Artistic Resistance: A Comparative Perspective of Protest Art in Militarized Cities

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of militarization, governments around the world are subjecting cities and their citizens to increasing levels of securitization and violence. These policies limit inhabitants' ability to use and control the urban spaces that they call home, a prominent theme in Lefebvre's right to the city, leading many inhabitants to push back. This paper considers the role of public art in the conflict over state encroachment, using case studies of Baghdad after the US invasion in 2003, Rio de Janeiro before and during the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and Minneapolis during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. In each of these cases, art plays a critical role in marking the city space with the grievances of the inhabitants and calls for social reform, reasserting the inhabitants' right to city space.

Introduction

Moments of urban restructuring, often initiated by state action, create the opportunity to dramatically alter the use of a city. In a modern context, after a large event that disrupts normalcy, the state will push for increased control and securitization by employing tactics of militarization, while the people will demand more personal autonomy. This struggle demonstrates Henri Lefebvre's conception of the 'right to the city.' Lefebvre argues that residents implicitly assert that "the city belongs to those who inhabit it;" thus, increasing the 'use value' of space must be given priority over the whims of a powerful state or increasing the 'market value' (Purcell 2014, 149; Lefebvre 1996, 167). This struggle between a domineering state and its inhabitants over public space is a global phenomenon. In 2003, the United States' invasion of Iraq changed Baghdad's understanding of public space and free movement, causing ripple effects that continue to this day. Similarly, in Rio de Janeiro, statewide cleansing and redevelopment in preparation for the 2014 World Cup also drastically altered the environment of the city. Moreover, in 2020 the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked protests over power, policing, and the use of space. In this paper, I analyze these three case studies to explore militarism's encroachment on the inhabitants' right to the city, and the inhabitants' use of art to reclaim these rights. I argue that militarization employs violence to secure city space while art realigns that space with the sentiments of social movements, expressing grievances and making demands for the residents to have control over their city.

Militarized Encroachment on Space

Current theories of urban security demand state control, relying on and supporting increased levels of militarization. Militarization, in its urban context, is defined by Yaseen Raad (2017, 136) as "an *excessive deployment of security measures* to the point where it affects the everyday life of city dwellers'' for the purpose of protecting the interests of powerful stakeholders. States support increased militarization by considering war to be everywhere and everyone to be a threat. Thus, these states "automatically translate difference into othering, othering into targeting, and targeting into violence," which significantly limits the inhabitants' right to the city as defined by Lefebvre (Graham 2009, 399-400). Not only are locals not seen as the rightful controllers of space, they are treated like hostile invaders. The state causes "everyday spaces, sites and infrastructures of cities—along with their civilian populations" to be threats, bringing "military ideas of the prosecution of, and preparation for, warfare into the heart of everyday urban life" (Graham 2009, 388). In the push for state control to 'secure' the city against threats, war is spread across urban space, targeting civilians and their space.

Violent militarization is used to claim space for activities deemed secure and appropriate by the state, using space to re-entrench state power and suppress social mobilization. When a city is militarized, the available "public space shrinks," reducing city-dwellers' access to areas where they may spend time collectively (Raad 2017, 135-136). Physical space has an important role in fostering social connections

and political movements, especially for those traditionally excluded from power (Purcell 2014, 149; Pyla 2013, 5). Thus, by the militarized state disrupting public space, the state undermines the ability of residents to form the bonds and connections necessary for collective action, thereby insulating the state from popular demands (Raad 2017, 137). More precisely, this occurs through "the extension of military ideas of tracking, identification and targeting into the quotidian spaces and circulations of everyday life" (Graham 2009, 385). Techniques of militarization that invade and occupy public space prevent inhabitants from generating social connections, engaging in collective action, and otherwise using the spaces as they wish. Other scholars have expanded on Lefebvre's conception of the 'right to the city,' asserting that the "right to the city is seen not just as a right to appropriation, participation, and difference but even more broadly as a *right to space,* the right to inhabit space" (Soja 2010, 108). Militarism, and the violent exclusion that it causes, violates the inhabitants right to space by suppressing residents' ability to use and benefit from the domain of their city. This militarization manifests itself in violence against the city's residents, as seen across Baghdad, Rio de Janeiro, and Minneapolis.

Militarization in Baghdad, Rio, and Minneapolis

Across the three cases, increasing militarism has impeded on citizens' right to the city. The 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq brought devastation, uncertainty, and terror to Baghdad. During the invasion, the city was a crucial site of conflict and in the occupation that followed, Baghdad became the focus of American military strategy and served as the main hub for their army. The U.S. military during its occupation from 2003 to 2011—and the subsequent governments they installed—implemented physical changes to secure the city. Perhaps most noticeably, the U.S. built walls, checkpoints, and barbed wire fences to segment the city and place it under permanent siege (Mehta 2013, 56). On Abu Nuwas Street, for example, the US used blockades ostensibly to protect the Westerners and regime officials staying in the hotels along the street. The United States' forces also restricted access to the riverbank next to the street in order to protect the Green Zone, an American military base, which sat across the river (Raad 2017, 141-142). These measures eliminated any remnants of the citizens' free access to the city. It also eliminated the nightlife that Abu Nuwas Street had previously been known for, depriving them of their traditional space for leisure and entertainment. In total, 44 walls and 50 fixed checkpoints, along with many other blockades, were erected across Baghdad during the U.S. occupation (Mehta 2013, 58). These barriers control the movement of the inhabitants, cutting off Baghdadis' access to their city under the guise of security. Iraqis were forced "to submit to a system of law enforcement that dehumanizes them as objects of war" as they were deemed to be security threats and subjected to arrests and violence for merely walking in their city (59). This militarization psychologically "unhom[es]" Baghdadis—creating an unwelcoming environment for locals (62). Both physical-

ly and psychologically, militarization caused by the US occupation of Baghdad has denied Baghdad's inhabitants control over their city space.

In Rio, destructive practices and special-access zones were similarly used to modify the city in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The state and World Cup organizers' main priority was to portray an image of a safe, clean, and revitalized city to the world (Kassens-Noor and Ladd 2019, 52). Most of the planners of the city's redevelopment—politicians, city officials, investors, sponsors, and internationally based event organizers—were not, nor were they representative of, the inhabitants of Rio. Since, according to Lefebvre's theory, "it is the everyday experience of inhabiting the city that entitles one to a right to the city," this method of redevelopment calls into question the organizers' respect for the right to the city (Purcell 2014, 142, 150). Furthermore, this redevelopment plan mirrors militaristic ideology by labeling all residents as threats. In fact, the state used violence to move over 19,000 families, oftentimes by marking entire neighborhoods for destruction (Kassens-Noor and Ladd 2019, 53). This large-scale relocation undermines the right of the inhabitants of Rio to control and use their space. The effects were magnified for the homeless or poor because they are more easily cast as the 'other' by the powerful controllers of the state and made unwelcome in the city. During and before the World Cup, the police relied on consistent violence against homeless populations, including physical beatings and even burning homeless people's belongings in the streets, to remove them from tourist-heavy areas (Kassens-Noor and Ladd 2019, 57). Additionally, the redevelopment efforts created new 'special access zones' for World Cup guests that city inhabitants, especially the homeless, were excluded from. The state instrumentalized bright lights, random searches, and arbitrary arrests to remove the homeless from these areas (Kassens-Noor and Ladd 2019, 53). Therefore, in the name of making visitors, sponsors, and players more welcome, violent acts were key in making the Rio locals unwelcome and powerless in their city

In the summer of 2020, militarization increased in Minneapolis, where the police behaved like an occupying military force in their city as the inhabitants' claim to space was wholly ignored and violently seized from them. Following the murder of George Floyd by an officer of the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), Minneapolis—along with much of the United States—erupted into demonstrations over justice, policing, and structural racism. The MPD responded with escalatory violence. The police arrived at the protest grounds in Minneapolis in full riot gear and armored vehicles. They tear gassed crowds, shot rubber bullets, threw flash-bang grenades into crowds, conducted mass arrests, and used stun guns on people (Lee, Jarvie, and Hennessy-Fiske 2020). The state also employed violent police action to deny residents access to space. Violent suppression of residents' access to streets and parks also occurred because the state believed these areas could be forums for political action. Even though the protests were sparked by a system of violent, racist policing practices resulting in murder of George Floyd, agents of the state still

employed militaristic policing practices to secure property at the expense of public's rights to protest on their streets.

The Power of Art in Militarized Urban Contexts

Art as Reflecting Mass Politics

Art can be a political act that both reflects and influences popular sentiment. Protest art, defined in its broadest sense, includes graffiti, songs, murals and slogans. It has a unique ability to capture the subjective voices and experiences of participants in social movements, even in moments of political violence (Jonsson 2021, 514). Under the conditions of high militarization, art can recognize that spaces are modifiable, making them "targets for social and political action seeking justice and democratic human rights" and working to increase "their positive and/or decreas[e] their negative effects on our lives" (Soja 2010, 104). In 2019, the Sadoon Tunnel in Baghdad, a few blocks from Abu Nuwas Street, became a focal point of public art during anti-government protests that were violently repressed. During the occupation of Baghdad, the US built walls to permanently divide Baghdad along sectarian lines and established a government structure that did the same (Mehta 2013, 60). Protestors demanded an end to these divisions, in addition to the elimination of corruption. They also advocated for better social services, and independence from US and Iranian intervention (Bencks 2019). One specific target of the protests was the police presence, as demonstrated in a Sadoon Tunnel mural by Sinan Hussein showing a police officer in full riot gear standing with their back to the viewer. The riot shield the officer is holding shows the reflection of a clown face—revealing the officer to be a clown (Appendix Figure 1). This mural satirizes how laughable the police's claims to provide security were to the people of Baghdad. Rather than increasing safety, the police inflicted violence on Baghdadis. In a separate painting, the image of a tear gas canister is shown lodged in a bloody face next to the words "they killed my dream," showcasing the violent effects of the police's militarized response. Another mural, depicting a child painting a bright sun rising above a country house onto a fully armored officer's shield, casts the state as oblivious to inhabitants' needs and shows how militarization corrupts the innocence of children. In Baghdad, the artists capture and resist the political violence waged by the state by plastering the prominent walls of the Sadoon Tunnel with their pain and frustration. The artists were able to use and transform "aesthetic forms, discourses, and tactics produced by social movements and contribute to these movements' aesthetic repertoires and archives" (Léon 2018, 353-354). In comparison to art, other ways of communicating social change, such as history, political science, and journalism, are limited in their ability to portray the freedom and common emotion of a social movement (Jonsson 2021, 515). Protest art is less hampered because it is unmediated by state and media organizations; thus, artistic representations can more accurately demonstrate the demands and emotions of a social movement. In the case of Baghdad, the grief, anger, despair, and hope of the protestors was captured in the many murals lining the tunnel.

Moreover, art displayed publicly has the power to showcase demands of social movements by making them visible to the general populace. Public display in art means "artistic production can be immanent to the politics of social movements and…can exercise agency in shaping their meaning and direction" (Léon 2018, 372). In the context of state violence and militarism, art can play a crucial role in ensuring people can see, recognize, and condemn this violence in all its forms by providing alternatives to state narratives that would otherwise gloss over the violence and diminish their role in it (354). For instance, in the wake of the release of information about American officers torturing Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison, a Salaheddin al-Sallat painted a mural depicting this torture. In the mural, a hooded prisoner attached to electrical wires stands on one side of the mural while a hooded and cloaked Statue of Liberty figure stands on the other side. In the mural, the Statue of Liberty's hand that traditionally holds the tourch is instead poised to touch controls that will send electricity coursing through the prisoner. By implicating the US in the perpetuation of violence against Iraqis, the mural serves to condemn and acknowledge the role of influential foreign actors in this violence. This mural speaks to the pain inflicted on the inhabitants of Baghdad, reflecting popular anti-US sentiments and reminding viewers of who is responsible for such heinous acts of violence. Social activist murals do not necessarily contain an explicit demand or call to action, but each uses the public nature of the mural to push back against state power and its false narratives. The murals identify the culprit of violence and oppression even when the powerful would rather ignore it, expressing "the anguish of an aggressed nation that nevertheless exposes its resistance through the resilience of the creative spirit" (Mehta 2013, 57).

Urban art also operates by marking the quotidian spaces of the city with messages and demands, indicating how "political violence is structurally inherent to the city's present social and spatial order," and not just in well-known locations (Léon 2018, 363). Even before the 2019 protest movement in Baghdad, one artist drew regime attention after painting murals in regular places across the city focusing on the violence faced by children. In one mural, a child is depicted with his hands on the back of his head next to the words "don't shoot me" written in English. This mural conveys the terror caused by the militarization of everyday life in Baghdad, and it demands a different method of security. Another mural showed four children, three of which were holding guns, next to the words "What do you want to become?" followed by an array of question marks. This mural asserts that the future of Baghdadi children is at risk due to widespread militaristic violence. The question "What do you want to become?" written on the wall in the mural seems to be directed at the children in the mural, but the question also asks adult viewers what kind of space, city, country, they want their children to grow up in. This demonstrates how routine the violence in Baghdad has become and it ensures that artistic resistance becomes enmeshed in everyday life.

In Rio de Janeiro, residents utilized art to demonstrate that the World Cup investment and

militaristic street clearing designed to showcase security and cleanliness to the world was undertaken by the state without regard to the inhabitants of the city. The focus of Rio de Janeiro's leaders on improving the city's appearance often manifested itself in the destruction of favelas, or working-class neighborhoods at Rio's periphery, and the removal of homeless people (Kassens-Noor and Ladd 2019, 52). In one mural, a child wearing a Brazilian soccer uniform cries next to a soccer ball with a skull on it. On the other side of the child are depictions of a home and a family crossed out with blood and written at the top of the mural is "They will destroy our community for the World Cup" (Appendix Figure 2). This mural addresses the plight of children, calling attention to the destructive spatial practices of the World Cup preparations. In this mural, there is no separating the game of soccer from the violence and destruction occurring, thus co-opting the imagery of the World Cup to bring awareness to Rio's struggles and their causes. Another mural turns a soccer ball into a bulldozer, tearing through an entire neighborhood to make way for a red carpet. This mural intimates that soccer and its glitzy stars have taken priority over the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, and that leaders of the World Cup are to blame for the violence. Another mural of the Brazilian flag with the word "Sold" written on it dripping red paint, reinforces the plight of the community subjected to changes made to benefit those with capital investments. This mural suggests that while Rio's residents were fighting to save their homes and spaces for themselves, the state and international investors tried to eliminate their presence to make room for the World Cup and its attractions. This is why "the right to the city is understood to be a struggle to augment the rights of urban inhabitants against the property rights of owners'' (Purcell 2014, 142). Inhabitants need control of the city for themselves, rather than relinquishing it to the highest bidder. This, however, is made more difficult by state interventions focused on security rather than social support.

In Rio de Janeiro police violence not only directly aided the foreign capital holders but, perhaps more insidiously, also diverted resources away from the public inhabitants. Another mural depicts the World Cup mascot firing a rifle next to a demand for "education not repression," making it clear that protestors see the priorities of the state as misplaced. Stencil paintings on the street reading "less jails, more schools, demilitarization, less weapons, more health" next to a chalk outline of a body reinforces this point. In these murals, there is clear linkage between the militarization of the city, which brings harm in and of itself, and the decline in social services, which lead to protestors using the street space to demand better treatment of Rio's inhabitants. The murals denounce the state's guise of security and cleanliness to rationalize militarization. Put bluntly by another mural, the demands of the people were simple: "FIFA Go Home". The street art of Rio demanded that the city be controlled by and for its inhabitants rather than the destructive forces of the state. By marking the city, protest artists subverted the state's obsession with outward appearance by making the art and its accompanying social grievances and demands inter-

national news.

Art as Demanding the Right to the City

In the context of city space, public art marks the space, asserting the people's right to use the area away from the militaristic state's incursions. In broader terms, art can be used to protect the right to the city. Art can be used to modify the meaning of prominent buildings, walls, and spaces, often subverting the state or official narrative of domination (Edelman 1996, 75). The Turkish Restaurant building, located just above Sadoon Tunnel became a symbol of the protest movement in Baghdad (Reuters Baghdad 2019). In Sadoon Tunnel, side by side murals demand "Iraq for Iraqi people" and showcase the Turkish Restaurant building draped with an Iraqi flag and filled with triumphant people. The message of this mural is clear: rejecting control of Iraq by foreign powers or an unrepresentative government. By marking this building as belonging to and representing the Iraqi people, the mural of the Turkish Restaurant building showcased what could be. Another mural depicting the Turkish Restaurant building shows a motorized rickshaw, an unofficial symbol of the protest movement, circling the Turkish Restaurant with an Iraqi flag trailing behind. Sitting just below where the building actually stood, these murals create a hopeful interpretation of the building as a new home for the Iraqi people and a place for celebration without the interference of the state. This building is claimed on behalf of the protestors, who wish to push militarization out of all of Baghdad so they can claim the city space for the inhabitants.

In Minneapolis in 2020, police desperately wanted to maintain the status quo against demands for changes in social structure and art was used to claim space free from state control. In an increasingly militarized city, violence and surveillance were key aspects of the MPD's attempt to enforce 'public order' and 'security.' In response, residents used physical barriers and symbolic markers to claim the intersection where George Floyd was murdered as an autonomous, de-militarized zone for people to mourn and protest, naming the space George Floyd Square (Bella 2021). Within this square, the site of Floyd's death had been marked with the painted silhouette of a figure. In addition, at the time of the protests, the square was transformed into a multi-functional community space; food was sold or given away, a first aid clinic was established, and protestors gathered in large numbers. In contrast to Lake Street eight blocks away where most of the violence occurred and protestors clashed nightly with the police, George Floyd Square was clearly marked as a place claimed by and for the inhabitants. Hung up in the square was a black sign saying "Reclaim a Sense of Space,'' with a drawing of a flower that had "healing" and "community" written on the leaves. Hence, George Floyd Square was demarcated as a place of community for the residents and protestors, away from the violent encroachments of the police. At the entrance, a graffitied traffic sign was modified to read "No cops" and "Residents Only". Although there was no significant physical barrier to entry on foot, these artworks work on a psychological level to bar the space for some and grant access for others.

As Raad states, this distinction "is about how someone enters a space even if not physically barred from it and is conditioned by feelings of receptivity, welcome and/or comfort or by the lack of these feelings" (2017, 137).

In George Floyd Square, the reversal of traditional power politics of space was facilitated through art. The marginalized and their allies were welcomed with "Black Lives Matter'' plastered everywhere and food, and flowers covering numerous memorials. Meanwhile, the military mechanisms of the state were barred by combative signs and defund the police sentiments. Emphasizing this reversal, concrete barricades placed by the state were painted in bright colors with words like "power," "peace," "get free," and "stop the violence". When the permanent police barricades around the George Floyd Square blocking vehicle traffic were removed, people replaced them with tables, a wine-rack, and other household items. These items indicated that the police were no longer allowed to impose or remove segmentation on the street because the people were in charge of the space. Art made this separation between inhabitants—users of the space—and the police—agents of the state—explicit. Painted in bright block letters on the street were the words "Know Justice, No Street" and on the bus stop "No Justice, No Streets". Since the protestors have taken the space from the state, this demand announces the requirements protestors placed on the state in order to relinquish the space. One of the most prominent messages in the square was written on the gas station canopy and read: "Where There's **People** there's **Power**" . This statement is bigger than just George Floyd Square. The writing looks over all of the square, reminding the world that everyday people have the ability to control space and impact the political realm as they see fit.

Quotidian art advocates for inhabitants to enjoy their full right to the city, by marking and controlling the daily and mundane urban spaces; this, however, does not always have to use the exact same tactics or achieve the same goals. In Rio and Baghdad, the art focused more on attracting attention about violations of spatial rights, both from inside the city and from abroad than the art in George Floyd square did. This is likely because Sadoon Tunnel in Baghdad was already prominent before the murals and Rio was hosting an incredibly prominent international event. This desire to attract attention in Baghdad and Rio resulted in the creation of large murals as opposed to the artwork of signs and smaller graffiti in Minneapolis. While all three represented and influenced the protest movements they were a part of, the intended scale of audience was potentially different. Instead of focusing on attracting attention from the city and abroad, the art of George Floyd Square placed a greater emphasis on claiming space and marking its boundaries. By associating space, both quotidian and famous, with the symbols, images, and messages of a social movement, art has the power to make the spaces in each of these three cities work for the citizens who live there.

Conclusion

As the state militarizes space—enclosing it, dividing it, securitizing it—and wages violence on its inhabitants, political art gains importance

as a method to fight state control. Public art becomes a potent tool for social movements to express their grievances and demands, make statements, and then claim space. In Baghdad, the divisionary blast walls of a foreign occupier were co-opted as a canvas for protest and a central tunnel displayed the demands and hopes of a budding protest movement. In Rio, where livelihoods were targeted for destruction, residents used art to demand the prioritization of their needs. In Minneapolis, a space where the presence of racialized policing cost George Floyd his life and where the MPD continued to seek control, George Floyd Square was transformed by art into a community centre where the state held little power. In all these places, systemic harm and state control was challenged by art that subverted hierarchies and undermined militarism. Whereas militarism uses fear to justify state encroachment on the right to the city, art relies on hope and captures inhabitants' support to defend this right.

Appendix

Figure 1. A police officer in riot gear is reflected in their shield as a clown. Sinan Hussein. Located in Sadoon Tunnel, Baghdad, Iraq. Photographed by Alex MacDonald.

Figure 2. A crying child wears the Brazilian National Team Uniform. To his right a soccer ball with a skull in it. To his left a symbol for home and family are crossed off in blood. The words above read "They will destroy our community for the World Cup." Meteo Mangueira. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photographed and translated by Voice Project.

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