

Graffiti as a mirror of social and cultural dynamics in urban development: a case study of Jijel, Algeria

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Abstract: Contemporary urban development is accompanied by significant social and cultural challenges. These challenges profoundly transform the public space, its uses, and its practices, often resulting in alternative forms of expression. Among these forms, graffiti constitute meaningful urban inscriptions capable of making visible marginalized voices, conflicts over usage, local memories, and implicit critiques of urban policies. This article examines the role of graffiti as indicators of the social and cultural issues of urban development. Through a case study of the city of Jijel, it relies on a methodological approach combining structured observation and research interviews. The results highlight how these “graffiti,” these “expressive walls,” express forms of contestation, territorial appropriation, or claims, thus revealing their active role in the contemporary production of public space. As an essential component of urban development, public space serves as a strategic site where the social and cultural issues related to urban transformation materialize.

Keywords: graffiti; artistic expression; public space; Jijel; urban development.

Introduction:

Urban development in Algerian cities has been marked by an acceleration of spatial and social transformations since the post-independence years, and even more so since the 2000s (Cote, 1996 ; Sidi Boumedine, 2013). These changes, often driven by rapid, urgent, and national urbanization policies, generate significant needs for urban appropriation (Sidi boumedine, 2016 ; Semmoud, 2009 ; Khelfallah & Farhi, 2025). Among the most visible and accessible forms of appropriation, graffiti emerge as a powerful means of spontaneous and non-institutional communication (Bedjaoui, 2019). They transform city walls into individual or collective “voices”, revealing hidden issues of urban development (Khelfallah, 2022b).

This study explores the role of graffiti in the production of urban space, focusing on the city of Jijel, a coastal Algerian city undergoing rapid transformation and which has experienced socio-spatial changes in its public spaces in recent years (Kouras & Khelfallah, 2022) : with walls expressing urban texts of multifaceted dimensions. This article posits the hypothesis that graffiti, beyond mere acts of expression or vandalism, represent performative acts, whether deliberate or spontaneous, that actively contribute to the political, social, and cultural construction of the city, giving voice to urban actors and contributing to its co-production. The objective is to understand the role of graffiti in Jijel’s public space and their forms of expression/appropriation. Through a contextualized (Djidjelian) study, this work takes shape within a specific regional, social, cultural, political, and spatial framework.

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1. Graffiti and the production of the city

Addressing graffiti transcribed on the facades of public spaces means considering walls as graphic supports on which creative expressions construct urban biographies. Initially confined to abandoned and marginalized urban spaces, cities and their neighborhoods have begun to claim these new canvases of socio-urban texts (Schacter, 2013). Whether in the form of writings, drawings, or paintings, they represent a unique graphic language applied to walls not originally intended for such purposes. This language (Regazzoli et al., 2018) encompasses collage, tags, hobo, flop, graff, stencil, wildstyle, typography, block letters, inscriptions, bubble style, 3D, aerosol art, epigraphy, graphic art, frescoes, street art, art brut, ephemeral art, hieroglyphs, or calligraphy. It constitutes any unforeseen graphic expression that elevates non-places to the status of appropriated and theatricalized spaces (Khelfallah & Farhi, 2021).

The study of graffiti as a structure contributing to urban production no longer requires legitimization (Bonte & Slitine, 2022; Faucher, 2025). Since the 1970s, graffiti have proven their role as forms of symbolic resistance against the imposed socio-urban order (Bloch-Raymond, 2002 ; Riffaud & Recours, 2016). At the intersection of urban sociology, cultural geography, visual studies, and, more recently, urban anthropology, the study of graffiti highlights how walls mark and modify territories while expressing and shaping social texts.

In Algeria, studies on graffiti primarily focus on a few cities such as Algiers, Oran, Tizi-Ouzou, or Mostaganem (Sebih, 2019 ; Ouaras, 2019 ; Si Hamdi, 2019 ; Belhamideche & Ouaras, 2019). These studies mainly address discursive, sociolinguistic, and epistemological approaches related to political, cultural, and linguistic themes. Starting in 2021, studies examining graffiti in Jijel and their relationship to urban dynamics and/or citizen participation have emerged (Khelfallah & Farhi, 2021 ; Khelfallah, 2024b ; Khelfallah, 2024a). These studies are primarily the result of the effervescence known as the “Hirak”[†] movement, which Jijel experienced alongside other Algerian cities. Unlike other cities, Jijel’s protest movement was supported by a surge of frescoes, graffiti, and artistic demonstrations in the streets: the political demands of the “Hirak” were largely carried by spontaneous artistic dynamics that took over the streets and public spaces of Jijel (Khelfallah & Farhi, 2025).

Several years after the “Hirak” phenomenon, Jijel’s walls remain a stage for appropriation and diverse expressions. This study focuses on this period, between 2020 and 2025. The objective is to decipher the meaning and role of graffiti in this new phase[‡] as well as to explore the modes of production and appropriation in Jijel’s contemporary public space.

1. Research methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this research combines on-site observation, and research interviews.

2.1. On-site observation

Primarily through the use of photography, observation grids, and a field journal. Over 600 photographs of graffiti were cataloged in the main urban agglomeration of Jijel (within its urbanizable boundaries). Explanatory diagrams accompanied the field journal, providing further details on the composition and organization of the frescoes.

2.2. Research interviews

Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of participants, including graffiti artists, passers-by, and local residents of various ages and genders. All interviews were fully audio-recorded and transcribed, then subjected to a content analysis aimed at decoding both manifest and latent content.

The analysis relied on two types of analytic units:

[†] The protest movement that emerged in Algeria from February 22, 2019, until March 13, 2020 (the beginning of the COVID pandemic), demanding political change and the establishment of the rule of law (Zerrouky, 2020).

[‡] The “Hirak” has ended in March 2020. This study considers graffiti produced between August 2020 and August 2025

- Quantitative (numerical) units, enabling a lexicometric examination based on word frequency and recurrence patterns;
- Qualitative (meaning-bearing) units, corresponding to semantic segments identified within the discourse.

These units were examined through a systematic segmentation by word, sentence, or theme, followed by a structured process of open, axial, and selective coding. The analysis was carried out through a dual reading:

- Horizontally (horizontal condensation), to deepen the internal variations within each interview;
- Vertically (vertical condensation), to compare participants' narratives.

This dual reading ensured proper contextualization, weighting, and progressive saturation of categories.

To strengthen the reliability and validity of the analytical process, a peer debriefing procedure was implemented: a second researcher independently recoded 30% of the corpus to verify the consistency, stability, and relevance of the emergent categories. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, thereby reinforcing the robustness of the interpretive framework.

Finally, the results of the content analysis were systematically triangulated with the data derived from on-site observation (photographic material, field notes, and observation grids). This triangulation strategy enhanced the internal validity of the study and consolidated the reliability of the overall interpretive process.

2.3. Case study: Jijel's main urban agglomeration

Jijel, located on the Algerian Mediterranean coast, is a city characterized by rapid urban development. Since the 2000s, planning policies (port, university, airport expansion, etc.) have transformed the city, fostering tourism attractiveness (summer and local tourism) and significant socio-spatial adaptations (Khelfallah, 2022a). Starting in 2019, the Hirak movement amplified citizens' appropriations of public space, with graffiti becoming tools for protest and political expression. Today, the walls of this city continue to bear daily texts: spontaneous, deliberate, or orchestrated. These are the urban texts of everyday life.

1. Results and analysis

The analysis of the physical imprints found in the public spaces of Jijel's (main urban agglomeration) reveals a multitude of thematic frescoes and graffiti. After grouping, cross-referencing, and discursive analysis, the "expressive walls" translate three main fields: contestation, sporting identities, and embellishment.

3.1. Contestation: a timeless struggle, pictured and imaginary

Contestation represents one of the most significant themes conveyed by the city and its users. Through their words, these users inscribe grievances directly onto the walls, representing the spatial mark of appropriation. Between "social therapies" and "protest claims," the walls address issues ranging from intellectual poverty to unjust imprisonment (Fig. 1): "he is the son of the neighborhood; he didn't do anything! He was unjustly arrested by 'EDDOULA'[§]. He was only defending his brother. Life is unfair; Inshallah, he'll benefit from a presidential pardon and rejoin his family and friends!" (K.J., 57 years old, local resident and painter).

[§] "EDDOULA" refers to "the State" in the sense of formal authorities, including, in particular, the police and judicial institutions. In the context of this study, EDDOULA specifically denotes law enforcement and administrative services, which are often perceived by local residents as distant, bureaucratic, or occasionally oppressive. The term carries a distinct socio-political connotation, reflecting state authority exercised in a manner sometimes disconnected from citizens' needs, and at times perceived as limiting certain public freedoms. In interviews and graffiti, references to EDDOULA frequently convey tensions, grievances, or critiques concerning local governance and social regulation.

These contestations are considered the voice of truth. They can only be expressed anonymously through the city's walls: "the walls speak for us. They cannot be judged or imprisoned; they're made of brick! We give them a voice, and they carry it for us. Sometimes, we see EDDOULA's agents come and cover everything with paint. The truth disturbs them. So we write elsewhere! In any case, we write!" (A.M., 26 years old, graffiti artist).

In this logic, the voices are not only carried by the walls but amplified by their erasure. The traces of suppression become stronger than the act of enunciation itself, scrutinized in public spaces, revealing "muted walls" and voiceless texts: "by erasing the truth, they confirm its credibility. The message is delivered, it's confirmed! And everyone knows it, even those who erase it! The erased message is even stronger. Now, they no longer erase because they know it will amplify it. That's the role of graffiti-mission accomplished" (J.R., 24 years old, muralist).

Graffiti thus serve as expressions of contestation that leave a lasting impact through their presence or absence. In this sense, graffiti take on dimensions of a timeless, pictured, or imaginary struggle.

Fig. 1. Graffiti expressing despair, oppression, and victimization

Left translation: "knowledge is a light turned off in Algeria"

Right translation: "may God bring deliverance to every oppressed/prisoners"



Source: Khelfallah, 2024.

3.2. Sporting identities: a theatricality from the arena to urban life

Another recurring theme in the public space of the city of Jijel is that related to football, regardless of its scale: international, national, or regional.

On-site observation reveals a multitude of frescoes and graffiti directly related to sporting events, such as football, JSD (Jeunesse Sportive Djidjeliennne), EN-NEMRA (the panther, emblem of the JSD), the ULTRAS, 1936 (the founding year of the JSD club), Ouled la corniche, green and white (the colors of the JSD), UGG (Ultra Green Gunners), etc. (Fig. 2).

These graffiti feature colorful and embellished images with messages of hope, encouragement, identity, and pride: "first, it's a joy to see the streets in the colors of EN-NEMRA. These are messages for our children, for our history, and for ourselves. My father always told me about the JSD, and now it's my turn to tell my children. It's a legacy, our legacy, and we're very proud. Inshallah, we'll qualify, and the street will be even more beautiful" (T.B., 65 years old, local resident).

Fig. 2. Graffiti expressing pride, identity, continuity, and sporting heritage

Left translation: “embrace the ark, we are history and reality”

Right translation: “if I leave, my son will carry the torch”



Source: Khelfallah, 2025.

Football-related graffiti often carry stadium chants, terrace songs, and official club anthems. Thus, through interpolation, the city’s walls recreate the atmosphere of stadiums with the musical chants of the ULTRAS and JSD supporters: “it’s about the trace of our sporting events. We tell what we’ve experienced and how we share it. Each neighborhood represents a part of the stadium, so the stadium is everywhere in the city with its chants, its atmosphere, and its dynamics. Do you see the decorations? They’re the same as at the stadium entrance. Plus, here there are flares (Fig. 3) that never go out (laughter and a wink)” (D.K., 33 years old, JSD supporter).

Thus, graffiti of sporting identities represent scenes and stagings of sporting atmospheres, with copies in the stadiums and pastings in public spaces. Here, graffiti reproduce, translate, inform, and transfer theatricalities from the arena to the urban: it is the theatricalization of the city through the spectacle of sport.

Fig. 3. Mural celebrating the JSD in the LAZWINE neighborhood

Translation: “yesterday as today, always in love with her (the JSD)”.



Source: Khelfallah, 2024.

3.3. Embellishment: towards socio-spatial cohesion

Embellishment emerges as an ordinary and spontaneous act of urban appropriation. It is a common practice that associates frescoes with the decoration of walls and urban landscapes.

Lexicological analysis reveals a significant thematic connection between qualifiers of embellishment and aesthetics and terms such as fresco, painting, graffiti, tags, etc. Indeed, in the subconscious of local residents, aesthetic messages are a primary concern in the creation of graffiti, even though awareness of the underlying messages is real: “thanks to them, the neighborhood is beautiful, clean, and distinctive. I know these frescoes carry messages, but aesthetics are just as important as the messages. They have transformed the neighborhood’s landscape, making it much more pleasant and beautiful. I am proud to live in this neighborhood. Ideally, all walls should be painted. This isn’t just my opinion; everyone is asking for it. We even discussed it with the neighborhood association, and we plan to ask the graffiti artists to create something here” (H.A., 55 years old, local resident).

Embellishment thus fosters social cohesion in neighborhoods, creating a sense of belonging and a need for aesthetic distinction.

Fig. 4. Commissioned embellishment for the ‘Barberousse’ restaurant in Jijel



Source: Khelfallah, 2021.

These results confirm that graffiti actively contribute to the production of urban development by marking territories, making marginalized voices visible, and challenging official narratives. They create dynamics of social cohesion, urban theatricalities, and timeless struggles.

Conclusion

Graffiti, as “voices of the walls,” reveal the politico-aesthetic and socio-cultural issues of urban development in Jijel. They transform public space into an arena of contestation and appropriation, contributing to an expressive and vibrant city.

The study of graffiti in Jijel between 2020 and 2025 highlights their status as active actors in the production of urban development, transcending their traditional perception as mere vandalism to position them within a structuring socio-spatial dynamic.

This work underscores the role of graffiti in the public space of the city of Jijel. In this study, graffiti represent everyday tactics that subvert institutional urban planning strategies, enabling marginalized or assertive citizens to appropriate and reconfigure public space. Graffiti thus function as empirical indicators of the tensions inherent in accelerated development: they materialize forms

of political contestation, social claims, and collective theatricalities, often obscured by official narratives.

This study demonstrates that these visual expressions contribute to the production of collective meanings, fostering urban dynamics, socio-spatial appropriation, and the emergence of new practices. Graffiti in Jijel are not limited to mere ornamentation; they actively participate in the co-construction of the urban landscape across its physical, social, economic, political, aesthetic, and identity-related dimensions.

These findings open up concrete perspectives for contemporary urban policy, suggesting actionable pathways for planners and municipal authorities to positively valorize and channel these practices. In this regard, several recommendations can be proposed:

- Recognize graffiti as legitimate expressions of urban citizenship, integrating them into participatory dialogue mechanisms with residents;
- Create dedicated mediation spaces for graffiti practice, while promoting neighborhood beautification and positive appropriation;
- Develop co-design strategies for urban planning, where the voices conveyed through graffiti are consulted in redevelopment projects, ensuring that citizens' needs, symbolic representations, and aesthetic preferences are considered;
- Integrate graffiti practices into cultural and educational policies, recognizing them as vehicles for cultural transmission and civic expression.

The implementation of these recommendations would transform graffiti into a genuine lever for citizen participation and inclusive urban planning, thereby strengthening the city's social and cultural vitality.

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