| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Walls of Many Colors: The Celebration of Mural Art in the Moroccan City

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| ABSTRACT

The history of walls in Morocco is extremely rich. Walls have played a powerful role throughout history, recounting stories of protection, resistance and encounter. They stand as historical palimpsests bearing traces of former times. However, in our modern times, walls have now embraced new functions. They have become spaces for creative communication and artistic performance. As a survivor of the Arab Spring revolutions that swept the MENA region by the end of 2010, Morocco has adapted to the transformations that have altered the political landscape in the region by answering the national demands and needs. It has elaborated strategies that aim to ease the masses' frustrations and answer their aspirations by offering them larger platforms to express themselves and more liveable and breathable public spaces to occupy. Morocco has been creatively upgrading its cities where mural art is celebrated, thus competing with the world's most famous metropolises. This article explores the evolution of mural art in Morocco with an emphasis on the cultural wall heritage of the country.

1. Introduction

The title of this article was inspired by the 1970s musical hit, *Coat of Many Colors*, in which Dolly Parton praised a coat that her mother had caringly made for her beloved daughter. Dolly Parton proudly wore the piece of clothes chanting its beauty and value despite her schoolmates' mockery of the ragged coat. She 'was rich as she could be just by wearing the coat of many colors that her momma made for her'. Similarly, Morocco proudly exposes the walls of many colors that adorn the facades of buildings and embellish the streets of its cities. The murals that have been realized these recent years align with the global visual trend that has altered the urban landscape of the largest cities of the world. Morocco has succeeded in creating a visual legacy of its own that needs to be preserved and perpetuated, just as its already laden cultural and architectural history.

2. Literature review
2.1. The meaning of walls

Despite the heavy symbolic value walls may carry, they have been under-researched in academia. They are signs of power and sovereignty, standing for security, containment, and segregation, witnessing stories of wars, fear and resistance. Walls are political artefacts that interfere with some behaviors and actions that impact people's lives and reality (Sferrazza Papa, 2018). Sferrazza Papa believes that they are material objects that can be interpreted politically since they can be a space for political, legal and ethical contention. They may translate a state's political decisions or impede and hamper mobility by constraining people's movement and space, as in the case of the Berlin Wall and the Segregation Wall in the West Bank. Related to this, they are built and planned to control people and their activities, employing a strategy of space control or a shield against voyeurs to protect one's privacy and property. From a spatial political perspective, walls are governmental objects (Foucault,1978/1991); governmentality being defined as a set of institutions and procedures that exercises power over the population, separates and control spatial mobility.

Therefore, walls are among the widespread and effective instruments used for governing populations around the world since they occupy the material and sensorial environment. They are configured as separators that set a certain type of boundary into a space enabling the demarcation and separation within and beyond a space, defining flows of circulation, paths and trajectories (Foucault,1978/1991), and are in constant need of maintenance, repair and reconfiguration.

Moreover, walls are subject to tactical and strategic manipulations by both engineers and bricoleurs (Brighenti, 2010). In other words, they can be part of a project by city planners but can also undergo spontaneous treatment. Street art is part of this tactical intervention on walls that are built in daylight but painted in the dark. They are often used as support where visibility and public expression of certain groups or individuals interplay (Cozzolino, 2009). Graffiti and street art are territorial by excellence. A writer's tag, for instance, is a marker of territory, as well as a search for an identity and spatial belonging. Walls offer street artists a space of performance that differentiates them from other art performers. Indeed, a wall is not a cold concrete object but can be a vivid presence that interacts with its users. Soufiane Zorgane, a.k.a. Zorg, is a promising Moroccan street artist who poetically communicates with 'his wall' before performing his art. He believes that every crack, hole, or bump on the wall tells a story that the artist catches and uses creatively. Sometimes, it is the wall that chooses and inspires him. Writing on the wall, thus, feels like dressing a child in a party outfit. Zorgane also agrees with the idea that walls offer a chance for visibility. Artists often look for walls that might expose their art longer as the mural is an infant that the artist leaves for the wall to nestle and shelter. Moreover, walls are tools of exclusion and containment that define what can, should, and cannot be seen. Pictures, screens, billboards, and murals are now multiplying in public as well as in private spaces. This invasion of the visual space of city dwellers redefines their perception and interaction with the built environment and with public space, in particular. Consequently, both street artists and advertisers have grown aware of the possibilities that walls have to offer in their search for publicness and recognition. In short, 'touching' a wall facilitates the diffusion of the message and the promotion of both the art and the artist.

2.2. The right to the city

The global dominance of image production has redirected cities toward a specific spatial configuration and architectural redefinition that reshape the citizens' urban everyday experiences. Image production has generated metropolises where "the space of exposure becomes the structured embodiment of public space, designed to optimize the exposition of city users to the spectacle of goods, being impressed, entertained, directed by flows of commodified images" (Tripodi, 2015). This form of production makes use of different techniques and tools borrowed from the media and entertainment industry to exploit and enhance the value of a certain space. Advertising and entertainment corporations compete to monopolize and control urban surfaces and exploit their expressive and communicative potential. Consequently, city planners, along with private institutions, invest in renewing the image of the city and transforming the public space. They are interested in the building, the transformation and the preservation of the image of the city, driven by the neoliberal trend that has reached globalized cities and has enhanced competition among cities of the world, imposing new regulations. Urban planning promotes the imageability of the city by marketing public space to attract investments, tourists, and workers. By the same token, Mitchell (1997, 2003) and Smith (1996) recommend erasing all signs of urban decay, poverty and crime, such as homeless people, loitering youth, informal traders, protesters, or any other types of space invaders, and creating a distinctive and positive urban image.

The revival of cities can be assured through the use of tools and techniques derived from visual arts. Urban planning is progressively adopting logistics of perception that implies strategic domination of space through the control and manipulation of visual means (Tripodi, p.47). This can be achieved through the appropriation of walls, as they are omnipresent in public spaces. Respectively, urban marketers have prioritized art installed in public spaces as a tool to transform the image and the identity of a city, while urban planners have concentrated their efforts on the development of cultural projects that include museums and art centers.

Undoubtedly, the importance of art in the beautification of public spaces is not a recent phenomenon. Art has been present in public spaces since the Roman Empire, mainly in the form of monumental sculptures. It was used by the elite to mark and impose their power on space. Ages later, states have adopted art as a form of reappropriation and fortification of public space while expelling inappropriate space users. During the Arab Spring revolutions that swept the MENA region in 2011, both artists and authorities engaged in a battle of paint to demonstrate their control of public space. While artists were covering the walls of the city with political messages, authorities were behind with their white brushes effacing every single sign of political, social and artistic resistance. After a relatively tacit arm-wrestling battle between artists and authorities, public spaces have been eventually commissioned yet under institutional rules.

While the presence of art in urban spaces is not new, the reasons for its presence are. Art in public spaces is now much more related to the revitalization of urban space (Ursic, 2014). After a highly industrialized era, the focus has shifted towards recreational and creative activities through culture and art that would develop an alternative economy, allow the masses to give vent to their stress and frustrations, and alter the city into a creative and more liveable space where healthy interaction and cohabitation take

place (Lefebvre, 1996). Therefore, designing and having an urban space that offers inhabitation, sharing, and creativity has become a right.

3. Research design and methods
This article follows a case study design that provides a scope of evaluation needed to depict the evolution of wall writing in Morocco and would permit the development of an in-depth analysis of Moroccan street art. The data is collected through observation and fieldwork that aim to explore, explain and describe the use(s) of walls in Morocco and their recent use as canvases for creative street artworks, in particular. The images included within this article are only a very few examples of the immense collection of murals recently produced. They were deliberately chosen to juxtapose the historicity of Moroccan cities with the novelty of the art form.

The case study type of research design allows for gathering a holistic and meaningful vision of the case and facilitates the production of contextual knowledge about it. The article was motivated by the desire to understand the particularity of the Moroccan context. Therefore, studying Moroccan mural art as a case study allows a better understanding and interpretation of the artistic situation in the country. The eventual readings of the case are influenced by the relevant historical, cultural, political and/or economic contexts, besides the personal experiences and background of the authors.

4. Results and discussion
Marred by decades of political arbitrariness and negligence, governance and democracy within the Arab urban are questionable issues. Urbanization in Arab countries is translated into a radical transformation of the modes of production of the urban experience. Over recent years, Arab cities have been impacted by state insufficient policies and limited action that cater to urban social demands of housing, employment, and social and economic services. Furthermore, Arab cities seem to face the same challenges that cities of the world encounter, such as social inequalities and urban fragmentation, besides the frantic international competition that makes them resemble other emerging metropolises. As a result, private investment, as well as the improvement of urban services such as electricity and transportation, were presented as a solution to address the challenges faced by growing and impoverished cities (Stadnicki, 2014).

During the 2011 Arab unrest, cities were territories of contention and contested territories altogether, as in the case of Syria, where a ferocious war was conducted to reinstate an absolute political, physical and military order on cities, mainly those where the conflict originated. Governments were then faced with two choices, whether to continue their failing capitalist policies or develop a new agenda that serves the general interest despite the much-needed effort and will. Meanwhile, protesters and activists that were interested in urban affairs have brought back politics in the city, challenging the established urban order (Stadnicki et al., 2014). The State of Arab Cities Report 2020 also highlighted the importance of urban planning in motivating sustainable development and positive societal changes investments since the majority of people seek success and fulfillment within cities and towns. The report maintained that the design and the implementation of infrastructure in countries where social tension, conflict, poverty, and exclusion prevail increase stability, social inclusion and citizen participation in shaping the built environment. After the Arab Spring revolutions, the city and urbanization issues have become central to the political agenda.

As for Morocco, it enjoys a rich urban tradition characterized by historic imperial cities and other ancient ones that date back to the beginning of the 20th century. This constitutes a main asset for the social and economic development of the country. However, Moroccan cities have equally been facing urban, environmental and socio-economic challenges as a consequence of modernization and globalization. These challenges were accentuated when urban governance proved unable to contain the growing dysfunctions and deficits in human development, position among cities, and social cohesion (Kheireddine and Zouite, 2020).

Culturally speaking, urban projects often allow art to show up and make it at the service of public planning. Kullman et al.(2017) explored how city-making has reached the world of art and how urban planners have turned to creative design. They supported their findings with a report of *The Art and Urban Planning Guide Plan* that believed art to be "a local negotiation lever and a visibility tool at a metropolitan scale" (Kullman et al., p.2). Art contributes to the creation of space and emphasizes "the visibility and viability of a city's symbolic economy" (Zukin, 1996, p.45); art is, therefore, used as a tool to renew and update urban planning projects, as well as a means to promote and reveal the city. Hence, art has a regenerative role by reinvigorating areas of the city through museums, theatres and other cultural facilities, which people believe to be important to have in their environment (Kullman et al., 2017).In line with this, the British General Secretary of the Arts Council, Luke Rittner, has already reflected on the priority of urban renewal in the national agenda and the potent contribution of arts to the revitalization of cities and life quality in them (Rittner, 1989). In fact, art activities such as cultural tourism increase a community's sense of identity and awareness and its determination to make a change (Rittner, 1989).

4.1. Walls of Morocco

The interest in the role of walls in the Moroccan urban policy started with the late King Hassan II and has perpetuated with his majesty Mohamed VI. When celebrating the anniversary of Morocco's twelve centuries of existence, the late King Hassan II stressed the symbolism of ancient walls. Indicative of Moroccan cities, ancient walls and great gates shape the architectural landscape. Each dynasty and empire that reigned over the Moroccan territory has left its walled monuments. These walls, for Ibn Khaldoun, were a sign of the urban tide that brushed the region and generated the need for a creative and sustainable urban policy that would preserve the aesthetic, urban and functional characteristics of the cities and keep the semiotics and meanings of these historical and cultural artifacts. Eventually, the late Hassan II advised architects and urban planners to seek inspiration and creativity from the Kasbahs, mountains, valleys and colors of Moroccan nature, while he insisted on including this heritage in Moroccan urban planning.

Fig.1: The wall of Taroudant. Photo credit: Google.

Fig.2: The Andalusian wall of Bab El Hed Square at the heart of the Capital city, Rabat. Photo credit: Google.

Walls are not mere stone or mud constructions but a habitation style and shields for Moroccan cities and mnemonic reserves of military and trade operations. Imperial cities are surrounded by majestic walls that were used to counter intrusion and assault and separate the old city (medina) and the modern one. Walls stood as witnesses to the life characteristics, styles and needs of the civilizations that inhabited behind those spaces. They are symbols of the rich past of the city and witnesses of the conflicts and transactions that took place between the center and the periphery, between the city and the village, and between what is inside and what is beyond. Walls used to be a shield against enemies' attacks and an index of the importance of the city and its residents. Today, an exponential demographic and urban explosion has exceeded these barriers and extended to create new neighborhoods. However, the essence of the city remains confined between these iconic walls that surround the city. Despite their oldness, they still stand tall and strong.

Walls in Morocco have been functional, preserving stability and security. They were constructed on certain urban, social, economic and protective bases. First, the iconic wall of Taroudant, which envelops the city, is the oldest walled construction in Morocco (fig.1.). It has witnessed the alternation of the Amazigh, Almoravids and Almohads periods. It surpasses the Great Wall of China in width. Its different towers and gates served specific functions (army, trade, livestock, etc.). A second example is the city of Salé which is also surrounded by a set of walls that stretches along the medina. Located on the Atlantic Ocean, the walls of Salé served as forts against naval attacks. The city is historically famous for its ruthless piracy and ship manufacturing. As an eminent imperial city, Meknes also has its share of ancient walls with a world-renowned 45km of Ismaili walls. Another historical wall is the Andalusian wall of Rabat (fig.2.), which extends to the banks of the Bouregreg River. It was built in the 17th century AD by the Moors, who left Andalusia after the end of Islamic rule. The wall included several gates and defensive towers and was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012. Of a sacred nature, these walls stock the cultural memory of those cities. They have become a shared cultural heritage between Morocco and the world.

Accordingly, exploiting and rehabilitating those historical monuments as part of urban planning has become a necessity. Now, the preservation of the cultural heritage and maintenance of historical sites and artifacts are part of the country's new urban dynamics. It is one of the several projects that King Mohamed VI has initiated and closely supervised to introduce a deeply rooted, authentic, modern and young Morocco that would ignite its people's pride, enthusiasm, patriotism and sense of belonging. Hence, history and culture have become effective vectors exploited by urban planners to display the singularity of their nations.

Indeed, the wall experience is peculiar in cities like Rabat, Casablanca, Meknes, Salé, Taroudant or even Marrakech, where the authenticity of imperial walls stands 'pillar to pillar' to the creative murals that street artists have produced. The singularity of this phenomenon is striking. Bystanders take on a voyage between authenticity and modernity, enjoying the paradoxical worlds that both artifacts have to offer, the Moroccan and Islamic architectural artistry and the contemporary visual creativity. Morocco has always been an extroverted country, linking Africa to Europe and the West to the East. It has opened its arms to different civilizations and cultures while keeping a firm grip on its cultural identity and particularity.

4.2. Art on walls in Morocco
Today, Morocco follows the global approach of urban engineering and planning to create breathable and livable public spaces. This engagement with the world movement has been expressed by the royal initiative that aims to improve life in cities by offering better services to their residents. Consequently, a battery of projects has been launched to improve transportation and mobility, restore historical sites and monuments, engage youth within the social and economic realms, create green spaces, open up to technology, introduce art in public spaces, and ultimately promote cultural tourism. The progressive vision of the King has opened up to the possibilities that modern art offers when fused with the historical character of the Moroccan city. Supported by a rich culture and history, the Moroccan experience promises to produce global cities that transcend into a whole new urban level where modernity embraces authenticity.

fig.3.: A mural by Waone near the old wall of the medina, Rabat (Jidar street art festival 2017). Photo credit: jidar_streetart

fig.4.: A mural by Mur0ne near the iconic Bab El Hed Square, Rabat (Jidar street art festival 2018). Photo credit: Jidar_streetart

The particularity of the urban Moroccan landscape resides in the architectural and artistic mixture. The global artistic movement of street art has penetrated the Moroccan territory recently and has found fertile soil where this visual trend could grow. Art agents and urban planners have seen in street art an opportunity to both help local artists stand out and present their artistry to the world while fostering an artistic hub for world street artists and art disciples who are willing to exploit new spaces and lands. International street art festivals and events such as *Jidar Street Art Festival*, *Sbagha Bagha*, *Casamouja Urban Art Wave*, *Asilah Art Festival*, *Marrakech Biennale* or *Street Art Inside* are among the annual street art celebrations held in Morocco to create a meeting point and a space for exchange and communication between prominent and famous international artists, local artists and residents. The events are an occasion to display what the Moroccan art scene has to offer and an opportunity to add an artistic touch to the city.

fig.5.: A mural in Azemmour (Azemm'art 2023). Photo credit: the author

fig.6.: A mural in the streets of Asilah (Asilah Art Festival). Photo credit: Google

Moroccan cities have now become open museums with artistic murals adorning walls. Walking in the streets of Rabat or Casablanca, for example, has turned into a tour-like experience in an open museum or art gallery. A visitor would easily find themselves in a contradictory setting whereupon a contemporary mural overlooks a historical wall surrounding the city (figures 3 and 4) or embellishes the already culturally and architecturally laden walls of streets and alleys (figures 5 and 6). This artistic fusion displays the singularity of the Moroccan city and leaves a particular trace in the memory of its visitors. As a matter of fact, most street artists that were interviewed during the festivities of street art events have expressed their admiration of the city, culture and people and the abundance of sources of inspiration to produce their art on walls.

fig.7.: An Amazigh Empress by YZ Yseult, streets of Taroudant. Source: Facebook

fig.8.: A mural in the old medina of Marrakesh. Source: Facebook

In all, states have grown aware of the importance of public space in city life. People nowadays spend most of their time between their offices and public spaces. This interest in the outdoors has urged city planners to exploit public spaces innovatively and afford citizens a space where they can alleviate their professional and daily burdens. Accordingly, these spaces are expected to offer certain services and to answer some needs. The use of mural art as an urban strategy to upgrade and advertise public spaces has

denied this art form its notorious reputation as an eye-sore and vandalistic practice. When employed creatively and productively, graffiti and street art tend to ease the sight and add a modern look to public spaces (fig.9.), better people's city life, motivate local artists to have a palpable and lucrative participation in urban design and encourage city planners to think and act creatively. The potential that this strategy holds accounts for Morocco's adoption of the global insight of city-making and its decision to catch the urban wave.
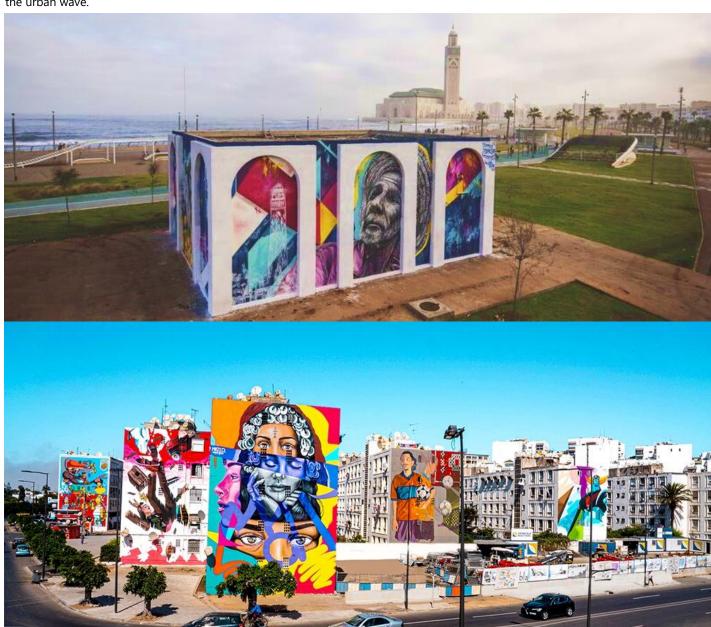

Fig. 9.: Murals in the city of Casablanca. Photo credit: wecasablanca

5. Conclusion

In only a few years, Morocco has succeeded in registering its name in the list of countries that foster global cities. It has also guaranteed a place on the map of mural art destinations. Around all the corners of the Moroccan cities, murals occupy the visual landscape attracting bystanders' attention. Blessed with a significant historical heritage, Morocco has decided to seize its cultural singularity to improve its cities by enhancing services and highly frequented public spaces. Mural art was chosen to refresh the visual and mitigate the stresses of everyday life. As such, the proliferation of mural art in cities has revealed the importance of art in city design and how beneficial it may be to social life.

The study provides an overview of the affluent history of walls in Morocco, which has lately been reinforced by an artistic explosion of mural art. It emphasizes the singularity of the Moroccan experience that joins the authentic to the modern and the functional to the aesthetic. Since a few academic studies have tackled Moroccan mural art, the article can be read as a first step towards a deeper exploration of the case. However, the murals illustrated in the article barely display the considerable works that are being realised in the artistic scene. Indeed, Morocco may be a gold mine for researchers and academics interested in mural art if exploited creatively.

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