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THE CITY AS A STAGE: RUNAWAY INTERNATIONAL STREET ART FESTIVAL

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Abstract: *As the largest man-made artefact, the city has a profound impact on consciousness. We start from the premise that public space serves as a stage within the urban arena where conflicts between different interests and cultures unfold. What transforms the arena into a stage for urban culture are self-aware and liberated individuals who form the backbone of urbanity. This paper aims to show how street art festivals transform the city into a stage. The first part introduces the city as a stage and examines the role of festivals in cultural revitalization. The second part discusses the importance of street art for the city. The third part focuses on a case study of the Runaway International Street Art Festival. Finally, the significance and meaning of public space as a site of socially engaged art is considered from the perspective of both the artists and the local population.*

Keywords: *street art, public space, Runaway International Street Art Festival*

The city as a stage¹

Cities play an important role in shaping social reality. When it comes to the developing potential of a city, visibility certainly plays a role. This important component faces numerous obstacles, and the role of the city in achieving “visual harmony with the environment” becomes a particular challenge for architects, urban and spatial planners involved in planning and designing a particular spatial segment. The aesthetics of space is disturbed for various reasons, summarised under the term “visual pollution”: environmental factors, fuel consumption, the consequences of economic development

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and the construction of high-rise buildings. However, “visual pollution” can encourage individual participation in public life. Public spaces become attractive for use when they are safe, accessible to all and diverse. In addition, it is necessary to constantly develop new strategies and take an active approach to revitalising vitality.² Graffiti culture and street art are working on these strategies without official initiatives, and the consequences of their activities are currently the most discussed topics in the modern city.

Those who choose to actively engage take on the role of gladiators, breathing life into the city, much like in the ancient arena. Individual energy drives the spectacle. The vision of the city as a stage was first taken up by Rousseau in a cosmopolitan and secular society, where the interaction between the masses and the individual is the main driving force of urban theatre. The myth of the city is mediated and created by the need for self-expression in the crowd.³ Street theatre and guerrilla performances use public space to articulate public issues and revive ownership of the space, often based on disobedience. The performance always requires an urban space with visual intensity to emphasise the theatrical experience. The boundaries between audience and performers are blurred.⁴ In this context, graffiti culture and street art created in public spaces without permission can be broadly categorised as performance art.

The city as a stage has been described by many authors. Rousseau believed that cosmopolitan and secular societies are characterised by the theatrical character of the city. Why is a city perceived as a stage? This transformation is made possible by the self-confident, free individual, his inventiveness in public space and critical mass. The stage is thus characterised by social energy and the individual gestures of the citizen described. Richard Sennett identifies three basic elements: the time — the rehearsal, the definition of the audience — the public, and the definition of the goal — the theme. Within these three elements, “actors, expressive emotional actors,” as Sennett calls them, perform within the spatial boundaries of the city as a stage. Interestingly, Bobić writes that the forms of urban theatre are expected above all in mundane places, “on the street, between parked cars... in queues for gasoline or public traffic.”⁵

As Pušić notes, every city is looking for “something”, for places where “something always happens”, and this “something” includes very different and atypical things: historicity, a kind of exoticism, unusual spaces, architecture, customs, urban rhythm, local culture. On the other hand, there are these unloved, unused and neglected spaces. Whether they are so-called living or dead urban spaces does not necessarily depend on whether they are located downtown or on the outskirts of the city. The vitality of certain urban spaces is influenced by numerous factors, first and foremost by the activities within the space. As Jane Jacobs points out, cities need to fulfil a number of factors to be vibrant, such as the type of use, the diversity of motives and the social diversity of peo-

2 Pušić, Lj. (2001) *Održivi grad. Ka jednoj sociologiji okruženja*, Beograd: Srboštampa, pp. 277-282.

3 Bobić, op.cit.

4 Irvin, op.cit., pp. 49, 50, 52, 53.

5 Bobić, op.cit., pp. 17, 18, 19, 22.

ple and groups interacting with the space. This relationship between the people and the space is seen as a prerequisite for liveliness, regardless of whether it is spontaneous or induced. The places where the “engine of social vitality” is created are precisely those that offer, among other things, a wide range of urban activities and the authenticity of urban dynamics. The feeling of urban comfort is the aspiration of a vital city, which is essentially based on people’s cultural needs and the need to make varied use of their time.⁶

During the festivals, the city takes on the character of a stage. The need to create a new urban identity and the growing importance of the “experience economy” have encouraged urban development strategies that draw on their own resources — history, space, creativity, talent.⁷ Festivals transform the city into a stage set and contribute to the processes of revitalization and urban development. By creating a lively atmosphere and urban spirit, they increase the recognition value of a place. The role of events today is no longer just to offer specific content, but culture performs the function of urban revitalization. In addition to the experience economy, festivals also play a role in improving the quality of life in the city, strengthening social inclusion, promoting the development of a new urban identity, creating an urban narrative and promoting the city’s international and local potential at the same time.⁸

Art in Public Space

Art in public space encompasses a wide range of artistic activities, from performative to visual, and by its very nature these artistic practices often intertwine and influence each other. Consequently, there are various research trends in these arts today, some of which aim to unify all these practices, while others strive to distinguish individual artistic expressions.

The urban environment is always a symbolic and spatial manifestation of social relations. In the interaction of space and the environment, street art becomes a product of the current circumstances in the community, the city, the country or the world.⁹ Street art as a broader field of artistic activity is an area where a whole spectrum of perspectives and conflicting interests exist between different parties (local community, artists, city authorities, etc). Within this concept, we can consider street art, a form of visual expression that emerged from graffiti culture, as a highly autonomous and democratic means of communication. Through graffiti, in the broadest sense of the word, and street art, various political messages are often implicitly or explicitly conveyed, which therefore fall within the realm of freedom of expression. The negative perception of street art without permission, which often points to an urban identity crisis, is therefore an

6 Džejkobs, Dž. (2011) *Smrt i život velikih američkih gradova*, Novi Sad: Mediteran Publishing; Pušić, op.cit., pp. 267 -275.

7 Pine, J. and Gilmore, J. (1999) *The experience economy*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

8 Ričards, G. i Palmer, R. (2013) *Uzbudljivi gradovi. Kreativni menadžment i revitalizacija grada*, Beograd: Clio, pp. 14, 15, 21, 28, 29, 301.

9 Pogrmić, Z. and Đerčan, B. (2021) The role of street art in urban space recognition, *Researches Reviews of the Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management* 50–2/2021, p. 124.

indication of the lack of the humanistic, emancipatory potential of the space as a space of rebellion. Discussions about street art are therefore always also discussions about the politics of urban space and the control of public space. Debates ranging from different types of graffiti to street art to large-scale mural-like works have addressed the question whether these forms constitute esthetic practice or vandalism. There have been opinions that these forms of artistic expression are acceptable in legally permitted locations (with the owner's consent).¹⁰

As part of the city, street art contributes to its appearance, becoming part of the culture and overall context of the city and its social environment. Street art cannot be considered out of the political, cultural and economic context. Artists create their works in a specific social environment, and it is logical that the themes of art have changed throughout history as society has changed. This often leads to encounters between local and global content. Unauthorised street art poses a moral and symbolic challenge to city authorities, as it represents a conflict over the use of public space and reactivates Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city.¹¹ In the interaction of space and environment, street art becomes a product of the current circumstances in the community, the city, the country or the world.¹²

In addition to structural and spatial characteristics, a place also contains cultural and esthetic forms of expression that play a decisive role in the development of urban identity. Local urban identity plays a special role for street art in the urban landscape. Local urban identity is defined as the identity of small towns or neighbourhoods. Individuals form an image of the local identity of the street, the neighbourhood in which they live, work and move, based on physical and functional characteristics, but also on personal experiences and media images.¹³ Street art develops a sense of place while promoting economic development.¹⁴ Layak notes that street art is increasingly taking over our cities during festivals. Both the artist and the architect aim to reshape urban space by viewing the city as a "creative object in scenic motion." He defines street art as "a collection of all the lively and brief spectacle that takes place in the public space of the city, insofar as it is inscribed in an urban scenography."¹⁵

10 Pogrmić and Đerčan, op.cit., pp. 122-124; Đukić, N. (2020) Graffiti and Urban Identity: Negative Perception of Graffiti as an Indicator of Urban Identity Crisis, *Post-socialist transformation of the city*, Novi Sad: Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Sociology, pp. 123-135.

11 Gutierrez, J. J. P. and Marcos, L. C. (2020) Drawing on the Walls: Graffiti, Street Art or Walls in Time. Analysis of the Torre Vieja Experience, *Street Art Drawing on The Walls*, 13 (24), pp. 1-13; Pogrmić and Đerčan, op.cit., pp. 122-125.

12 Pogrmić and Đerčan, op.cit., p. 124.

13 Relph, E. (1976) 'On the Identity of Places' *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion, pp. 44-62; Pogrmić and Đerčan, op.cit., pp. 127-128.

14 Palermo, L. (2014) The role of art in urban gentrification and regeneration: aesthetic, social and economic developments, *Journal of The Section of Cultural Heritage*, 10, pp. 521-545.

15 Lajak, P. (2000) Šalon na ulici, in: *Urbani spektakl*, ed. Dragičević Šešić, M., Beograd: Clio, p. 73.

The presentation of art in public space has changed considerably in recent decades, both in terms of its scope and its practice. The functions of street art are diverse and range from expressing the painterly skills of the creator to political activism, marking territory, expressing identity and creativity. In places with different social, economic and ethnic structures, the integrative function of street art is of great importance.¹⁶ For example, the initiative launched in Belgrade in 1989, when the authorities decided to beautify the urban space with murals, had a significant impact on the history of the city by paving the way for various forms of street art. Professor Čedomir Vasić and other outstanding artists who joined this initiative saw the city as a space for art and dialogue.¹⁷

Today, the energy of unauthorised artistic works within graffiti culture and street art is recognized as a unique expression and illustration of the modern city. This has meant that artists who previously worked without permission now have the opportunity to work legally and receive financial and material support for production. Such works, which we now refer to as new muralism, are created as part of festival productions. Elements of street art contribute to the visual enhancement of grey areas, old buildings and abandoned structures.¹⁸ The creation of an artistic work and the transformation of the urban environment are secondary goals compared to the primary one: to animate people and raise awareness of the need for their involvement in changing the environment they live in.

Runaway International Street Art Festival: A case study

The Runaway Festival builds on the tradition of the Belgrade mural movement of the late 1980s and combines it with the tendencies of the new muralism that emerged from graffiti culture and street art, thus integrating the history and modern life of the city. By taking place in a neighbourhood that, in addition to its unique community and identity, also possesses the necessary characteristics for creating festive spirit, Runaway has created a unique space in Belgrade. In this space, the Runaway Festival works based on grassroots initiatives with the support of local residents to create a neighbourhood in Bežanijska Kosa that stands out on the city map with its unique visual identity.

The festival in Bežanijska Kosa is intended as a successive painting on the facades that will eventually lead to creating a neighbourhood, a part of the city that works as an open-air museum. In 2016, the first facade of around 160 square metres was painted on Vajara Živojina Lukića 3 street. Eight festivals were organised until September 2023, and during this time more than 35 artists visited Bežanijska Kosa and painted around 20 large facades (about 200 m² each). The artists chose their themes themselves. Graffiti artists, street

16 Kujundžić, L. (2006). Graffiti, accessed 23. 08. 2021, http://liduss.blogspot.com/2006/07/graffiti_115343773398615873.html; Pogrmić and Đerčan, op.cit., p. 125.

17 Dragičević Šešić, M. (1992) *Umetnost i alternativa*, Beograd: Institut za pozorište, film, radio i televiziju Fakultet dramskih umetnosti, Clio, p. 54.

18 Poon, T. F. S. (2016) Street Murals as a Unique Tangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Artifact Value Preservation, *International Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries*, 4, 1, pp. 48-61.



Figure 1: Das Drogen, 2022, photo Soulttime media

artists and traditionally trained artists involved in public art took part in the festival and all contributed to the creation of a new mural. In this case study, we will shed light on the organizational and financial challenges faced by the artistic director of the festival, as well as the unique characteristics of Bežanijska Kosa as a venue for the festival, but also as a place for interaction between artists and audience.

Organisational challenges

To understand the context of the Runaway Festival, it is relevant to briefly review the work of the festival's artistic director, Andrej Josifovski, known as Pijanista, who is also one of the authors of this text. Starting in 2012, Pijanista created works several times a



Figure 2: Pijanista, 2020, photo Boris Vatovec

year on facades that already had various interventions that the residents of Bežanijska Kosa did not like. In contrast to the earlier interventions on the buildings, over time the residents took a liking to Pijanista's works, which gave the festival a kind of informal permission to paint the walls. In 2014, the first forms of street art emerged as he began to draw more actively. This year marks the beginning of his active involvement in street art.

A prerequisite for the later successful organisation of the festival was the trust between the artist and the residents of Bežanijska Kosa that was built through these first works. The signature "Pijanista" became a symbol of recognition for the residents, instilling confidence. After two years of painting, the neighbourhood began to recognize and approve the works with this signature. The artist's original motivation was to beautify the neighbourhood in which he lives.

Pijanista used the trust he had gained to launch the Runaway Street Art Festival project. The first organisational steps consisted of developing institutional creative strategies to meet the formal requirements for founding the festival. First, the Runaway Street Artists Association was founded, with Josifovski and his closest family members as its founding members. For the first festival, which was organised within two weeks, the artistic director put together an artistic council based on his vision. This council included artist and architect Professor Milorad Mladenović, painter Mihailo Petković, poet Mića Jakšić, entrepreneur Marko Starović and illustrator Dobrosav Bob Živković, who was also responsible for the logo and visual identity of the festival. The well-known street artist Aleksandra Petković, known as TKV, was also involved in the organisation. Aleksandra Petković and Pijanista worked on two artworks during the first two festivals. After the first festival, the organisation and logistics were entirely based on the personal and voluntary commitment of the artistic director.

Financial challenges

In the eight years that the Runaway Festival has been organised, financial support has been based on informal networks: personal acquaintances of the artistic director, responses from benefactors and informally received material support (scaffolding, paint). Despite the many years and festivals that have passed, no real sponsors have been found. There have been companies that have chosen to collaborate with the Runaway Street Artists Association in a particular year due to their own campaigns or budget activations: The Coca-Cola Company, UNICEF and the Dutch Embassy. The façade painted by Weedzor, entitled "Heart on Hate," was the first façade whose painting was financed by a sponsor. In addition, the murals were transferred to digital form in 2021 with the help of UNICEF as part of the traditional UNICEF greeting card project in the form of NFTs. Sponsors also facilitated the arrival of certain artists at the festival. However, support from sponsors could not provide a long-term funding method to make the event sustainable. Therefore, the artistic director was forced to raise funds in other ways. In 2021, thanks to numerous fundraising activities, the Runaway Foundation was established, whose main objective is to promote culture and art.



Figure 3: Weedzor, 2019, photo JDL, Soulttime media

One of the fundraising strategies for the festival was a kind of street performance: Pijanista stood alone with a cardboard sign that read: “One dinar for culture and art - Runaway Foundation” and begged at a traffic light. That day marked the beginning of donations from citizens that led to a significant financial influx when he recorded a short video during last year’s festival explaining what had been achieved without support from the city, the state or any cultural institution.¹⁹

International and “exciting” strength of the festival

In 2019, the festival took on an international character when Farid Rueda, one of the world’s best-known street artists from Mexico, was a guest. His arrival was made possible by the “Donji Dorćol” association. The artistic director used two strategies that are considered crucial to the success of a festival in cultural management: the strategy of bringing in “stars” and the creation of an “experience economy” for festival visitors. The strategy of inviting “stars” consists of inviting artists whose “names” are used as a marketing tool to attract a wider audience, the media and public attention.²⁰ In the eight years of the festival, the artistic director has succeeded in inviting numerous nationally and internationally recognized artists (Farid Rueda, Judith de Leeuw, Pablo Astrain and Marija Tiurina).

¹⁹ Due to the turbulent paths of transformation from socialism to market-oriented systems in the countries of Southeast Europe, support policies for the cultural and creative sector have not been a priority on the political agenda. Jocić, N., Budović, A. and Winkler, A. (2017) Dynamics Behind the Rise of a Creative Space? A Creative Quarter Development in Belgrade, *The Impact of Artists on Contemporary Urban Development in Europe*, Berlin: Springer, p. 122.

²⁰ Ričards & Palmer, op. cit., p. 111.



Figure 4: Sobekcis, 2021, photo Sobekcis, Soultime media

The international potential of the festival is manifold, as the artists not only bring their culture to the city and bring it in colour to the facades of Belgrade, but also take beautiful memories from Belgrade with them, thus contributing to the recognition of the city as a city of culture:

I really love Belgrade. The Serbs have a healthy spirit and a rich and diverse culture. They are very warm-hearted and are not afraid to tell you if they do not like something. That's why Serbia is one of the few countries where I can see people for who they are. It's good that there is this social freedom (Judith de Leeuw, artist from Amsterdam).²¹

In street art, global and local influences often intertwine, the influence of the artist's culture and the local culture. This can be clearly seen in the mural by the famous Mexican muralist Farid Rueda in the Bežanijska Kosa district in Nikole Dobrojevića Street. On the façade is a portrait of a girl with an eagle-like cap. Rueda painted the image of a beautiful girl wearing a cap that is part of the Mexican tradition, but in the shape of an eagle symbolising our country.

In view of the increasing importance of the “experience economy”, the artistic director also wanted to offer visitors a kind of spectacle as expected from the “exciting city” so at the end of the fifth festival, he brought in the chamber orchestra Muzikon as a festive

21 Žujović, S. (2022) “Strit art na Bežanijskoj kosi. Muralima pokriveno više od 3.500 kvadrata fasada”, 15.10. 2022, accessed 25.04.2024., <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/strit-art-na-bezanijskoj-kosi-muralima-pokriveno-vise-od-3500-kvadrata-fasada/jzz4jct>.

novelty near the painted façades, who played several pieces in front of each façade. This was also an announcement for an open-air concert planned for September from the viewpoint of Bežanijska Kosa neighbourhood, which overlooks the entire city. The golden flower “Catharsis”, a sculpture created by Pijanista in 2020 that symbolises the need for spiritual purification, cultural upliftment and the general elevation of our social consciousness, had previously stood in this place.

It is important to emphasise at this point that the economic element is not present as the main driving force of the festival. The most important aspect of the festival is the artistic transformation of the space, which stems from the vision of the festival director, who is both an architect and a street artist and who, by revitalising a neighbourhood, creates its cultural and social cohesion.

*Local strength of the festival: Local landscape of
Bežanijska Kosa, people, trust, creators*

In addition to the international stars, the festival has played an important role in the individual careers of local artists involved in street art: TKV, Artez, Endo, Sleš, Kori, Brva, Rage, ZEZ lunatic, Đurađ, Piros, Weedzor, Hesoyam crew (Chenipe, Quam, Endo, Kid Leaf, Zvrk, Snout), Stefan Stanojević, Wuper, Sobekcis, Sensi, Atelje Šoln (Marg and Wunste), Das Drogen.



Figure 5: Hesoyam, 2020, photo Boris Vatovec

What is very interesting and important for this story, so that it does not remain just a dead letter or another in a series of designed projects, is that the festival has flourished successfully and beautifully in a specific environment with very different

social profiles. It is about a long-term process of building trust between the artist and the environment in which the artist creates. Ten years ago, this process of building trust was not easy. You had to explain to people what a mural was, why it was necessary to paint a building, and so on. Recently, the tide has turned completely. Initially, it was a long and laborious process to obtain the consent of local residents to paint a façade. Now the neighbours themselves approach the festival and ask when their building will be painted, which has proven to be the best support for the festival. The artistic director of the festival is also a resident of Bežanijska Kosa, and according to his observations, probably the most diverse population in the city lives in just a few square kilometres. Young, old, middle-aged, rich, poor, highly educated and uneducated. Hooligans, pop artists, athletes, doctors, scientists, all have agreed on one thing: this is beautiful! We mention just some of the comments from festival visitors that were shared on social media: “I am lucky to enjoy this and other works every day”, “You are doing something great so that those who will never step into a museum can see some colour”, “It feels like we are abroad, but this is what Serbia should look like”, “I live here on Bežanijska Kosa and had the pleasure and honour of a great artist coming and painting our building (via Farid Rueda).”²² The artistic director of the festival repeatedly received these comments in personal conversations with residents of Bežanijska Kosa. This shows that street art can only be validated through processes of building long-term trust. Trust between residents and artists is the crucial link on the long road from the perception of graffiti culture and street art as vandalism to the recognition of its artistic qualities and finally to its acceptance in the form of a new muralism.

Conclusion

The Runaway Street Art Festival utilised existing spaces in the area and established an active relationship with the vitality of the city. In its initial phase, before it received international artist support and financial help from organisations and donors, it relied solely on the power of one individual — the artistic director — who recognized the Bežanijska Kosa neighbourhood, a “profane place”, as a potential venue on the outskirts of the city. The painted facades offered the “something” that Pusić wrote about: atypical elements such as the unusualness of the space and the distinct local identity of the residents of Bežanijska Kosa. In this way, the festival confirmed the idea that the liveliness or lifelessness of neighbourhoods does not depend on whether they are located in downtown or on the outskirts of the city, but on the activities in the space, how it is used, the invention of the individual in the space and the authentic urban dynamics created by the interaction of space and the residents. Perhaps the most important contribution of the festival taking place on the outskirts is the revitalization of neighbourhoods that are generally

22 Comments personally addressed to the artistic director (by Prof. dr Vladimir Mako, Miroslav Raduljica) and taken from websites: Marka Žvaka (2020), *Pijanista*, accessed 26. 07. 2024., <https://youtu.be/51qrLQeaS7I?si=JLe7snS2ciNOCLCp>; Runaway Street Art Festival, accessed 26. 07. 2024., <https://www.instagram.com/runawayfestival/?hl=en>.

neglected and unrecognised by city authorities in terms of cultural events. Over time, the festival, which was recognized by the Donji Dorćol association, was extended to Dorćol, bringing the stage back to its “old home”, the city centre.

Another feature of the festival is its bottom-up approach. Urban revitalization is usually initiated by the city, but there are also aspects of revitalization that come from citizens or artists. The Runaway Festival in Bežanijska Kosa represents a bottom-up approach to urban regeneration, a grassroots initiative by immediate and potential users, as opposed to the top-down approach that usually prevails in cities and is initiated by cultural politicians²³. In this particular case, it is an independent grassroots initiative realised through the vision of the artistic director of the festival.

The content seen at the Runaway Festival over the past eight years has confirmed the multiple functions of the new muralism: social inclusion, expression of free thought, creativity and, as the artistic director notes, the most important aspect — establishing direct contact with the audience, in this case with the local population of Bežanijska Kosa and Dorćol. Trust between the artists and the public is not achieved through a single mural, graffiti or even a single festival; it is a long-term process of building trust that is essential for street art to be perceived as art and not as something that goes against the visual identity of this part of the city. It can be concluded that street art festivals have a significant local and international potential for the cultural revitalization of the city and the creation of an authentic cityscape. Since street art cannot be separated from the urban context, it truly represents a “window to understanding society”.²⁴ In order to “open” this window and change the environment, the “extra-artistic” social significance of street art, as Dragičević Šešić states, is indispensable: it encourages people to actively engage.²⁵

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ГРАД КАО СЦЕНА:

RUNAWAY INTERNATIONAL STREET ART FESTIVAL

Сажетак: Као највећи артефакт начињен људском руком, град има свеобухватан утицај на свест. Полазимо од тезе да јавни простор представља сцену у арени урбаног простора у коме долази до сукоба различитих интереса и културе. Ови сукоби доводе до тензије између човекових личних потреба и друштвене принуде. Ричард Сенет (Richard Sennett), културни антрополог, сматра да традиционални град насељавају „глумци, актери експресивних емоција који снагом симулације прозаичну стварност претварају у духовни и културни чин“. Оно што арену трансформише у позорницу на којој се ствара урбана култура су самосвесни и слободни појединци који чине упоришну тачку сваког урбанитета. Настојали смо да прикажемо на који начин се град трансформише у сцену посредством фестивала уличне уметности. У првом делу рада град је представљен као сцена и истакнута је улога коју фестивали имају у његовој културној ревитализацији. У другом делу рада указано је на значај који улична уметност има за град. Трећи део рада посвећен је студији случаја *Runaway International Street Art Festival*. У закључку су размотрени значај и значење који јавни простор има као простор друштвено-ангажоване уметности из перспективе уметника и перспективе локалног становништва.

Кључне речи: *street art, јавни простор, „Runaway International Street Art Festival“*