



## Going Local:

# Deciphering Street Art through Urban Territory and Urban Territory through Street Art

Diana Raisa Laura Lolici

The Graduate School "History. Civilization. Culture", Babeş-Bolyai University, 400000, Cluj, [diana.lolici@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:diana.lolici@ubbcluj.ro)

Although often framed as a global movement, street art remains deeply rooted in local contexts in which emerges, making territoriality a lens for its interpretation. Using this as a foundation, this paper explores the role of territory in the deciphering of street art and elucidates the relationship between artistic expression, spatial configurations, and power structures, demonstrating that while territorial context is essential for interpreting street art, street art itself serves as an active agent in the redefinition of urban boundaries.

The study employs Romania's street art scene as a case study, examining how artists engage with the built environment and how territorial context shapes both the production and reception of artworks. Examples such as Pisica Pătrată's intervention at the Capitol Summer Theatre in Bucharest, revitalizing a neglected cultural landmark, or Orhan's socio-politically charged stencils and installations illustrate the intricate relationship between street art and spatial discourse. Future analyses of such cases will demonstrate that artists rarely choose locations at random, each site is deliberately selected to enhance or strengthen the intended message.

At the same time, the presence of street art plays an active role in shaping urban space, raising the question of whether the city begins where artistic interventions appear or whether its boundaries extend only as far as these works reach. This dynamic underscores the reciprocal relationship between urban territory and artistic practice: while the spatial and socio-political structure of a city influences both the shape and placement of street art, these interventions, in turn, contribute to redefining the city's territorial limits.

**Keywords:** street art, territory, site-specific, interpretation, urban boundaries, Romania.

## Introduction

The relationship between street art and the city can only be understood as a two-way process: urban space conditions artistic practices, while these, in turn, contribute to the tracing and renegotiation of the lived city's real boundaries. In the theoretical tradition opened by Henri Lefebvre, who argued that urban space is a social product and not a neutral framework (Lefebvre, 1991), and continued by Michel de Certeau, who differentiated between the strategies of power and the creative tactics of individuals (de Certeau, 1984), it can be observed that most often urban artistic expression is not limited to a simple ornamentation of surfaces, but rather inserts itself into the socio-political and cultural structure of the

territory, the works thus becoming site-specific, which contributes to the loss of meaning and recontextualization of the work in the case in which it is displaced or lost. The choice of techniques, forms, and especially of intervention sites is determined by the material and socio-political context, going beyond the aesthetic dimension: each work participates in redefining access, visibility, and the perceived boundaries of the city. Thus, the city and street art seem to be engaged in a reciprocal relationship: while the spatial, socio-political, and cultural structure influences the form a work takes and its placement, such interventions contribute to redefining the boundaries of a city.

### Choosing the place

As can be deduced, the choice of intervention site in street art is not an arbitrary act but a strategic one, articulated according to several factors related to the artistic purpose, the target audience, the form and technique employed, the thematic content, and even the legal status of the intervention. These factors determine not only the positioning of the work within the urban landscape but also its capacity to engage with the city as a social and cultural organism.

At the same time, the physical support of the work plays an essential role in shaping, transmitting, and amplifying its intended message. Street artists strategically select highly visible locations, frequently traversed by pedestrians and marked by intense traffic flows, precisely to direct public attention toward social and political concerns, including corruption, inequality, discrimination, and systemic abuses of power. In doing so, these urban surfaces are transformed into communicative agents, functioning as carriers of critical discourse that might otherwise remain unnoticed within dominant narratives. Interventions situated in symbolically charged sites, such as those adjacent to institutional buildings or historical monuments, further intensify this effect, as visibility itself is mobilized as a tactic of pressure and a means of contestation, turning the artwork into more than a mere image, assuming the role of an instrument of protest and civic engagement. The chosen space thus becomes an integral part of the message, reinforcing and contextualizing it while directly linking it to the realities it critiques. In this way, the street artist emerges not as a detached observer but as an active agent in urban life, instrumentalizing the built environment as both canvas and stage to provoke reflection, stimulate dialogue and expose dynamics that are often concealed.

### Form from place, meaning from context

When considering how the urban context shapes the creation and reception of street artworks, it is often the case that the artists involved have built a recognized practice within this type of work. To better understand how this dynamic unfolds, the following section presents four case studies of two of Romania's most consistent and representative street artists for this form

of practice, highlighting the relationship between their works and the specific urban sites in which they intervene.

An illustrative case of this kind of intervention was carried out by Orhan in February 2024 on the public benches situated near Piata Romană in Bucharest, a location that functions simultaneously as a highly trafficked urban node and as a habitual resting place for homeless individuals, thereby condensing within its spatiality both visibility and marginality. Through the use of the stencil technique, the artist produced monochrome images representing the silhouettes of human bodies curled in fetal positions, a configuration that operates as a visual condensation of existential fragility, social abandonment, and extreme vulnerability. The intervention is further accentuated by the addition of red paint spilling over the edge of the bench, a material gesture that assumes a symbolic function by translating invisible social suffering into a visible trace within the shared urban fabric, metaphorically articulated as "blood" staining public space and obliging the passerby to confront what is otherwise ignored. The discursive dimension of the work is completed through the text accompanying the artist's Instagram post, "No one sees. No one hears. No one feels.", which not only reiterates the critique of social indifference but also transforms the intervention into a multilayered act of civic commentary, in which visual form and textual inscription converge to expose the erosion of collective empathy.

This intervention may be situated within the broader tradition of socially engaged street art (Eales, 2025), establishing both a visual and conceptual dialogue with the series of works produced by Blek le Rat in Paris during the early 2000s. In that context, the French artist developed a sequence of stencil portraits of homeless individuals strategically positioned in visible areas of the city in order to expose and problematize a systemic social crisis. Through this practice, Blek underscored the paradox whereby passersby were willing to pause and contemplate the painted representations while simultaneously disregarding the presence of the real homeless persons situated in the same spaces. His observation that "creating an image and reproducing it all over the city attracts



Figure 1: ORHAN, [untitled], stencil on public bench, Piața Romană, Bucharest, February 2024. Source: Artist's archive.

people's attention and makes them talk about the subject" (King & Prou, 2008) can be extended to the Bucharest intervention, which similarly employs repetition, visibility, and symbolic displacement as mechanisms for transforming social invisibility into public awareness and critical reflection.

By re-engaging with this theme and employing comparable visual strategies, the Romanian artist not only denounces a local social reality but also positions himself within a critical genealogy of street art. In this sense, knowledge of the visual history of such interventions becomes indispensable, as the work should not be read as a mere act of empathetic representation but rather as a deliberate gesture of re-signification and amplification within a practice marked by ethical stakes. The intervention transforms the bench, an ordinary urban object associated with temporary rest, into the support for a socially charged visual statement, thereby re-signifying public space and foregrounding the marginalized realities of homelessness that are otherwise rendered invisible. Through this process, the artist revalues an everyday element of the city, mobilizing it to expose and critique the structural deficiencies of the social system. Far from being merely ornamental, and functioning as a form of urban political art (Wanjiku, 2024), the work

actively interrogates the city, compelling passersby to confront social realities that are often ignored or rendered invisible. Situating the artwork within a carefully selected urban context allows the artist to transform an ordinary public space into a site of heightened visibility and civic reflection. This strategic positioning fosters a dialogical engagement between the intervention, its audience, and the socio-spatial structures it seeks to critique, while simultaneously amplifying public awareness and establishing the space itself as a medium for collective consideration and ethical engagement.

In a subsequent intervention, the artist shifts attention from the public bench to another element of the urban landscape: the commercial advertising panel, which becomes both the medium and the target of critique. Rather than functioning as a neutral infrastructure of consumerism, the panel is re-signified as a platform for counter-advertising, its original purpose visually and ideologically subverted. Inside the display case, the artist inserts the image of a human figure depicted as cramped and suffocating, clutching a cardboard sign that reads "Advertising is suffocating us!!!", a direct and unambiguous denunciation of the mechanisms of commodification.



Figure 2: ORHAN, Advertising is suffocating us, Bucharest, September 2024. Source: Artist's archive.

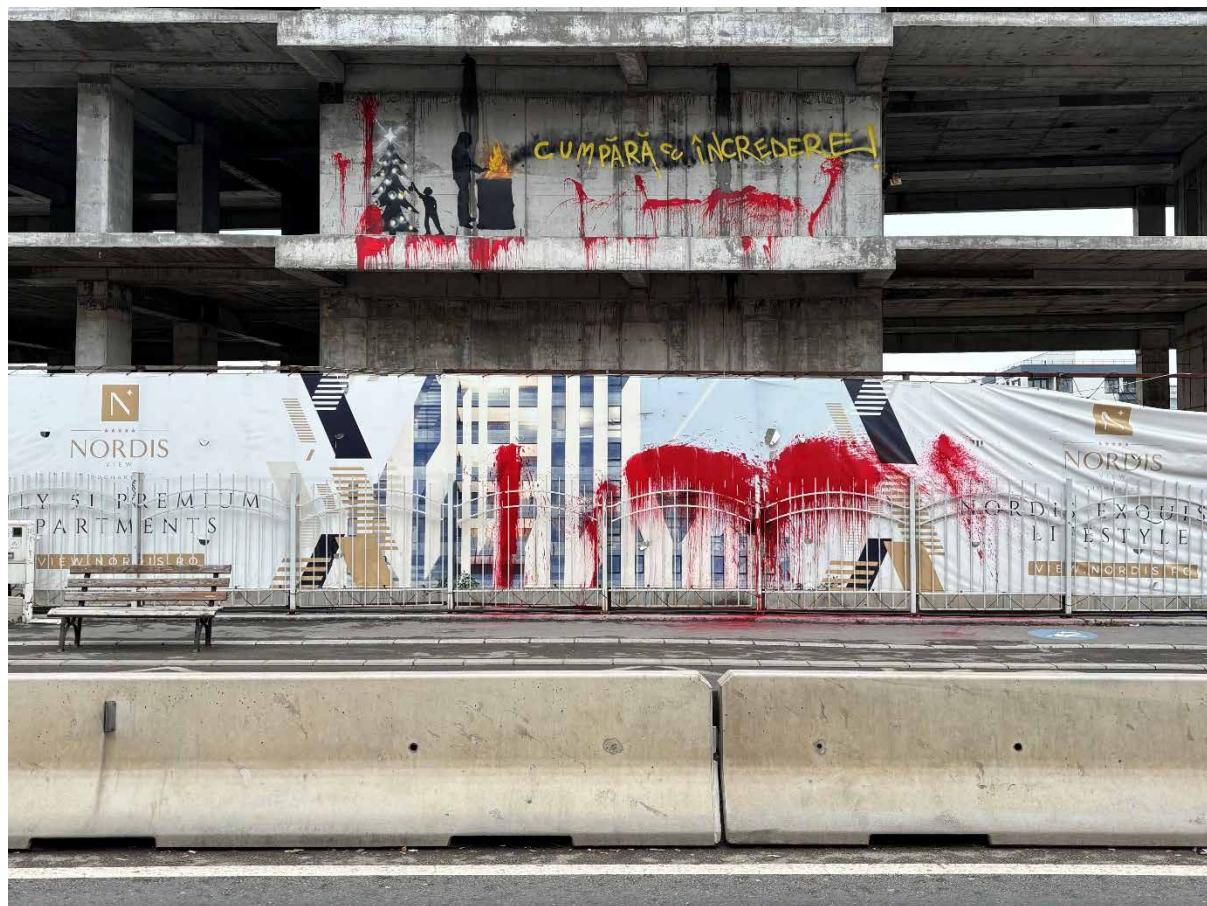


Figure 3: ORHAN, Buy with confidence!, Bucharest, December 2024. Source: Artist's archive.

The composition is once more punctuated by the presence of red paint spilling across the surface, a recurring visual device that intensifies the affective register of distress. Far from an incidental choice, this motif emerges as a recognizable marker of the artist's practice (Blanché, 2016), reinforcing a personal visual vocabulary in which repetition and recurrence serve to construct a distinct authorial identity within street art. In this configuration, the advertising panel ceases to function as a neutral support and is instead redefined as a performative site of protest. The intervention resonates with the Situationist strategy of *détournement* (Bonnett, 1999), through which the instruments of capitalism are appropriated and redeployed against their original ideological purpose. By occupying the visual infrastructure of consumerism, the artist interrupts its normative function, dislocating the expected flow of commercial imagery and transforming it into a space of resistance. The re-

sulting form of counter-advertising not only denounces the saturation of the urban environment with visual pollution but also underscores the deeper suffocation of shared civic space by corporate and commercial interests. In this sense, the act may be read as an exercise of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1991), reclaiming a fragment of public space from the logics of commodification and re-inscribing it with a critical and collective significance.

This critique acquires heightened significance within the Romanian context, particularly in relation to the case of Nordis, a real estate company that since 2019 has come to epitomize the rhetoric of aspirational capitalism, promising luxury apartments, premium lifestyles, and guaranteed returns. In practice, however, these assurances collapsed: by 2024, numerous buyers had yet to receive the homes they had paid for, while construction sites remained abandoned (Dimitriu, 2025, pp. 35-68).



Figure 4: ORHAN, Apartment key, budget key!, Bucharest, February 2025. Source: Artist's archive.

Against this backdrop, the intervention realized by Orhan on December 23, 2024, on the unfinished façade of the Nordis View complex operates as a visual protest. The composition depicts a silhouette warming itself beside a burning dumpster, juxtaposed with a child decorating a Christmas tree, thereby invoking the rituals of tradition. Emerging from the smoke is the sardonic message "Buy with confidence!", a direct parody of the developer's promotional rhetoric. Here, the promised luxury is subverted, replaced with images of deprivation, and the figures embody those who, despite having purchased "securely", were left without shelter.

When the initial protest was covered over in an effort to erase its critical message, the artist responded by returning to the very same location with a new intervention entitled "Key to the Apartment, Key to the Budget!!" Executed in February 2025, this work reclaims both the visual and ideological space, signalling not only the persistence of the problem but also a refusal to al-

low the issue to be silenced. In this iteration, the message becomes sharper and more satirical: the company's rhetoric is inverted, suggesting that buyers, instead of receiving apartment keys, merely contributed to the developer's financial resources. The act of repetition here transforms the urban surface into a site of memory, a contested ground where unresolved social and economic tensions are inscribed. Within the broader practice of street art, the re-occupation of a surface previously used for visual intervention is often understood as a response to censorship or the deliberate erasure of prior messages. Such repetition functions as a strategy of insistence, underscoring the urgency of the theme and reasserting the artist's commitment to exposing the social and economic failures inscribed in the urban landscape, while simultaneously resisting censorship, challenging institutional erasure, and asserting the artist's determination to maintain public attention on a theme deemed urgent (Brown, 2015).



Figure 5: Pisica Pătrată's intervention, Capitol Summer Theatre, 2009. Source: Save or Cancel archive.

A similar approach is evident in the work of Pisica Pătrată (The Square Cat), one of the most prominent figures in Romanian street art, whose interventions on the façade of the Capitol Summer Theatre in 2009 and 2016, supported by Save or Cancel, (Save or Cancel, 2018, pp. 22-32) demonstrate how artistic practice can simultaneously reactivate neglected urban heritage and mobilize public awareness regarding its material degradation.

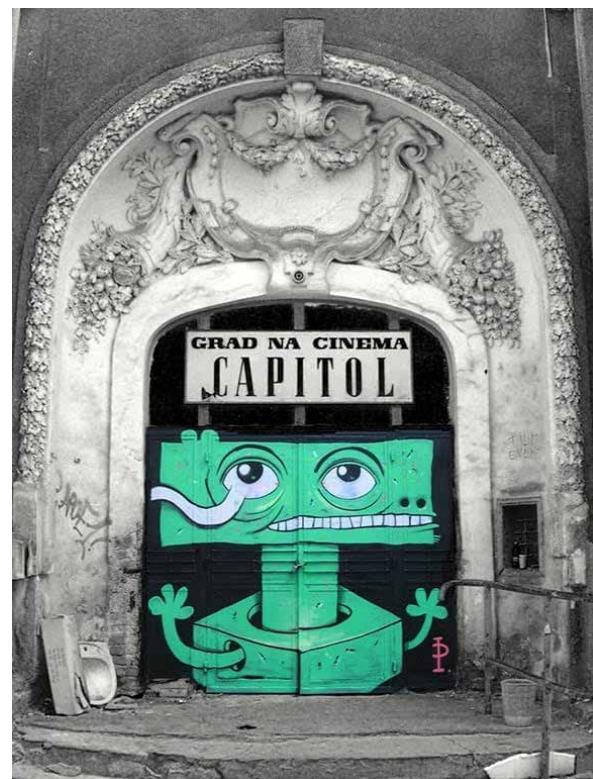


Figure 6: Pisica Pătrată's intervention, Capitol Summer Theatre, 2016. Source: Save or Cancel archive.

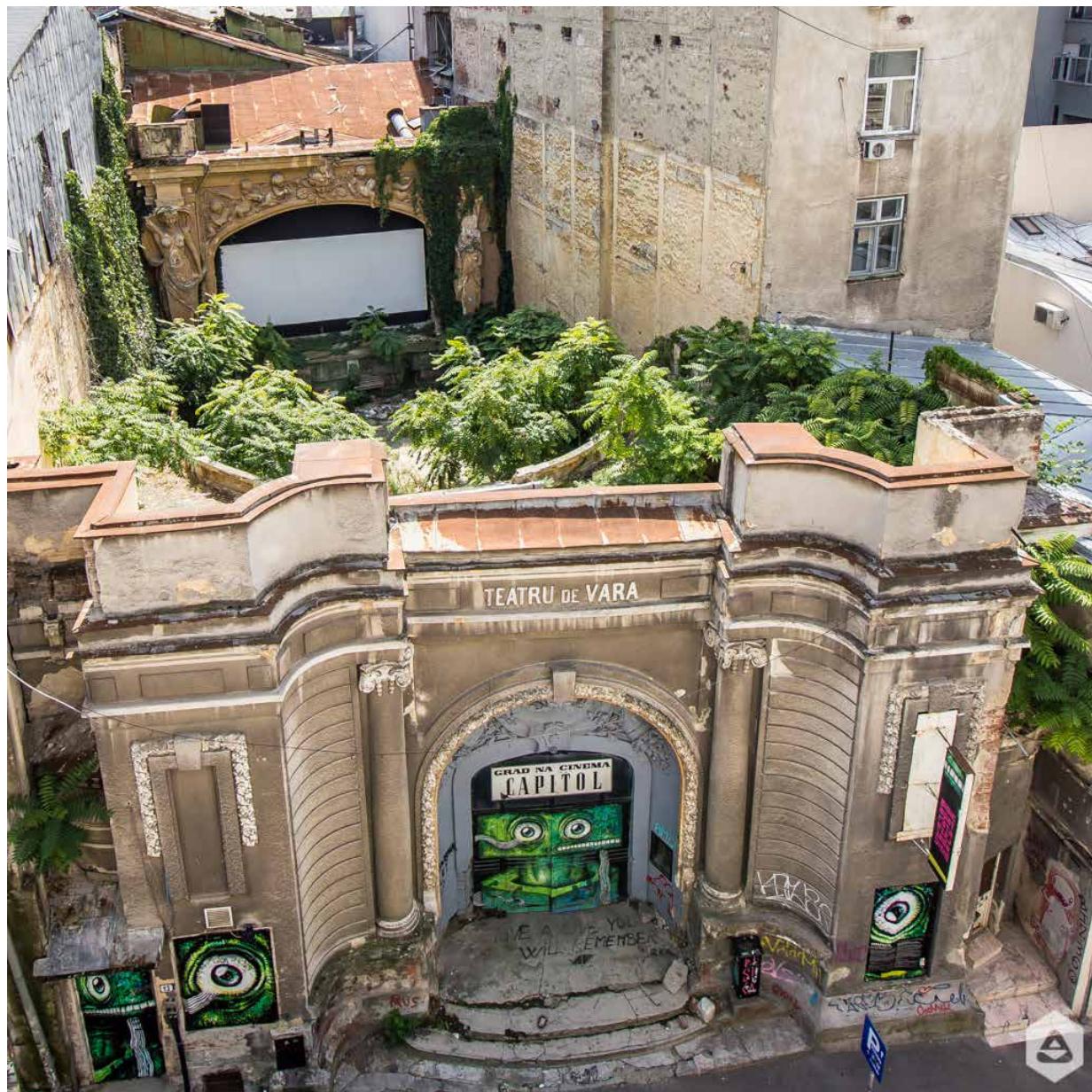


Figure 7: View of Pisica Pătrată's intervention and the Caryatides in the courtyard, Capitol Summer Theatre, Bucharest, 2017. Source: Save or Cancel archive.

In this case, the building itself is a decaying yet historically significant monument in Bucharest and becomes inseparable from the meaning of the work. Through the insertion of brightly colored, geometrically stylized figures that engage directly with the building's architectur-

al elements, particularly the caryatides of the inner courtyard, the artist constructs a visual dialogue in which the cat's bifurcated expression, simultaneously joyful and mournful, articulates the broader tension between vitality and decline, visibility and neglect.



Figure 8: Brașov peripheral zones - bridges, abandoned buildings.

The fact that Pisica Pătrată returned to the same site on two different occasions reinforces this logic of persistence, transforming the façade into a contested surface of cultural memory where repetition asserts both the urgency of the message and the refusal to let the monument sink into oblivion. The intervention thus functions as a site-specific negotiation between contemporary artistic language and historical urban fabric, re-signifying the façade as both a space of memory and a demand for civic attention. In activating this forgotten structure, Pisica Pătrată demonstrates how street art can inscribe new layers of meaning into the urban landscape, simultaneously preserving and rearticulating collective heritage through critical visual engagement.

#### Artworks as visual indicators of urban boundaries

Beyond the analysis of individual interventions, these practices reveal a broader phenomenon: in contemporary Romanian cities, street art and graffiti have moved

beyond their historical status as marginal acts of defiance to become visible markers of urban thresholds and instruments of informal cartography. They function as visual mechanisms through which the spatial order of the city is contested, inscribed, and rendered legible, disclosing not only where urban life unfolds but also where it is symbolically claimed and appropriated. In contexts such as Bucharest, Ploiești, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Sibiu or Brașov the distribution of interventions reflects a layered spatial dynamic. Large-scale, elaborate murals tend to cluster in central areas of habitation and cultural circulation, where their primary function is to engage with a broad public through visibility and symbolic presence. Some of these works are tolerated, even celebrated, by local authorities and institutions, serving an explicit function of aestheticizing urban space or contributing to cultural branding. In other cases, however, such interventions emerge in open contestation with those same authorities, occupying walls without permis-

sion and challenging the logic of official urban planning. Parallel to these practices, certain municipalities have developed initiatives to designate spaces for street artists: legal walls or curated festivals, that integrate this form of expression into the cultural fabric of the city, offering visibility while simultaneously attempting to channel and regulate it.

When it comes to the peripheral zones of the city, a distinct pattern emerges. On the outskirts, where the city begins to dissolve into industrial or infrastructural zones, the density of large murals decreases, giving way to rudimentary inscriptions: tags, throw-ups, quick slogans, that accumulate along bridges, overpasses, fences, and abandoned buildings. These markings, though less spectacular in form, carry a distinct spatial significance: they convert anonymous or neglected zones into symbolic gateways, signalling entry or exit points from the lived city. In this sense, while central murals address visibility and recognition within the urban core, peripheral graffiti, whether intentionally or not, functions as a form of territorial inscription, staking claims on liminal spaces that are otherwise marginalized or excluded from official cartographies.

Together, these two modes of intervention articulate a layered geography of street art, where works aimed at maximum visibility coexist with those whose purpose is less to be admired than to delineate boundaries, assert presence, and transform urban margins into sites of meaning. These liminal spaces, less subject to surveillance and regulation, often function as laboratories of urban creativity, offering conditions for experimentation and the emergence of new forms, motifs, and discursive strategies before they migrate toward more central, visible sites. Even the most ephemeral of these traces operates as a spatial affirmation, signalling habitation, presence, and visibility. They assert that the city is not merely the product of planning and regulation but a lived environment continuously negotiated and redefined by its inhabitants.

When mapped, the density, form, and placement of such interventions reveal a distinct psychogeography, one that charts the boundaries, tensions, and symbolic thresholds of urban life through the acts of those who

traverse, inhabit, and re-signify the city's fabric. In this sense, graffiti and street art enact a dual role: they document the lived realities of the contemporary urban condition while simultaneously reshaping the perception and experience of space. By marking limits, claiming neglected zones, and inscribing symbolic boundaries, these practices articulate a counter-cartography of the Romanian city, one that operates in parallel with, and often in tension against, the logics of institutional planning and governance.

### Conclusion

The analysis of street art interventions by Orhan, Pisica Pătrată, and other prominent Romanian practitioners demonstrates that these practices cannot be reduced to acts of aesthetic embellishment but must instead be understood as active agents in shaping and contesting the urban environment. The city provides the material, social, and political conditions that both constrain and enable artistic action, influencing the form, technique, and placement of interventions. Yet this relationship is not unidirectional: street art also feeds back into the urban fabric, inscribing new meanings onto its surfaces, redrawing its symbolic boundaries, and transforming ordinary infrastructures into sites of memory, protest, and civic engagement. In this sense, the relationship between city and street art is reciprocal, each shaping and redefining the other.

Case studies such as Orhan's socially engaged stencils on benches and advertising panels, his Nordis façade interventions, or Pisica Pătrată's repeated engagements with the Capitol Summer Theatre exemplify this mutual dynamic. On the one hand, the choice of benches, façades, or ruins is dictated by their social visibility, architectural symbolism, or historical weight. On the other hand, once marked, these sites no longer function in the same way: they acquire new layers of meaning, becoming stages for collective reflection and reminders of neglected or unresolved issues. Recurring motifs, re-inscribed surfaces, and persistent acts of visual occupation reinforce this reciprocity, showing how artists use the city not only as a backdrop but as a co-producer of meaning, while at the same time altering how the city itself is perceived and lived.

Beyond individual interventions, the broader geography of street art in Romanian cities reveals how this reciprocity operates at the scale of the urban whole. Complex murals tend to cluster in central zones of habitation and cultural circulation, where they are either tolerated as tools of aestheticization or institutionalized through the creation of dedicated spaces for artistic integration. At the opposite pole, other central works openly contest authority, transforming regulated spaces into arenas of confrontation. Meanwhile, rudimentary gestures such as tags and throw-ups accumulate on the urban margins, turning bridges, industrial fences, and abandoned sites into symbolic gateways that redefine where the city begins and ends. In these cases, the periphery offers artists the temporal and spatial freedom to experiment, while their interventions revalue neglected zones and inscribe them into the lived map of the city.

Seen through the lenses of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Michel de Certeau's conceptualization of tactics within everyday urban practices, Romanian street art emerges as a practice that not only responds to the city but actively produces it. These interventions inscribe lived experiences onto the urban fabric, generating alternative forms of mapping that reveal the underlying dynamics of power, exclusion, and collective memory. They function simultaneously as instruments of critique and as markers of urban boundaries, materializing the city's invisible structures and rendering them visible, negotiable, and contestable.

In this sense, contemporary street art in Romania must be understood not as peripheral or ornamental but as a constitutive practice of urban life. By creating and redefining physical and symbolic boundaries, it shapes the way space is lived, remembered, and imagined. It challenges the authority of official cartographies, producing instead a lived geography of the city: one articulated through acts of presence, persistence, and visibility. What emerges is a reconfigured understanding of urban territory: not as a fixed or administratively delimited unit, but as a dynamic field of negotiation in which walls, façades, infrastructures, and forgotten sites become stages for cultural inscription and civic agency.

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