Graffiti, Street Art and Murals in the Age of the Neoliberal City: The Muralization of Capital

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Abstract
The article explores graffiti, street art, and murals in the context of the neoliberal city, highlighting the transformation of these forms in the context of growing urban commodification, touristification and gentrification. The paper shows how contemporary neoliberal urbanism has driven the concept of the creative city that, in the framework of late-capitalist inter-urban rivalry, recuperated graffiti, street art and murals. Drawing on the growing body of literature in the field of graffiti and street art studies, and combining it with urban anthropology, the analysis of ethnographic material collected in Ljubljana (Slovenia) illuminates the role of graffiti and contemporary street art in the context of the neoliberal city – both as anti-gentrification politics and pro-gentrification policies. The paper argues for a nuanced understanding of the role of graffiti, street art and murals under the neoliberal regime of urban development, emphasizing the multi-layered nature of graffiti and street art: as a form of political activism, as an object of commodification, and as an instrument for de-ideologization, or what the author calls the muralization of capital.

Keywords: graffiti, street art, creative city, gentrification, touristification, Ljubljana

1. Introduction

The article aims to explore the development of graffiti and street art culture in terms of its local historical recontextualization and contemporary decontextualization. It focuses on the differences, similarities and relationships between particular aesthetic forms that have developed along this trajectory, namely the sub-political and subcultural graffiti, contemporary street art and new muralism (cf. Schacter, 2017), where it “harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third" (Wacquant, 2012, p. 71). Drawing on the growing body of literature in the field of graffiti and street art studies, the analysis illuminates the role of graffiti and contemporary street art and muralism in the context of the neoliberal city. The research is bifocal. While attempting to show how contemporary street art and new muralism are becoming an integral aesthetic element in the production of creative cities (Schacter, 2014), it is imperative to first highlight the role of graffiti as sites of contestation of the dominant ideology and hegemonic political practices in the urban landscape. These expressions offer a direct critique of the neoliberal processes such as commodification, touristification and gentrification.

The paper is anchored in ethnographic research conducted in Ljubljana between 2017 and 2024. Although my focus was primarily centered on the atmospheric and sensory transformations of urban space, I simultaneously documented a variety of visual expressions that critiqued and resisted the dominant tendencies in the restructuring of public spaces, the burgeoning impact of the mass tourism industry, the elitization of housing, and other pertinent shifts in urban governance, policies and setting. Reading the spray-painted walls while navigating the city’s streets on foot, and capturing the ephemeral essence of its visual messages with my smartphone, was my main method for making sense of the urban metamorphoses in Ljubljana (see Holgersson, 2014), especially those linked to gentrification and touristification. Contributions from fellow graffiti researchers and aficionados, who shared their materials with me enriched this endeavor. Examples were also sourced through digital ethnography. My empirical dataset, comprises approximately 250 photographs and fieldwork diary entries relevant to the topic under study.

2. Setting the Scene: Neoliberal Urbanism

If graffiti is to be understood situationally, the context is always being a constitutive part of the deciphering its meaning (Velikonja, 2020a), it must be noted that the emergence and the rise of the graffiti culture in the United States concurred with the era known as the post-war welfarist Keynesian city. This model, characterized by public housing and middle-class suburban developments, lasted until the 1970s (Hackworth, 2006, p. 78). However, it began to be reshaped by the forces of neoliberalism, defined as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005; cf. Pinson and Morel Journel, 2016). Under this paradigm, individual creativity and innovation emerged as crucial forms of agency (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018), which evolved into a new regime of urban development and governmentality. The new model of urban planning and policy in late capitalism (Harvey, 1989) ushered in the neoliberal city, characterized by a combination of "inner city and exurban private investment, disinvestment in the inner suburbs, the relaxation of land use controls, and the reduction of public investment" (Hackworth, 2006, p. 78). In addition, urban policy shifted away from reliance on the state towards "business, real estate and developer interests, […] to facilitate the unfettered operation of 'the market". (Mayer, 2017, p. 7).

While neoliberalism encompasses an unstable, dynamic, and somewhat incoherent ensemble of intellectual currents, policy orientations and regulatory arrangements designed to strengthen market mechanisms, relations, discipline and ethos in new social spheres (Pinson and Morel Journel, 2016, p. 136), the neoliberal city refers as to a set of processes of transformation of urban spaces underpinned by neoliberal policies. Such urban spaces reflect gentrification, social inequality, and a prioritization of capital accumulation over social issues (Hackworth, 2006). Public spaces and urban atmospheres in these cities have transformed from semblant democratic places, welcoming diverse populations and activities, to hubs predominantly oriented towards commerce and consumption, as well as sites of political surveillance (Low and Smith, 2006, p. vii). Moreover, the contemporary restructuring and transformation of urban governance reflects four characteristic traits: it privileges capital investment, adopts entrepreneurial forms of governance, intensifies privatization of state assets, public infrastructures and services, and, ultimately, exacerbates social polarization (Mayer, 2017).

The shift towards a new model of the city, however, does not imply a move towards homogenization across cities. In this sense, Harvey (1990, p. 293-296) identifies a fundamental paradox within postmodernity, where the gradual annihilation of space through time (essentially, the collapse of spatial barriers for the seamless circulation of capital in the global economy) does not reduce the significance of space. On the contrary, it amplifies it. The intensified global competition between cities vying for capital both diminishes and accentuates the cultural and spatial distinctions between cities (Harvey, 2002). Harvey argues "the less important the spatial barriers, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the incentive for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital" (Harvey, 1990, p. 295-6).

Following the economic recession of 2008, cities began to parade under the banner of 'creativity'. Similar to the creative industries, the notion of creative cities was neither a scientific nor a theoretical brainchild but a political-ideological construct (after Vogrinc, 2012, p. 126) implemented to reanimate the economy in the aftermath of the global (financial) crisis. With the shift towards 'creativity', i.e. the cultural and knowledge production, as the dominant guiding principle of urban policy, the development strategies sought to address and mitigate economic and, increasingly, social challenges in cities (Poljak Istenič, 2016, p. 161). The creativity framework thus quickly turned into a new sourcebook for urban planning, positioning creativity as a key catalyst for post-crisis recovery and a tool to attract capital investment amidst interurban rivalry. In the words of one of the main architects and proponents of this ideologeme,

Cities are cauldrons of creativity. They have long been the vehicles for mobilising, concentrating, and channelling

human creative energy. They turn that energy into technical and artistic innovations, new forms of commerce and new industries, and evolving paradigms of community and civilization. (Florida, 2005, p. 1).

The politics of contemporary neoliberal urbanism, notes Mayer (2017, p. 6), is marked by "the deliberate valorization of real estate and public space, creative city policies, as well as punitive (austerity) policies." More recently, we have witnessed a rise of specialized and localized niches of "the creative city", highlighting the experimental *and* experimental dimension of urban space, thereby creating a new aestheticization of the urban landscape, or a new urban sensorium (see Goonewardena, 2005). As Sachs Olsen (2019, p. 43) notes, the penetration of natural science discourses into urban affairs has given rise to "'[l]iving labs', 'innovation hubs', 'city deals', and 'green deals' [that] have become the new lexicon of urban governance".

In this context, neoliberal urban aesthetics enshrined in labs, hubs, incubators and deals, along with their visual by-products, are increasingly leveraging street art as catalyst for enticing urban creativity buried beneath the processes of rebranding, revitalizing, regenerating, and ultimately gentrifying neighborhoods and city centers (see Lennon, 2021). As pointed out by Schacter (2014, p. 162), "the domestication, the neutralization of Street Art [...] has emerged through what is now an almost total complicity with the world-dominating gospel of the Creative City". However, the matter is more complex than it might initially appear. It is precisely because this kind of "hijacked creativity" (Gržinić, 2008, p. 3) as the "key to economic growth" (Florida, 2005, p. 5) in the production of the creative cities that provokes subversive responses. Mould (2015) suggests that the gentrifying and capitalist narrative of the creative cities yields alternative, counter-hegemonic creative practices. These forms of urban subversion, articulated also by urban subcultures including graffiti and street art, "are proliferating and becoming more 'creative' in reaction to (and between the cracks of), rather than in conjunction with, the contemporary Creative City ideology" (Mould, 2015, p. 3-4). Yet, as Pasquinelli (2008, p. 6) warns, it is precisely the symbolic labor, and not acts *per se*, feeding the perverse machinery that the real estate businesses and city councils build in alliance with the art world and (sub)cultural producers.

The following discussion will delve into how street art and murals, as distinct from graffiti, are enmeshed into the repertoire of the creative city as expressed in Ljubljana. On the one hand, one can observe the process of what I describe as the muralization of capital, namely, how street art and new muralism began to serve as commodity-oriented aestheticizing elements within the experimental-experimental modes of production and consumption in the urban space of Ljubljana (see also Abram and Bajič, 2022). On the other hand, the visual language of political graffiti among local activists (see Abram, this issue) serves as a radical media to voice "dissensus" (Rancière, 2010; 2011), offering a critical confrontation with the aesthetic, that is to say, ideological reconfiguration of the neoliberal city (cf. Leventis, 2021).

3. Overview of Ljubljana's Urban Metamorphosis

In 2014, after spending an evening in the embrace of Metelkova, an autonomous cultural zone squatted in the early 1990s, I found myself heading towards home. As soon as I left the dimly-lit exit street, my attention was drawn to a freshly painted graffiti. In bold, blood-red letters, it declared "*STOP GENTRIFICATION!*," with a circle with a piercing arrow (the international symbol of squatters). This lettering piece, emblazoned on the façade of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, heralded what would become, four years later, a grassroots political mobilization within the squatters' community, which orchestrated the first protest march against gentrification at the end of October 2018. Graffiti, as has historically been the case on the territory of Slovenia (see Konda, 2016; 2018), once again served as one of the primary media of agitprop in leftist movements.

Yet, intriguingly, the original graffiti was soon met with a rejoinder that stated, in small letters underneath, "*kva the fük je gentrifikacija*?", roughly translating to "what the fück is gentrification?" (see Figure 1). At first glance, one might interpret the author's use of colloquial language and deliberate misspellings as a mocking commentary on yet another academic abstraction. More importantly, however, the language perhaps goes beyond the purpose of pure mockery, possibly creating a sense of alienation, even distance, from the political message itself. The political

Figure 1. What the fück is gentrification? Source: Jaka Repič (23 January 2014)

graffiti that emerged in Ljubljana after 2014 represented one of the few public discourses addressing the pressing issue of gentrification, simultaneously weaving a narrative that not only questioned but also, in few wall-written words, critiqued the accessibility and relevance of such academic discourses to the wider public. But unlike the spray-painted interventions against gentrification, and other vertically oriented proclamations that brought the issue into public debate, the process of gentrification, like touristification, surfaced in the wake of a new political constellation within the city and a new direction in urban policy.

The remodeling of Ljubljana, the medium-sized capital of Slovenia with a population of around 300,000 inhabitants, can be traced back to a key historical period. This was the time when the country joined the European Union in 2004 and adopted the euro as its new currency in 2007. In the same period, the newly elected municipal council in 2006 announced an ambitious urban planning strategy aimed at transforming Ljubljana into a green, creative and sustainable city. The ensuing years were characterized by a neoliberal approach to urban development. Central to this production of abstract space was the pedestrianization of the historic center, complemented by the revitalization of post-industrial spaces. Additionally, the proliferation of commercial semi-public spaces emerged, along with the emplacement of urban spectacles and large-scale commercial megaprojects. Ljubljana soon also sought to adopt the 'creative city' model (see Abram, 2017; Bajič, 2017; Poljak Istenič, 2017), a concept aimed at attracting capital and fostering cultural industries, which further contributed to its urban metamorphosis. From the perspective of international recognition, this blueprint for the renewal of Ljubljana as 'the most beautiful city'—a neologism for gentrification over and again uttered by the mayor—appears to have been successful. The praise for the refabricated city was echoed in various travel magazines, newspapers, and guidebooks. A luxury and lifestyle travel magazine described the Slovenian capital as no less than "romantic and charming, and clean" (City of Ljubljana, 2019).

The neoliberal restructuring has significantly positioned Ljubljana on the global maps of tourism and capital investment. Both the upsurge in tourist arrivals and the escalating property prices encapsulated in statistical figures illustrate the city's growing appeal as a tourist destination and international investment opportunity. The period from 2010 to 2019 saw a 165% increase in tourist overnight stays, soaring from 841,000 in 2010 to a peak of over 2 million in 2019, the year preceding the pandemic. Furthermore, between 2013 and 2018, there was an remarkable 1881% increase in the number of officially registered, active providers on Airbnb (from

99 to 1,961), the short-term accommodation platform that has restructured local housing markets around the world. In terms of real estate, the average annual price for apartment units per square meter in Ljubljana has also risen significantly, with a rise from 1,887 EUR in 2005 to 3,880 EUR in 2023 (the highest recorded price for housing units exceeding 10,000 EUR per square meter) (Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia 2023).

Touristification and gentrification have not only resulted in a palpable loss of sense of place among residents (Abram and Bajič 2022), but have also provoked a range of street-level responses and articulations. Although the majority of the grassroots expressions I encountered took the form of graffiti, there were sporadic instances of street art—mainly stencils and paste-ups, but also murals—although these were less common and more site- and time-specific. I subsume the graffiti-written problematization of touristification and gentrification in Ljubljana into two clusters.[1] The first focuses on the writings on the walls that directly engage in the anti-gentrification and anti-touristification momentum. The second focuses on graffiti, street art and murals in autonomous zones, discussing the relationship between space, street art and neoliberal policies.

4. "*We <3 empty streets. Do you?*": Anti-gentrification and Anti-touristification Graffiti in the Heart of the City

Anti-gentrification and anti-tourism graffiti are particularly prevalent in the heart of the old town and the surrounding areas. These visual articulations, especially those inscribed before the main tourist seasons—for summer in June and for winter in December—are often confronted with systematic cleaning. They are usually subjected to waves of pressure washing or buffing before the influx of tourists. The graffiti created during the tourist season is frequently met with immediate erasure, indicative of a pursuit to maintain the aesthetic order of the ruling class.

The practice of zero tolerance towards graffiti and, to a lesser extent, street art, enforced by both the municipality and property owners, has often sparked critical responses on the walls. In the streets, I have encountered rhetorical inquiries such as "*and what's about with these white walls?!*". Other expressions, more confrontational in tone and delivery, proclaim "*you've repainted in vain*" (đabe ste farbali), "*death to the white walls!*" or question the taste of building owners who have carelessly covered up previous graffiti on the façade with patches of grey paint: "*how can these scrawls be more beautiful than what was here before?*". One writer even opted for a more creative and sardonic tone, as in "*stop vandalism*", written with a black marker. In other graffiti, "*beautiful facades remain beautifully silent!*" (lepe fasade lepo molčijo!).

The anti-gentrification graffiti engages with the public sphere in a direct and provocative manner, starting from the questions such as "*do you even know what gentrification means? look it up*". "*Gentrification 100/h*" flags the swift transformation of both the built environment and the social fabric into a palpable phenomenon. Similarly, the subversion of the official slogan 'I feel Slovenia' by the Slovenian Tourist Board, the national agency for the promotion of tourism, manifests itself in a sticker "*I feel concrete*". Some graffiti even pose pertinent questions about temporary urban voids, such as "*and what will grow here?*" written across from a gaping construction pit.

During the research period, much of the graffiti voiced loud protest against urban regeneration projects that favored tree-felling over preservation. In the words of a wall-writing in English-Slovene, there is "*no such thing as zelena [green] Ljubljana*". The sudden disappearance of trees sparked moral imagination and political activism, with graffiti on office-storage containers and nearby facades, expressing dismay and frustration at these urban development practices, such as "*have you completely lost your mind? You're cutting down perfectly healthy trees!! Why??*", "*tree killers*", "*this is vandalism*", "*tree murderers*", and

1 - All verbatim graffiti is transcribed and translated, and presented in italics. Along with translations of empirical material captured on my smartphone while walking, I also provide some original transcriptions of graffiti that can allow for an understanding of the poetics and linguistic ingenuity of certain graffiti, including wordplays, rhyme, and cultural references. To enhance the readability and accessibility of the text, all graffiti transcriptions have been standardized by replacing the frequent use of capital letters with small caps.

Figure 2. Graffitiscape of Ljubljana. Source: Sandi Abram (23 July 2018)

"*crooks / thieves / capitalists*". In one case, a new construction site bore a plea: "*please, don't cut down healthy grown trees in the city! #human*". The subsequent disappearance of the single tree led to an added expression of anger: "*you had to cut it down, didn't you? Fuck you idiots*" (ste ga mogli posegati, ne? Mamu vam jebem butasto). Similarly, in another part of the city, an abandoned building near a former green space, now a gravel parking lot, became the canvas for painting a prediction of where such approaches lead to: "*No more trees / no birds / no bees / no air / no brains / no future*". The examples of political interventions on the walls show "the evocative power of trees, which, […] stand not only for life, but also for social justice and public space" (Rival, 1998, p. 16). Trees thus are deeply rooted in human politics; the fate of trees and disempowered human communities is seen as one and the same (ibid.).

Other forms of street-level commentary critically addressed the escalating housing crisis. As seen in a series of stickers with messages such as "*my home / is not your profit!*" and "*housing for living / not for profit!*" accompanied by an illustration of a raised fist clutching a pillow. A sticker that takes up the city's official slogan for promoting public order in an allegorical way poses the question "*human, do you find this OK?*" next to the graphic of a square meter and a price tag of 4000 euros. The graffiti "*I'm letting a toilet for 2,500 €*" draws attention to the issue of landlords and homeowners renting out substandard and dilapidated accommodations at exorbitant prices, and places the housing situation within the broader issue of "housing financialization" (Rolnik,

2013; 2019).[2] The spray-painted responses to the housing crisis, which were particularly pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic that exacerbated residential situation (see Velikonja, 2020b), include assertive statements such as "*give me an apartment and I'll quarantine myself*" (dejte mi flet, pa se dam v karanteno), "*housing for all!*", "*against rents / for a decent life*" and "*it's easy to isolate yourself in a mansion*" (lahko se je samoizolirati v dvorcu), "*open the hotels/hostels for the homeless*" and "*house the homeless in empty flats*". These political graffiti deal with the social field of housing and the changing role of cities; they refer to Lefebvre's "right to the city" with phrases such as "*the city to the people!*" (mesto ljudem), "*this is my city*" (to je moje mesto), and "*the city is not a company*" (mesto ni firma).

Others refer to historical revolutionary movements. For instance, the stenciled "*our time is about to come*" (naš čas prihaja), which was seen in front of the two newly erected five-star hotels in Ljubljana, harkens back to the guerrilla partisan resistance in occupied Ljubljana during World War Two. This phrase, originally broadcast by Radio Kričač, a clandestine radio station of the Liberation Front (Reisp, 1975), is recontextualized by contemporary writers-activists. It paints the contemporary urban condition as a new form of occupation – that of capital. In short, they take the position "*against the dictatorship of capital*". Such public discourse, usually harbored at night, challenges official narratives about urban development and, to quote Lefebvre (1991, p. 151) again, exposes the high degree of segregation in a homogenous space.

The various articulations, from stickers, stencils to graffiti, not only pinpoint and illuminate the commodification, privatization, and financialization of urban space ("*everything is for sale in the name of profit*", as the walls claim) but also make a plea for social justice in the field of housing. A verbose mobilization campaign, articulated through graffiti and stencils, revolved around a housing activist struggle centered on the premises of the Barag Seminary (*Baragovo semenišče*). Since 1945, the southern part of this cultural heritage building has functioned as a student dormitory, known as Akademski kolegij (Šenica, 2019). For the students living in the Akademski kolegij, the situation changed after denationalization, which culminated in the City of Ljubljana regaining ownership of the building. The transition meant a precarious situation for the students, as they were threatened with eviction due to the planned renovation work, which is due to be completed by October 2024. In response to the city administration, the students expressed their right to housing with several dozen spray-painted and stenciled slogans throughout the city demanding "*Akademski kolegij to students!*".

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a noticeable trend towards political mobilization in the form of calls for rent strikes (on the subject; see Lawson, 1984; Joubert and Hodkinson, 2018) as a strategy of urban social movements. Calls for action such as "*rent strike!*" (rentna stavka, najemniški štrajk) and "*rental strike / give! / us! / flats!*" reflect this sentiment. In the midst of these pleas, however, some authors opted for a more ironic tone. One example is a hand-drawn illustration of a cubic house in the modern architectural style characteristic of elite homes, with a pool and a car parked in the driveway. This paste-up is ironically captioned "*I would live here and be happy*" (tukaj bi živel in bil srečen), a line that subtly criticizes the inequalities of urban living conditions in neoliberal capitalism. In other words, "*fuck comfort*".

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The anti-touristification graffiti revolve around the pressing issue of housing, in particular the dramatic rise of short-term rentals such as Airbnb accommodation. The phrases "*housing for people, not tourists (A)*", "*tourists go home*", "*FCK AIR BNB*", and "*I can't live in an Airbnb*" express the discontent of those who feel impacted by the growing tourism industry. Other graffiti takes on a sarcastic narrative style, for example imitating a tourist wondering and wandering around the city, with phrases in German such as "*Wo ist das Hostel*" ("Where is the hostel?"). The graffiti "*tourism*

2 - Housing financialization refers to the transformation of urban land and the built environment into mere financial assets, subject to speculation on the global real estate market (Rolnik, 2013; 2019). Marcuse and Madden (2016, p. 26) note, "housing is becoming ever less an infrastructure for living and ever more an instrument for financial accumulation." A graffiti discovered in 2024 also drew attention to the increased cost of living for students: "*Food stamps for 5,14€? Suck cock*".

or life?!" (turizem ali život?!) frames the dispossession and displacement of local populations, particularly those from the former Yugoslavia (the word "*life*" is deliberately written in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language to emphasize this point), as a matter of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003). The simple but effective juxtaposition of tourism and life emphasizes the existential threat, a matter of life and death, of a certain community in the process of growing touristification. Put succinctly, "*tourism kills the city*".

Trubarjeva Street, a liminal street bridging the Old Town and other neighborhoods, was for some a focal point for scrutinizing the issue of tourism-led city's renewal. When the redevelopment began in 2019, the official signs scattered across the street declared that the works were intended to enhance the public space for everyone (they read: "we are renovating for you"). They were soon altered into "we are renovating for you, *tourists and elites*". Furthermore, the critical perspective on the radical transformation of the city's spaces draws a clear link between touristification and the elitization of urban space and, by extension, housing. In particular, it articulates the socio-spatial polarization and exclusion that favors the (new) urban rich—elites, investors,

Figure 3. Stencil on Vegova Street. Source: Sandi Abram (18 July 2019)

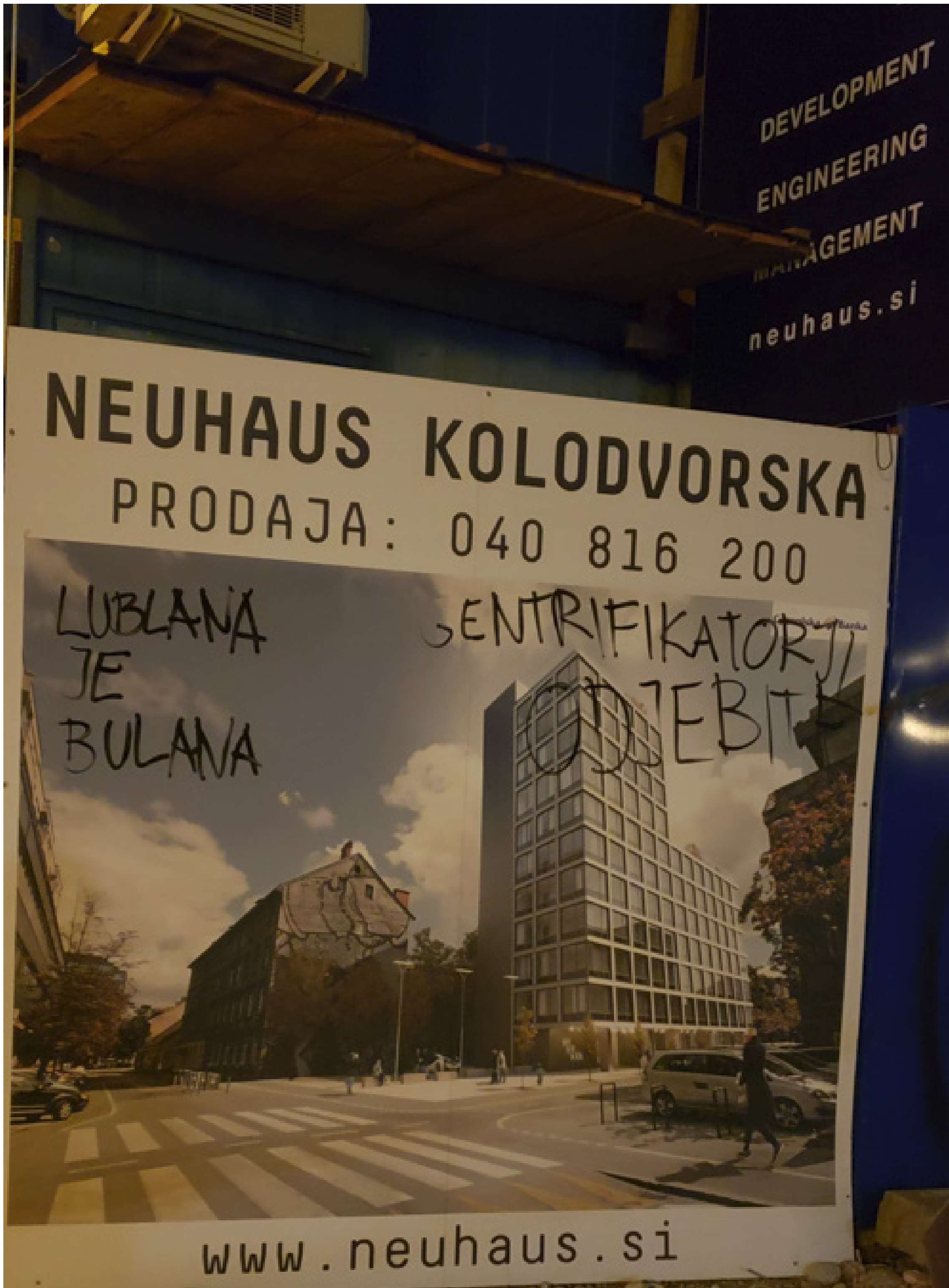

Figure 4. Billboard advertising the sale of units in the aparthotel NEU Residences, with the graffiti reading "*Lublana je bulana*" and "*Gentrifiers fuck off*". Source: Sandi Abram (14 October 2021)

professionals, tourists—while marginalizing, in a graffiti-sprayed Fanonian vocabulary, the "*wretched and poor*",[3] such as the unhoused and unemployed. This chasm was embodied in the graffiti on a municipality-owned temporary accommodation building for the housing-deprived people, used during the pandemic, which read "*where elites dwell and tourists roam, where's the shelter for those with no home?! (A)*".[4] In the same period, the exclamation "*shelter the homeless in hostels*" (brezdomce v hostle), written on the façade of a hostel on the riverbank of Ljubljanica, voiced a similar concern about the expanding gulf between the rich and the poor. Not far away, a lone scream from the walls shouted "*stop the elitization of the city!*", while a few blocks away a wall-writing declared "*stop the violence against the poor*".

In the neoliberal city, as experienced in Ljubljana, the dramatic rise of short-term rentals and accommodations catering to the tourism industry is paralleled by the emergence of new elite housing typologies, including luxury villa-style apartment blocks and upscale serviced apartment hotels near the city center. A prime example is the NEU Residences, a luxury commercial-residential building structure that, to borrow the words of Ploštajner and Iglič (2021, p. 902), epitomizes "the conflict between the exchange [value] and use value of space", with so-called place entrepreneurs prioritizing "exchange value at the expense of use value for the local inhabitants" (ibid., p. 905). As of December 2023, for instance, a 150-square-meter apartment in NEU Residences could be rented for a staggering 8,800 euros per month, including utilities. However, shortly after the foundation stone of NEU Residences was laid, the billboard advertising the sale of the apartments was met with two messages: "*Gentrifiers fuck off*" and "*Lublana je bulana*".[5] The three-dimensional render on the billboard concealed an additional detail. In the architectural plans, the façade of the neighboring building adjacent to NEU Residences was to be embellished with a mural from the very beginning. This intention materialized in 2023 in the form of a public tender for the creation of, to quote the call, a "new media wall" through an "international competition for a mural on Kolodvorska Street" (NEU residences, 2023). The chosen artist, who would be awarded a prize of 1,000 euros *and* a stay in the luxury residence during the mural's production, was expected to conceive a "powerful statement for years to come […] that in some way (direct[ly] or indirect[ly]) communicates with its surrounding[s] – national media institutions and passersby." (ibid.).

This initiative to integrate art and visual creativity, in particular in the form of street art and commissioned murals, into the urban context reflects the dynamics within the process of gentrification. In the discourse of the real estate entrepreneurs, murals assumed a role once performed by graffiti – as vehicles for powerful statements and penetrating political expression. However, in the apparent harmony and cultural heritage between the two forms lies a critical distinction. In contrast to the uncensored, spontaneous, ephemeral nature of (sub-political) graffiti, the apolitical new urban medium [sic!] is permanent, commissioned and curated, and above all, it contributes to the visual enhancement of property exchange value.

The subsequent appearance of the phrase "*art sucks*", painted in bold purple fat caps on the textile construction fencing adjacent to the nearly completed NEU Residences, could thus be interpreted as a critique of the role that new muralism plays today within the framework of elite housing typologies that have morphed into tourist accommodation hubs qua attractions – that of aesthetic markers in gentrifying and touristifying neighborhoods (see Campos and Sequeira, 2020; McClinchey, 2023). In this context, "*art sucks*" suggests nothing less than a soon-to-be-erased critique of the commodification of street art and murals, in which underpaid artists are hired to beautify overpriced residential buildings (though, if selected by the appropriate commission, they may enjoy the temporary stay in the accommodation). Direct, uncensored interaction is thus

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3 - The original graffiti used feminine and masculine conjunctions (i.e. "*zgaran in reven"* and "*zgarane in revne"*), with one exception, where the last letters were crossed over to form a politically correct, (trans)gender neutral statement that read "*zgaranx in revnx"*.

4 - In original: *Vzniknila so elitna stanovanja in turistična središča / Kje so brezdomska zavetišča?! (A*)

5 - The latter, which translates as "Ljubljana is wrecked/ragged/jacked up", not only echoes the lyrics of a famous song from the socialist 1980s by the punk ensemble Pankrti, but also speaks to the perceived impact of such projects on the local community.

transformed into a mediated and commodified aesthetic experience.

In sum, the anti-touristification graffiti serves as a critique of, in Agamben's words, the religion of money and the administrative blindness that has transformed cities and boroughs into amusement parks for tourists (Agamben, 2020, p. 18). The narratives of these expressions range from direct criticism and irony to tourism-phobia (as in the graffiti "*I hate tourists*" [mrzim turiste]) and self-organizing cries. A paramount local example of such a proactive stance against touristification is the contemporary adaptation of the historical anti-fascist battle cry "*alerta, alerta, antifascista!*" from the 1920s, which was repurposed into the activist warning "*alerta antituristа*", signaling a call for change in a different socio-political context. To counter "the taste of gentrification" (Stock, 2013), one graffiti suggests, in Rousseauian terms, to "*eat the rich*" – to which someone later added "*and MDMA*". "*I'm thieving tourists (A)*" (pljačkam turiste) exemplifies how anarchists recontextualize references from popular culture into the urban space, as the line is taken from the song by the Croatian trap group Kiša Metaka. Through the lens of this political graffitiscape, tourists are seen as "walking wallets" (Beek, 2005). In this lexicon, the letters "*A T M*" no longer stand for an automated teller machine, but rather "*Ask / Tourist / Money*", especially given the appearance of predatory cash machines with exorbitant withdrawal fees that mushroomed in the city center and in tourist-heavy areas after 2017.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, Ljubljana has undergone an intensified urban transformation, engulfed by contemporary restructuring and transformation of urban governance with different phases and degrees of privileging capital investments, endorsing entrepreneurial forms of governance, intensifying privatization of public resources that ultimately lead to an aggravated social polarization (Mayer, 2017). The most apparent features of the local manifestation of the neoliberal city involve, but are not limited to, the growth of the mass tourism industry and the effects of gentrification. While such processes are often framed within the "urban crisis" (Weaver, 2017), this paper explored the "the ways in which walls, in times of crisis, are repurposed as canvases of resistance, which communicate, amplify, and incite embodied resistance" (Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi, 2021, p. 422). In this perspective, we can read the subversive fissures in the form of political wall-writing in the times of multiple, overlapping, and permanent crises of capitalism as "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990), as discourses of the powerless against the dominant forces of neoliberalism.

If the urban crisis is marked by a class-oriented character, and the neoliberal city aims to quash the working class opposition and disruption of the social order (Weaver, 2017, p. 13-14), the radical creativity and visual language of handwritten protest on vertical surfaces persists as a "'material disturbance', an interruption of empty walls" (Velikonja, 2021, p. 148). Despite the concerns that murals, street art and graffiti, as forms of direct anti-gentrification politics, may morph into pro-gentrification policies, from means of place making to methods of space branding, it is still tempting to interpret these unruly political expressions on the walls as acts of resistance that do not conform to the postmodern impasse described by Pasquinelli (2008), which leads to "the self-castration of the living energy of the metropolis" due to a "Lacanian paranoia about the Spectacle ab[ility] to co-opt any spontaneous production of culture". The anti-gentrification and anti-touristification graffiti are only a fraction of the articulations that can be found by reading the spatial textures—and not just texts, as Lefebvre reminds us—of the urban fabric.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/or consent to publish.

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