DOI: doi.org/10.28939/iam.debats-137-1.4
ISSN 2530-898X (print)
ISSN 2530-8262 (digital)

Towards a new radar. Urban art and neighborhood identities in Buenos Aires

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Received: 31/05/2021
Accepted: 12/02/2022

ABSTRACT
In recent years we have seen huge growth in Urban Art worldwide. Many works highlight its link to city marketing, as a strategy that ties in with others in the global competition to attract investments. However, it is also possible to find other growth-drivers stemming from identity issues in terms of marking a place as one's own. On this last point, this paper analyzes how Street Art is intertwined with local identity, reorganizing neighborhood space and imageries associated with it in Argentina's Capital, Buenos Aires. An anthropological approach (which includes observations and interviews, as well as a survey of the literature, press and social networks) is taken to reveal the various needs, expectations and strategies served by community murals.

Keywords: urban art; local identity; Buenos Aires; neighborhoods; popular culture

SUMMARY

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Suggested citation: González Bracco, M. (2023). Towards a new radar. Urban art and neighborhood identities in Buenos Aires. *Debats. Journal on Culture, Power and Society*, *8*, 67-82. DOI: http://doi.org/10.28939/iam.debats-137-1.4

INTRODUCTION. THE URBAN ART SCENE IN BUENOS AIRES. WALLS AND ARTISTS ON THE GLOBAL RADAR

For several decades now, the development of Urban Art has been ubiquitous in large and small cities around the world (Schacter, 2013). The success of this practice can be seen from the growth of festivals, circuits, and recognized artists who travel the world painting for official and private events. Public Administration sees the beautification of cities through Urban Art as both modern and democratizing, as long as we can all access it. Fostering Urban Art is also seen as bringing public spaces to life and boosting their use. On the other hand, academic research on the subject has shown how such art spurs urban commodification and gentrification. Urban Art joins here with other aestheticizing experiences of urban life, such as gastronomy and tourism, to turn cities into exclusive spaces for consumption by the middle and upper classes. Given that these are high-impact, low-cost measures, by supporting Urban Art to spruce up anonymous or blighted spaces, both City Councils and real estate operators forge a link between art and the valuation of urban land (Rosler, 2017).

The city of Buenos Aires actively takes part in these global circuits and several local artists have achieved international renown, being in demand in large-scale events and projects. As in the case of other world cities, Urban Art attained official recognition after springing up 'in the wild'. According to Claudia Kozak (2004), ours is a society that is tolerant of illegality, so graffiti and other markings on city walls could flourish almost unhindered during the 1980s and 1990s, becoming more complex and taking different lines. After the economic and

institutional crisis that shook the country in 2001, Urban Art forcefully reemerged as a form of expression[1]. It was then when stencils gained prominence with all their communicative force, often on the fringes of The Law (Indij, 2005). The initial meetings, where the artists began to recognize one another, fostered collaboration between them, opening up new spaces and themes in the process. Regarding the techniques used, Gonzalo Dobleg and Guido Indij (2016) carried out a thorough survey in which they found a growing number of both creators and artistic techniques: stencils, freehand works, rollers, pasting, and stickers.

However, the professionalization of artists and official interest in the practice made for a more complex field. An example of public funding and promotion is that by the Buenos Aires City Council (GCABA), with its local version of Meeting of Styles,[2] an international graffiti festival that emerged in 2002 in Berlin, and that tours the world's main cities. Other officially-funded and promoted projects followed this path, giving rise to things such as the murals on the underpasses, the various editions of the Shop Blind Project,[3] and the GCABA mural festival itself, called *Color BA* ['BA' referring to Buenos Aires] (González Bracco, 2019). The works are carried out around these calls are of various kinds: figurative, abstract, playful, with explicit or poetic messages that are always celebratory, and as part of a big public event. There are ever more events of various kinds that include mural painting.[4]

However, outside the commercial/official circuit that seeks to highlight certain areas of the city for their commercial, tourist or real estate interest, another kind of Urban Art flourishes in Buenos Aires' neighborhoods. These are murals painted by individual artists, neighborhood or community groups that meet the need to express local identity beyond urban marketing. The techniques can be pretty basic (although they are of a high standard in some cases) because stress in not laid on the virtuosity of the finished work but rather on its creation in and with the community. In the case of the more professional murals, the themes chosen range from the merely aesthetic and playful ones to less celebratory ones incorporating social protest or commemoration of the dead. There is also celebration of certain highly local characters and spaces (neighborhood artists and athletes, references to the neighborhood soccer club).

This paper delves into those "other" forms of Urban Art that have sprung up and thriven over the last decade. The activities of muralists (whether individually or collectively) in various Buenos Aires neighborhoods and the city outskirts are analyzed from an ethnographic standpoint.[5] The approach includes observations made during the painting of murals, participation in events held by mural groups, interviews with artists, officials and neighbors. This first-hand information was supplemented with press articles, social networks and academic bibliography, which shed different lights on the phenomenon. One should note that this is not an exhaustive survey but it does set out to gather significant examples that show the divergent forms taken by the city's murals. That is why we chose the 'radar' metaphor, a system that detects objects and draws our attention to them. Based on this idea, we ask ourselves: What kind of Urban Art shows up on the official radar? What is left out? How do these

1 Apart from Kozak's text(2004), one can also see the film *White Walls Say Nothing* (Robson & Bradley, 2017) and the web page https://muralesbuenosaires.com.ar/

2 This was part of what one artist called the politicians swallowing up a formerly 'anti-establishment' event.

3 https://www.facebook.com/proyectopersiana/.

4 One should note that while GCABA patronizes Urban Art, it also has an "anti-graffiti" brigade that cleans off those wall-paintings it considers to be vandalism. In this respect, Urban Art is used as another social control and disciplining mechanism. Several of the neighborhood artists interviewed said some of their works had been erased by this brigade.

5 The ethnographic perspective seeks to grasp social phenomena from the standpoint of the actors involved, describing and interpreting their discourses and practices (Guber, 2016).

neighborhood murals work with or resist the City Council's commodification projects? What scope is there for creating another type of public visibility that draws attention to one's values on one's own terms by putting them on the radar? Our starting hypothesis is that within an urban neo-liberalization context, such artistic activity effectively strengthens neighborhood identity. It does so since it works as a material, symbolic marking out of the territory for those dwelling in the neighborhood, for those in adjoining districts, and for outsiders.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND MURALS ON AND OFF THE OFFICIAL RADAR

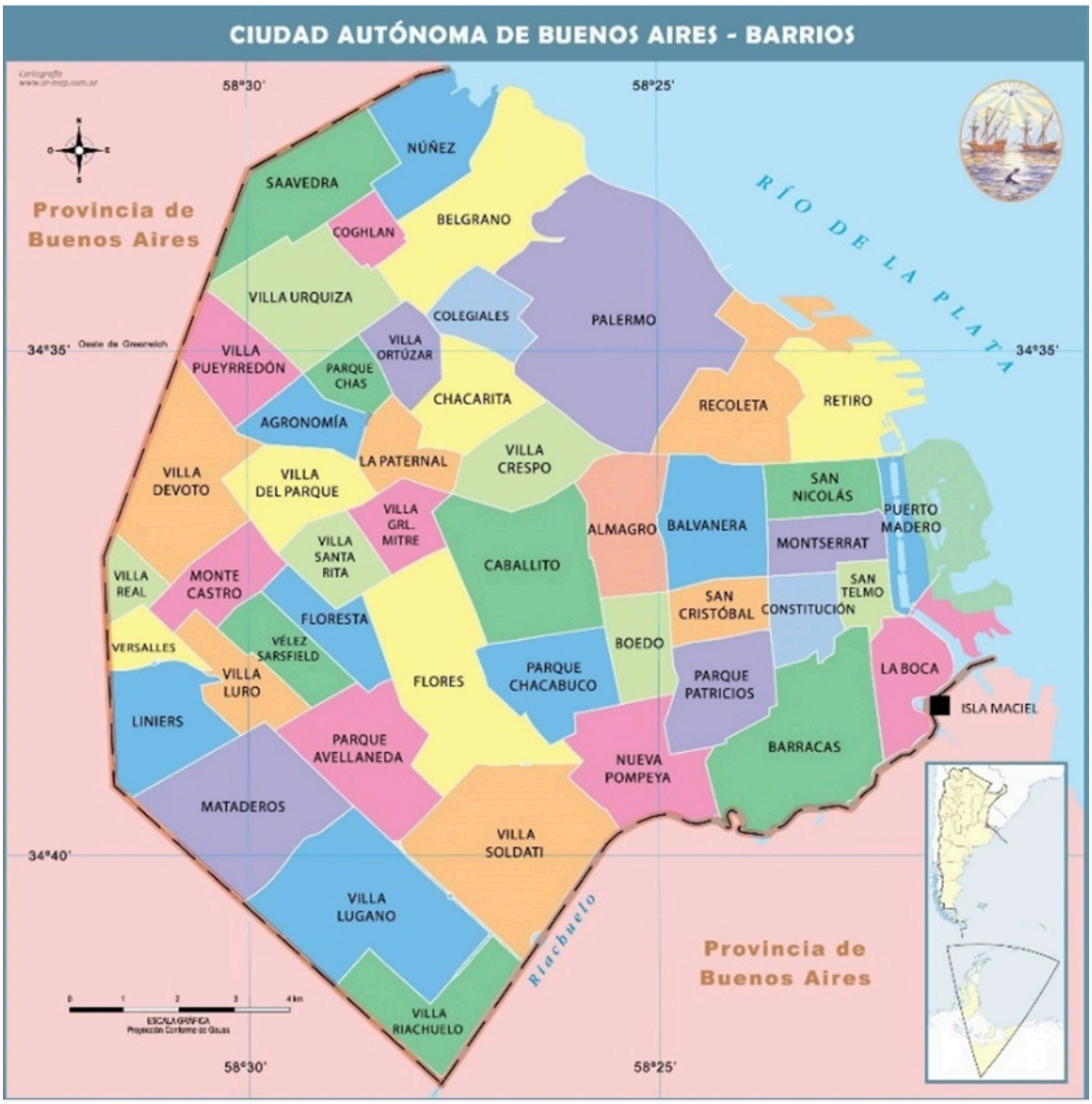
Buenos Aires has a thriving urban cultural tradition that is reflected in its neighborhoods. Although there are some well-to-do areas and others that are poor and blighted, most of Buenos Aires neighborhoods (Figure 1) enshrine middle-class culture, with a deep-rooted feeling of belonging. Most of the city-dwellers see themselves as belonging to a neighborhood, with various categories and imaginaries being articulated through this identity. There are cultural, sports associations, educational institutions, shops and other singular spaces in each neighborhood that shape how these spaces are inhabited, marking the territory in a unique way that is recognized by both the locals and others. Here we follow Angela Giglia (2012, p. 13) who notes that living expresses "a set of practices and representations that allow the subject to place himself within a spatial-temporal order, at the same time recognizing and establishing it. It is about recognizing an order, placing oneself within it, and establishing one's own order". Said conception of living goes beyond the merely domestic sphere to be anchored in the urban space, allowing the Simmelian conception of the condition of anonymity of the great metropolis to be qualified by understanding neighborhoods as places charged with affectivity. Compared to the central areas, which belong to everyone and no one at the same time, the neighborhoods provide scope for the feelings, discourses and daily practices of their inhabitants, and as part of their multi-faceted identity. Pierre George (quoted in Gravano, 2003, p. 15) refers to the neighborhood as the basic unit of urban life:

> "Whenever an inhabitant wishes to locate himself in the city, he refers to the neighborhood. If he moves to another neighborhood, he has the feeling of crossing a boundary (...) Public life develops on the basis of the neighborhood and popular representation is articulated. Last but not least - the neighborhood has a name, which gives it personality, within the city".

Marked by this imprint, neighborhood muralism reveals key differences with the murals made at events and festivals. The first difference is a spatial one given that neighborhood murals only make sense in the place they occupy. Beyond that, they directly allude to the neighborhood reference or some other highly specific context that only makes sense in the local context. The second concerns authorship, given that are not signed by single authors — the murals are either unsigned or bear the name of a group. They sometimes also show a name linked to the mural site. Third, the link to the setting is also different. The neighbors often not only give permission to the mural artist but even invite him to paint the work. The owner of the wall thus has his views on the design or takes part in it, and may supply materials and or pay for the work's execution and upkeep. Fourth, the execution of the work is not shaped by deadlines (as in the case of festivals) but rather occurs more spontaneously and over a longer period. This makes the very act of painting the mural part of a process that nurtures the neighborhood community, boosting local pride.

Last but not least, one should note that a given mural practice based on neighborhood values must be read in line with current trends in the city's development. It is not a simple urban renewal process, there are also aesthetic goals. The celebration of belonging to the neighborhood ties in with other agendas, such as the use of the mural as a strategy for highlighting State neglect, or as resistance to the staging of urban

Figure 1 **Author's adaptation of map of neighborhoods in Buenos Aires.**



Source: http://mapoteca.educ.ar

spaces for tourism. Based on these guidelines, we build a series of layers of meaning that are set out below to reveal how Urban Art shapes discourses and territories.

The mural as a celebration. Soccer neighborhoods

At first glance, pride in famous local people (such as musicians, writers, singers, poets and athletes) appears almost naturally in many neighborhood

murals. A common denominator in several cases is also the passion for the local football club. In Argentina, soccer is the most popular sport, and Buenos Aires has lots of clubs scattered throughout its neighborhoods, several of which are internationally famous. The neighborhood identity, in these cases, is greatly affected by support for the local team. Among other examples, we find the Boedo neighborhood, associated with San Lorenzo de Almagro,[6] while Parque Patricios is home to Club Atlético Huracán.

Boedo is a small neighborhood in the south of Buenos Aires, well known for its cultural and soccer tradition. It is fairly close to the city center and has its own very active shopping mall, while maintaining a residential profile of low-rise houses with long-standing neighbors. It has many cultural groups that make it a lively district and the neighborhood is usually covered by the GCABA's cultural and tourism policies.

In this district, murals began to spring up thanks to two groups: Boedo Pinta (BP),[7] which emerged in 2010, and the Grupo Artistic Boedo (GAB),[8] in 2012. BP's founder says that the goal of painting the neighborhood was to mark the territory in alliance with neighbors. Their murals mostly portray the neighborhood's coat of arms and San Lorenzo FC's crest and colors, although they also paint commissioned works for neighborhood businesses. Here, the identity embodied in the mural makes the group the bearer of the place's own voice, which transcends people and generations as long as the neighborhood functions as an extension of the home itself:

> It all started as a game to mark our area (...) in 2010 we did the "Welcome to the neighborhood" and that's where it all started. (...) Our murals are in areas where there are people (...) They are strategically located and not because we locate them but because we know the people who live there (...) We do not get to sign the murals, we become known but that's not the idea. Everything we do is for the neighborhood, it's not for us, like tomorrow if someone comes to paint them and I'm no longer alive, you'll grab a brush and paint it, you'll have everyone's permission. It's the same as your house, it's falling down, you have to paint it, that's how it is, and I'm going to do that because this is my house, Boedo is my home (BP member, personal interview).

The GAB's origins were similar. For them the murals are the skin of the neighborhood but that reveal its soul. They say that the process in more akin to revealing the walls' underlying identity rather than merely painting them:

> It is as if the murals emerge from the wall, it is not that we just cover it with a mural. It is more like passing a duster over them to reveal the history of the neighborhood (...). We look at what is in each place so that it can be showcased on the street rather than being confined to a book or to a museum. The idea is to make the neighborhood's identity available to everyone in a place that belongs to everyone" (GAB member, personal interview).

The GAB murals mainly cover themes linked to San Lorenzo (the club's idols, its history) but they also make room for other expressions of the neighborhood, with murals that illustrate motifs and characters typical of local features and history. Their work had such an impact that the group was declared of Cultural Interest by the City Council and in 2016 a journalist organized a collective book to narrate their career, highlighting the uniqueness of the experience and detailing the first four years of the GAB group's existence (Saldaña, 2016).

6 Club Atlético San Lorenzo de Almagro was founded in 1908, its first basketball court being sited in the Boedo district. In the late 1970s, this facility was sold and the club built another court known as Bajo Flores. Nevertheless, the club's roots have always been in Boedo. Now, steps are afoot to return the basketball court to its original location, though the move has raised the hackles of residents in other areas. The club's 'de Almagro' [of Almagro] designation arose from the fact that the area, which now forms part of Boedo, was part of the Almagro district back in 1908.

7 https://www.instagram.com/boedopinta_cultura/.

8 https://www.instagram.com/artisticoboedo/.

Although the groups do not work together, each respects the work of the others. Unlike BP, the GAB incorporates various techniques into its work — *porteño filet* [Buenos Aires 'Port Style'], mosaicism, as well as taking references from various pictorial styles in dialogue with the painted motif. In addition, they have invited or worked with other visual artists and have even made a mural with a group from Parque Patricios, which is home to Club Atlético Huracán (a soccer club in long-standing rivalry with San Lorenzo). It is worth highlighting this mural because it sought to present the rivalry with the neighboring club in terms of healthy sports competition, notwithstanding brawling between the fans of the two teams.[9] In a journalistic note on the subject, two members of the GAB argued that the rivalry between the two neighborhoods is fueled by the same passion for soccer:

> "Perhaps the closest thing to what is experienced in Boedo with San Lorenzo occurs in Parque Patricios with Huracán. Not only because of the murals that they also did. They are two very similar neighborhoods, where the same traditions are upheld and where the clubs permeate the streets", says one of the artists. "We are almost next door: most of them have a friend, or a distant cousin, or a relative who is a fan of Huracán and a neighbor of Parque Patricios" ("Boedo, the most painted neighborhood, is already buzzing with another Huracán-San Lorenzo match", *Clarín*, 03/10/18)

A first version of the mural, painted in 2014 depicted two fans who, while each wore his respective club shirt, resembled each other insofar as they also wore Buenos Aires' traditional clothing —with jacket and hat— and were set against an old street scene. The 'tradition' theme was stressed by using a black-and-white background showing a cobbled, lantern-lined street, with old-fashioned lettering and flourishes for the headline slogan. A second version of the mural, released in 2019, abandoned the traditional theme and joined the feminist agenda that had gained ground in recent years. For a sport traditionally linked to male honor (Alabarces, Garriga Zucal, & Moreira, 2008), the choice of two girls to represent the idea of "We are pals, not foes" remained fresh. The figures also gained prominence as they were much larger and the background also changed, with a colorful aesthetic depicting the neighborhood landscape found in both Boedo and Parque Patricios. Unfortunately, this mural was vandalized, suggesting social solidarity is still sorely needed (Figure 2).

9 On Argentine football culture, see Alabarces et al. (2008).

Figure 2 Evolution of the mural made by GAB and Corazón Quemero.

Photos by the author.

For its part, Parque Patricios lies to the southeast of Boedo and is home to Club Atlético Huracán. The neighborhood has two marked sectors split by Caseros avenue. The north, which is of a residential and commercial nature, houses most of the neighborhood's traditional institutions. To the south, an old industrial area with many sheds is either blighted or is under-used. The soccer field lies behind this area. Behind it lies land where social housing is being built by the national government. The plot was formerly owned by a railway company. There was a jail on Avenida Caseros until 2001. Despite local residents having a strong sense of identity and pride in their district, such land use issues led to urban blight in some places. The media labelled the district as a dangerous. These discourses began to change after the neighborhood was designated a Technological District in 2008 and the move of the Buenos Aires City Council headquarters to Parque de los Patricios —the main green space in the neighborhood— which marked the beginning of a change in uses. and land prices.[10]

Murals began springing up there in the early 2000s but it was in 2010 that, at the invitation of a group of Huracán fans, a call was made to fill Luna Street, which is the one that leads to the stadium, with murals:

> That street at that time was very dark with many abandoned houses, a lot of transportation, it was dark and poorly lit at night, so if a soccer match ended at eight, nine at night, it was really scary to walk there. With so much neglect, the walls were up for grabs, you didn't have to ask permission, it was 'just do it' (Member of Luna Quemera and Nacaruh, personal interview).

This marked the birth of the Luna Quemera group,[11] which after work on Luna Street, began to paint murals in Parque Patricios and its surroundings, mostly with a Hurricane soccer club theme but also covering other major cultural or sports figures in the neighborhood. Another of the mural groups active at the time was Metejón Popular. In an interview, one of its members recalls:

> When we started to paint murals, there was a discussion in the neighborhood chat rooms with many people against it because they said that what we were doing was horrible. Yet in reality we were managing the desire of many. (...) Perhaps those who said it was horrible were right, and someone else should do the painting. I wonder what we want. Do we only want to have beautiful walls or do we want to manage desire? They are two different things. I want beautiful walls and it's great but one tires of the merely pretty... The only thing you don't get tired of, is work that forges bonds (Interview with a member of Metejón Popular).[12]

Beyond the availability of walls in what is a blighted area, the main reason for painting seems to stem from a sense of community among neighbors, where the aesthetic quality of the mural matters less than the shared experience of painting and, that once the work is finished, confirms the place's identity.

10 The creation of the Technology District, together with other districts stemmed from GCBA intervention whereby The State sought to nurture private business in an effort to boost the area's tax revenues and 'economic development 'while fostering 'urban renewal' and battling urban blight and crime (Socoloff, 2013). Several Press Notes show the change in vision: "Parque Patricios: in transformation" (La Nación, 6/4/13); "Parque Patricios: changing fast as the real estate sector bets on the area" (Clarín, 12/4/15); "Parque Patricios becomes a culinary hub as the district goes up-market" (La Nación, 8/3/19).

11 Until the late 19th Century, Parque Patricios was known as "The Fire District" because this is where the city's waste was burnt. That is why Huracán fans are known as 'burners'. The Luna Quemera murals can be seen at https://www.instagram.com/luna_quemera/. In 2016, the group split up, with some of its former members creating Nacaruh, whose murals can be seen at https://www.instagram.com/nacaruh_/.

12 Interview held for the documentary short "Pintando mi aldea. El arte público en Parque Patricios" [Painting My Village. Public Art in Parque Patricios], available at: https://youtu.be/jr91ph03Qnk. This project also included a book(Valerio, 2019)and a web site: https://www.pintandomialdea.com.ar/.

Both in the case of Boedo and Parque Patricios, soccer, history, and famous people linked with the neighborhood are the context and pretext for the locals recognizing that the same space unites them in ways that go beyond geography. However, recognition has been mixed. The quantity and quality of the murals in Boedo have drawn attention beyond the neighborhood and today they are part of official and private tourist routes, and are promoted as part of the district's image. The fact that the murals have shown up on the official 'radar' has had unintended consequences, as we shall see later. The murals in Parque Patricios have had less impact as tourist attractions. This may be several reasons for this, for example the more sporadic nature of the latter district's muralist groups, the fact Parque Patricios is farther out on the outskirts and is considered more dangerous. On the other hand, the murals express a threatened identity, not least because unlike in Boedo, they were not painted to mark the area's designation as a Technological District.

The mural as redemption. Forgotten neighborhoods, stigmatized neighborhoods

Going beyond celebration of the neighborhood, there are other Urban Art experiences to be found in the city's district. More specifically, there are approaches to lighting and tarting up blighted areas that are ignored by The State. We shall now look at the cases of Barracas and Isla Maciel to illustrate this facet.

Barracas is in the south of Parque Patricios, an area with an industrial and working-class tradition. The neighborhood is split by a highway that, together with the location of a large hospital complex and a shanty town, break the neighborhood up into different parts. Within them, Barracas "is in the background", that is, on the southern edge of the neighborhood, and is also the southern boundary of Buenos Aires. It is framed by a landscape of low houses and large industrial sheds, some in use and others lying vacant. This zone ends facing the polluted Riachuelo river, an environmental emergency area.

As in Parque Patricios' case, Barracas was also affected by the official district policy. In this case, it was the setting up of the Design District in 2013, which presented an opportunity to repurpose abandoned spaces, taking advantage of the conversion of the old Fish Market into the Metropolitan Design Center in 2001 (González Redondo, 2019; Hernández, 2019). In this context, the southern area of Barracas hosted the second edition of *Meeting of Styles* in 2012, with 19 murals painted by local and international artists.[13] The company Sullair,[14] based in Barracas, was the event's main sponsor but later withdrew due to disagreements over the project curatorship. Unlike the case of Parque Patricios, official interest in the area faded after this event. However, after this experience, Sullair decided to forge ties with an artist who began working in the neighborhood as a host for other colleagues, giving rise to a practice that added walls over the years. Back then, festivals are what gave such projects the initial impetus so an artist curating the initiative was something new:

> Everything I told you about was done over a period of years, let's say, a long time, and it differs greatly from what Color BA is. For example. Color BA wanted to change the whole Usina de Arte area in just a week or ten days, right? I think there is a clear Council focus on the whole of La Boca district. Everyone knows the City Council is investing at the real estate level, at the tourism level, at the infrastructure level in La Boca. Whether one likes what it is doing or not, it involves renovating La Boca's tenement houses, villas and so on. Well, 40 artists worked over a week and they spruced up the neighborhood. We never wanted to take that approach. Instead, we read a little about

13 See *Meeting of Styles* in Barracas: https://youtu.be/1M4NEcf3my4

14 This company's cultural projects can be seen at https://www.sullaircultura.com/

> how the locals adapt to these murals and the images they depict (Curator artist of murals in Barracas, personal interview).

These first murals also implied a change in Sullair's relationship with the local setting and with neighbors in an area that was hitherto gray and anonymous. The difference the curator highlights regarding Council-sponsored festival murals can be seen in the book *Siete murals* [Seven Murals], covering the beginnings of such works. Featuring interviews with the participating artists, two anthropologists also made contributions to the book, revealing the affective bond forged as a result. Being a space forgotten by public policies, the murals were initially received with a mixture of interest and suspicion, although resistance weakened and there was soon a 'waiting list' of people wanting murals on their walls too. Although the murals bear very diverse motifs, they are not always rooted in Barracas' identity. There are also signs, hints and expressions that make "the locals feel like valued participants in the work" (Daels & García Dopazo, 2017, p. 104).[15] In the same vein, the curating artist noted that young people were especially happy that "at last something is happening here, in Barracas." This also boosted visits by tourists and residents from other neighborhoods, who tend to think of Barracas as "dangerous" or simply "empty." The murals began to appear in the media and a special tour was laid on to see them all.[16]

The lighting of the city's backyards by community actors and artists was also used as a way to overcome the stigmatization of these spaces. This is the case of Isla Maciel.[17] The area lies in front of Caminito, the most touristy area of the La Boca neighborhood. This small port neighborhood is administratively part of the Province of Buenos Aires, although it has strong links with the Capital in both symbolic and day-to-day terms.[18] At the same time, despite its closeness to Caminito and having a great cultural, historical and architectural capital, Isla Maciel has never been seen as a tourist site but rather has been labelled 'dangerous' by the media.

A few years ago, a group of residents and workers on the Island began to take steps to overcome this stigma. Among other projects, Pintó la Isla (PLI) stands out.[19] The plan was carried out by the art teacher of the neighborhood secondary school who, since 2014, began to fill the walls with murals. The project brought artists from all over the world into contact with students from the school with a view to fostering a new relationship with the setting:

> …when I started coming to school I told the children that artists were coming. They didn't believe me. 'No, teacher, they are going to steal from us" (...) That is because they too saw the neighborhood as screwed-up (...) Later on, I realized that many students did not know the neighborhood. I would take them to the other end of the neighborhood and they would say "I've never been here before, Teacher". I asked them 'How come, you don't live here on the island?' They would tell me they only travelled from school to home and back. As a result, the kids began to: get to know their neighborhood and community; meet neighbors; enter a neighbor's house — all things that were new to them. It made the community better (...) and although a student can show his neighborhood from another standpoint or re-signify it, the amazing thing is that they are showing their neighborhood from a cultural perspective, or

15 A video showing the progress of these murals and neighbors' perceptions of them can be seen at: https://youtu.be/hB2E2Z9BhGQ.

16 https://graffitimundo.com/es/buenos-aires-graffiti-street-art-tours/.

17 Until the mid-20th Century, the district was surrounded by the Riachuelo river and the Maciel brook, which was then culverted. That is why the area's name still bears the word 'island' [Isla].

18 Many children in Isla Maciel went to school in La Boca, while residents in neighboring areas use urban services sited in this district (Health, Commerce, Culture, Leisure).

19 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBMUPNM74g1ZuAYidtjjrsg

> from an angle they are proud of (Art teacher and founder of PLI, personal interview).

As the interviewee points out, the nature of the island and the discourses are socially rooted. Yet this project (together with others such as museums and community tourism) has broadened the kind of information about the neighborhood over the last few years. While Maciel continues to have a bad press, little by little one can also find other views that value the neighborhood, through its history, its culture and, of course, its murals.[20]

The PLI stress that the aestheticization of the neighborhood helped them grasp they had something to show to the outside world, letting the island be seen through new eyes. The colorful walls display images and stories invite one to imagine this space beyond its material reality. The opening of the community museum, together with the community tourism project, created jobs in areas that were badly blighted, where knowledge and practices had to be put to work in a new context. Thus, initially the residents interested in the project were advised by the Tourism Guide course of the University of Avellaneda, which had an office on the Island for a few years. Together they built the tour and wrote the script, and the visits open to both locals and tourists, in Spanish and English, with local guides.[21] History, architecture and murals are included, as well as football (the San Telmo soccer pitch is sited on Isla Maciel) and religious practice (there is a small tabernacle of Gauchito Gil, a popular saint, which greatly interests foreign tourists).

Unlike the cases of Boedo and Parque Patricios, in Barracas and Isla Maciel the murals generally lack direct links to the area. One can infer that appealing to local traits is unpopular given the stigma borne by the area. That is why murals here become a poetic path to redemption. In this we agree with Thomazs (2018) who, in his analysis of a similar process in a stigmatized, badly blighted housing complex in the Villa Lugano neighborhood, argues that it is a 'subversive' use of the rezoning processes, where local actors become active agents who appeal to Art and Culture to stake and justify their right to the city. In the terms presented by this work, these two areas showed up on the radar, using murals as a way to give the districts a more positive image, counteracting connotations of urban neglect and danger.

The mural as a complaint. neighborhoods versus economic and political power

A third layer of meaning around the neighborhood murals is linked to the messages they convey, whether in terms of recognition, statements, or complaints as the case may be. What does a mural mean in a context of neighborhood alienation? What happens when officialdom shuns local associations and their initiatives? We chose two diverse examples to find out, one in the Boedo neighborhood and the other in La Boca.

Boedo, as we have already shown, has a thriving, community-based mural scene. Later initiatives did not follow the same approach. Between August and September 2016, the GCABA called on various artists to paint shop blinds on Avenida Boedo. The artists used the colors of San Lorenzo FC and proposed compositions that included traditional elements of the neighborhood, such as the tango. Officials from the Ministry of Public Space publicized this action as follows:

> MORE POETRY IN #BOEDO
>
> We invite you to discover the shop blinds painted by various artists interpreting the neighborhood identity theme.

20 Also see: "Argentine and foreign urban artists are transforming Isla Maciel" (Minuto1, 20/02/16); "Isla Maciel is filling with Art and color to overcome stereotypes" (Clarín, 14/8/16); "Murals in Isla Maciel: How a group of residents used Art to boost the district's image" (La Nación, 13/11/18); "Putting heart into a district: students and residents start guided tours in Isla Maciel" (Clarín, 31/5/19).

21 An example of a visit and mention of the district's stigma can be found at https://youtu.be/-G4xb7zyBYI

> They are along Av Boedo from Humberto Primo to Pavón.
>
> We continue to paint more #ArteEnLaCiudad! [Art in The City hashtag][22]

Although the ad mentions neighborhood identity as one of the planks of the initiative, neither BP nor the GAB were called on to participate. The response was not long in coming and, shortly after, these murals had uncomplimentary comments sprayed over them. However, it was not vandalism like the one in Figure 2, where the original message was obliterated. On the contrary, in this case the graffiti that "ruined" the blinds had very clear messages, among them "Boedo is not for sale", "To paint Boedo you have to give your life for Boedo", "Marketing pimps, get out of my neighborhood" (Figure 3).

22 https://fb.watch/5M-eVJ9uCh/.

Figure 3 Graffiti on shop blinds in Boedo, painted by GCABA

Author's photos

The graffiti artists then realized that the neighborhood murals mean more than just prettying the place up, they are also an act of 'appropriation' that requires local consent and not just an official 'rubber stamp'. This explains why arbitrary City Council badging of 'a neighborhood identity' was seen as a marketing imposition deserving sabotage and resistance.

A different tack taken against the 'the marketing guys' in La Boca district. Caminito passage enshrines this strategy, which draws on a great artistic tradition and a major network of associations. The passage is one of the city's biggest tourist hot spots. The tourism story celebrates the city's roots in European immigration by depicting immigrant shanty towns as picturesque scenery. Yet such dwellings are poorly-built, overcrowded, and evictions and frequent fires threaten those living in them. Most of the families there are desperately poor. This urban blight also explains the strong stigma and the neighborhood is considered perilous.

Starting in 2012, the GCABA incorporated it into 'The Arts District', promoting a new narrative that would be attractive to investors and new residents with greater purchasing power, albeit with evictions and institutional violence towards neighbors to get results (Thomasz, 2017). In this context, starting in 2016 the City Council moved forward with Color BA,[23] a festival of murals that had several editions in La Boca. There, in the words of the producer of the event, the GCABA asked them for something that would have a big impact to accompany the changes they wanted to make in the neighborhood:

> … I think that this was accompanied by a lot of Council policies because they were working on sidewalks, while we were doing that, we were painting or before, we saw how they were changing things to turn the place from a factory district to a more cultural district. That's the side they're going for. I mean, we began to find out and, of course, they began to open art galleries. There were two or three before but the ones today are much networked, they began to open artists' workshops too. Now three little bars have opened. We couldn't believe it. When we went there a year ago, there was nothing to do at three in the afternoon, and today suddenly it's a lively scene. Well, a week before we started this third edition of Color BA, we saw busy streets that werenot here a year ago. We were very surprised (BA Color Producer, personal interview).

A link was forged between the program and its goals. In this case, the call did not include artists from the neighborhood, with it being felt that Color BA's proposal should be more 'laid back' and depoliticized. La Boca's social and cultural groups had already strongly mobilized to paint murals in the neighborhood, their themes reflecting daily life. This path made it possible for the multisectoral organization *La Boca Resiste y Propone* [La Boca Resists and Proposes] (LBRP)[24] to hold a counter-festival for which they brought together various artists and muralist collectives who carried out works reflecting the neighborhood's problems. The works bore provocative titles such as "Real Estate Speculation and Sale of Public Lands", "Housing Emergency Act for La Boca" and "Consequences of Exclusion Policies", among others (Figure 4).

An artist participating in the event stated that, unlike what happened with Color BA, local organizations:

> … create spaces that are highly visible walls packed with the neighborhood's history. What they do is look for groups that have been working in the territory and organizations or canteens or workshop spaces, various places that are also working in the neighborhood, that have already settled, and groups that have not settled but that work in the district, uniting it… (Artist participating in the counter-festival organized by LBRP, personal interview)

23 https://www.instagram.com/color.ba/. This case is analyzed in depth in González Bracco (2019). The program continued, with mural projects in other city districts.

24 https://www.facebook.com/La-Boca-Resiste-Y-Propone-Lbrp-1522981001352806.

Figure 4 Murals of recognition and denunciation in La Boca

Author's photos

Thus, territoriality and culture, material and symbolic marking of the place, aestheticization and politics of a space strongly stressed by deep conflicts come together. As noted in another work (González Bracco, 2019), these forms of opposition through Art are remarkable insofar as they cover the strategies of appropriation and re-semantization of the Boca space that the Council uses but that are re-appropriated by social and cultural organizations. as a tool for visibility and territorialized resistance. Here, a new 'radar 'is created that meets residents' needs, desires and imaginaries — something that goes beyond just tarting up the district in ways that nobody wants.

CONCLUSIONS. TOWARDS A NEW RADAR? TERRITORIALITY AND CULTURE IN THE MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC MARKING OF NEIGHBORHOODS

The path taken in this paper lets us grasp that the uses made of mural go beyond the purely decorative and/or official policies/real estate developments. The examples chosen point to certain ideal types for thinking about these divergences. They range from self-recognition to the need to change the link with the outside world and reaction against perceived threats. Returning to the expanded concept of living proposed by Giglia (2012), we find that neighborhood murals express a novel form of appropriation, where a neighborhood's history, delights, and problems are depicted on its walls, fostering a neighborhood communion that boosts identity, giving meaning to the neighborhood space, making it affective.

In formal terms, we saw how the code is open when it comes to murals created by neighborhood groups, though the art is figurative, with clearly recognizable elements for the audience identifying with them. Although individual authorship is also part of these practices, the collective gaze prevails over individual subjectivity or "creative genius", which is kept in the background. The approach used for festival murals focuses on big names and unique creativity, with large works seeking a spectacular impact. By contrast, in community muralism the artist's virtuosity serves the neighborhood narrative, transforming the mural —large or small— into an act conveying local values and that acquires vital importance. This is because its communicative value resides in working together to paint the mural, as well as in the finished work. In this case, a rapport is struck between the muralists and the wall owner, with the latter often bringing the artists something to eat and drink. Friends drop by to play music. Neighbors pause to see how things are going. Passers-by ask the artists who they are and why they are painting a given theme, take snaps and upload them to social networks, making the artwork go viral. Bearing this in mind, one can reasonably say that these popular practices "shape a collective memory and circumvent hegemonic narratives, impacting urban iconography. In this way, other 'unofficial' stories are articulated around identities and the construction of subjectivities" (Lobeto, 2018, p. 105).

The neighborhood murals thus meet varied needs, interests and strategies. As one artist stated, "each wall is a story". In some cases, being off the official or commercial radar greatly spurs creativity and neighborhood collaboration. By contrast, when it is picked up on the radar of official urban aestheticization policies, the works may command less local support. In some cases, State and market interest in the murals is well received, in others it may be questioned insofar as it hinders other ways of building and living in the city. In the latter case, dispute over control of the neighborhood's image then becomes a battle for control of the territory. In this confrontation, the mural is both a material and a symbolic marker, an imposition of meaning that is played out from wall to wall.

That said, we see the need to broaden the record and problematize ways for adopting the discourses and practices of current Urban Art as ways of exercising citizenship. Here, the intersection between the appropriation of space in Lefebvre's terms (2013) and culture as a resource in Yúdice's terms (2002) facilitates emancipatory experiences for ordinary folk. An unanswered question is whether these individual cases will go beyond ignoring/confronting the hegemonic power to come up with their own 'radar' — something that would let them show that another kind of Urban Art is possible.

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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