

Street Stories: Graffiti and the Urban Memory

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Abstract: For an attentive reading of the city and to help understand the public policy of memory, we need to pay closer attention to the processes of sense-making inscribed in uncommon forms. Public art has long been recognised for its potential to transform urban spaces. While the most traditional way of conserving memory centres on formal street art, graffiti may be seen as subversive. Graffiti is considered vandalism; its role in urban memory is overlooked. The author argues that such a notion is not directly related to protecting public and private property in Cairo, but rather conflicts with the elites' and authorities' need to control the urban narrative, the diversity of cultural values, and political positions. The article explores the role of graffiti in Cairo by selecting numerous graffiti pieces across the city. The graffiti pieces were selected to address cultural diversity, aesthetics, and political aspects. They were selected to represent what came to be known as guerrilla memory. Graffiti pieces were classified by their objectives and analysed semiotically. Besides the political graffiti, Cairo exhibits commercial, aesthetic and religious graffiti. The different types of graffiti in Cairo tell a story about the community's hopes, frustrations, and cultural values. This turns the city walls into memory carriers. Graffiti in Cairo plays a significant role in expressing the silenced community's thoughts by providing a visible and tangible representation. Graffiti's visibility and its imposition of diverse, unauthorised urban narratives explain why it is highly contested in Cairo, as it draws marginalised citizens' voices into urban places.

Keywords: Public Art, Street Art, Mural Art, Graffiti, Urban Memory, Placemaking, Cairo

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1. Introduction

If the city can be understood as a language (Alexander, 1977, 2002; Qudeisat & Rababah, 2021) [1-3], then it is a complex text constantly actualised and transformed by its citizens' practices. It is clear that the city is the result of numerous interventions, enunciations, and writings. The momentary instance of a city contains the contributions of authors, eras and layers of meaning superimposed on one another throughout history. The city is alive; it changes materially, and at the same time, it is as stable and legible as a book. The urban text moves at different speeds: the topography lasts for thousands of years; buildings, streets, and monuments last for centuries; the linguistic landscape lasts for years (Opromolla & Thibault, 2018, pp. 459-460) [4]. Focusing on reading the city's contribution to cultural memory, Umberto Eco (1976, p. 298) [5] claimed that the nature of semiotics includes a cultural dimension. While the city is unquestionably the product of a culture, it is also itself a producer of culture. Thus, the urban text is directly correlated with human activities and traces; it cannot exist on its own (Tsilimpounidi, 2015, p. 80) [6].

Although street art is not a force capable of creating spaces on its own, it affects and changes their perception through continuous interactions with other elements of space. It helps to see what we have not noticed before, to accept what has offended us, and to appreciate details (Gralińska-Toborek, 2016, p. 86) [7]. Street art beautifies urban landscapes and catalyses community empowerment and revitalisation (Brandon &

Deserea, 2025) [8]. It creates a place by questioning social norms or provoking dialogue (Kang, 2025, p. 1) [9]. Street art seeks to interact with the observer with the pretence of asserting symbolic meanings. It is a form of public art, a creative cultural expression in urban places. Street art not only enhances the city's visual appeal and aesthetic value but also serves as a form of storytelling that signals a willingness to address social and environmental problems (Sharp et al., 2005, pp. 1001-1004) [10]. Street art may be considered an art form; regardless of the angle from which it is studied, the power of the messages it transmits plays a meaningful role in communities (Cercleux et al., 2025, pp. 2-4) [11].

Street art is no different from art in general, where matters of taste and preference become paramount. It is not a dominant message in Cairo's visual image; it is a secondary yet persistent element. Street art in Cairo uses urban media and city elements. Sculptures are presented in squares, gardens, and streets and graffiti is displayed on walls. Walls are the built element that divides the public from the private. Those walls are mostly architectural façades. The façades have a precise meaning that responds not only to the architecture's requirements but also to the city's spatial articulation. The walls are part of the public space and serve as the communicative interface through which the building reveals itself. Generally, there are three recognised categories of muralism: graffiti, wall writing, and art installations (Vitiello, 2024) [12]. Categorising mural art remains challenging, despite the specific differences between graffiti and wall writing. These differences are determined by the types of visual representations, the capability to decode messages, the motivation for intervention, and the impact on the landscape (Cercleux, 2022a) [13].

Among the different types of popular street art, in Cairo, muralism is the most common. Despite the common impression that wall writing constitutes most mural art in Cairo, it is difficult to draw such a conclusion. Hence, the term 'mural art,' as used in this work, will be limited to graffiti. Graffiti, as a form of muralism, became a significant part of the city's memorial landscape at the beginning of the new millennium through the work of internationally known artists such as the British Banksy, the American Shepard Fairey, and the Italian street artist Blue (Pierandrei, 2018, p. 462) [14]. Graffiti represents the roots of many forms perceptible today, in diverse styles, shapes, and templates that have emerged over time (Brita, 2018; Gralińska-Toborek, 2016) [7,15].

While the most traditional way of conserving memory centres on formal street art such as public sculptures, what Opromolla and Thibault (2018, p. 458) [4] call 'guerrilla memory' tends to evade these approaches. Graffiti may be seen as subversive, with subversion understood as the capacity to challenge the corporate regime of visibility. This sets graffiti apart from official public art, while it is, at its very core, a form of street art (Baldini, 2022) [16]. Public art has long been recognised for its potential to transform urban spaces, yet graffiti is considered a form of vandalism because it challenges elites' confined aesthetic taste and its visibility challenges the official urban narrative. Meanwhile, confining artworks in a museum limits their exposure and denies specific individuals the opportunity to publicly express their memories. For example, the author's survey of the visitors to Mahmud Mokhtar's Museum presented only 86 visitors over three consecutive months (from February to April 2026). Knowing that Mahmud Mokhtar is one of the greatest sculptors in modern Egypt and the founder of modern sculpture in Egypt warrants significant attention. Even when we redirect our focus to placemaking, it is apparent that the intersection between mural art and the cultural memory is complex and context-dependent. For graffiti, this issue is magnified precisely because of their visibility and hence their 'inescapability', although reactions to them can range from highly vocal and oppositional to unaffected (Sharp et al., 2005, p. 1001) [10].

The author does not support the claim that only political graffiti is real and relevant; rather, he argues that other themes also are meaningful. Graffiti is a controversial activity in Cairo, often associated with vandalism and illegality (al-Eqtsadia, 2015; Khodr, 2022)

[17,18]. The author argues that such a notion is not directly related to protecting public and private property, but rather conflicts with the elites' and authorities' need to control the urban narrative, the diversity of cultural values, and political positions.

To challenge the notion of graffiti as vandalism in Cairo and to explore its role in urban memory as a form of self-expressive art, it is essential to address graffiti as a carrier of cultural memories. This article examines how unconventional strategies for transmitting memory can be implemented in urban spaces. Thus, the author explores how graffiti in Cairo creates an urban narrative and contributes to the conflict surrounding urban memory.

This article is not trying to assess the artistic quality of Cairo's graffiti. It explores how graffiti becomes a marker of an alternative voice in Cairo. Furthermore, the study does not aim to investigate public perception of Cairo's mural art nor to pinpoint where graffiti stops and street art begins.

Exploring graffiti in Cairo will focus on its classification, semiotic meanings, and role as a carrier of memory. Related literature will be used to create the assessment criteria. The study classifies Cairo's graffiti types based on a field survey conducted between February and May 2026. An in-depth analysis of the cultural and heritage dimensions of representations of Cairo's graffiti is presented, with concrete examples from different areas. Interpret their characteristics based on similarities and differences in relation to their communicative objective. As several authors have attempted to produce comprehensive surveys of mural art in Cairo and other cities, the selection of graffiti pieces in this article is limited by time and the size of the study. In other words, the author will move away from a purely quantitative description to explore the semiotic meanings at work in these pieces. The author attempted to identify the graffiti artist's information, but this proved challenging in many cases. Where information was not provided, no data were reported below the Figures.

2. Graffiti in Cairo

Evaluating the artistic value of graffiti pieces in Cairo is challenging. Even when they seem naïve, they have some form of cultural value. However, they are defined more by the act than by their artistic values. This is because they are a form of visual communication, often linked to culture (Wanjiku & Extension, 2024, p. 17) [19]. Schielke (2018) [20] argued that graffiti in Cairo, before the 25th January uprising, consisted mainly of advertising, romantic declarations, cheering for a football team, celebrating social events, and wall decorations as folk art. One of the early mural works in modern Cairo is the piece created on the façade of the former Nile Hilton (now the Ritz-Carlton), as shown in Figure 1. It is designed as a tourist attraction with an ancient Egyptian theme. Popular graffiti in Cairo is classified into the following categories: commercial, political, religious and aesthetic.



Figure 1. The mural work of the former Hilton Hotel. The author, 2026

2.1. Commercial Graffiti in Cairo

Commercial murals include professional and non-professional writing, stickers, stencil printing, and graffiti. Nevertheless, graffiti is rarely used in commercial murals. However, there are a few exceptions to this rule, as shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. Commercial murals are commonly produced without the consent of the authorities and the wall owner. Although commercial murals are a form of advertising, they can be impressive and showcase artistic talent. Figure 2 explains how the artist intends to draw attention to the establishment rather than the shopkeeper, and to present camels as beautiful animals. The camels also introduce the quality of the restaurant's culinary art. The graffiti is readable, attractive, and colourful, indicating craftsmanship and some level of artistic talent.



Figure 2. A graffiti for a commercial establishment: A restaurant serving camel meat. The author 2026



Figure 3. Commercial graffiti advertising the shop's service quality. The author 2026

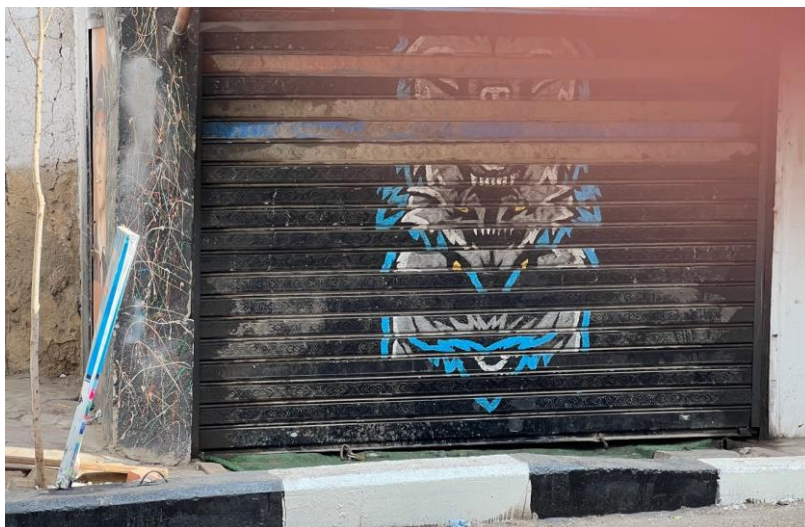


Figure 4. Graffiti on a shop shutter. Drawing attention, no advertisement. The author 2026

2.2. Political Graffiti in Cairo

Political mural art is a universal phenomenon. It exists in Athens, London, Jakarta, Cairo and Gaza. During the Intifada in Palestine, artists used graffiti to advocate for their cause. The aesthetic value of what was being painted came under pressure; the task was too risky to allow time for aesthetics (Rolston, 2014, p. 10) [21]. Graffiti in Jakarta, for example, shows that this art form has existed since the independence struggle. Artists used street walls to express their dissatisfaction with colonialism and social injustice (Harjono et al., 2025, p. 9) [22]. Political graffiti relies on the tension between speaking out loud and remaining invisible. This relationship makes political graffiti an effective tool of communication. It justifies a counter-authoritarian perspective on political events. This is why graffiti in Cairo thrived during the 25th January 2011 uprising: because it often flourishes during periods of political uncertainty and contestation (Rolston, 2014; Selvelli, 2016; Tsilimpounidi, 2015) [6,21,23].

Political graffiti is a slogan that serves as a visual marker of shifting, complex discourses of power struggles, marginality, and countercultures, establishing a new reality to be seen and read (Tsilimpounidi, 2015, p. 71) [6]. Political graffiti in Cairo is mostly straightforward. It uses signs familiar to the public, such as a geographic map (Figure 5) or a well-known flag (Figure 6). The technique used in political graffiti focuses on conveying a message rather than expressing artistic intent. Straightforward signs allow for an informed reading of what the wall says; the need to ask the artists about their thoughts diminishes.



Figure 5. A well-known map (inaccurate) of Palestine. The author, 2026



Figure 6. Well-known Egyptian flags on both sides of the street. The author, 2026

During the 25th of January uprising, a handful of young Egyptian artists and activists employed graffiti and wall writing to raise public awareness of the ongoing protests. Political graffiti and wall writings have spread in Tahrir Square and its surroundings, particularly along Mohammed Mahmoud Street, a major centre of state power. The street housed the Ministry of the Interior Affairs and the Parliament House. Political graffiti served as acts of civil disobedience and forms of protest (Pierandrei, 2018, pp. 454-458) [14]. Throughout 2011, the walls of the AUC's old campus underwent frequent weekly transformations, epitomised by a constant war of paint (Abaza, 2012) [24].

For two years after the 2013 military coup, a game of cat-and-mouse was played between the authorities and activists. The activists used the public space as a political media, writing, insulting the coup symbols, exposing its brutality and objective, and expressing their trauma. The game was played; every time the protesters wrote, the authority painted over it. One of the interesting writings said, "Every time you paint over, we will write again." In 2014 and 2015, public spaces in Cairo were contested, rich with debates and dynamic.

The graffiti from the 25th January 2011 uprising depicted a mural with a particular attitude in commemorating individuals. Such an attitude can be interpreted from two perspectives. The first perspective reflects the sociocultural changes in the community during the 19th and 20th centuries, as street art adopted an elite role in commemorating individuals. The second perspective reflects the uprising's unique political and ethnographic nature. The primary stream of activists in the 25th of January uprising was aged 20 to 40. Losing friends and colleagues at such a young age must have left devastating marks on the artists; the graffiti of individuals might have been a traumatic commemoration. This made the graffiti on 25th January an exception in Cairo's muralism. It would not be illogical to consider that such an exception was created only by the political event. Political graffiti in Cairo had never commemorated individuals till the beginning of the 21st century.

It is remarkable that the murals of 25th January 2011 relied more on graffiti than on wall writing. The artists acknowledged the need for a wider group to read the wall. Writing limits the reading of educated Arabic-speaking groups. Drawing is an international language. It can be understood by non-Arabic speakers and the illiterate. Meanwhile, it testifies to the artists' knowledge of visual communication. The desire to

communicate with an international audience through graffiti was a significant feature of the 25th of January, 2011 uprising (Pierandrei, 2018, p. 470) [14].

2.3. Religious graffiti in Cairo

Historically, Egypt's religious mural art is a form of folk art. Egyptians have long had a custom of decorating the walls of those who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, dating back to the 16th century (Kruk & Oort, 2015) [25]. Cairo's culture and religious mural art fall into two primary categories: writing and graffiti. In numerous cases, both types are introduced and integrated (Figure 7).



Figure 7. A Hajj graffiti; mixed drawing and writing. The author, 2026

Hajj graffiti serves as a memorial to the social and cultural particularities of the city's residents (Riga, 2025) [26]. The custom of decorating the pilgrim's house with graffiti and inscriptions is widespread in Egypt and other Arab countries (Kruk & Oort, 2015, p. 163) [25]. In Gaza, Palestine, for example, they are painted to welcome a householder returning from Mecca (Rolston, 2014, p. 13) [21]. Though the impression one gets these days is that the higher social classes in Egypt now tend to see it as an old-fashioned, rural (*baladi*) custom. The fact that Hajj murals in Cairo are mostly found in the popular quarters confirms this (Kruk & Oort, 2015, p. 165) [25]. The author was unable to spot Hajj murals in middle- and high-class areas such as Heliopolis and New Cairo. Another impression is that calligraphy might have started to replace graffiti in Hajj's murals in modern times (Figure 8). Whether such a replacement is due to cultural or economic factors, or to a reduced availability of professional artists, is unknown to the author. Hajj graffiti is not created by pilgrims themselves and does not reflect personal memories. Rather, the graffiti is created by an artist, friends, or relatives and features pilgrimage landmarks. It spans a significant range from professionalism to non-professionalism (Figures 9 and 10). While the images are intended to symbolically highlight the pilgrimage landmarks, the writing is mostly religious, straightforward and readable.

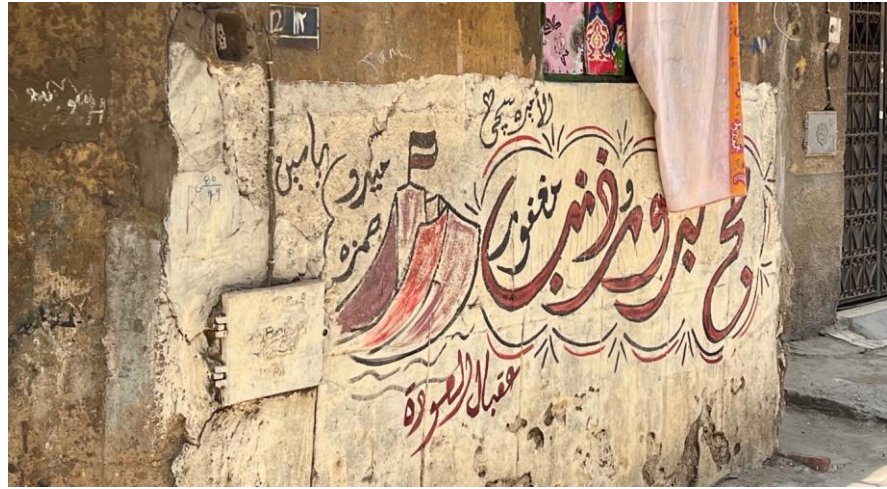


Figure 8. A Hajj graffiti, dominated by wall writing, professional individual. The author, 2026



Figure 9. A Hajj graffiti sprayed by a professional. The author, 2026



Figure 10. A Hajj graffiti drawn by an ordinary individual. The author, 2026

Hajj Graffiti serves as a memory carrier, as walls serve as a testament to social and cultural events and their contributors (Schielke, 2018) [20]. Despite the wide and long history of Hajj graffiti, little is known about the artists. Seen semiotically, Hajj graffiti is a mixture of two- and three-dimensional, highly metaphorical forms of discourse (Kruk & Oort, 2015, p. 166) [25]. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that three-dimensional painting is impressive and interacts with space. This is a traditional *trompe l'oeil* (deceive the eye) technique that creates the illusion of space (Gralińska-Toborek, 2016, p. 86) [7]. However, Hajj graffiti is a design that largely breaks the Renaissance rules of perspective by presenting the signs in an out-of-perspective. Signs do not follow the perspective; they follow their hierarchical position in the story. The Ka'ba is larger than other signs, regardless of its position in the artwork. However, if the artists want to emphasise travel rather than the destination, the mode of transportation becomes more prominent.

2.4. Aesthetic graffiti in Cairo

In general, graffiti in Cairo has political or religious aspects. Pure artistic graffiti is an exception that emerged later. For example, two graffiti pieces are used for beautification in Mataria, Eastern Cairo. Despite the distance from the Giza pyramids, a theme is used in both face-to-face graffiti to emphasise Ancient Egyptian identity (Figures 11 and 12). Even some aesthetic graffiti pieces that aim to create an artistic atmosphere convey political or cultural meanings. However, there are a few examples of pure aesthetic graffiti created by non-Egyptian artists. Other examples are created by known and unknown Egyptian artists. Despite the authorities' opposition to graffiti, several artists secured official approval for their murals. In the 21st century, Cairo became home to several professional graffiti artists, among them el-Seed, Michalczyk, and Nofal.



Figure 11. An aesthetic piece of graffiti depicting the Sphinx and palm trees as symbols of Egyptian identity. The author, 2026



Figure 12. An aesthetic piece of graffiti depicting the Pyramids of Giza as symbols of Egyptian identity. The author, 2026

Because graffiti typically ranges from tagging to elaborate ‘pieces,’ the complexity of letter styles in el-Seed’s work renders graffiti illegible to the wider public. El-Seed, a French Tunisian street artist, created a magnificent graffiti installation on the walls of several buildings in Manshiyat Nasser, Cairo, in 2017. El-Seed’s work is a free and legal act, the result of his collaboration with powerful public institutions (Vitiello, 2024, p. 198) [12]. What is striking about this graffiti is that the entire composition must be viewed from the Mokattam plateau, hundreds of meters away. El-Seed’s work relied on Arabic calligraphy within abstracted designs and cheerful colours. To create a pleasant urban memory, he and his team created an anamorphic piece. The piece uses the words of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, a Coptic Bishop from the third century, who said: ‘Anyone who wants to see sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eyes first’ (“Perception | EL Seed’s Anamorphic Mural in Cairo,” 2026) [27]. El-Seed’s work belongs to the graffiti genre, which is more oriented toward aesthetic expression than verbal communication. Even if one zooms back to observe the entire form, one will find it challenging to read the words of Saint Athanasius. The colours and Arabic letters draw the observer’s attention to an artistic level, creating a pleasant space. In low-income housing, el-Seed’s work communicates in cheerful colours rather than in words. El-Seed was later encouraged to create three more murals on the walls of Darb al-Labana Street in Old Cairo, near the city’s Citadel, of which only one remained until 2026 (Figure 13). Those three graffiti pieces, however, were much smaller and visible from street level. El-Seed presents an interesting case; his work combines calligraphy and graffiti. His use of Arabic letters as primary artistic motives makes him a calligrapher. Nonetheless, as the overall work becomes unreadable, the cheerful colours and aesthetic composition make it a piece of graffiti. Moreover, el-Seed’s three graffiti at Darb al-Labana, near the citadel, feature abstract letters that the author found incomprehensible in linguistic terms. Despite the author’s linguistic impression, the use of Arabic letters and colours infused the space with a sense of cheer. One can easily distinguish between spaces with and without el-Seed’s graffiti.

The second example of a known artist's graffiti is Agnes Michalczyk, a Polish artist who has lived in Cairo. She painted murals in the al-Khalifa area of Old Cairo in March 2021. The mural works, drawn in black and white, depict local women wearing modest clothing and head coverings, accompanied by children, as well as elements from the traditional setting (Alaa Eldin et al., 2024, p. 4) [28]. Among the few Egyptian graffiti artists authorised to draw in Cairo's public places is Ahmed Nofal. Ahmed Nofal created a pharaonic-themed work, interwoven with elements of contemporary street life, on a building wall on Faisal Street, a few kilometres from the Giza Pyramids. One can only speculate that the context suggested the theme.



Figure 13. El-Seed's remaining graffiti at Darb al-Labana, Cairo. The author, 2026

Near el-Seed's abstract calligraphic graffiti at Darb al-Labana, two more graffiti pieces are noticeable (Figures 14 and 15). They depict a visual play with colours and signs. One of them includes a sponsor's logo, but both miss the artist's signature. During an unplanned visit to the al-Khalifa area in Cairo, the author's attention was drawn to two other significant pieces of graffiti. One of which was completed and coloured, and the other remained unfinished. The two graffiti pieces were not signed by the artist, despite their monumentality, which occupied two four-story residential buildings (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 14. A celebrative theme: Aesthetic piece of graffiti at Darb al-Labana, Cairo. The author, 2026

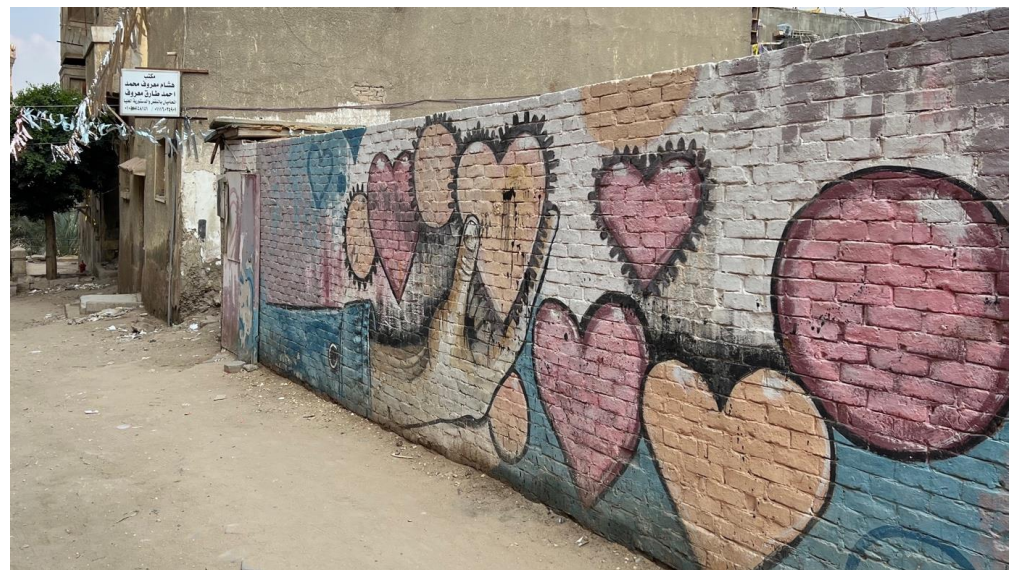


Figure 15. A love theme: An aesthetic piece of graffiti at Darb al-Labana, Cairo. The author, 2026



Figure 16. A piece of unsigned aesthetic graffiti at a community playground. The author, 2026



Figure 17. An unfinished aesthetic graffiti at a community playground. The author, 2026

Aesthetic murals are done by educated and uneducated individuals. The individuals might be educated professionals, such as el-Seed, or talented but not professionally educated. There are various types of graffiti which indicate talent but seem naïve (see Figures 11 and 12). Graffiti artists in Cairo, however, varying in artistic level, share common ground in relying more on signs and symbols than on artistic impression and philosophical meaning. Even in this case, abstract form and colours were the artistic means of beautifying the place. The effect of large-scale graffiti on the space is significant, imprinting the place with a memorable experience (Figure 18). While el-Seed's graffiti is challenging to read, the cheerful ambience of all large-scale graffiti is remarkable. Nevertheless, interpreting Agnes and Nofal's artistic philosophy is controversial. Their images can be described, but the relationship between their motives, colours, and figures is disputable.



Figure 18. A graffiti contributing to space beautification. The difference between the foreground and the background, which contains the graffiti, is remarkable. The author. 2026

3. Storytelling Walls of Cairo

Walking along the street, we read the city through a sequence of images, gathering information with each one. To greet the images, we have to offer them an alternative visual understanding (Tsilimpounidi, 2015, p. 83) [6]. Using elements such as images, colours, layouts, and illustrations, graffiti is among the most impactful forms of visual expression. It effectively communicates messages, ideas, or emotions, encapsulating the essence of visual communication (Li & Liu, 2023) [29]. Each graffiti carries a distinct message or narrative, ranging from social and political commentary to purely aesthetic themes. An ethnographic example of reading mural art is Susan Phillips's work (Phillips, 2020) [30]. Through graffiti, she reconstructs the histories of marginalised groups in Los Angeles, which reveals an untold narrative of the city. Sayed Owis's (1978) [31] study, *Hitaf al-Sametien (Chanting of the Silent)*, explains how writing on vehicles in Cairo in the 1970s conveyed messages of disobedience and opposition to the state's discriminatory practices. That is what makes graffiti an initial spark of communication, in which the silenced becomes visible. This is because graffiti finds a place in the urban language

through discourses that challenge indiscriminate criminalisation (McAuliffe, 2012, p. 2) [32].

The walls speak. Graffiti in Cairo speaks to us — it tells stories and constitutes a form of ‘urban language’ that characterises stands, turning the wall into a form of testimony. This is because graffiti is fundamentally a battle over memory (Nguyen & Pham, 2025, p. 21) [33]. But how can we listen to these stories? Mural art, of course, does not literally speak; it borrows its voice from others. Its voice appears as visual images, patterns, signs, and text. To understand what the wall says, Riga (2025) [26] argued that the first voice we should listen to is that of the artists: their producers. However, given the ambiguous legal status of mural art in Egypt, identifying the artist is difficult. To address this difficulty, Sarah Awad (2017) [34] interviewed residents and pedestrians to explore the meanings they attributed to graffiti in Cairo following the 2011 uprising. Nonetheless, this approach introduces the viewers’ perspective into the interpretation of the artwork. It does not introduce the artist’s voice; such an argument relies on the evidence presented in Sarah’s conclusion. Sarah concluded that mural art speaks through multiple voices. Such a multiplicity is most likely related to the diversity of interpretations among residents and pedestrians.

Another method might be to relate the art to a particular event or to look for similarities or contrasts in the signs adopted. While artistic and political murals might be controversial and subject to diverse interpretation, religious and commercial murals in Cairo are straightforward. Religious graffiti can be easily read, as it depends on symbols and written citations from the Quran or the Prophet Mohammed. Moreover, Hajj graffiti relies on symbols that are easy for the public to read. The similarity of those signs and symbols, and the communal nature of the Hajj event, make religious graffiti easy to remember. Using and repeating symbols in the graffiti indicates their collective meanings and consent. Even as technological and social changes emerged, the Hajj graffiti, for example, produced signs to address them. The camel, the ship, and the aircraft all represent travelling long distances and crossing the sea to reach the destination; see Figures 7 and 10. Similar signs, symbols, mostly colours, and combinations dominate the Hajj graffiti. Canova (cf. Kruk & Oort, 2015, p. 166) [25] speaks to the semiotic aspect of the Hajj graffiti, noting that the meaning and broader implications of each element can be immediately grasped by all who see it, as part of a sign language understood by the whole community. The presence of a single sign, for instance, the Ka’ba, suffices to let the signified emerge in its globality (see Figures 9 and 10).

Although the revolutionary graffiti of 25 January 2011 was a vital act of civil disobedience or a distinctive form of art unknown in Egypt (Dal, 2013, p. 249) [35], Cairo’s walls spoke differently in the early and mid-20th century. Numerous senior political activists explained to the author how they used street walls to convey political messages, express their views, call for civil disobedience, expose corruption, and encourage political contestation. Political posters (*Manshurat*), printed with a few words or a caricature, were posted on street walls to convey clear messages. Activists had to be quick because they were being chased by the police. The street walls were the early- and mid-20th-century media for political discourse. No one had time to draw on the wall because they risked being caught easily; their solution was to print the poster, affix it to the wall, and run. The game of cat and mouse played by the political activist is a hidden story behind every post affixed to the wall or every sentence written in haste. Furthermore, because the commercial mural relies on communication, clarity is essential. Even when the commercial graffiti is more artistic than informative, as in Figure 2, it is easy to draw attention to the subject. Though graffiti is sometimes more artistic than communicative, it is not limited to expressing beauty in public spaces. Pure aesthetic graffiti in Cairo serves a communicative purpose; it says, ‘I am here.’ Imprinting the place with graffiti reflects an individual or a group’s need to be noticed. Nonetheless, Cairo’s graffiti is not merely a

drawing on a wall; it is mostly a medium that reflects society's identity and ideology. This explains the overwhelming presence of religious murals in Cairo.

4. Graffiti and the urban context in Cairo

Graffiti becomes more visible when it functions as an antidote to the negative images and non-functionality of various places and is accompanied by cultural meanings and creativity. Figure 19 depicts graffiti cheering for a football player. Its location makes its message more visible than those in Figures 16 and 17. Despite differences in size and professionalism, the location of Figures 16 and 17 makes them unavailable to the public. While large-format murals dominate their surroundings, minor works stay effective through their reproducibility and haunting presence. Considering that the relationship between art and space also depends on the viewer's perspective (Gralińska-Toborek, 2016, p. 97) [7], Cairo's graffiti, depending on location, scale and topic, contributes to the development of space and its better reception (see Figure 18). Large graffiti requires an overall perspective that is challenging to achieve, as in Figures 16 and 17 and Ezbet Hamada's slogan/logo (Saad, 2026, p. 147) [36]. Mural art is created where it is not expected; it changes the existing place in unpredictable ways, surprising (Gralińska-Toborek, 2016, p. 85) [7]. Street artists use the space to publicly display social diaries (Tsilimpounidi & Walsh, 2014) [37]. Such a display expresses their consciousness that springs from lived experience (Tsilimpounidi, 2015, p. 75) [6]. If graffiti is to be understood situationally, the context is always a constitutive part of deciphering its meaning (Abram, 2024, p. 41) [38]. For example, the widespread use of Hajj graffiti in popular housing areas reflects residents' cultural values and their need to celebrate a significant and expensive ritual. Moreover, the urban structure of low-income housing invites residents to imprint their places with low-cost, non-permanent means, such as writing and graffiti, to withstand the authority's reaction to grassroots placemaking (Saad, 2022) [39].



Figure 19. Graffiti cheering for a football player and advertising for a commercial service. The author, 2026

5. Graffiti and politics of visibility, place and memory in Cairo

Graffiti is an artistic phenomenon difficult to pin down to specific fields. It is a form of resistance against the new liberal notion that only large corporations have the right to colonise public places (Vitiello, 2024, p. 183) [12]. The street is not only the artist's canvas but also a common space that everyone can identify with and share. As the observer and the observed become no longer indifferent and passive, interested, searching, and critical (Wanjiku & Extension, 2024, p. 18) [19], graffiti plays a social role in affirming identity and empowering marginalised groups. Aletto interviewed Selim, a Lebanese artist, who stressed the importance of art not being confined to galleries for a reserved *bourgeois* audience. "Mural art should be consumed by the street, by people! It has an expiry date: after a while, somebody will come and wash it out" (Aletto, 2024, p. 126) [40]. Turning their backs on the world of gallery art, the fine-artist founders of Free Form in Britain were determined to use their visual expertise to connect with working-class people. The Free Form story calls into question common understandings of the categories of 'art,' 'expertise,' and 'community' and makes it relevant beyond late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Britain (Crehan, 2020) [41]. Their engagement with the working class was directed to the streets, where they introduced art as a response to social exclusion (Cercleux, 2021) [42]. Mural art breaks the conspiracy of silence: one of its roles is to form artistic consciousness in urban places. It is decentralised and free from the *bourgeois*'s synoptic viewing in art. "It is a barometer that registers the spectrum of [public] thinking" (Chaffee, 1993, p. 3) [43].

In contrast to art in a museum, graffiti in Cairo is designed to be accessible to all, eliminating the traditional boundary of confined art. It aims to provoke thoughts, celebrate cultural issues, and draw attention to a significant stance. In a city where barriers to art are prevalent, mural art stands as a beacon of inclusivity, inviting individuals from all walks of life to partake in its beauty and meaning (Burger, 2023) [44]. The freedom of graffiti extends beyond mere consumption; it empowers individuals to become active participants in the creative process. From amateur enthusiasts to seasoned professionals, graffiti in Cairo offers a canvas for self-expression and exploration, "free from judgment or constraint" (Abdul Razak et al., 2025, p. 57) [45].

The street artist's choice of a particular place and surface is linked to the building's communicative capacity, as expressed through availability, contestation, location, and visibility (Vitiello, 2024, pp. 189-192) [12]. Graffiti is noticed through the alteration of the semantic and spatial field of the places in which they operate. It is employed in the urban landscape as an unconventional means of claiming place (Saad, 2026) [36]. Graffiti in Cairo indicates the artists' intention to mark a specific place, as their work is always bound to it. It probably indicates that art becomes visible and the space becomes accessible to people outside the elite and institutions associated with the authorities. Baldini (Baldini, 2022) [16] adds that the subversive dimension of mural art is its essence, given its ability to create a 'temporary autonomy zone' that allows people to express freedom from corporate and state control. Graffiti in Cairo depicts a lived experience that creates a politics of space, claiming territory by marking visual borderlines and engendering a sense of belonging by laying claim to an alley, a corner, or an entire area (Nandrea, 2002, p. 112) [46] (see Figures 7, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19). Claiming the right to place is not limited to political murals; commercial, celebrative, cultural, and religious graffiti works are various means for the silenced public to be heard.

Juan Eduardo Campo (1991) [47] characterises the Hajj graffiti as simple drawings with a limited set of signs. In his opinion, this indicates that people are working from memory. He approaches the Hajj graffiti from a semiotic perspective, viewing them as carriers with stories to tell. Hajj graffiti introduces resilience and flexibility; it maintains its symbolic expression while also creating signs for transportation and destinations. Switching from camels to aircraft and modern ships, for example, introduced these new

stories of travelling to the collective memory. The Hajj graffiti's overwhelming art form compels the author to make an educated guess: that the Hajj graffiti is meant to freeze the event in time and place, to be remembered as long as possible. Little attention is paid to philosophical, artistic, or political debates; the event, not the individuals, is the primary focus. The Hajj artists, depending on signs and texts engraved in the collective memory, make this form of graffiti comprehensive and require neither explanation nor interpretation from the artists or the residents. Canova (cf. Kruk & Oort, 2015) [25] provides a clear picture of the social and religious contexts in which these graffiti pieces are produced. Decorating the house offers pilgrims' friends and relatives an opportunity to share in the event and memories. Transforming personal memory into a collective. Sometimes, the only information missing from the graffiti is the artist's name. In other cases, artists wrote their names, addresses, and telephone numbers so they could be remembered.

As memory is connected to identity and culture, graffiti helps revive or enact memory (Monod, 2011) [48]. This mechanism introduces observers to specific narrative programs about the past and has them enact during their routine activities (Opromolla & Thibault, 2018, p. 464) [4]. Political muralism generates and regenerates schemes of public intervention in placemaking; this was especially evident during the 25th of January 2011 uprising (Saad, 2021) [49]. Strategies of 'interventions' are probably the closest to the surroundings, as they touch specific sites and insignificant, 'single-purpose' items (Gralińska-Toborek, 2016, p. 90) [7]. Furthermore, commercial graffiti is designed to be remembered. Even if an aesthetically displeasing piece of graffiti targeted the individual's memory, it would likely convey messages such as 'we are here,' 'think about our service when needed,' or 'you might need our service.'

Cultural trends such as the spread of graffiti indicate that marginalised groups have left their marks or memories in the public sphere (Rasan, 2014) [50]. In the UK, Banksy's street art has become iconic for its provocative commentary on social and political issues. His murals, often found in urban areas, challenge viewers to reflect on topics such as consumerism, poverty, and war. While controversial, Banksy's art has undeniably influenced public perceptions and contributed to the cultural landscape of urban areas, illustrating the potential of public art to provoke thought and inspire change (Olsson, 2026) [51]. Large-sized aesthetic graffiti are more impressive than small ones. However, they both introduce the observer to new experiences. They create memories or testify to particular memories. It is challenging to ignore the impact of graffiti pieces on the observer. Nonetheless, the duration of impact can be challenging to examine.

6. Graffiti in Cairo: vandalism, control, and the right to memory

Graffiti is often viewed as vandalism that undermines the aesthetics and design features of buildings (Ferrell & Stewart-Huidobro, 2021; Gómez, 1993) [52,53]. This official misunderstanding of mural art led to a zero-tolerance policy toward graffiti and, to a lesser extent, street art (Abram, 2024) [38]. Graffiti is often done without permission (i.e., illegally) (McAuliffe, 2012, p. 3) [32]. The authorities claim they protect private property and public space from unauthorised murals.

Moral geographies reflect normative expectations for the use and misuse of particular walls and, as such, can serve as a basis for inclusion and exclusion. For example, the criminalisation of graffiti artists is bound to the presence of a dominant moral code concerning property rights. The misuse of property by graffiti artists is thus understood as normatively unacceptable, as the wrong thing to do. Yet this transgression of right and wrong, the thrill of doing something that is risky and illegitimate, drives graffiti practice (McAuliffe, 2012, p. 4) [32]. Using a specific wall for graffiti requires the artist to calculate the consequences. First, there is the right of building owners to the surface of the

architecture. Secondly, there is the copyright held by the street artist, who changes the character of the medium without the owner's consent (Vitiello, 2024, p. 194) [12].

While political mural art is illegal, comprehending that, non-political mural art is also considered illegal. Remarkably, the Hajj mural does not constitute geographic morality; it does not infringe on the building owner's rights, but it does infringe on the public space. As it is commissioned by the owner or obtained with their consent, the Hajj mural cannot be labelled vandalism; it is labelled '*Baladi*'. This raises a question: is mural art illegal because it creates place-politics, or because it lacks the authority's consent? This question was prompted by the authorities' consent to the aesthetic mural art by el-Seed, Michalezyk, and Nofal. If graffiti in general is vandalism, why did the authorities give them permission? This introduces an urban paradox that indicates an exception concerning the application of legality. Such a perspective suggests that obtaining the authorities' consent shifts the graffiti from vandalism to art. This shifts the notion of vandalism entirely to authoritarianism and control. The authorities issue a notice stating that if you want to draw in a public place, you must have our permission. By gaining the authorities' permission, graffiti becomes no longer vandalism. The blog editor, Maverickbird, expressed concerns about the authorities' beautification plans for downtown after the 2013 coup. The blog editor wrote, I read reports of a major beautification project in the downtown area. Based on my experience, I believe it would lead to the demolition of the graffiti from the Arab Spring. It is sad because these are not just random Cairo street art but reminders of a huge cultural, social, and political movement in Egypt. These are memories of how powerful the people's unity can be and of what art can do to bring about change. I often wonder if this is why the city walls need to be cleaned, to be erased from their powerful Cairo street art and their revolutionary past (Maverickbird, 2022) [54].

One can argue that finding graffiti in public places suggests that the authorities can turn a blind eye to such activity, or that it constitutes some form of unofficial consent. However, as the public mostly creates murals away from main streets, the city authorities claim they lack the manpower to chase down every mural (an interview with a municipality official in 2025). Only the political murals are chased and erased. Dealing with graffiti in such a dual way indicates certain aspects. It is not vandalism *per se*; it becomes vandalism only when it involves the authorities in a place's contestation or conflict. In cities such as Berlin, London, and Melbourne, graffiti has undergone a shift in meaning, from activities originally seen as illegal to a legitimised medium in shaping city image and identity (Ardhitya, 2026, p. 700) [55]. This reinforces the notion that graffiti is more than vandalism.

It is true that not all graffiti is beautiful or impressive; some is naive or ugly. Thus, controlling graffiti is a means of eliminating ugliness from the city. However, who has the right to judge what is beautiful and what is ugly? Moreover, why do we deny the city individual creativity, self-expression, and cultural diversity? Whether graffiti is legal or illegal, it makes the place different. It is a global form of communication (Northoff, 2003) [56]. The authorities' consent does not change this fact; it merely puts the place's power into the bureaucrats' hands. Graffiti fosters a sense of place, when local artists—once granted visibility—can increase citizen participation, strengthen community identity, and improve well-being by reducing stress and enhancing quality of life (Kang, 2025, p. 3) [9]. Granting individuals cultural rights to the place promotes public, unconfined art. Community-based graffiti in Ezbet Hamada, for example, transformed physical spaces into vibrant places of cultural exchange and social engagement. Ezbet Hamada's murals created a sense of place identity, enhanced urban quality, and served as visual testimonies to the community's collective memory, depicting local narratives and cultural symbols (Saad, 2026) [36]. Moreover, projects such as the 'Mural Arts Program' in Philadelphia, USA, have successfully engaged local communities in creating murals that tell their stories and celebrate their heritage (Chinedu, 2024, p. 4) [57].

One might argue that, to solve the predicament of graffiti in Cairo, one should distance the urban landscape from such elements. Cities are cauldrons of creativity, evolving paradigms of community and civilisation (Abram, 2024, p. 42) [38]. In modern times, the call for the 'creative city' has become significant to the urban experience. Creative cities offer ways to mobilise the urban memory in the post-industrial city. Attempts to attract the 'creative class' (Florida, 2003) [58] into cultural precincts are essential to new mechanisms of cultural planning (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004) [59]. Hence, the loss of mural art denies creative individuals opportunities for cultural experience and experimentation. Alongside its visibility, graffiti might offer various benefits. Depicting local histories, fostering a sense of place and social inclusion. In Rio de Janeiro, the Favela Painting project has transformed neglected neighbourhoods into vibrant, colourful areas, enhancing the residents' sense of ownership and pride (Gesare, 2024, pp. 16-20) [60].

But how far can mural art's expression affect society? Imad Rasan considered this question important, but difficult, and it remains open (Rasan, 2014) [50]. The identity of mural art is produced by the artist's self-expression (Tsilimpounidi, 2015, p. 81) [6], as they create a possible semiotic relationship with the past, ranging from censorship to nostalgia (Leone, 2014) [61]. Pogrmic and Đerčan (2021) [62] argue that graffiti contributes to the construction of urban imagery and identity by creating social spaces that reflect the dynamics of urban society. Štambuk et al. (2023) [63] find that the presence of graffiti positively affects public perception, making public spaces appear more comfortable, safe, and attractive. Meanwhile, graffiti functions as a form of symbolic learning that encourages sociocultural interaction (Ardhitya, 2026, p. 701-702) [55]. Unlike traditional forms of art created in isolation, community-based murals emerge from collaborative processes that engage residents and unknown artists (Abdul Razak et al., 2025, p. 57) [45].

7. Conclusions

Within the study sample limitations, the following conclusions can be drawn:

In contemporary Cairo, urban stories extend beyond architecture and urban form. Graffiti in Cairo contributes to the city's visual narratives. It is not simply art placed outside; it is art intended to engage its observers and create spaces where people can both identify and remain invisible. Whether or not Cairo is emulated, its walls produce meaning and speak to society.

Except for the political graffiti of the 25th January 2011 uprising, in which activists chose the best locations for visibility, graffiti artists choose optimal locations for better visibility while avoiding conflicts with the authorities. If the graffiti artist does not have permission, they might choose a hidden location from the authorities.

Graffiti in Cairo speaks by adopting straightforward, common, and readable signs. Whether political, commercial, cultural, or aesthetic, graffiti does not address the observer in an ideological or philosophical manner.

Graffiti in Cairo offers a canvas for self-expression and exploration without judgment or consent. The most important aspect of Cairene graffiti is its ability to convey sociocultural, economic and political messages. Graffiti artists in Cairo care little about the story's players, taking from the story only what has caught their attention and processing it within the collective or urban memory. Therefore, graffiti in Cairo creates both visual and psychological differences, leading observers to perceive public space differently. It combines disclosure, anonymity, and intimacy, crossing the conventional divisions between ordinary and literary language. This makes it interesting as a historical testimony to the contestation of place. Unlike most commercial graffiti in Cairo, which is purely advertising, aesthetic and religious graffiti challenge the prevailing elite narrative, inspire empathy, and contribute to the creation of more comprehensive storytelling places. This is because becoming visible, challenging prevailing narratives, inspiring empathy, and mobilising collective memory create conflict with the state and the dominant cultural elite.

Graffiti claims parts of Cairo for sociocultural affiliations, commercial operations, memorials or romance.

The boundaries of Cairo's cultural memory are clearly expressed in Hajj graffiti. This graffiti is limited to celebrating the event, not the Pilgrim. Even purely aesthetic graffiti conveys memories and information, in addition to creating a cheerful atmosphere. It is difficult to attach it to philosophical or ideological aspects.

Graffiti in Cairo affirms local and alternative senses of place and of what is considered important in debates about memory. It tells stories through powerful visual narratives and interactive exhibits, fostering a collective memory that recognises the various cultural events and values. The need for visibility, self-expression and claiming the place explains why graffiti is most likely considered vandalism. In contrast, it can be understood as a sociocultural, political, and commercial expression that interweaves people, walls, and places.

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