

# Visual Codes Generated through Urban Art. Cultural Confluences between Colombia and Mexico.

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**Abstract.** In recent years, artistic manifestations have had a greater impact on the economic, cultural and social axes. The objective of this research is to examine the visual codes generated through the urban art of Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia and Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico. Two case studies were selected with themes aligned with the Sustainable Development Objectives. In Bucaramanga, the case is “Community Tourism”, a program to transform forgotten and in some cases violated spaces in the city, where through street art: murals and graffiti, neighborhoods and different corridors of the urban area are given new meaning. As far as Ensenada is concerned, it is La Colectiva Maremoto, who generates urban interventions to make gender inequality visible and promote a future in which women and non-binary gender participate in safer environments. The scope is descriptive, to account for codes, visual techniques and discursive lines used in Latin American artistic expressions. It is concluded that although urban artists are immersed in the orange economy, it is relevant to appropriate the needs and approaches of other economies, as in the cases shown here, purple and green economies, since with their capacity for mass communication they generate spaces for reflection and promote social well-being.

## 1 Introduction

There are various meanings for the concept of creative or orange economy. In this research it will be interpreted based on the definition of the Inter-American Development Bank in which it is conceived as the group of activities through which ideas are transformed into cultural and creative goods and services whose value is or could be protected by intellectual property rights (IPR) [1]. Although the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID19) affected the creative sectors, reducing up to 10 million jobs related to the cultural and creative industries, recognition of the value or social benefits that the orange economy entails has been increasing. At a global level, during the same pandemic, the well-being that different artistic expressions caused in the population during confinement was very significant. Even the year 2021 was named the International Year of the Creative Economy and resolution 74/198 of the United Nations General Assembly emphasizes the contribution of said economy to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2], highlighting, among others, the Goal 5: Gender Equality and the Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities which are related to the case studies of this research.

If we talk about the economic contribution of the cultural sector, it represents 3.1% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Likewise, United Nations

Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that during 2020 “creative goods and services represented 3% and 21% of all exports of goods and services, respectively”, generating 6.2% of total jobs [3]. No specific data was found on the economic impact produced particularly by the creatives dedicated to mural painting, so this research focuses on the cultural and educational contributions it generates, presenting as analysis two case studies: Tres Perros Colombian collective which is part of the Community Tourism project, which is an initiative of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism of Colombia to transform forgotten and/or violated spaces in the city and in Mexico La Colectiva Maremoto, which seeks the inclusion of female and non-binary gender artists, in safer environments. Although they have collaborated with foundations that receive government funding, they argue that, as a collective, they have not received such funds directly.

## 2 Objectives

The general objective of this research was focused on accounting for codes, visual techniques and discursive lines generated through the urban art of Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia and Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico.

To this end, three specific objectives were defined:

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- Describe the management and work dynamics considered in both Latin American artistic groups.
- Identify the discursive lines used in the artistic expressions of the case studies La Colectiva Maremoto and Tres Perros.
- Describe the symbolism used in the urban art of the case studies.

### 3 Problem statement

Throughout the American continent, stone engravings or paintings made by its first settlers have been observed. Such is the example of the symbolic representations of communication made by the Muisca indigenous people, first settlers of the Cundiboyacense Altiplano of Colombia, who preserved their customs by carving their deities, rituals and habits related to natural phenomena and crops on rocks [4]. Mural painting, in turn, has had different interactions with Latin American peoples, for example, muralism is inherent in Mexican culture since pre-Hispanic times, were the elements used serve as a systemic communication, for instance, birds have a great importance in the iconography of their representations, establishing two levels of reading, the first being the cultural relevance that was given to them, when they were captured in archaeological sites, which reflect the way of feeling and thinking of the people through graphic expression; and the second level being, the metaphorical one, being part of its pictorial language [5]. Likewise, different indigenous peoples transmitted religious teachings and symbols through mural painting. The murals of Bonampak, Chiapas are probably the most relevant example of Mayan muralism both for the transmission of cultural knowledge, its technical and conservation quality and the dimensions it covers [6]. However, it is during the Mexican Revolution movement that the communicative nature of Mexican muralism is charged with a patriotic discourse that exalts values among indigenous peoples and the masses [7]. Therefore, since the Mexican muralism of the early 20th century, one can appreciate the capacity of public art to build a collective memory and national identity that transmits the legacy or history of a people [8].

Although the previous cases refer to a mural endorsed by the government, in contemporary times muralism has been associated with street art, through the production of graffiti artists, carrying a connotation of exclusion by governments and even in different parts of Latin America artists and cultural managers talk about the need of democratize the urban art aims to foster an appropriation of public space and collaborative governance [9]. On that same axis, it is expressed that graffiti art has its beginnings in New York in the late 70s, being a manifestation of protest by African American groups against social marginalization [4]. Thanks to Hip Hop music, graffiti spread to other parts of the world, and although the first manifestations of graffiti in Bogotá, Colombia occurred in the 60s and 70s, it was not until 2010s that it exploded, gaining the status of artistic expression and even diverse artists received incentives from the government to paint the walls [4].

In the case of Mexico, there are 3 moments in the study of local graffiti art : 1) The placazo, symbolic-cultural production used by the cholo subculture to mark and delimit the territory of their group within the neighborhood 2) The New York influence, identity linked to the territory, generated by the decoration of facades of visible and busy spaces, grouping with respect to the city 3) Communication strategies for youth, symbolic production of the city's identity considering the public politics [10].

Currently, the collectivity inherent in public art is not only recognized in the society to which discourses are transmitted, but it is increasingly common to appreciate public art developed by collectives of artists who may have diverse origins, training and even artistic disciplines united by principles, values, social causes, so, from their essence, these groups embrace diversity and generate a flexible work dynamic.

In that sense, Código after interviewing five Mexican groups, concludes that there are some characteristics specific to artists who are grouped in collaborative work cells:

- They are independent and self-managing.
- They present flexibility in their constitution, since they can be from a specific artistic discipline; interdisciplinary teams (such as writers, sculptors, painters); o multidisciplinary teams (for example cultural managers, curators, artists, designers)
- They give visibility to creatives from a certain geographical space, social condition or cultural context.
- They address social and political problems in which their members are immersed.
- They generate community, participate in exhibitions, workshops and research.
- They can have physical spaces where they can show and sell the work of the members of the collective.

The above addresses the synergy and collaboration between artistic collectives, which within the union is a common practice in specific projects [11].

The social discourses through urban art in the localities of the case studies present common characteristics, since the discursive lines of the interventions appeal to social themes that encompass the purple and green economies, such as violence, gender, lack of equality and sustainability. Through the graphics used, the two groups seek to make visible the problems inherent to the social system. Likewise, art is proposed to generate reflection and contrast in public spaces, to capture the public's attention and by this contribute to improve the environment.

According to what has been stated so far, it is relevant to investigate the work dynamics of these groups, with the objective of identifying the processes for the selection of the discursive axes and the symbolism used in artistic expressions.

## 4 Methodology and presentation of results

The focus of this research is qualitative, and the scope is explanatory, with the intention of identify codes, visual techniques and discursive lines used in artistic expressions by two artistic collectives, one in Bucaramanga, Colombia and the other in Ensenada Baja California, Mexico

The case studies were chosen for accessibility and proximity of the subjects to the researchers. In the case of the collective in Ensenada, a semi-structured interview was carried out in an in-person session, in which three members of La Colectiva Maremoto were present. In the case of the group from Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia, a semi-structured interview was also carried out with a member of the Tres Perros collective through the virtual platform Teams, and a written transcription was made. Semi-structured interviews begin with the posing of a question that can be adapted to the answers given by the interviewees [12]. The interview was carried out based on main axes according to the objective of the research.

- Integration of the collective.
- Learnings and challenges.
- Project management.
- Style and graphics.

These interviews, along with the visual analysis generated, allowed us to recognize the management and work dynamics, as well as to define symbolic elements and graphic style of the two groups that are the case studies of this research.

### 4.1 La Comuna 14 está Aquí, community tourism in Bucaramanga, Colombia.

In the city of Bucaramanga located in the department of Santander, in eastern Colombia, new dialogues of artistic co-creation are generated, aimed at community tourism proposals, where urban art is implemented in public space and produces new narratives in the neighborhoods that have been socially excluded and stigmatized by violence. This is the case of the Albania neighborhood in Comuna 14, better known as Morrórico.

Community tourism arises from projects of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism of Colombia according to the Policy Guidelines for the Development of Community Tourism and occurs in vulnerable contexts or with complex situations from the social, economic, environmental and cultural perspectives [13]. It comes as a strategy to improve and transform the environment, to increase opportunities for territorial development; to promote local entrepreneurship, sustainable innovation alternatives and appreciation of heritage and the generation of culture. The community tourism proposal in Colombia was created supported by the Millennium Development Goals 2000-2015, currently in continuity with the new SDG 2015-2030 in this case addressing Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities [2].

Regarding Goal 11 of the SDGs, the United Nations Organization foresees a growth in the population rate in

urban areas of 70% by the year 2050. Within the statistics, it is reported that around 1.1 billion people today live in marginalized neighborhoods worldwide, and it is estimated that in at least 30 years the number will increase to approximately 2 billion. Therefore, the efforts lie in seeking sustainable cities and communities, for this, among many other actions, inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban development policies and practices are applied that encompass civil society and public, private and government organizations, in order to reduce identified problems, such as: lack of access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, the improvement of marginalized neighborhoods, lack of social distancing, isolation, inclusive and sustainable urbanization, among others [2].

In that sense, Tres Perros, is an artistic collective made up of three emerging artists: Sebastián, Juan Felipe Fuentes Meza and Anderson Niño Durán, who permeate the peripheries of the city of Bucaramanga, motivated by territorial calls managed by cultural institutions, undertake a proposal called La Comuna 14 está Aquí, in the search for recognition and transformation of the Albania neighborhood. Moved by art, music, culture, they initiate conversations with the residents of the neighborhood and cooperatively visualize a change in the environment through meaningful color on the walls. This relates to the essence of Goal 11 which claims that “for all of us to survive and prosper, we need new, intelligent urban planning that creates safe, affordable and resilient cities with green and culturally inspiring living conditions”[14].

Concerning the graphics used by this group, the members argue that it is inspired by the artistic currents developed in the favelas of Brazil and replicated in the Colombian northwest in the city of Medellín, which is how urban tourist routes emerge. Relating to La Comuna 14 está Aquí, it is notable that the graphic starts from an aesthetic view of the wall worn by the passage of time and the decline in humidity (figure 1), later once the intervention has been carried out (figure 2), the place obtains a new reading, generated by phrases that are part of the popular slang of the neighborhood, such as: symbolisms of cumbia as a fundamental element of the identity of the context of La Comuna 14 está Aquí, for example, a common practice is that in every corner of Morrórico a speaker vibrates to the rhythm of the cumbia and its inhabitants enjoy the musical joy.



**Fig. 1.** Before intervention. Photography by Sebastián Gómez (n.d.).



**Fig. 2.** After intervention. “Cumbia Salvaje” (Wild Cumbia). Murals made by Ceroker and Lucho. Photography by Cristian Piedrahita, 2023.

In the intervention one of the symbolism inherent to the context of the commune is appreciated, the musical sound of the Cumbia Salvaje, which is captured by the artists Ceroker and Lucho belonging to La Comuna 14 está Aquí movement; In this mural you can see the contrast in the public space, the vibrant color palette with connotations of joy and celebration.

On the other hand, El Leopardo (figure 3), another of the murals made by the collective, which was conceptualized as an analogy that alludes to guarding the neighborhood and at the same time to the Atlético Bucaramanga soccer team, through the symbolisms that are given to the leopard. Once again color is used as a resource to generate contrast and revitalize spaces that are in deteriorating conditions.



**Fig. 3.** “La Comuna 14 está Aquí” (Commune 14 is Here). Mural created by Tres Perros Colectivo. Photography by Cristian Piedrahita, 2023.

The ecosystem is also a line that is visualized in the graphic symbols reflected on the walls (figure 4), the care of the common home [15], respect for the fauna and flora, close to the area are represented in the project carried out by groups, such as Tres Perros, within the graphic it is integrated into the vegetation surrounding the neighborhood that is part of a protected nature reserve. Likewise, allusion is made to the animals of the environment, and they are integrated as characters that transform the walls of the neighborhood, both the species that live on the green paths, as well as the stray cats and dogs (figure 5) that accompany passers-by, becoming representative characters of the neighborhood.



**Fig. 4.** “Mural de la casa común” (Common House Mural). Mural created by María Fernanda Tarazona. Photography by Cristian Piedrahita, 2023.



**Fig. 5.** “Personajes Callejeros” (Street Characters). Murals made by Enka and Pinky. Photography by Cristian Piedrahita, 2023.

This is how the Albania neighborhood in the upper periphery of the city of Bucaramanga is emerging as a

cultural reference and a tourist space. Through a plan that seeks to leave urban violence and crime behind, capturing the characteristic idiosyncrasy of its environment. A proposal, whose maximum objective was to recover part of the lost identity, to achieve greater cohesion between a forgotten urban fabric and a disenchanting social fabric.

The measure carried out by the artistic groups in La Comuna 14 está Aquí has given a revitalizing character; the murals have decorated the strategic points of the neighborhood; and these artistic pieces have returned color and enthusiasm to areas that were marginalized, with grayish tones, which in the words of the collective “have seen how time uproots the local references, which brought a smile to the local people” [16]. That nostalgic factor that it produces in those who are knowledgeable about the history of the place, or those who have experienced what is portrayed, adds to a determining pedagogical factor; since these works cause local traditions to be transmitted generationally, re-founding a renewed intra-history that prevents all crucial moments from falling into the most abject of oblivion.

#### 4.2 La Colectiva Maremoto (The Maremoto Collective), Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico.

The next case study chosen for this research is La Colectiva Maremoto, a group of cisgender female and gender dissident artists made up of Amanda Bueno, Claudia de la Mora, Casandra Lucero, Elsa Magaña, Guadalupe Alonso and Yolotl Zertuche who graduated from the B.A. degree in plastic arts from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC), in Mexico. They are founders of La Colectiva Maremoto, called by them as La Colectiva (The Collective), whose members are artists, teachers, illustrators and creatives. They have had individual experiences in mural art in different cities, some of them have collaborated on murals with other groups and artists. The collective expresses that “they decided to group together to generate a safe space where you can reflect, learn and grow from empathy, sensitivity and honesty, and to dialogue and work around social problems from a gender, race and class perspective, through a visual language” [17].

Within their manifesto they explained that the objective of the group was to find a way to manifest itself in urbanity under a critical feminist perspective, “from the implications of their social context as minorities and with the idea of proposing another perspective of urban art in our locality” [17].

In that sense, the discursive lines addressed by the collective, like the Tres Perros collective, are aligned with the SDGs, in the case of Maremoto it is aligned with Goal 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Therefore, the actions binding on this objective are related to eliminating forms of discrimination and violence against all women and girls worldwide, in addition to eradicating trafficking and exploitation in all its forms. For the United Nations, gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but one of the essential foundations to build a prosperous, peaceful and sustainable world [2].

The above, according to what was argued by the members of the collective, was one of the reasons for grouping together, since from their perspective there was a lack of representation of issues inherent to social problems in the city of Ensenada. According to what was asserted by the members of the collective, the graphics that were seen in the public spaces were presented from a male perspective, and, with the objective to make other perspectives visible they established the collective during the SARS-CoV2 pandemic (COVID 2019). Sadly, the UN recognized that as society we won't be able to overcome the gap between genders and estimates that “the is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030” reporting a 15.4% of Goal 5 indicators on track, 61.5% at a moderate distance and 23.1 far or very far of track [18].

In the case of Maremoto, all the members have a direct relationship with art, and share a feminist perspective, in their words, a genuine interest in recognizing gender dissidence. Thus, through their graphics they seek to express their own experiences and those of other women addressing social problems.

The projects executed so far by the collective have been within the state of Baja California, Mexico and the media used has been mostly the mural, sometimes completed with performance but they are willing to explore other techniques. The first collective work was a mural located on Calle Madrid (Madrid Street) on the corner of Berna, in the Colonia Ampliación Moderna (Ampliación Moderna Neighborhood), in the city of Ensenada, Baja California. This mural was made in collaboration with the Siemprevivas accompaniment network (figure 6).



Fig. 6. “Mujeres” (Women) Mural created by Colectiva Maremoto. Photography by Colectiva Maremoto, 2023.

Concerning management and work dynamics, one of the objectives of this research, the collective argues that for the projects they have executed, they have had contact from some organization or invitation from other groups. The decision to participate or not in a project is related to a system of shared beliefs, specifically, they conduct an assessment to determine if the project aligns with their group ideologies, ensures that the topics addressed create spaces for reflection, and provides fair remuneration for their work.

With respect to the use of the elements used in the mural, the collective argues that their selection is made through a consensus between the artists participating in the work. Each process is carried out in a personalized way, the style is chosen depending on the project requested, and once the idea is clear, sketches are made within the group, “an idea is individually drawn, shared with the group and together visual elements are integrated” (La Colectiva Maremoto, personal communication, 2023). For them, symbolic elements are

part of a code to express the problems addressed in the graph.

Regarding the above, in most of the collective's works the basic elements of nature, water, earth, fire and air, are mainly used. According to what is argued by the group, they are used to express emotions and sensations, the use of birds, plants, people, spaces, are visual resources that integrate the discourses to emphasize and make visible social issues mainly oriented to a movement that has gained strength in recent years, which seeks to eradicate, inform, make visible and educate on gender equality issues that benefit women and non-binary gender (see figure 7 and 8).



**Fig. 7.** "Ojo de Pájaro" (Bird's Eye). Mural created by Colectiva Maremoto. Photography by Colectiva Maremoto, 2023.



**Fig.8.** Mural making process. Mural created by Colectiva Maremoto. Photography by Colectiva Maremoto, 2023.

For the group, there is a high degree of responsibility to take care of what is expressed in the murals, since the topics addressed are sensitive for some members of society. Like the other case study in Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia, the artistic interventions create a distinct contrast within the environment in which they are carried out. Changes in the surroundings are also evident through the color palette employed.

Although the themes expressed in the graphic of La Colectiva Maremoto until now have been oriented towards problems of equality, abortion, violence, among others and even they are not excluded from consideration of other themes, topics such as

transphobia, homophobia and racism are lines of approach that the collective argues they would not carry out because they contradict the principles of their group.

For the collective, through art they have found a way to raise awareness and educate about those problems that they consider need more visibility. There has been openness on the part of society, workshops have even been carried out that reinforce the discursive lines used in the projects they have executed. They contemplate accompanying seminars, and the inclusion of more members of civil society and more organizations. Among the challenges and plans that La Colectiva Maremoto has are the holding of more workshops, the dissemination of its work to generate more spaces to express social issues, making more efforts so that society understands the relevance of visibility through art and reaching more places in the country.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

Identity is a necessary element when developing an urban art project, allowing cultural customs and traditions to be rescued, from symbolic representations as a key piece in artistic co-creation and the transformation of space. In the case studies of this research, the topics addressed refer to community tourism and gender equity, however, using the cultural identity of the context in which the visual proposal is developed allows the concept to be transmitted in a more organic and sensitive way. social problems that characterize the piece or artistic proposal.

Regarding the characteristics of the groups, it was determined that both comply with the character of independence and self-management, present flexibility in their constitution, give visibility to their members, address social problems and generate community, participating in exhibitions, workshops and research.

Throughout this research, it has been realized that the use of symbolic elements and visual codes inherent to the style of the Tres Perros and Maremoto collectives reinforce their discursive lines.

The murals of the case studies aim to make social or environmental issues visible, according to each environment, generating or rescuing a territorial and identity essence. In Bucaramanga they are marginalized areas, in which through art they seek to improve the related appearance and for individuals to live in a place with a revitalized appearance while addressing environmental issues. In Ensenada they are environments exposed to a considerable flow of people to make gender equity issues visible. Both groups seek to improve environments, through color palettes that generate contrast, as well as generate a reaction from the social fabric alluding to sensitive and emotional experiences.

The groups integrate efforts to improve urbanization and open a dialogue that transcends all social strata, being projects that also scale to the digital issue, through dissemination and virality on social networks.

Urban art has been used as a means of rapid absorption, avoiding all the labels that position it as an art elevated to the intellectual elites and prostrating itself

before the people as a hopeful message that permeates the streets and society in which it is located. Although these urban artists are part of the entities of the orange economy, their capacity for mass communication allows them to effectively transmit topics relevant to other economies such as the green and the purple, generating spaces for reflection and enhancing social well-being. As a recommendation for future research, the relevance of evaluating the impact of these visual discourses on the societies in which they are generated was detected.

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