

Collective memory and governance through graffiti in Medellin, Colombia

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Resumen

La cultura ha sido utilizada por muchos años como un mecanismo para expresar y desafiar el orden establecido. En las últimas décadas los actores públicos han aumentado su interés en las expresiones culturales por su importancia económica y social. Desde los setentas académicos se han dedicado a estudiar la dinámica del mundo urbano con el análisis de subcultura. En Medellín, una ciudad conocida por su violencia, la subcultura del graffiti ha sido adoptada como un instrumento para expresar una memoria colectiva y el control de diferentes grupos sobre el territorio. El graffiti puede ser un mecanismo para entender el comportamiento, las actitudes y los procesos sociales en diferentes segmentos de la sociedad. Puede ser empleado como un medio para conceptualizar una lectura del espacio urbano, y los actores sociales utilizan el graffiti como una herramienta de comunicación para construir una identidad. Esta investigación analiza dos aspectos del graffiti en el contexto urbano de Medellín: 1) la transformación del graffiti de una memoria colectiva a una herramienta para implementar políticas públicas, y 2) el graffiti como un referente sobre la gobernanza del territorio. Este trabajo enfoca estos objetivos en el caso de la Comuna 13 en Medellín, un espacio en la ciudad que incorpora las dinámicas de violencia, memoria y políticas públicas en la ciudad. En esta comuna el graffiti ha sido utilizado como un instrumento para crear miedo, esperanza y memoria a través del tiempo. Esta investigación no busca definir el graffiti sino utilizarlo como un instrumento analítico para comprender el contexto urbano focalizándose en la construcción de una memoria colectiva y el control sobre un territorio. Con un análisis multidisciplinario entre gobernanza urbana, cultura urbana y políticas públicas este trabajo analiza la movilización de ideas a través de la cultura de actores sociales, públicos y grupos ilegales.

Abstract

Culture can be used as a mean to communicate ideas and thoughts of a community in a territory. In the last decades policy makers have increased the interest on cultural expressions due to its economical and social importance. Since the seventies researchers have focused not only on culture but also on subculture as a mechanism to comprehend cities. In Medellín, a city known for its violence, the graffiti subculture has played an important role to build a collective memory and governance of the territory. Graffiti can be used as an analytical instrument to understand behaviors, attitudes and social processes in different segments of the society. It can be used as a mean to conceptualize the lecture of the urban space and its actors to build an identity. This paper explores two main aspects of graffiti in the urban territory: 1) the transformation of graffiti from a collective memory to a policy instrument and 2) graffiti as an instrument to identify the governance of a territory. Focusing in the Comuna 13 this paper underlines how different social, public and illegal actors use graffiti as a mechanism to mobilize ideas and govern a territory.

*“Graffiti is a revolution, it’s way of forming artists. It is an open museum in the neighborhood.”
El Perro, graffiter of the Comuna 13*

Culture has been used for many years as a mean of expressing social concerns to challenge the established order and in the last decades culture has become a center of interest of policy makers because of its economical and social importance. Since the 1970s there are various scholars dedicated to framing and understanding the dynamics of the urban world through the analysis of subculture (Hebdige, 1979). In Medellin, a city known for its violence and drug cartels, graffiti subculture has been an instrument to foster a collective memory and a form of expressing control over a territory. Graffiti can be a mechanism to understand behaviors, attitudes and social processes of different segments of a society. It can be used as a mean to conceptualize a reading of the urban space, and social actors use graffiti as a tool of communication to build identity. This paper underlines two main facets of graffiti in the urban space in Medellin: graffiti transformation from a collective memory to a “manufactured” expression, and graffiti as a reference of the governance over a territory. To address these objectives this research will focus on the processes of graffiti in the *Comuna 13* (District 13) in Medellin.

Medellin graffiti dynamics mark an attractive case study because of its capacity to represent urban dynamics of violence, memory and policies. Graffiti has been used as a way to create fear, hope and memory throughout a period of violence. After 10 years of the “pacification process”¹ in the *Comuna 13* graffiti has played an important role to built social mobilization in coordination with other forms of culture such as Hip-Hop, rap and dance. The *Comuna 13* offers a particular territorial space in the city to address due to the interest it raises to illegal groups and its social-economical characteristics. It’s a district that was established with informal housing as a result of urbanization and forced displacement from the rural parts of the country. Of the 135 thousand inhabitants that live in the district 62% are considered poor and 23.7% are indigents² concerning their income. Also, it’s the territory with the highest proportion of young population - 62% are between 15-39 years - and it has the greatest education deficitis in the city

¹ The Pacification process is a policy that began in Medellin in 2002 by the national government to recover the territory controlled by illegal groups. It involved the incursion of the military in the urban territory that was normally controlled only by the policy. (Gutiérrez et al, 2009)

² The Colombian society is divided in 6 social classes with different incomes. The poor have a monthly income of 100 USD per month, and the indigents below 46 USD per month.

(Angarita, Gallo, & Jiménez, 2008: 15). Having a young population is important to underline because of their importance for fostering cultural expressions but also the interests of violence actors to recruit youth for their illegal activities in the territory. According to the municipality 85% of the illegal groups are composed of young people between 14 and 30 years old (El Mundo, 2012). Facing these social-economic challenges this district has used the walls as a social, cultural and political instrument to communicate governance and memory.

This work is constructed among interdisciplinary theories of urban governance, urban policies and urban culture. It was elaborated with an analysis of news articles, interviews, research papers and policies of graffiti. This analysis includes the scrutiny of 5,000 pictures of graffiti and 60 interviews to graffiti artists collected by Parcharte³. The selection of the visual support was structured within the research questions selecting the graffiti reflecting memory, identity, control and governance over a territory. This visual analysis involved the interpretation of the messages and ideas expressed by the actors involved in the creation and framing of graffiti. This paper does not attempt to define graffiti as such but to use it as an analytical instrument to understand an urban dynamic process of memory and governance. To undertake this discussion this work is structured in four categories. First it frames graffiti and culture in the urban context. Then it grasps the urban process of graffiti in the Comuna 13 underlying the construction of memory and identity in the walls. Following this community ideas and mobilizing the study examines the institutionalization and manufactured transformation of graffiti. Finally it addresses the limits, conflicts and ideas between bottom-up community graffiti and top-down manufactured graffiti.

Framing culture and graffiti in a urban context

Since the beginning of the urbanizing world, cities have been the center of cultural production and have provided the territorial space to exchange ideas and enhance interaction between people. The evolution of a global economy has changed the position of culture in the city and has increased its importance as an urban development instrument. From 1980 and 1990 new technologies amplified cultural production and

³ Parcharte is a non-profit organization that was created in 2010. Its objective is to map and visualize young artists in Medellín to promote their work. Private and public institutions fund the organization.

transformed the way culture was produced, distributed and consumed in cities (Scott, 2000). Also the cultural imaginary shifted from just an art and heritage perspective to an imaginary of marketable city spaces for economic and social development (Zukin, 1995). In the last decades of the 20th century “cultural planning” in cities has increased its awareness of policy makers (Scott, 2000). Global diffusion of cultural policies is transforming the way of interacting and creating international networks of policies where cities exchange experiences in public policy management (Dobbin et al, 2007).

Policy makers have increased their attention in fostering creative industries in a specific urban space to capacitate, attract and retain talents. By doing so, policy makers want to foster “creative cities” as an urban development mechanism that is in continuous transformation of its social and economical structures using the capacities of its inhabitants with collaborative models that involve the private, public and social actors (Florida, 2003). There is a clear objective to identify and promote creative classes in the urban space to foster cultural production and city beautification. There is a change in the relationship that is not unilateral between the government and the civil-cultural society (Kooiman, 1993). Urban governments have experienced a share in the accountability of a public policy because of the empowerment of actors (Miraftab, 2004), and there is a mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches in the policy process (Matland, 1995). Graffiti as a subculture and urban transformation process plays a significant role under the cultural and governance transformations in the last decades.

Graffiti has a long history and has been studied since Ancient Greece or the Roman Empire. The contemporary graffiti has its origins in New York and Philadelphia in the 1960s and has become a popular expression in many cities in the world (Rowe & Hutton, 2012). Normally graffiti is associated with subculture values and forms of expressions that shape the urban landscape (Lachmann, 1988). This subculture has been analyzed as a mean to represent “adolescent personality, ancient cultures, sexual attitudes, artistic style, gender differences behavior, communication, female suppression and territoriality” (Alonso, 1998). This research will frame graffiti as a form of constructing a public action to manufacture the urban landscape and also as an instrument to communicate governance and memory in a territory. In recent years there has been an emerging debate towards the positioning of graffiti as art and the commercialization of this subculture (Rowe & Hutton, 2012). How are local actors and the government

addressing graffiti in Medellin? How wide is the gap between identity community graffiti and manufactured graffiti in the city? Community graffiti are the ideas expressed by community and the manufactured graffiti is the imposition of ideas to the artists.

Building a memory and collective action through graffiti

Even though graffiti has been present in Medellin since the 1980s, following a global diffusion of this urban subculture that started in New York (Rowe & Hutton, 2012: 68), the “pacification process” which began in 2002 marks a tipping point for its sprawl and capacity to mobilize people. In 2002 the *Comuna 13* had no state presence and was in dispute between the militia –guerrilla- and the paramilitary groups. The rural conflict of the country was introduced into the city and this district became a strategic territory for the internal conflict due to its location and no-government control. The result of the transposition of the conflict in the urban context was an increase of the homicides in the district making it the most violent urban space in the world with 434 homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants in 2002 (CNE, 2002). Not only was it a marginalized and segregated district in the city but also the most violent one. This period of violence is visible in the walls of the district through graffiti. The illegal groups marked the walls as a tool of communicating territorial control and fear. The social and cultural leaders in the community expressed the community experiences throughout this hostile and violent moment. The following graffiti’s illustrate these ideas.



Figure 1: “Death and cleanup. Paramilitary Present” *Comuna 13* (2002)



Figure 2: “Are we born in war?” *Comuna 13* (2002)

The expression of governance over the territory is evidently communicated in figure 1. The graffiti contains powerful words such as “death” and “cleanup”. The term “cleanup” –*limpieza*- in the Colombian war context means the removal of non-wanted people by the illegal groups in dispute. In this case the paramilitary (AUC) wanted to “cleanup” or remove by death the guerrilla and militia groups present in the territory. This also included the families and persons that interacted with and supported the militia. The second important element to comprehend is *-AUC presente-* “Paramilitary groups present”. This is significant to underline because it is stressing the mobility of the rural conflict in the country to the urban context (The paramilitary were created by landlords in the rural territory of the country to protect their properties due to the lack of state presence and the growing threat of the guerilla). The second figure communicates a community-based reality of the violent moment in the district. The graffiti painted in red, with the figure of baby in a grenade expresses the felling of community living in a war terrain. Furthermore the message “Are we born in war?” expresses the community concerns of their future within a war-zone according to one of the artists.

Facing the social-economical and violent issues in the *Comuna 13* the national government, in coordination with the local authorities, launched in October 2002 a “pacification process” -*Operation Orión*- with 1.500 military and police effectives to recover by force the control of the territory (Medina, Posso, & Tamayo, 2011: 10). It was the first time the military and the Special Forces made an operation in the urban territory in Colombia. After three days of intrusion with tanks and helicopters the government “gained” control over the territory. This process was highly criticized by community members that argued that the government was working in coordination with the paramilitary groups to remove the militia from the district. Human rights organizations account that more than 100 people disappeared with no clear link with illegal groups (Noche y Niebla, 2009: 20). Also, they point out that this process was used to establish territorial control of the paramilitary groups and not the government (Gutiérrez et al, 2009). From the disappearance, death, displacements and lack of accountability of the “pacification process” the cultural and social groups started to mobilize ideas through the walls to create a collective memory and awareness of the human rights violation during this process.



Figure 3: “Our community rejects violence honoring and remembering the victims of the conflict... Their ideas will be always with us”. Comuna 13 (2003)

Communication became an important component of the collective actions promoted by different sectors in the community. The walls became the space of expressing ideas due to the inability of accessing mass media. As one of the graffiti’s express in an interview “graffiti is a form of expressing our political and social critics.... it’s a way of getting the young away from violence”. The messages impressed through graffiti are the ones that can’t reach the communication circuits due to the lack of means would argue Umberto Eco and according to Baudrillard:

“Graffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of non-response announced by all the media. Does it oppose one code to another? I don’t think so: it simply smashes the code... it works through the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code” (1986, p. 140).

The idea was to create a collective memory of the conflict and to search for alternatives to transform it (Angarita, Gallo, & Jiménez, 2008: 226). Other graffiti’s conveyed the social paradigms the city and the country had about the community living in the Comuna 13 with messages such as “To be poor, is not a crime”. Also graffiti’s grasped words such as peace, identity and memory of the victims.



Figure 4: "Mural in honor of our victims of the conflict"... "I am Comuna 13". "No Body wins on war" 2003

Graffiti acted as a channel to communicate and build a different identity from violence in coordination with other cultural urban expressions such as hip-hop, dance, cultural festivals and rap (Parcharte, 2012). As in New York and other cities graffiti actors were closely linked to hip-hop. During this scale-up of Hip-Hop and graffiti in the district the illegal groups killed 8 cultural leaders. From this violent action the community created Revolution Without Death -*Revolución sin Muertos*- to mobilize culture and ideas in the community through a musical event in the district. This concert attracted famous and well know international artists to support the rejection of violence through culture. Additionally the community created non-violence movements to reject violence inviting the whole city to reject the situation of the *Comuna 13*. Graffiti also was present in this mobilization when they painted a wall to honor the cultural leaders that were killed.



Figure 5. "Mural of four of their own, murdered by local gangs." (Kimmelman, 2012)

Through ideas on the walls and social mobilizations the community started to obtain awareness from public actors in the city that began to identify graffiti as a cultural and social instrument. This stream of bottom-up mobilization in the walls expresses the ideas of control, memory and identity in a territory. This collective action opened a policy window under a government structure and policies that were empowering the community and promoting culture.

From memory to policy: institutionalization of graffiti

To comprehend the process of the institutionalization of graffiti in Medellin there must be an inclusion in the analysis of the cultural policies and governance structure. The main elements to underline are: the Urban Integral Plan, cultural investment and the participatory budgeting designed to empower local communities. The Urban Integral Plan project objective was to implement coordinated actions -education, transport, culture, health and housing- at the same time in the districts with the lowest human development index. The Comuna 13 was prioritized within this policy due to its social-economical characteristics. There was a construction of a cable-propelled transport system, improvement of education centers and a large Park-Library with cultural facilities since 2004. Also, culture became an important public policy component in Medellin where municipality started to promote massive musical events, and urban regeneration projects including Public Libraries and cultural centers.

Community participation was also implemented in the 2004-2007 and 2007-2010 development plan of the city. The main element for participation was the Planning and Participatory Budgeting that aimed to empower local actors with decision-making capacities on specific local issues. This policy wanted to strengthen the links between the government and society to build governability in the territory. The Comuna 13 received 10% of the total funding for this policy in the entire city with only 5% of the population. From 2004 to 2007 culture initiatives had the second highest approved number of initiatives of the participatory budgeting with 373 after education with 410 in the *Comuna 13*. Through out this period 450 people presented projects to this policy and 81 of them were youths of the district (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2008). Within the youths projects culture was a main component. The projects approved included cultural

workshops and events in the district. A significant initiative that was within this project was the Community Investigation Network that started to identify and map cultural talents in the neighborhood. With the construction of this cultural network and funding the cultural and social leaders started to build cultural capacities.

Following this stream of participation, cultural expressions and community mobilization the local authorities in coordination with civic organizations created *Parcharte* in 2010 (Parcharte, 2012). This institution was established with the objective of mapping and identifying graffiti and other cultural expressions in the city. The creation of *Parcharte* marks a tipping point for graffiti. It represents the institutionalization of graffiti from the local authorities and a clear objective to promote cultural-graffiti actors. From this moment the local authorities started to use the talent of the graffiti groups to brand the city and follow a global ideal of creative cities. Local authorities invited local talents to “beatify” other parts of the city and to promote graffiti as a form of “art” under their ideas and funding (El Tiempo, 2012). The following examples can underlined the shift and different approaches graffiti made from memory to policy.

Is Graffiti Art? Urban Gallery in the Museum of Modern Arts of Medellín

One of the first institutional spaces for graffiti as a policy instrument was the invitation of graffiti artists from the *Comuna 13* to paint the walls that encloses the new Museum Modern Arts in Medellín (MAMM) in 2010. The MAMM is located within revitalization process of an old industrial sector with housing, parks and cultural spaces in a high-income neighborhood. Graffiti was painted in the walls of the old industrial buildings that surround the new development area and also in a half-pipe for skaters in the center of the new park near the Museum. This initiative highlights a central conceptualization of the territorial presence, political interests and cultural concepts of graffiti. In terms of territory the action to take ideas and cultural expressions from the *Comuna 13* to a high-income neighborhood underlines an acceptance and support for graffiti in the city. In terms of political capital the authorities seek social cohesion by empowering and connecting the marginalized cultural expressions to the “modern-city”. Also, graffiti became a mechanism for city beautification and creative cities by the local authorities. Definitively in terms of graffiti as a cultural expression this invitation

opened an interesting debate that places a subculture in the same location as modern culture. This illustrates the shift from subculture to culture of graffiti in the city.

Graffiti: Art to policy tool

Since 2004 the Municipality of Medellín started urban regeneration policies in the city center with new parks, sciences and technology centers, pedestrian renovation and a project called *Ruta N* to transform Medellín into a “Knowledge Economy”. These projects in the center underline the territorial and public policy framework where graffiti was transformed from art to policy. The municipality invited the artist from the Comuna 13 to paint the walls during the construction of *Ruta N* in 2011. This invitation was not grasped under the ideas of the artists but under the idea of the policy: *Ruta N*. The graffiti painted was linked with the ideas of innovation, creativity and knowledge of the innovation policies in the city. The following images illustrate how policies were transmitted or communicated through graffiti during the construction of the buildings.



Figure 6. “We are working here so knowledge gives us the correct way.”

This graffiti's are representing the policy ideas in the territory. There is an appropriation of the territory with graffiti elaborated by community. Graffiti is used as a communication mechanism to create imaginaries of projects. During the construction graffiti was used as a mean to enhanced the urban space and after the project was finished the graffiti was removed. The project remained and the graffiti disappeared. In this case graffiti is used not only a mechanism to express creative classes imaginaries, but a communication instrument that represents policy ideas.

From communication instrument to policy design

Within the Urban Integral Plan of Medellín the authorities constructed a transportation system of electric stairs in the *Comuna 13* from 2011 to 2012. This project illustrates another policy-manufactured impression of graffiti. In this case the municipality invited the local community to paint the walls surrounding the electric stairs. Graffiti was used as a mechanism to beautify the transport policy, enhance community participation and also build accountability of the projects. The following images show how graffiti was framed in this urban project.



Figure 7. Electric Stairs project in the Comuna 13. Graffiti painted around the project by community children and graffiti artists.

In the inauguration of the electric stairs the city Mayor Anibal Gaviria was not only present but also acted as a participant painting the walls. He did the following graffiti with the slogan and the logo of his government term in the city. This graffiti is a well-defined result that underlines the institutionalization or manufactured conceptualization of graffiti in Medellín. Having the highest public authority paint graffiti is a clear idea

of the utilization of graffiti as policy-instrument. Furthermore this graffiti marks territorial and political presence in the Comuna 13.



Figure 8. “Graffiti made by the Mayor Anibal Gaviria. Medellín, a place for life”

This graffiti expresses governance over a territory and acts as a communication instrument that highlights a political stream to reach the marginalized. The slogan and policies “Medellin, a place for life” are expressing the values promoted by the municipality and also the idea of using subculture as a tool to connect with the communities. The shifts from subculture to policy instrument underline a different approach on this urban expression in cities. How can these different conceptualizations of graffiti be reviewed?

Discussing the gaps and limits of graffiti

This stream of transformation of graffiti in Medellín opens an interesting discussion of the process, transformation and capacities constructed through graffiti in the city. There is shift that transform memory and identity messages of graffiti into public manufactured expressions in the urban space. What are the limits, challenges and conflicts between these two faces of this urban expression? How can graffiti be a community mechanism to construct identity and also a manufactured idea of policies in the territory? From this process stream there is a clear difference on the approach of the ideas expressed from the different actors. One is a community based –bottom-up- idea of creating memory and the other is a manufactured graffiti used by the authorities to enhance and beautify the cities projects and policies.

The ideas promoted with graffiti by the community address memory, recognition and identity. They aim to express their own thoughts and social processes in the walls. As Lukas Jaramillo, director of Parcharte, says, “*graffiti is not motivated from outside, it surges from the deepest spaces in the urban context, creating it’s own rules, its own source of belonging and its own way of recognition*” (2011). Jaramillo also questions how authorities are erasing some graffiti in the city at the same time that they are inviting the same groups to paint their policy ideas (2011). A clear example of this conflict between the spaces to express ideas is the Metro of Medellín. A graffiter painted his signature in one of the metro vagon and then it was erased by the local authorities. The same space is used by the authorities to promote historical cultural artisits from the city. The following pictures illustrate the ideas from the graffiter and from the municipality.



Figure 9. “Graffiti in the metro”

As this example illustrate there is an institutional control over who can be present in the public space. In this case the “illegal” graffiti was removed and the manufactured restored. This underlines an important point on who and how are the local talents recognized in the public space. The same events occurred in other parts of city where the local authorities errased some graffiti’s. Rengifo, a graffiter from the Comuna 13, comments that the “city is growing and we are winning the battle against the Public Space authorities. It does not matter how many paint they buy to erase the graffiti, people will make a graffiti again” (Parcharte, 2012).

The municipality is using the creative talents of the marginalized communities to beautify the city with their ideas and policies. Following this logic the case of Medellín offers an interesting remark to the concept of “creative classes” by Florida because it is

not the middle-class and well educated that are “beautifying” the city but the marginalized and segregated population. This goes in accordance to the argument of the “real creative classes” by Wilson & Keil (2008). Nevertheless this work demonstrates that there is a middle terrain between these two approaches on “creative classes”. Both theories are complementary in Medellín. The “real creative classes” are the poor and marginalized but they follow the idea of “creative cities” under the manufactured approach of graffiti as a policy instrument. In terms of the audience of the graffiti there are also two approaches in this work. The manufactured graffiti is following the global trend of diffusion of creative, innovative and beatification of cities and the local memory graffiti is localizing into the territory the ideas of the graffiti. Thus diffusion in the urban context must be address within the global diffusion networks of policy but also within the local context that are building identity through cultural expressions.

From an urban governance approach this case study follows and confirms the new forms of governance in cities where governments are empowering actors and creating collaborative working actions. The case of *Parcharte* represents this trend but also account for the shifts of accountability. Within this institutional arrangement actors are question the conflicts of graffiti in the city. This introduces another conflict or limit of the institutionalization of graffiti within accountability. How can an institution address the gaps created by the actors that finance it? How can *Parcharte* build sustainable arrangements when it is the voice of the social and cultural actors but at the same time the institutional representation of the public authorities?

Another outcome from this case in terms of governance is the public action process that involves several approaches. The public window is structured under a bottom-up process of the community that claimed recognition, memory and identity. Following this awareness process the communities are empowered by territorial policies and decision-making capacities from the government. There is a transposition of the talents to paint other parts of the city by institutionalization. The ideas expressed are top-down policy instruments but the talents were constructed through a bottom-up process. Thus as Matland portrays there is a mixture between top-down and bottom-up in the graffiti transformation in Medellín. There is a complementarity between the community process of cultural expressions and a policy approach on promoting culture in the city. Both actions enabled the interaction and institutionalization of graffiti in Medellín. Finally, a

question is left aside from this study. Is the institutionalization of graffiti in Medellin taking into account the request of memory from the community or are the authorities erasing the collective memory and imposing their creative imaginaries of the city? Can the urban regeneration projects and community empowerment account for the “pacification process” and memory of the territory?

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