

Whose Wall is it Anyway? Using street art to navigate the private and the public in a community.

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Abstract

In this working paper, I investigate the tensions and questions that arise when street artists use private walls in communities to create their work. I will also discuss how street art complicates, at times, traditional understandings of private and public spaces in neighbourhoods. Written in the style of academic journalism, this working paper is an attempt to work through questions that surface from attempting to understand the impact street art, when positioned as public pedagogy, may have on those who live and create in a community.

Keywords: street art, communities, public pedagogy, private spaces

1. The Homeowner and the Street Artists

On April 11, 2017, 70-year old João Batista da Silva was filmed painting the walls surrounding his home with grey paint. The video¹, which was posted on Facebook, went viral with thousands of views in a short period of time, as reported by several media outlets. Comments, which were mostly critical of Mr. da Silva's actions, were also left on the post. By all accounts, painting one's property typically does not garner such attention or criticism, but the unusual response to Mr. Silva's actions was due to his home being located in Beco do Batman.

Known as Batman Alley in English, Beco do Batman is comprised of a myriad of twisting alleyways flanked by homes in Vila Madalena, a neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil. It is a tourist area known for the colourful street art that adorns its walls from top to bottom, and which is created by "grafiteiros"² without the permission of homeowners in many cases. It is visited by thousands of people each year who not only want to see the street art,

but also take selfies with the pieces (see Figure 1 and 2).

When Mr. da Silva began painting the walls around his home (with the help of his son), he destroyed some of these pieces, which led to the public outcry against him.

Mr. da Silva was accused of being emboldened by the actions of São Paulo mayor, João Doria, who had recently rolled out an initiative called "Programa Cidade Linda" (Operation Beautiful City). The implementation of the urban program, described as an effort to clean up the city, had resulted in many pieces of street art being covered with grey paint³. Speaking to the media, Mr. da Silva explained that he wasn't against the street art being created on the walls that belonged to him, but rather he was reacting to the disturbances he was experiencing daily due to visitors and street artists spending time in the area, even late into the night. He also said that his breaking point came when some street artists told him that his walls belonged to them, leading him to paint over the street art that was there⁴. Mr. da Silva's walls did not stay grey for long.

1 - The video can be seen as part of this online article:

<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/muro-do-beco-do-batman-em-sp-amanhece-pintado-de-cinza-21191003>

2 - Grafiteiro is a word used in Brazil to describe a graffiti or street artist.

3 - https://news.vice.com/en_ca/article/8xmpqz/sao-paulos-graffiti-artists-revolt-after-mayor-attempts-to-paint-the-city-grey

4 - <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2017/04/1874589-como-doria-joao-do-beco-do-batman-pinta-muro-recua-e-libera-novo-grafite.shtml>



Figure 1. One of the alleys in Beco do Batman. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues



Figure 2. A visitor taking a selfie in Beco do Batman. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues



Figure 3. Mr. da Silva's wall with graffiti. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues

By the next day, statements such “What is the worth of a wall?” and “There are things that are more important than a grey wall” were graffitied on them (see Figure 3).

2. Street Art as Public Pedagogy

In April 2017, I travelled to São Paulo, Brazil with 20 post-secondary students from Canada to co-teach a course on social justice, global citizenship and what it means to be an ally. We visited Beco do Batman on April 30th, approximately two weeks after Mr. da Silva had painted his walls. As I walked around the alleyways taking pictures and discussing the street art with some of the students, I was asked by two of them for help to decode a piece they were discussing (see Figure 4).

The street art, which was created by artists Pato and Vinicius Caps, had no words to help decipher its message. We debated its meaning, putting forth different narratives that connected back to the issues we were exploring while in Brazil, such as the rights of Indigenous

peoples and the environmental problems in the Amazon caused by a string of governments who were putting profit before people. We did not reach a consensus on the meaning of the piece, but we did feel, that as a result of the informal conversation that took place at that time, we furthered our understanding on some of the social justice themes we had been studying in the course. We were not in a classroom, but undeniably participating in the type of knowledge building that typically takes place in educational institutions. That conversation, which was sparked by street art, seemed to align with the educational possibilities provided by public pedagogy, described by Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick (2010) as a theory that is concerned with the spaces where informal learning happens, or, in other words, the knowledge people obtain outside of traditional educational institutions¹.

1 - Sandlin, J., Schultz, B. D., & Burdick. (2010) Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling. New York: Routledge.



Figure 4. Street art created by Pato and Vinicius Caps. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues.



Figure 5. The street art on Mr. da Silva's wall before he painted it grey. This work was created by street artists Binho Ribeiro, Speto and Ciro. Image source: Google Maps

3. Negotiating Public and the Private Space

When visiting Beco do Batman with my students on April 30th I was able to see the walls that had been the centre of such contention just two weeks before. I saw that some of the grey had been eradicated by a beautiful piece of street art. I found a media article online explaining that well-known grafiteiro Binho Ribeiro, who had created one of the pieces that Mr. da Silva painted over, had reached out to the homeowner and asked for permission to create new work on the grey wall. Mr. da Silva agreed to the street art and Mr. Ribeiro in collaboration with two other grafiteiros, Boletabike and Milo Tchais, created a large piece that covered one of the walls entirely (see Figure 5 and 6).

Mr. Ribeiro said he understood Mr. da Silva's concerns about the disturbances and felt that it was important for street artists and homeowners in Beco do Batman to reach an understanding, with help from the local government, that would allow street art to continue being created in the alleyways without impacting those living in the area¹.

1 - <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2017/04/1874864-grafiteiro-visita-beco-do-batman-apos-ter-obra-apagada-por-morador-assista.shtml>

It was interesting to read about the interaction between homeowner and artist that resulted in street art being created on what is a private wall. I was fortunate to film² such an interaction between Mr. da Silva and another street artist named Mauro Neri on the day that I was in Beco do Batman. Mr. Neri is known for his Veracidade (See the City) street art. When being interviewed³ for an online publication, he described the street art he creates as a way to encourage people to enter into a dialogue with urban spaces and see the city from different perspectives.

I was watching Mauro Neri work on his piece on one of Mr. da Silva's grey walls when I noticed the homeowner watching him as well. Mr. Neri walked over to Mr. da Silva and the two spoke about what was being created on the wall. After their conversation, the artist returned to the wall to finish his piece while Mr. da Silva went back into his home (see Figures 7, 8 and 9).

2 - The video can be seen at this link: <https://youtu.be/jdRsmMMBTA4> <https://youtu.be/jdRsmMMBTA4>

3 - <http://www.itaucultural.org.br/ver-a-cidade-e-suas-nuances-entrevista-com-mauro-neri>



Figure 6. The street art on Mr. da Silva's wall after he painted it grey. This work was created by Binho Ribeiro, Boletabike and Milo Tchais. Image source: Luxshan Ambi



Figure 7. Mauro Neri starts working on his piece on Mr. da Silva's wall Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues



Figure 8. Mr. da Silva watching Mr. Neri. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues



Figure 9. Mr. da Silva and Mr. Neri discuss the street art. Image source: Anna Augusto Rodrigues

4. Redefining public and private spaces through street art

The purpose of this working paper is to explore the ways in which the creation of street art affects public and private spaces in communities. In the example I just related, the walls in question are privately owned, but they are located in a public area and seen by not only those who live in the neighbourhood, but also those who create street art there and, as well, the hundreds of tourists who visit the area every year. I feel this situation tests notions of private ownership, particularly when street art is positioned as public pedagogy. Positioning street art as a form of informal education may offer an alternative way for individuals, who are marginalized and unable to obtain a traditional education, to learn about issues that affect them and the community they live in. Street art, which is easy to access, may also encourage participation in public discourse, both online and offline, therefore allowing individuals an opportunity to shape their communities by having their voices heard. When street art is positioned as public pedagogy but constrained by traditional notions regarding private and public spaces in communities, its potential to provide informal learning opportunities is impacted. Who has the right to decide what ends up on a wall that is privately owned but publicly available for anyone to see? Does ownership over a wall take priority over education and knowledge-mobilization? And, if street art as public pedagogy is extinguished from walls that are privately owned, is there space to argue for a redefinition of private property within a community for the public good?