adopted for branding purposes in central neighborhoods. This dual potential, documented in both Bucharest and comparable cities across Europe (Colomb, 2012; Zebracki, 2013), calls for carefully designed policies that integrate artistic freedom with inclusive development strategies. Additionally, the coexistence of sanctioned street art and unsanctioned graffiti, as evidenced by sites like Nicolae Golescu Street, underscores ongoing tensions between creative expression and the regulation of public space (Young, 2014).

Moreover, as street art becomes institutionalized, via festivals like Street Delivery or platforms such as Street Art Bucharest, it navigates a delicate balance between spontaneity and regulation. This tension raises important questions about authorship, artistic freedom, and urban governance. While artist collectives such as Sweet Damage Crew maintain a grassroots

ethos, their increasing collaborations with local councils and cultural institutions demonstrate the evolving formalization of urban art in the public sphere.

Finally, the issue of preservation remains contentious. As discussed earlier, ephemerality is a defining trait of street art, yet this temporality challenges the continuity of collective memory and artistic legacy. Efforts to digitally archive murals, through initiatives like Un-hidden Romania's online map, are crucial for documenting these transient cultural expressions and enabling longitudinal analysis of the city's visual evolution (Save or Cancel, 2024).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that urban art in Bucharest serves as a vital tool for cultural expression, aesthetic transformation, and social activation. Street art contributes to the revitalization of public spaces, the empowerment of communities, and the promotion of the city as a dynamic artistic hub. However, it also presents challenges related to preservation, accessibility, and urban equity. To ensure that urban art continues to benefit Bucharest's diverse communities, city planners, cultural institutions, and residents must collaborate to support inclusive, community-driven projects while also navigating the delicate balance between artistic autonomy and urban governance. A nuanced and context-sensitive approach will be essential for preserving the vibrancy, accessibility, and authenticity of Bucharest's evolving urban art scene.

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