

Harkusha, V. S., & Simonov, S. (2025). Determining the impact of street art on the urban environment. *Actual Issues of Modern Science. European Scientific e-Journal*, 38, _____. Ostrava.

DOI: 10.47451/cul2025-07-01

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Determining the Impact of Street Art on the Urban Environment

Abstract: This study examines the role of modern urban murals in shaping urban space and their impact on the social, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the urban environment. It is noted that the beginning of the 20th century was marked by the birth of avant-garde ideas, which were also reflected in visual art. The article presents an analysis of some modern murals as an element of the urban environment. The main functions of murals as an element of urban development are determined. Locations where the placement of modern murals is appropriate are considered. Images of the most famous modern murals are presented, serving both aesthetic and motivational purposes. The primary types of influence of modern murals on the psychological and mental state of people have been identified. Modern urban murals serve not only a decorative function but also contribute to the spiritual enrichment of society, creating meaning and shaping the unique emotional atmosphere of the city. The main trends in the development of murals are considered. It is demonstrated that murals can convey national, social, or psychological significance, stimulating reflection and engagement with citizens. Examples of iconic urban murals are given, such as the patriotic murals “Ukraine Will Win!”, Khmelnytskyi; mural “Ukrainian Soldier Sewing the Flag”, Kyiv; “Beauty Will Not Tolerate”, Rivne; “Russia Is NEVER Here”, Kherson; “Defenders of Light”, Kyiv; “Hutsulka with a Laptop – Past and Present”, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine. The importance of integrating murals into the urban environment, considering aesthetic norms and modern urban design strategies, is emphasised. Key locations have been identified for placing murals that harmoniously blend with the architecture and provide emotional interaction with the space. It is concluded that urban murals are not only an essential element of art but also a tool of social communication, which contributes to the harmonisation of urban space and the creation of a unique city identity.

Keywords: mural, public art, street art, urban environment.

Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked the beginning of the emergence of avant-garde ideas, both in art and in culture as a whole. This period is also characterised by urban trends, which in turn led to the mass construction of the same type of multi-storey buildings. Street art is an integral part of big cities. Art has a significant role in the spiritual and aesthetic

enrichment of the urban environment. Nowadays, the creation of the urban landscape occurs in an environment of freedom of expression and is centred on exploration and innovation.

The typical development of residential areas characterises Ukraine; most of the architecture of cities is made up of the so-called “Khrushchevkas”. Most industrial cities in Ukraine are characterised by monochrome architecture created through industrial methods, which contributes to the greyness of the facades of residential buildings, which deteriorate over time. As a result of hostilities, the vast majority of them have now been destroyed. Most industrial cities in Ukraine are characterised by monotonous and faceless buildings with technically obsolete structures, poorly planned and structured territories, and growing social problems among residents. Street art is one way to make these cities vibrant and alive. For residents of territories where hostilities have occurred, it can serve as a psychological release and attract creative young people to these cities (*Tyurikova & Pogorelov, 2016*).

The post-war task of urban planners and architects is to create comfortable living conditions for residents of residential areas, turning these abandoned areas into an attractive part of the city. Street art will make the restored cities even better than they were before the war and become an integral part of them.

The review of the latest sources of research and publications. The most visible and discussed form of street art is murals. The first murals were founded in Mexico in the 1920s, following the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), when artists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco began to create huge wall paintings that glorified freedom, labour, people, and historical heroes. Over time, murals have developed in the United States, Great Britain, and other regions, especially during conflicts in Northern Ireland, Palestine, Argentina, and Spain. Ukraine was no exception.

Allocation unresolved before parts of the general problem. Since Ukraine’s independence, wall painting has been distributed exclusively in the form of “graffiti”. The phenomenon of “graffiti” was not even distributed in the form of wall art, but more often mainly in the form of an act of vandalism. These were unprofessional drawings of very low quality, lacking any artistic value. Examples of such “painting” can still be seen in many cities of Ukraine, although not in such large numbers. Currently, the authorities are taking measures to eliminate such elements that distort the urban environment (*Chernyuk & Malinowska, 2007; Hrytsyuk, 2015*).

In Ukraine, wall images from the Soviet era in the form of mosaics have been preserved. The appearance of such elements has deteriorated significantly over time, and they require restoration work. Very often, such images contain elements of Soviet propaganda, which is unacceptable, given the events that are currently taking place in Ukraine. Therefore, the question also arises as to whether such elements should be eliminated or restored (*Ladan, 2008*).

Problem statement in a general view. The first objects of street art began to appear in Ukraine on the day of Independence in the form of graffiti, but art festivals gave them a real impetus. During the first art festival, “StreetArtFest” in Kharkiv, 40 street art objects were created, including six murals. The next wave of mural creation took place before EURO 2012; however, the events of 2014 became a powerful impetus, as murals began to be created in almost every city, outside of projects and festivals. The main themes of the murals were resistance to the aggression of the Russian Federation and patriotic symbols, which have become the main ones since the initially large-scale aggression on February 22, 2022.

The study aims to study the aesthetic features of modern street art, its impact on the organisation of public and urban space, and the cultural and spiritual education of society during martial law.

Results

Most cities in Ukraine, where asphalt, grey, dark grey, and blue-grey colours are mainly used for painting the facades of houses, and insulation of the same colours is used for insulating apartments. As a result, already nondescript facades age over time, become unfriendly, and have a gloomy appearance, especially with the mass use of the so-called “patchwork” insulation. Ukrainian, especially industrial, cities have faceless buildings located both in the centre and on the periphery of the city. Such buildings and structures become a springboard for the birth of a new art—street art. Walls and roofs become a canvas for young artists who want to share their thoughts, prompting the viewer to think about the actual or eternal. Artworks by street artists help add charm to nondescript high-rise buildings, making them an object of aesthetic delight. Increasingly, it was possible to see drawings of street artists at the ends of houses, which were made at the order of the administration. It is worth noting that all this was before the war, but we hope that the development of this art will shine with brighter colours after the de-occupation of cities and the end of hostilities.

After the end of hostilities, it is necessary to legalise street art and grant more creative freedom, as well as special preference to young people. In such cases, murals can be used not only as decorative elements on attractive facades and walls, but also for the development of this type of street art in public spaces. Ukraine has experience in developing murals since 2014, when local authorities invited street artists from all over Ukraine to paint their drawings in designated locations (*Simonov et al., 2022*). There is a possibility that we will see the same practices in the post-war cities of Ukraine, especially in the occupied ones.

Murals have tremendous commercial potential. They hide building defects, actualise social problems, and convey key ideas to the target audience. At the same time, murals remain within the realm of art and do not devolve into mere advertising. In modern art history, mural art is a form of street art, a legal artistic expression on the outer walls of houses in urban spaces for aesthetic purposes.

Muralists strive to express something symbolic in their works in an artistic way. In recent years, there has been a significant surge in street art: Ukrainian street artists have gained recognition not only in Ukraine but also worldwide. Citizens are enthusiastic about the newly created murals, and the city authorities have begun to invite street artists to collaborate. Street art in Ukraine has taken a place somewhere on the border between socio-political statements and contemporary art. This type of art often sparks heated discussions in society, but fails to leave anyone indifferent (*Miro, 2018*).

Street wall art is an indicator of moods, experiences, views and interests of modern society and is an integral part of the urban landscape, an attempt to make urban space more attractive and contribute to its harmonisation (*Hrytsyuk, 2015; Hrytsyuk, 2019*). Contemporary street art is focused not so much on the future as on the present. This type of activity attracts investment, promotes tourism development, and transforms dangerous and impoverished neighbourhoods

into affluent and prestigious areas. This is a powerful tool for social change, and cities have become full-fledged canvases for him.

Art, transferred from a single skilfully executed canvas in a museum exposition to the wall of a modern high-rise building and with the help of aerosol cans, receives a different filling. Passing by city streets, you can see how huge, picturesque images—the so-called “murals”—appear more and more often on the blank facades of houses. This is evidence that spontaneous street art was gradually “civilised” and organically included in the urban strategy of harmonisation and modernisation of urban space (*Shylo & Ivashko, 2016; Efimova, 2014*).

Ukrainians are renowned for their creativity and innovative approach to every situation. In particular, since the beginning of the full-scale war, many tracks, memes, and patriotic drawings have appeared. The murals that adorn houses in almost every city have become mainly symbolic. Despite critics despising street paintings on houses, mural creators argue that it is a new art form that gives voice to those whose voices are not heard. Therefore, in this way, artists express their attitude towards the war waged by Russia against Ukraine, react to individual events, or support the people who are going through a difficult stage in Ukraine’s history. In addition, they often utilise their creativity to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine by placing QR codes with links to fundraisers near them.

After February 22, 2022, murals can be divided into several main themes:

1. Honouring heroes are the Armed Forces of Ukraine, doctors, volunteers and others.
2. Memory of the dead is civilians and military.
3. Symbols of freedom are the trident, the Ukrainian flag, and the towels.
4. Calls for unity and victory are images of united hands in the colours of the Ukrainian flag.

During the war, murals appeared in almost every city, covering the whole of Ukraine geographically. The main centres are Kyiv, Dnipro, Odesa, and Mykolaiv, where numerous murals adorn houses damaged by shelling. There are murals dedicated to the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Lviv, Ternopil and Uzhhorod. There are murals about the invincibility of the city in Kharkiv. Irpin, Bucha, and Borodyanka are murals in memory of the victims of the occupation.

Famous examples:

“Girl in a Bulletproof Vest” in Kyiv, a symbol of the invincibility of Ukrainian women.

“Angels of Azovstal” are murals dedicated to the defenders of Mariupol.

“Flowers on the Ruins” in Irpin and Borodyanka, artists painted flowers on shelled buildings.

“Bird” is a mural in honour of the paramedic singer “Bird” from Azovstal.

The reason for the creation of murals is also the fact that in Ukrainian cities, there are still many images from Soviet times that should have been painted over a long time ago. Murals began to be created by both teams of artists and individual artists. Many Ukrainian cities have long suffered from abandonment, so the appearance of such elements is significant.

The centre of Khmelnytskyi is decorated with a mural “Ukraine Will Win!”. It depicts a heroic Ukrainian woman with a sword in her hands and a stork's wing instead of an arm. A Ukrainian woman with a sword in her hands symbolises the readiness to fight and repel any enemy. The Patriotic mural “Ukraine Will Win!” is a symbol of the independence and invincibility of the Ukrainian people. There is the mural “Ukraine Will Win!” (*Figure 1*).

An interesting mural was created during the battles for the liberation of the cities of Bucha and Irpin. The artist depicted on the wall the hands of a soldier trying to sew the flag into one whole. This is an action that symbolises the return of Ukraine's territorial integrity. There is the mural "Ukrainian Soldier Stitching the Flag" (*Figure 2*).

In Ukraine, there is a project called "Cultural Landing". As part of this initiative, Ukrainian artists have already left their murals in the de-occupied territories of the Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions.

Outstanding are the wall works of Ukrainian artists, symbolising the intolerance of the Ukrainian people to violence of any kind. The most famous mural of the city of Rivne is called "The Beauty Will Not Tolerate" (*Figure 3*). It depicts a girl with a machine gun, which symbolises Ukraine. The work is significant and aimed at strengthening the morale and psychological state of the Ukrainian military and people from occupied territories.

The heroes of murals can also be children. In the city of Kherson, there is a mural "Russia Is NEVER Here!" (*Figure 4*). The mural depicts a girl erasing the coat of arms of Russia—a golden double-headed eagle—and the inscription: "Russia Is NEVER Here". The drawing was depicted on the wall of one of the residential high-rise buildings as a symbol of the clear civic position of the citizens and as a sign that no crime will go unpunished.

In 2023, a mural dedicated to air defence forces and Ukrainian energy workers was unveiled in Kyiv. The mural received the symbolic name "Defenders of Light" (*Figure 5*). The winter of 2022–2023 has become a real challenge for energy workers. The enemy tried to plunge the country into darkness. However, the occupiers failed, so the idea arose to pay tribute to the defenders of light: every air defence soldier who defends the sky around the clock, and to every energy worker who restores light after massive attacks and hits on energy facilities. The mural depicts a soldier watching over the Ukrainian sky from the air, and an energy worker prepared to repair power grids in the event of damage, all in a matter of seconds. They are shown against the background of evening Kyiv, in which, thanks to their joint work, there is light in people's homes.

In 2018, muralists in Ivano-Frankivsk decorated the concrete walls of a residential building near the trolleybus stop. This is the mural "Hutsulka with a Laptop—Past and Present" (*Figure 6*). This mural holds a specific sacred meaning, which is that, despite the active development of IT technologies, Ukrainian traditions remain our national treasure. The mural depicts a woman of the past with elements of progressive modernity. In their painting, the artists harmoniously combined the authentic beauty and interactivity of modern technologies.

Here, we see a certain correspondence between the mural "Hutsulka with a Laptop" and the mural "Defenders of Light", as the current events unfolding in Ukraine often limit our access to modern equipment, requiring the work of military and energy personnel. If it were not for the protection of these people, it would be impossible to work with modern technologies, without which most Ukrainians cannot imagine their lives.

Conclusion

The rapid development of modern engineering needs of the city is inextricably linked with its visual component. It is in this area that the synthesis of visual art with functional tasks takes place, allowing the solution of not only innovative issues and the combination of new

technological techniques, but also enabling the perception of the urban environment as a modern, comfortable, and emotional space. Elements such as murals can be not only an object of art, but also a centre of attraction for both locals and tourists, which will have a positive effect on the city's budget.

Since the beginning of martial law, a large number of murals have appeared in Ukraine, expressing social and political moods, as well as contributing to the formation of the national identity of Ukrainians. Murals during the war became more than just art. They are a reflection of the events taking place in Ukraine. The murals support morale, preserve the memory of heroism and suffering, and unite Ukrainians in a common desire for Victory.

Conventionally, the murals that have appeared in Ukraine recently they are mostly patriotic, which is a natural phenomenon, given the situation in Ukraine. These are symbols of the modern Ukrainian Renaissance. However, some murals reflect significant situations that Ukrainians experienced during the war, such as the constant blackouts that occurred both in winter and in summer. It was a complex situation that led to a production collapse, making people's lives extremely uncomfortable. Ukrainians literally had to fight for light. At the same time, some murals appeared before the war and symbolise the combination of progress and tradition.

Studies have shown that elements of street art are becoming increasingly modern and progressive. However, at the same time, they do not lose their humanity and actively inform ordinary citizens and guests from other countries about what is happening in Ukraine, as there are events that one needs not only to be aware of, but also to treat with respect.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Patriotic mural “Ukraine Will Win!”, Khmelnytskyi, Ukraine



Figure 2. Mural “Ukrainian Soldier Sewing the Flag”, Kyiv, Ukraine



Figure 3. Mural “Beauty Will Not Tolerate”, Rivne, Ukraine



Figure 4. Mural “Russia Is NEVER Here”, Kherson, Ukraine



Figure 5. Mural "Defenders of Light", Kyiv, Ukraine



Figure 6. Mural "Hutsulka with a Laptop – Past and Present", Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine