WALL ART AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE: A CASE STUDY OF DELHI

INTRODUCTION

Urban Sociology illuminates a unique field of study of the city and its social life where both time and space run as intersecting axes. The idea of urbanism interlaid with these temporal as well as spatial vectors, allows for a multi-textual landscape to emerge. Thus, while looking at urban landscapes such as Delhi, that are colloidal in socio-cultural, economic, geographical as well as physiological sense, space becomes an inherently complex force field. In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Michel De Certeau argues, "Space is a practiced place". While place is a kind of locus that functions for "ordering elements in a relationship of coexistence, space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (Certeau 1984). Spaces are stories told by the dynamic intersection of mobile elements, and as being a 'practiced place' spaces are constitutive of symbolic meaning. They are neither neutral or passive nor equally designed but play an active role in creating a particular social order.

Spaces have been known to embody experience that resonates with French scholar Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of space "as not a thing but a set of relations between things" (Lefebvre 1974). While many thinkers such as Edward Soja have been studying what they call "spatiality of social life", scholarship on city as an object of study has made clear that people not only shape city spaces over time, they are shaped by those spatial arrangements as well (Soja 1985). The practice of street art provides a fertile ground for leading an examination of public spaces within the city. Moreover, there exists a dynamic, dialectical relationship between spaces and art, which shape and affect each other in multiple ways. Street art in general and wall art in particular, through its various forms, asserts the argument that a space is never finished since spaces embody a living element because they are constantly being made and remade.
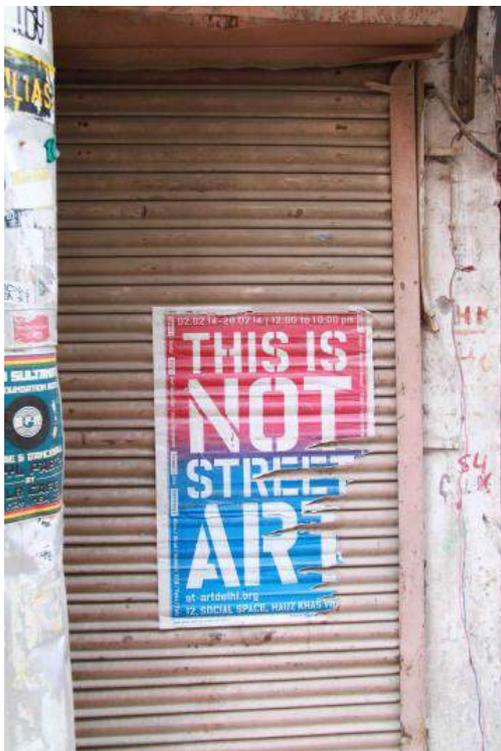
Image. The study of art in public spaces allows us to read the city as a text. (Location:Hauz Khas Village)

Public space has been described by Phadke, Khan and Ranade as "functional sites including public toilets, public transport, railway stations, streets as well as recreational areas such as public parks" (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011).The public space in its normative context has held a liberating and empowering element which emerges from the promise of mobility, freedom, liberty they seem to offer. But the deconstruction of public space while examining the complexity of differentials between voice, space and access illuminates its contested topography. The idea of the intrinsically politicized nature of public spaces is brought to light through the deep visuality offered by wall art. The scope of wall art and the functions it could be employed for, depending on the purpose, context and the space within which it takes form could be as diverse-as instruments of expression or resistance through the reclamation of public spaces or public performance of politics.

Delhi provides a fertile ground for looking at how wall art exemplifies the various means through which public space may be used and claimed, and the contestation and politics such an exercise may bring up. In order to delimit our object of study, we choose to look at wall art in a more defined sense, in form of murals, graffiti and wall painting.

Image. Mural by Graffiti artist *Yantra* in Khidki Village

<u>BRINGING IT TO THE STREETS</u>

Fete De la Photo 2014, a recent photographic exhibition organized in collaboration with Institut Francais, Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, Embassy of France and local civic authorities (NDMC) in and around the streets , subways and building facades in Central Delhi was symbolic of a kind of un-tethering of walls of the gallery or the museum that are conventionally seen as the houses of art.

Image. Onlookers in a subway at C.P. checking out the Foto De La Photo 2014 Exhibition

This bringing of art to the streets was at once pointing to a democratization and popularization of art, where now art was being brought in for popular consumption to a larger audience and into the gritty space of the public street via the photo exhibition, in this particular case.

A deeper unpacking of this activity may reveal is a transformed sense of access and engagement, which was quoted officially as the reason for this initiative, which was "bringing art to the public." What wall art as a unique form of street art signifies is that the public space can be both the canvas and the gallery.

The author and their intent certainly hold relevance yet wall art suggests a disentanglement of authorization itself, when 'it is on the streets, it is also of the streets'. Historically, wall art has been known to have traveled from the alternate spaces in the city (in the West) that were parched of mainstream and popular channels of voicing dissent, often called the underground. Graffiti as known today originated in the city of New York in the early 1970's as part of "underground" countercultural form that was largely used as advertising "for Hip-Hop MC's." It later traveled and made an appearance in a big way in California. In the mid to late 80's, Southern California was seeing graffiti battles as a claim on public space between neighborhood gangs who were marking their territory or "turf" by tagging a space.

Wall art in contemporary context in India retains mixed flavors of its historical origin and new forces of expression in terms of both style and content. The style and related factors of anonymity, which have been associated with graffiti as a practice that emerged in the West is lending to this relatively new practice in the urban metropolises. While wall art escapes a specifically defined law in India, it is largely subsumed under action liable in recourse to defacement. Wall art has had a long history in India with regards to being legally implicated as problematic due to arguments of it being a source of distraction and visual clutter that threatens road safety, imbalance to city aesthetics that may hamper the visual appearance of the city to the effect of vandalization of public spaces. However most of these accusations come from the existing law on outdoor advertising and hoardings rather than a specific law

for wall art in public spaces. The legal domain becomes a major undoing for practices such as wall art.

One of the oldest and most popular traditions of graffiti artists is that of tagging. The activity of spray-painting ones name or assumed name in a stylized manner, drawing heavily on typography. Examples of this can be seen across Delhi, where one can find tags by Daku, PCO, and Horus, among many others, written on walls all over the city in various manners, types, and color combinations. But, tagging too walks the fine line of vandalism and art.

The individual's perception of the work becomes the key factor here. While advertisements on wall spaces hold a different scaffolding than that required to analyze wall art, they may also bring us to similar areas of contention i.e. issues of defacement, vandalism of public property.

METHODOLOGY

Our research was inductive and looked to examine the field through a detailed qualitative lens. The secondary analysis was undertaken to orient ourselves to the field of study to understand the notion of urban spaces as well as establish a sense of historical understanding about wall art as a practice. We conducted a detailed area study over 3 weeks where we did visual documentation of the artwork as well as the neighborhood under study. This was followed by content analysis of the artwork (murals, graffiti and wall paintings). Targeted questionnaires were administered to artists, political (student) organizations and volunteers of art initiatives. Unstructured, informal interviews were conducted with residents, shopkeepers and passersby in areas under study as well as art galleries, both state and private. Formal interviews with state institutions that were part of wall art initiatives such as Tihar Jail, Police Department, Public Works Department and New Delhi Municipal Corporation were also conducted.

CITY AS A LIVING SPACE
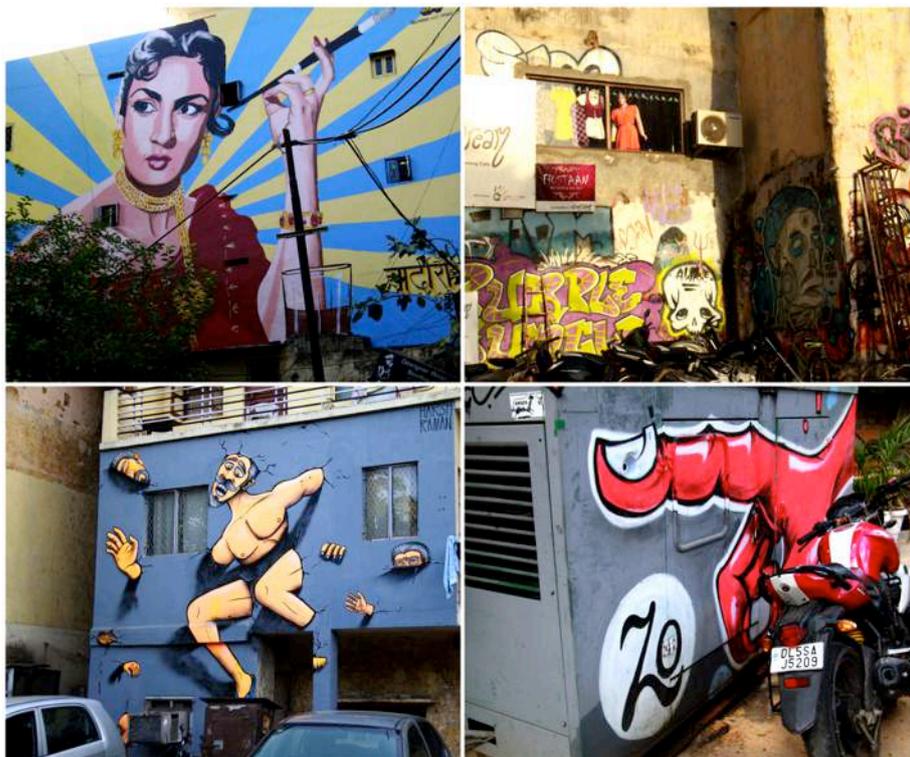
Image. Left Column: Wall Art in Shahpur Jat. Right Column: Wall Art in Hauz Khas Village

Shahpur Jat and Hauz Khas village were some of the key sites of the Street Art festival (St.Art Delhi), which took place in January- February 2014, in Delhi. Both being densely packed urban villages have numerous similarities but at the same time have evolved differently. The key difference between the two areas is the mix of shops. Hauz Khas village attracts a homogenous group of patrons, usually from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Even with the constant opening and closing of shops there, their key demographic remains the same. Shahpur Jat on the other hand, has a slightly different story. The mix of shops, catering to completely different classes is easily apparent. Even with the designer boutiques and the rise of stores, and restaurants meant for the urban chic, the mixed nature of the area survives. While for Hauz Khas it is the restaurants that really drive traffic, in Shahpurjat, it is the boutiques, which have established a client base. Another fact that differentiates these two spaces is the very built environment of both these urban villages. The locals and the 'village' part of Hauz Khas are easily hidden away in Hauz Khas village, where as the mixed character of ShahpurJat is abundantly visible. Finally, in terms of the way the St.Art festival used the space and the kind of work done in both areas further helps us contrast these the two spaces.

In Shahpur Jat the artists consciously chose to stay away from the commercial side, and restricted the work to the residential area right behind, mostly inhabited by middle to lower, working class families. Using the cramped construction, and high density of the area as an inspiration many of the artists attempted to represent the area through their particular artistic styles. In such cases the artwork became a reinterpretation of the space.

Image. Geometric Pattern By German Artist Tofu who took the buildings in Shahpur Jat as an inspiration for his piece

In some cases the area not only provided inspiration, but became a part of the art itself. German artist Tona, incorporated the architecture of the buildings into his art pieces. Placing his stencils around window ledges and ventilation ducts, he was able to use the space in such a way that the art and the space itself would not be separated.

Image. Tona's work in Shahpur Jat

The labyrinth like area is now dotted with pieces of art. While almost all the pieces act as route markers, there are some, which have become landmarks. Other than just the number of artistic styles used, the sheer number of the artwork is staggering. When walking down most streets it is difficult to keep track of the number of pieces. The festival has created a new image for the residential area, both for those living there and those visiting.

In Hauz Khas village too it was the character of the area that came through in the wall art. Although here the space seemed to be having more of a facilitating role than influencing. While the village has gained much popularity in the past 5 years, it has built the image of being a place of alternate expression over the last 20 years. Its shops and restaurants are all geared towards appealing to a certain urban bohemian sensibility. Thus, it only seemed natural that there be graffiti all over the village. Right in the middle of the shops there is an empty area known as the dumpster, where the surrounding walls are covered top to bottom in graffiti. The content of the work varies from tagging to social issues, with the work constantly being in flux and changing in a matter of months. While spatially they are areas, which allow such work to be done, the engagement of the area is in more commercial terms, with some shops using graffiti as a means of advertising.

Image. The Dumpster in Hauz Khas Village

Though Graffiti, tagging and murals may be relatively new art forms in this village, galleries have always played a crucial role in this space. In fact, some galleries have had a prominence for over 20 years. Then, intricately attached to this idea of growth and change in the urban form is the question of temporality of wall art. Overwriting is prominent in all walls that hold high visibility. The main street that leads up into the market in Hauz Khas Village bears multiple tags and graffiti, with numerous overlapping pieces of art. The use of public walls that do not to belong to any shop or resident in particular allows for a freer more frequent use by artists, who begin to have a dialogue within themselves that is enframed by single canvas of a wall and runs on a register of layering and overlaps. A piece of work that really stood out was a political image of a middle finger with the voters ink. Ironically, this image has been created by the Graffiti Artist 'Daku'. Like the dacoits and robbers of a bygone era, Daku says he lives to steal (in his case, for his art). Political images such as these often may be white washed or simply torn apart in the case of a sticker.

Image. One of Daku's more prominent works in Hauz Khas Village

Unlike art in museums and galleries , with wall art there always remains an element of risk as it is housed in the gritty reality of the streets where the vagaries and uncertainties of everyday life make the rules. Thus, while the work remains temporary, dependent on the will of the owner, durability of the paint, whims of public authorities, what it leaves even as it fades is an indelible impact on the neighborhood.

The use of electricity meter boxes and side walls of public utility units offer a similar potential to artists who tag not just mark spaces but attempt to built a recall for themselves even if the tags keep their everyday identities hidden. Hauz Khas has taken to the practice of wall art in tandem with its image of an alternative space, where wall art which was once seen as countercultural practice has transgressed from a subversive state to a more popular, prominently visible presence that is co-opted to further lend character to a neighborhood.

Image. Hauz Khas Village is dominated by tags and graffiti in vacant plots and electricity meters

In both urban villages what comes through is that the space and its character take part in inspiring, facilitating and influencing the wall art, both in terms of design and content. Space then no longer remains an empty signifier but is revealed in its more animate form. As the body of the city changes in the practice of constant remaking of the cityscape its living character questions if a space is ever finished or does it continuously evolve as new elements are added.

POLITICS IN AND OF SPACE

While neighborhood space becomes integral to wall art to both Hauz Khas and Shahpur Jat in terms of its incorporation either on the level of conceptual design of the pieces of wall art, nature of the work done as well as determining the surfaces available to artists the idea of how space becomes fundamental to wall art is implicated in a deeply entrenched operation of the 'politics ' in and of spaces.

Shankar market near Connaught Place being a marketplace in a government owned building comes into the picture with a different story altogether. Left ignored in the 2010 Commonwealth Games related renovation projects that gave the adjacent arterial area of Connaught Place a facelift, this 57 year old famous cloth market, housed in a building owned and maintained by NDMC (New Delhi Municipal Corporation), has become entangled in a series of conflicting claims and hostility fueled by sectarian divide between the existing trade unions.

To breathe life into the market NDMC and The New Central Market Traders Association has started a revamp project with the major attraction of this project being touted as the intensive artwork on walls. It was NDMC who tied up with Delhi Street Art, an artist collective and commissioned the project to beautify or decorate empty walls, while adding to the daily environment and enhancing the shopping experience by painting the market blocks with different hues of the rainbow, with the walls depicting images and narrations on music, dance and drama done by young students.

Image. Wall Art in Shankar Market

Shankar Market has a motley of interacting groups, where the wall art, which meant purely for "decorative purposes" led to volatile responses. There are heterogeneous perceptions and readings of wall art which can incite different groups of people differently, which comes out clearly in this case. In Shankar Market, wall art has set off rival trade unions against each other. On one hand, is the New Central Market Traders Union who supported and encouraged the month-long street art initiative. In opposition were the Shankar Market (New Central Market) Traders Association, who did not share the sensibilities on the designs chosen for the wall art since the beginning. The means of actually getting the work onto the walls was riddled with internal rivalry and politics.

Ideational conflicts between the two trade unions escalated into more performative territorial claims over the marketplace itself. Stories of a physical standoff and between the protesting trade union's president and the rival union and ensuing process of legal notices and complaints guides us along the thought of how Art in this context has resulted in a different experience of the space for not only those frequenting it but within the members of the unions who have shops in the marketplace itself

"Public Art should not be without guidance by the authority, choosing a wall is an administrative matter" said O.P Mishra from NDMC who had supervised the entire project, at once blacklisting individual acts of tagging, graffiti around Delhi as vandalisation. While the tussle continued between the differing opinions on the wall art done in Shankar market, it is quite visible that these arguments tie up to a larger battle of claiming territorial space. The two unions are in a wider fight of who can make claims on a building that is state owned and yet populated by shopkeepers who have been a part of this marketplace over a long period of time. Which particular union got an upper hand in appealing to the higher command and getting renovation plans of their own choice approved may hold a key to the future of balance of powers between these two rival unions.

In contrast the university campuses of DU and JNU politically charged wall art hasn't been a bone of contention, rather the medium has been naturalized as a mode of expression by student groups and political parties for campaigning and protests. What however may be the differentiating factor amongst various university spaces- in our study of JawaharLal Nehru University and Delhi University, is the level of institutionalization of the arena of political

performance, the role of disciplinary practices by official authorities heading these universities and finally the very nature and form of the politics itself.

While more or less the same political organizations exist on both campuses, their dissimilar use of this medium may be attributed to the character of the campuses themselves. Over time these characters are constantly getting transformed, affecting the nature of political expression as well. The walls along Chhatra Marg in North Campus, Delhi University is referred to as the 'Wall of Democracy', where slogans such as "Hang the Rapist" and "Against Sexual Violence", "Roll back FYUP" can be commonly seen. However, this is also precisely where any form of political expression or taking a political stand ends for the parties in Delhi University. Other than these slogans, what is absolutely intrinsic to the politics in DU is the use of exhibitionism and repetition. Political parties spray paint the names of the nominated candidates wall after wall simply as an attempt to catch the attention of spectators or prospective voters. Interestingly, these parties don't make use of any images or even remotely mention their political agenda. Wall art here, acts as a tool for advertising where claiming walls may be understood as symbolic of ongoing battle between different parties over space to increase visibility within the campus. The more dominant parties such as NSUI and ABVP have their party names spray painted for stretches as long as a kilometer while also making use of flyers and stickers.

Image. Wall Art on Wall of Democracy in Delhi University

Another stretch that is located behind the University's administration block, which sees relatively less traffic than Chhatra Marg, became host to Delhi Wall Book- an initiative by Tata Housing under the ambit of Delhi University's Cultural festival 'Antardhwani'. This DU wide cultural festival held in 2013, was seen by many as an attempt by the DU administration to promote their now scrapped 4-year undergraduate programme (FYUP). In an effort to possibly seem more accessible and student friendly, the wall art competition was held with

the theme, 'Design the change'. What is interesting is that while this was done as part of the DU cultural festival, the event itself was completely outsourced.

Image. The wall stretch within North Campus(Delhi University) that played host to Delhi Wall Book event.

Some may simply see it as the campus allowing students artistic expression, while those aware of DU politics may see it as pro FYUP propaganda. This particular event lay under the larger umbrella of changes that the University was going through at that time. While the artwork was part of a sponsored event, their impact it has is often dependent on both the viewer and political climate in the campus.

In contrast, JNU as a campus is known to be much more politically explicit and active than DU. While there is an abundance of wall art and posters they are largely found in the academic blocks. It is very easy to miss all this when visiting the campus if one does not go the academic areas specifically. Although the work is not as visible throughout the campus, it does attempt to make a greater impact on the viewer than the kind of work found in DU. Most of the artwork in JNU was in the form of murals that are painted like a poster but on multiple smaller pieces, which were later joined together to make a larger canvas that goes up on the wall. The student organizations use these not only to reserve space but also create their wall art on them. Thus while the wall is not directly painted on, this strategy allows the parties not only to change their images and text as they may want with higher frequency than a wall painting, but can also allow for easy vandalism between groups, in terms of the poster sheets being pulled off or being overridden with newer ones.

The student organizations employ the use of images much more than just simple text. There is also a clearer attempt made to create a political agenda. While the issues taken up in DU wall art were limited to current and consensus based ones, such as women's safety and rolling back of the FYUP, parties in JNU took in a clear political stand. Using images the parties made clear their opinions on various issues which are still hotly debated at the national level such as; caste politics, AFSPA, economic liberalization politics etc. While the wall art is confined to the academic blocks, within these spaces it is very difficult to escape from them.

Image. Wall art with explicit political messages and critique dominates the outer facades of academic and administration blocks in JNU as well as inside of these buildings

In JNU on the other hand the whole activity is organized at the inter party level. all parties attempt to grab wall space. Volunteers reserve the walls through the placing of plane sheets across them. Once wall space has been demarcated they begin with the painting. All images, texts and slogans are produced by party members, with no party hiring outside help.

The political environment present in both campuses is also facilitated by the role played by the institution and administration. In both cases there is very little interference by the administration on where and when work is done. However the veto power held by the administration does differ in the two campuses. In DU it is much easier for the administration to paint over any wall with little or no objection from the parties, as was done across the wall of democracy at the beginning of the 2014 academic session when the protests against FYUP were at its peak. The lack of protest by student parties may be attributed to the fact that as most work is simple text it is easy to reproduce. At the same time it can also be argued that the parties stick to such simplistic work due to the fact that they do not know when it may be painted over. Those who have been members of student organizations in JNU, see the administration as a much more invisible entity. While they have never had to directly deal with the administration in terms of censorship, there does exist the vague sense that if something extremely harmful or objectionable is made the administration will step in.

While wall art and especially graffiti are known for political expressions, in Delhi they seem to almost only come together within the campus space.

Although the mode of employing wall art varies in DU and JNU, predominantly due to the political environment and role of the administration, they do use it mainly for political expression. While it is almost impossible to overtly make political statements using wall art,

due to the lack of anonymity and institutional support, graffiti has a long history of being used as political tool.

The past few years have seen graffiti artists that offer a social commentary, picking up issues such as public urination, population density and developmental priorities. However, most graffiti artists in Delhi do not offer a political commentary. The most overt work of this kind has been by graffiti artist Daku at the time of the 2014 General Elections. Probably the most provocative work that we came across were anonymously spray painted stencils against Narendra Modi on a wall beside Aurobindo Marg between Yusuf Sarai Market and AIIMS. While highly controversial it has also exemplified Indian State's selective censorship of graffiti as the particular piece was painted over wherever it cropped up while the others were left untouched. Such acts of overt expression against the state mark a new phase for graffiti in Delhi. While these politically charged works are extremely important they are few and far between. Much of the political wall art and graffiti of the city remains limited to the university campuses. While both DU and JNU uphold the tradition of being spaces of political expression, the differences in the work make apparent how the social environment and the politics embodied by spaces come to bear on wall art. Simultaneously wall art itself renders the politics of the space a new dimension by continually marking and remodeling spaces into affective and reactive zones.

Image. Provocative content used in wall art in Delhi is increasingly coming under censure
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ANALYSIS

In the process critically deconstructing how wall art implicates politics of space within urban landscapes, we came across the multiplicity of intersectionalities that populate this domain. Cases of selective censoring of provocative political content brings forth the question of who is responsible for this censure – public authorities, nearby residents, organizational parties. The response of offended parties or individuals in one off acts of removing explicit pieces, as in the case of the poster critiquing current PM Narendra Modi ahead of 2014 General elections is reflective of the legal grey area in which wall art as a practice straddles. While the ambiguity pertaining to the lack of legally codified definitions for practice of wall art as a criminal offence gives it gives it its potency, it leaves the realm of interpretation and response to pieces open to censure according personal taste and affiliations in many cases.

The lack of specific laws on wall art opens a grey area that makes it harder to pin down individual acts under vandalism and defacement, which have been the prominent legal categories to capture incidents of wall art. Laws such as Prevention of Defacement of Property Act 2007 and Damage to Public Property Act 1984 do not explicitly prohibit wall art, which may have become the reason for the absence of any registered case and convictions which have deemed any particular wall art piece a criminal offence.

The potential engagement within public space through wall art thus speaks of a capacity to rewrite the city as multiple rather than singular narratives. Through such a perspective wall

art becomes a means to imagine and materially locate many Delhis that coexist rather than one single Delhi as city. There are varied narratives coexisting with new narratives constantly being born since spaces are experience only in the potential of their becoming because a space is never finished. The cityscape of Delhi continues to alter, modify and grow.

In this animated milieu, locationality becomes significant in both spatial practice of production of such pieces and their interpretations. From the choice of wall space to ideas that lent inspiration or the actual content and intent of artwork, each of these elements were governed by their location and in turn also transformed the space where they were created. For instance, parts of Hauz Khas which were mainly a commercial space saw graffiti on electricity meters and poles or vacant walls on free plots which indicated to a certain autonomy that residential colony spaces in Shahpur Jat would not have permitted.

Image. StArt Delhi has created markers within the residential area of Shahpur Jat

Similarly the initiative undertaken by StArt Delhi collective in collaboration with Tihar Jail authorities to paint outer compound walls of Tihar Jail in close consultation with inmates as well. The wall art at Tihar featured many thematic pieces, which resonated with life in prison- at once exteriorizing the life within Tihar and allowing the outside public to engage with the thoughts and moods of the inmates. Such an exercise makes an effort to bring to life dormant narratives in and of the city ,where aspirations and thoughts of inmates find 'space'. Wall art and public space thus becomes entwined in a simultaneously reproducible process of location and locution.
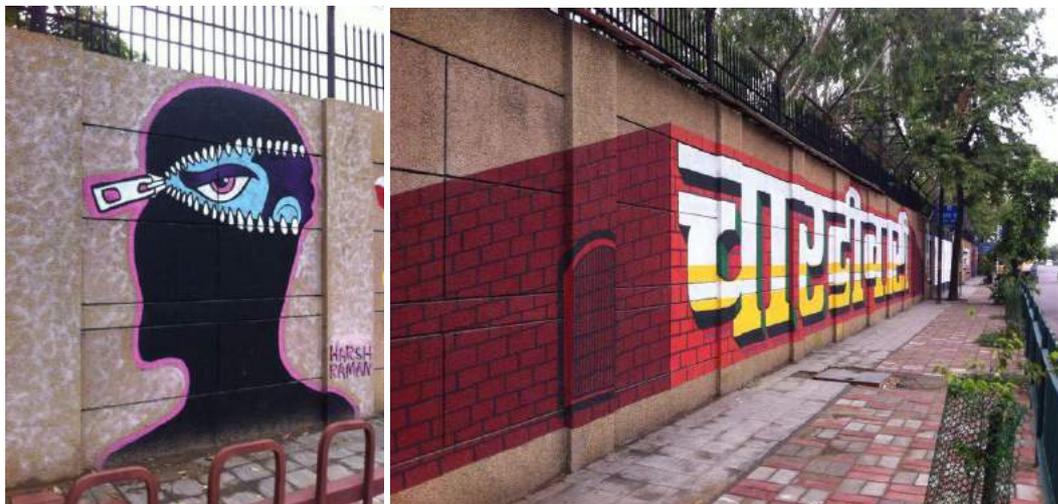
Image. Wall art outside Tihar Jail complex

The recent upsurge of wall art initiatives as well as individually carried out incidences of artwork in Delhi cannot be considered a coincidence. A deeper look reveals that individual incidents of tagging done by a slew of people who saw themselves more akin to the graffiti artists in the conventional sense such as Daku and Zine in the past couple of years made wall art a more recognizable entity in the city. These became the primary steps to laying a foundation that saw wall art a common presence in the city's public spaces. From these smaller or more individual acts to larger chains and later institutional commissioning of

pieces such as the Gandhi mural on the PWD and Police Headquarters or a full blown street art festival (StArt Delhi) which was majorly organized for popularization of wall art and was able to get together artists from around the world and an impressive list of sponsors, points to the practice of wall art in Delhi having a sense of contemporary history. Such institutional capture of a subversive art form and its prominent presence in public areas within Delhi make us re-evaluate its 'alternate' character at large.

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