

Spatial conflicts in the La Chana district of Granada. Analysis of the mural-based project “La Chana Open Gallery”

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Konflikty przestrzenne w dzielnicy La Chana w Grenadzie. Analiza projektu “La Chana Open Gallery” opartego na sztuce muralu

Abstract

The paper discusses the initial phase of mural-based touristification of the La Chana district in Granada. It is possible to distinguish social, artistic and organisational groups that influence the formation and development of the “La Chana Open Gallery” project and between which spatial conflicts perpetuate. The paper draws attention to the differences in understanding of the space of the district and of art in it. This allows for a deeper reflexion on mural-based touristification, which is becoming increasingly popular worldwide.

Key words: mural art, perception of space, spatial conflicts, touristification

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W artykule omówiono początkową fazę turystyfikacji grenadyjskiej dzielnicy La Chana przy użyciu sztuki murali. Wyróżniono trzy grupy, które mają wpływ na przebieg projektu otwartej galerii sztuki miejskiej “La Chana Open Gallery”. Są to kolejno: społeczna, artystyczna i organizacyjna. Artykuł zwraca uwagę na różnice w rozumieniu przestrzeni dzielnicy jak i sztuki w niej, które doprowadzają do utrwalenia się konfliktów przestrzennych między grupami. Praca pozwala na pogłębioną refleksję nad procesem turystyfikacji przy użyciu murali, który zyskuje globalną popularność.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka murali, turystyfikacji, percepcja przestrzeni, konflikty przestrzenne

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Murals have become a very popular art form in the space of many cities, towns, and even villages. It is easy to find them at a bus station, an apartment building, or even a cemetery. In addition, they play crucial role in projects of open-air urban art galleries projects that transform the space into an open museum, with the walls of the buildings promoted as ‘canvas’ for the artists. Besides the beautification, they can also become one of the elements influencing the socio-economic transformations. One well known case occurred with the MAUS project in Malaga, where urban art became one of the elements of gentrification (Vázquez de la Rosa 2021). However, it is important to take into account the context of each project and the stages of its implementation, as there can be fundamental differences between them (Koster and Randall 2005: 50).

The object here is to analyse the different understanding of the district’s space and art in it. I present organisational (organizers of the La Chana Open Gallery project), artistic (artists) and social (residents of La Chana) dimensions (Statucki 2019) which are involved in process of touristification of La Chana through mural art. There are not many historical monuments in La Chana. Most tourists visit the UNESCO-listed Alhambra palace complex and the Albaicín district in this city centre. La Chana’s past is agricultural and industrial, as evidenced by a defunct sugar factory building. The first social flats were built in the 1960s, which was connected with the mass emigration of the rural population to the cities. In recent years, new artistic interventions such as murals have been emerging in its space to create a new tourist attraction.

In my paper I follow the definition proposed by Jover and Días-Parra (2019: 1) that touristification is the creation of services and infrastructure, such as new attractions, adapted to the needs of tourists, which may, over time, lead to a decrease in the number of residents. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the spatial conflicts in La Chana, which may affect the further development of this mural-based project.

The notion of “space” is understood here as a continuous process of negotiation. On the one hand, space structures social actors, and on the other hand, they also have a creative influence (agency) on its change (Löw 2018: 31; Crossler 2022: 179-180). This can also be observed in the field of urban space, which is constantly re-constructed by social actors with different social characteristics. Thus, urban space is not homogeneous because it is where different social practices and imaginations clash (Lefebvre 1978: 67; Jałowiecki and Szczepański 2010: 348; Zarycki 2009; Rancew-Sikora *et al.* 2016). Giddens (2003: 167) explains that it is possible to distinguish “front” regions that are shown to visitors, and “outside” or “back stage” regions which are hidden and of lower status. Such spaces, defined by the values associated with them, exist, for example, in the privacy of the home, but they can also be found in urban space. This division is crucial when it comes to the process of touristification of La Chana.

Methodology

I conducted my research from January to June 2022 during my ERASMUS scholarship in Granada. I conducted two scenario-based in-depth interviews with the male and female initiators of La Chana Open Gallery project. They are members of the Angustias-Chana-Encina Neighbourhood Association. Later, I conducted 6 scenario-based in-depth interviews with three female and four male artists who painted murals in La Chana till June 2022. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and agreed upon. In order to analyse the social reception of the murals, I use surveys of passers-by (42 in total) collected by my research group as part of the final project in Urban Sociology at the University of Granada in 2022. We looked for the following information: has any information about the mural in question, knows other examples of murals, wants more murals. The answers were not recorded on a dictaphone, but obtained during a spontaneous conversation therefore in the text I quote the students' notes from these conversations.

Research

Organisational dimension

From interviews with a male and a female representatives of the Neighbourhood Association, it appears that the creation of an open urban art gallery was an attempt to resolve the numerous problems and economic stagnation the district is facing. They mentioned, among others: the poor quality of housing, which has been unrenovated for years and the associated inconvenience; the railway tracks surrounding La Chana, which hinder its urban growth and communication between its neighbourhoods and with other districts; the pedestrian entrances to La Chana, which are of very poor quality; the problem with flooding, especially in the Bobadilla area; the small number of parks in the area; neglected squares; unemployment and the difficulty of maintaining local businesses.

As can be concluded, there are different interest groups within the district. Depending on where they live and how they get around (on foot, by public or private transport), their perception of the place and their priority needs may be different. Moreover, residents are not necessarily aware of the problems their neighbours in another part of the district are facing. This may contribute to a feeling of misunderstanding.

However, there are issues that are problematic for a large number of residents, such as unemployment or poor state of housing. These are directly linked to the main problem of lack of investment, which is worsening the standard of district and not creating new workplaces. It is worth highlighting that the origin of this problem is rooted in the lack of urban and spatial planning during the establishment of the district (Del Pilar Puertas Contreras 2012: 189).

The report *Vulnerabilidad del tejido social de los barrios desfavorecidos en Andalucía. Análisis y potencialidades*, published in 2008, shows how various forms of social inequality intersect in the La Chana district: a high number of uneducated employed people,

a high number of households without a car, a high number of people living not in their own apartments, a high level of unemployment, low labour force participation of women, a high number of single-person habitant (associated with the advanced age of the residents). The authors also report the phenomenon of housing abandonment and replacement, also known as “invasion and succession”, whereby those with sufficient economic means tend to leave these neighborhoods to improve their living conditions relative to their surroundings and/or advance to a higher social status. The space left behind is occupied by disadvantaged populations who have no choice but to settle in these areas. Thus, a continuous process of reproduction of social segregation is observed [Egea Jiménez et al. 2008: 65]. This contributes to perpetuating the image of La Chana as a “outside” region in Giddens’ depiction.

The creation of a new tourist attraction in the La Chana area is therefore an attempt to break the general stagnation, as members of the association have explicitly stated:

This project is conceived as a rebirth for the district. We are looking for something to attract people to come here and we are looking for something to attract young people so that the district has the energy it used to have. A few years ago, La Chana was a reference point in terms of *tapas*. Many people used to come, even from abroad, to La Chana because of the famous *tapas*. This has declined, and now we are looking for another impetus, which could be urban art..., through quality murals (Association female representative).

It can't be that... this district with so much history is now without any life here, and I want it to be. Why can't La Chana be included in a tourist route, in a guidebook? Why can't people come and see this district? Also the bar area, which I'm sure you've heard about. So that people can come here, see the murals, and have a beer in the bar next door (Association male representative).

Respondents mention that La Chana was famous for its *tapas*, which is confirmed on Granada's tourism page. The decadence of this tradition suggests that the social and generational changes are taking place. The aim of organisers is then to give a new impetus to the economic development of the area, drawing on its former tourist fame and, to some extent, the idyllic vision of its past. Furthermore, the project is intended to evoke a positive connotation with “culture” rather than the problems mentioned before.

When asked about the use of art in space, interviewees said that their idea of using a mural was linked to the relatively low cost of its implementation. In addition, this type of project is considered to be relatively easy and quick to implement. Therefore, a solution is sought that could have a relatively quick economic effect (the appearance of tourists) as well as a social effect (the beautification of the space). However, the interviewees revealed that no public debate has taken place and the idea of an open urban art gallery has not been discussed at district level. Furthermore, no official project documents have

been published and no official project website exists. The difficulty in finding any reliable information may hinder the flow of knowledge and result in low public interest.

Artistic dimension

The general tendency of the group of artists is to associate the image of the district with their student days, since many of them studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Granada, which is located near the district. Some also rented apartments there or regularly visited friends who lived there. They have a lot of good memories related to this period and to the district itself (mainly the Angustias-Chana-Encina neighbourhood). One important element is spending time together in their favourite bars:

There was a bar in La Chana called Rialca, which for me was the best bar in Granada, but unfortunately the owner died last year. And it was a typical working class bar, with more or less the same people coming in. Paco, may he rest in peace, he was such a typical character. I didn't live in La Chana because I lived in another flat, on the Camino de Ronda, but I sort of lived La Chana (*vivía La Chana* in Spanish). Because of the university, the Faculty of Fine Arts, I was there every day. I always had lunch in Rialca, I had dinner in Rialca, I had a studio two streets away from Rialca (male, interview 1).

This shows that for them, La Chana has a very familiar character. The small local bars were meeting points that established a certain routine and gave the place a unique identity. The figure of the owner is also important because his presence attracted customers to come to the bar. These kinds of stories show how the past became a safe and idyllic space for my interviewees. On the other hand, the closure of the bar in this context seems emblematic. This can be linked to processes taking place in the district: generational changes, the lack of inheritance of skills, the disappearance of family businesses, migrations to other districts in the city or outside Granada, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

For many, especially the first generation of graffiti artists, La Chana was also where they first started tagging and learning to write:

It is true that when graffiti started in Granada, this area was, I mean the La Chana area, was one of the first centres of graffiti. There were three such areas in the city, which later expanded until they merged, but in the beginning it was El Zaidín, La Chana and Zona Norte from where many graffiti writers came from (male, interview 1).

Thus, La Chana represents a historically important place when it comes to the development of street art in Granada (Pérez Sendra 2020). It is worth noting that all three of these districts are located outside the city centre. This was no coincidence, as there were many abandoned post-industrial buildings such as factories or former sugar mills,

walls surrounding railway tracks and, finally, trains passing through, attracting budding graffiti writers. In this way, a new culture of street art was born far from the city centre. What's more, many of the graffiti writers who started out in La Chana now also paint murals, so the artistic work in this part of the city was a starting point for their later careers.

It can also be seen that La Chana is associated by my interviewees, above all, with its working-class history, its residents, and its peculiar climate. They mentioned the following terms: everything cheap and very pleasant, multiculturalism, familiarity, working-class, and modest residents. As a result, La Chana in opinion of artists retains a certain distinction from the rest of the city. This creates a sense of living in a different city, or as one interviewee puts it, "in the countryside where everyone knows each other" (male, interview 6).

Moving on to discuss artists' understanding of art in space, they pointed out the broad uses of art, which for the purposes of this paper I will categorise as: personal and social. The first refers to situations in which artists express themselves, their opinions, or the emotions they feel at a given moment. It can also involve spending nice time with others. The second can be: reflecting on the environment in which a particular mural is located to give it a "deeper" meaning; learning from each other and allowing non-artists to participate in order to awaken new passions, skills, the possibility of identifying with one's own work and the place where it is made.

When asked about the challenges of contemporary urban art, they mentioned the lack of reflection and dialogue on art in the public space, so that the art itself becomes nothing more than a tourist element (interview 1); the organisation of a competition as an inappropriate form of promotion and cooperation as a more fruitful one (interview 4), the centralisation of urban art projects, which leads to an accumulation of this art in a given area, thus not giving equal access to it to all city residents (interview 4); the public authorities commit a certain exploitation of artists because they do not always pay them for their work, do not give them a space to paint in and do not treat them as specialists in what they do (interview 5).

Social Dimension

By June 2022, five murals had been created on La Chana, located close to each other in the Angustias-Chana-Encina neighbourhood. They are located near parks, local grocery stores (*fruterías* in Spanish) or on the walls of residential blocks what should be associated with the typically residential and post-industrial character of the district. The distance between them is not big, so it would be easy to plan a route. Most of the time there are no other attractions near them except local bars.

When analysing the responses to the first mural, created by the well-known internationally Madrid-based collective Boa Mistura in 2015, the predominance of the opinion that the mural is incomprehensible is particularly noteworthy. Respondents were



Fot. 1. First mural in La Chana, Boa Mistura, 2015. Author's own photograph.

reluctant to interpret it. Furthermore, there were opinions that the mural does not improve the aesthetics of the place, but quite the opposite: “She thinks that murals should not be done in public spaces (streets), that there is another place for it” (survey 9).

However, despite the difficulty of answering the question of what it represents, it is also possible to find statements in which female and male respondents highlighted the strengths of the mural as nice colours which make it stand out from other buildings (surveys 1, 4, 7).

In the case of the second mural, depicting musician Jesús Arias and painted by well-known on nation art stage Grenadian artist El niño de las pinturas in 2017, it is puzzling that none of the respondents were able to say who was depicted in the mural. This is interesting because the artist, a member of the famous band Lagartija Nick, was born and lived in La Chana. Only one person who came to La Chana to walk around knew who painted the mural (survey 32).

However, respondents were more willing to interpret the content of the mural, for example, they think that the mural represents a passion for music (surveys 27, 31). One of the female respondent even shows a creative use of the mural, as its content becomes part of the bedtime story she tells her grandchildren (survey 34). Thus, the content



Fot. 2. Mural “Jesús Arias”, El niño de las pinturas, 2017. Author’s own photograph.

of the mural influences this woman’s activity by making it part of her private practise. It is also worth noting that the content of the mural and the question asked allow these associations to emerge and thus provide some information about the respondent, such as how she spends her time.

Moving on to the next mural, *Hercules and Hermes*, created by former student of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Granada, Álvaro López in 2018 it should be noted that only one person knew what the mural represented. It is also worth noting that, despite the figurative nature of the work, some people were indifferent to it and did not make the effort to interpret it (survey 9, 10). Respondents also pointed out that no information about the mural was posted anywhere, making it difficult to interpret (it is true that only the Jesus Arias mural had such an information board until June 2022). It is also interesting to note that the low level of interest in the mural was linked to the feeling that it was generally of no interest to others (surveys: 12, 15).

Nevertheless, some people looked for the strengths of the mural: it brings life and joy to the façade (survey 15), the artist must be someone experienced in their craft (survey 13). Another respondent said that: “[...] although she does not understand its meaning, she likes the work” (survey 17).



Fot. 3. Mural "Hercules and Hermes", Álvaro López, 2018. Author's own photograph.

Another example analysed is the murals located on the wall next to the LIV Student dormitory painted by various artists in 2021. Respondents most often referred to the wall as a whole rather than specific examples of murals, so for the purposes of the paper I treat them as a whole.

Students living in the residency confirmed that the mural was not very visible, a response that has been echoed in other surveys (surveys: 21, 22). It is important to mention that this opinion was common when talking about any mural in La Chana. Secondly, they expressed the opinion that murals represent a new dimension of culture and a way of self-expression but it was a role of the local authority to cede space to artists to express themselves. Other respondents also stressed that it is the role of the municipal authority to authorise this type of project (survey 24, 25). In this case, it is interesting to note that the respondents did not interpret the murals. Instead, the fact that their creation had been authorised by the city council led them to accept them and express positive opinions.

Moving on to the analysis of the last mural, *Hilando culturas*, by K-lina and Marta Pxxxs in 2021, there was a common opinion about its localisation. The tranquillity characterises both the mural and its surroundings by making them work together to create



Fot. 4. Wall of murals, various artists, 2021. Author's own photograph.

a new whole. Another interesting point is the interpretation of the mural in relation to La Chana as a whole: "For him, the mural represents the future of La Chana. In his opinion, it shows how the younger generation is following his generation" (survey 41). Interestingly, only against the content of this mural was no negative opinion was expressed.

Based on the statements of the respondents, it is possible to distinguish several functions that the murals in La Chana serve. First, they are a decorative element because the space becomes prettier thanks to them. Second, through their colours and dynamic elements, they give joy to passersby and distinguish the buildings on which they are located. Next, their content stimulates the imagination, can evoke positive associations or promote local history and thus fulfil an identification function and give a sense of belonging. In a way, murals also serve an educational function, as respondents try to give sense of their contents, read their message, or comment on it.

On the other hand, for not everyone the murals represent a change for the better. They seem to them to be too colourful and even to diminish the quality of the space, which in their opinion is not intended for such activities. Interestingly, many people also



Fot. 5. Mural "Hilando culturas", K-lina & Marta Pxzxs, 2021. Author's own photograph.

declare themselves undecided - they have no opinion about the mural. Thus, it is possible to distinguish a continuum: from views that are more favourable to the changes carried out with the help of the mural to opinions that are less favourable to them.

The tables collect the information obtained from passersby. In some conversations, all three questions could not be answered, so some surveys were incomplete. One table contains information from residents and the other from tourists. Both groups show similar trends.

Residents and tourists do not have in-depth information about individual murals, and obtaining it does not seem important to them. Many of them are aware that there are more murals, nevertheless they cannot point out where they are located. The elderly have a particular problem in this regard, which can be linked to their lower mobility. They also failed to note the change in the space, as they are most often unable to indicate when the mural was created or who painted it.

Table 1 Answers given by residents of La Chana. Source: Author's own work.

Residents of La Chana	Yes	No
Has any information about the mural in question (when it was painted, who painted it, etc.)	13	10
Knows other examples of murals (does not matter if s/he can point out where they are)	15	9
Wants more murals	11	3

Table 2 Answers given by tourists encountered in La Chana. Source: Author's own work.

Tourists (visiting someone, walking, etc.)	Yes	No
Has any information about the mural in question (when it was painted, who painted it, etc.)	5	6
Knows other examples of murals (does not matter if s/he can point out where they are)	7	4
Wants more murals	7	3

Conclusions - the future of the district

The analysis of the material collected shows that La Chana is an area where different forms of social inequality intersect. Difficult access to the district, high unemployment, the disappearance of local businesses, lack of investments and the deterioration of public and private spaces are just some of the problems identified. Consequently, it is necessary to highlight the multiple imaginations of different groups of the district space and the role of mural art in it.

According to the organisers of the urban art open gallery project, La Chana needs a new impulse, mainly economic, to get out of its stagnation. Drawing inspiration from the past splendour, they want to create a new, relatively quick and inexpensive attraction that will attract tourists and “bring life” to the district. History and awareness of the issues provide the structure for organizers. Drawing on the memory of La Chana's former *tapas* fame and its working-class history, they exercise their agency. It is worth noting, however, that there is a lack of: publicly available information about the project, specification of the goals to be achieved, public debate at the district level and the conscious engagement of artists, which may make it difficult to implement the project or at least measure its results by the organizers.

The artists have a different view of La Chana mainly because they have not lived there for so long. They associate La Chana with youth, safety, comfort, and family atmosphere, which can be considered as outdated image of the district. In addition, many of those who are now well-known muralists had their first attempts at writing graffiti

there. It would be worthwhile to refer to this part of La Chana's history in a project based on urban art and bring it out of oblivion. Speaking of the way of understanding art, they see it, depending on the context, as a tool for self-expression or the implementation of social projects. For the artists, the practice of painting builds their structure. Their agency manifests itself through the search for opportunities to express themselves or their vision of the world. The artists particularly emphasised the role of collaboration as crucial in community projects, as it stimulates belonging and responsibility for the space. Therefore, a project can set a goal not only to promote tourism but also to bring about revitalisation. According to various reports, the area of La Chana is degrading, so promoting only tourism could lead to a repetition of the pattern known from Malaga, among others. Municipal authorities should consider a sustainable investment in improving the lives of the residents and make of La Chana a "front area" (Giddens 2003: 167).

Concluding on the social dimension, there is a prevailing trend: the murals are not well known to residents of La Chana. This is due to the following reasons that I have identified: lack of information about the murals (no official documents and website), open discussions on district level and activities to get residents involved, informed, and active. On the other hand, the surveys show that the contents of the mural evokes contradictory emotions. It seems that only one mural, *Hilando culturas*, was interposed as an allegory of La Chana and was perceived positively by all. In interpreting its content, residents talked about themselves: their identity and their actions. This is important as it suggests that the project could be directed towards achieving the social dimension as a revitalisation of the space, stimulating a sense of belonging and agency, in addition to the economic and tourist aspects that dominate. Without the involvement of local residents, faced with the numerous problems listed in the aforementioned reports and mentioned in interviews, the murals may remain unnoticed by them and thus not generate any significant change.

Finally, it should be remembered that space is created by the actions of different social actors. The desire to assert their interests can lead to conflicts. As I show, the activities of the organisational, artistic, and social groups take place in the same urban space, although they have different objectives. The perception of this district differs between the organisers and the artists. The use of art in public space is also different for all three groups. "Re-creating" the former La Chana fame may be difficult without the support of a wider range of residents and artists. Investing in art workshops in the district, where artists could work and thus integrate with the local community and learn about its problems, could contribute to better cooperation and the creation of a strong art base in the long run. The research on touristification of La Chana is worth continuing, as one of the most important events in the world of street art, the Meeting of Styles, took place in La Chana in 2023.

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