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ESSAYS

Walling Strategy

Can T-Wall Murals really Beautify the Fragmented Baghdad?

Caecilia Pieri



Sadr City, this mural displays human silhouettes in the style of the Iraqi pioneer Jawad Saleem.
Courtesy Caecilia Pieri, March 2010.

Since April 2007, Baghdad has been experiencing a walling strategy designed by the US-led multi-national forces (MNF) that were then occupying Iraq. Between 2005 and 2008, kidnappings, assassinations and population displacements became the main tactics that the Sunni insurgency and Shi'ite militias used in their struggle to delimit newly homogenized areas over which they could gain spatial control and power. The MNF justified their strategy of surrounding some neighbourhoods with concrete blast walls (also known as 'T-walls') as a way of protecting city residents from the urban violence severely affecting daily life in Baghdad. By preventing hostile groups from penetrating neighbourhoods and kidnapping people or from using car-bombs and suicide-bombers, these security walls brought a limited and temporary solution to the effects of the sectarian violence, but not to its causes. With time, they progressively became the physical manifestations of a spatial reordering of the city along the same ethnic/sectarian and politicized dividing lines that have transformed Baghdadi society.[1]

The US army, Iraqi government, and some foreign associations commissioned a beautification campaign[2] with a US\$100,000 budget[3] to subsidize murals on the recently built T-walls to mask the ugliness of the barriers.[4] This resulted in the creation of a whole series of paintings all over Baghdad, led by the local municipalities.

This essay is the result of personal and regular fieldwork conducted in Baghdad on this subject since 2010. It has been quite difficult to communicate on this matter since, as was the case before the 2003 war, taking pictures in the street is becoming more and more risky, and photographing the walls – as well as other sensitive places like check-points, banks, and public buildings – is forbidden. Nevertheless, this essay marks a first attempt at decoding the themes of this new visual urban iconography, still present in Baghdad at the end of 2013. By addressing the issue of political narrative through so-called urban beautification in a militarized context, it aims at challenging various positive discourses produced around and about these murals, mainly in Iraq and in the USA. It shows how the T-wall murals are the result of a blurring discourse about Iraqi unity, at a time when Baghdad is more and more fragmented by the walls they are painted on.

Officially commissioned art in modern Baghdad, a well-established practice

Some of the painters who were selected to create murals for the blast walls seemed to sincerely agree with the need to beautify Baghdad;[5] they defined their intervention as inventing a new blast wall art and called themselves Jama'at al-Jidar, or the Walls Group.[6] Yet it was clear from interviews that I conducted with Baghdadis that 'every single image was the result of a precise decision between the painters and the commissioning body', according to Muhamad al-Rubaye (then head of the Strategic Planning Committee, Baghdad Governorate Council) in February 2011. Also, according to artist and art gallery director Qasim Sabti, the painters 'had to resist sectarian pressures.'[7] Baghdad's T-wall murals do not display religious themes (such as images of Imams Ali and Hussein). Though such images are increasingly visible in Baghdad, they are more commonly printed on cheap posters, small flags, or photographs that are sold everywhere in the city rather than on murals.

It seems that the first commissioned T-wall murals in Baghdad appeared in 2003 inside the securitized compound of the French Embassy. A dozen of painters had carte blanche to illustrate the topic of peace, and they chose to show female figures in the tradition of the Arabian Nights. To the best of my knowledge, these murals are probably the only examples in Baghdad to display this iconic theme.

Among the most recurrent themes painted on these T-walls is Mesopotamia, the founding period of Iraqi history. Images such as the lady of Ur, Babylonian lions and hunting scenes, the Ishtar Gate, and the priest Dudu seemingly serve to recall a mythic identity recently violated by wars and violence.

Painters also use regionalism to illustrate an ideally unified Iraq from south to north; that is, from the marshes (traditional *mudhif* of the South) to Kurdistan: (Kurdish countrymen harvesting or dancing the local *dabke kurdiye*). Likewise, some murals display quotes or pastiches from Iraqi masters like Khalid al-Rahal in front of the Iranian Embassy in Salhiya, Jawad Saleem in Karkh next to the Mansour Melia Hotel, or the horses in the style of Faiq Hassan on Palestine Street near Sadr City as well as in Masbah. Finally, everywhere, these T-wall murals convey the rhetoric of loss with images of the *shanashil* houses (the Iraqi version of latticed *mashrabiye*hs) recalling the fantasized vanished city, *Baghdad min zaman*, 'Baghdad once upon a time', as many residents say when speaking of the traditional city.



Imam Hussein's picture is visible on posters or flags at the Suq as-Safafir, in Rusafa.
Courtesy Caecilia Pieri, March 2010.

Murals serve as part of a modern tradition of officially commissioned art in Iraq, and constitute a legacy of the 1958 Iraqi revolution that put an end to the Hashemite Monarchy created in 1921 in the aftermath of World War I and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. The Monument of Liberty by Jawad Saleem and Rifat Chadirji on Tahrir Square, Faiq Hassan's mosaic panel of Liberty on Tayyaran Square or Revolution's emblematic Torch in Kadhimiya Square by

Qahtan Madfai (all from 1961), as well as more recent artworks such as the mosaic panel next to the Arts and Crafts Museum on Wathba Street (1980s), are all examples that testify that post-revolution Baghdad's public spaces have always illustrated a well-established relationship between art and power. Furthermore, it is not the first time that the Iraqi past serves as a repository for a collective national identity: Mesopotamian grandeur and pre-Islamic symbols, far from being a novelty, were already regularly manipulated by different Iraqi governments after 1968,[8] especially in public architecture and ornamentation.[9]

A civil-war like temporality

Could these walls be seen as a temporary stage toward peace, as was the case for Belfast's so-called 'peacelines', still in place 20 years after the end of the civil war?[10] Could their murals counteract the rampant narrative of sectarianism that now dominates the city, and deliver a sub-text in the shape of a common language based on a common pride able to transcend the current societal segmentation? It seems on the contrary that with time, the 2007 walling strategy has contributed to emphasizing the dividing lines between different neighbourhoods, leading to a kind of 'geography of fear'.[11] The strategy has ultimately had a counterproductive effect as it led to a cropping up of 'mini green zones'[12] in Baghdad, where people have to rely on this segmentation. Each walled neighbourhood has become a kind of isolated centrality – as occurred for instance in Beirut (*Achrafieh*) during the civil war – where shops, markets and services are installed in former residential quarters. But this centrality results from security measures that are constantly changing. Because of this, and unlike common ideas about the walling of conflict, these walls are movable, being constantly removed and replaced according to reasons that are not made public. Such a suspended and contested urbanity might recall what is described as 'the city of the war-yet-to-come',[13] with contours of possible militarization and displacements often being redrawn, and with a reconfiguration of the binary between centre and peripheries.

In the context of Baghdad, (but it could perhaps apply to other cases), I argue that the moment a T-wall becomes a painted T-wall signals a shift from the short-term temporality of the international conflict to the mid- or long-term temporality of the civil war, as the walls act as a new kind of permanent urban furniture. Their murals can be seen as a response to the public imagery of the old regime, when Saddam Hussein's portraits literally stifled the urban area. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the official beautification campaign many private or other types of groups commissioned paintings on thousands of T-walls. Therefore, such walls act as a convenient marker to convey all kinds of political signs and sectarian propaganda, though often in an indirect and rampant mode. For instance, painted Iraqi flags which call for Iraqi unity can be found, quite logically, in front of official buildings like the Baghdad Mayorality or Governorate. But they can also be found in predominantly Sunni areas such as Karkh or Adhamiya, as when the walls were installed most of the Sunnis in Iraq were militating for national unity to compensate for their numeric inferiority and loss of political influence.

On the walls that are in Shi'ite areas or in front of buildings belonging to Shi'ite bodies (including police stations), floral ornamentation characteristic of Shi'ite

imagery is recurrent. In many cases, the murals loudly attract attention with prominent emblems or bright colours (such as the green and yellow of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council), emphasizing the territorialization of public space through delimited new spaces of power for all kinds of groups, be they private or public, political or sectarian.



Red flowers and floral ornamentation on the walls in the compound of the French embassy (the murals were removed in 2012 but the walls are still there).
Courtesy Caecilia Pieri, February 2011.

Civil resilience and official discourse

I asked the painter Kareem Risan, creator of several paintings of 'walls of the wartime' which express 'the limits between neighbourhoods' what he thought of these walls. He answered: 'Can we talk of art, when there is no spontaneity?'^[14] Another painter, when I asked why there were no spontaneous images on the walls, answered: 'The murals were an official tool of the former regime. Saddam was using walls. And now, again, people do not feel free, they are afraid to use them for their personal expression. Fear is still there.' If the artists are still alienated by the fear of power, can there be room for personal expression in public space?

Because they are not spontaneous and are never implemented without official permission, and as they are supervised by the official power, Baghdadi T-wall murals clearly have nothing to do with examples of street art such as the tags of Beirut, 'a voice that screams to everyone passing them by'^[15] or the spectacular murals in revolutionary Cairo. They constitute an urban scene, but within a framework and limits which result from the power, not from the artists: for that reason, even when they show talent and when 'they reach some kind of truth or poetry'^[16] their images have neither the subversive potential nor the markedly individualized 'visual signature', which are generally typical of the graffiti. Also,

far from being treated as works of art, part of these T-walls are constantly removed and reused to erect other walls somewhere else, generally at night; in this process, paintings and slogans are dismantled and randomly reassembled. Therefore the meaning of the original mural is lost and the wall reassumes its role as a mere barrier. Finally, contrary to what happens with the separation wall in the Palestinian West Bank, invested by a host of foreign artists, Baghdad is still as difficult to access as it was before the 2003 war, albeit for different reasons. How could its walls become a cause for foreigners?

In fact the T-Wall murals in Baghdad are an integral part of the walling strategy itself. This is obvious when they are sectarian or political markers directly commissioned by groups or parties. But even when they display icons of Iraq's national unity or grand Mesopotamian past, when ordered by state institutions, the T-walls can be seen as legitimizing the official narrative, in which current social divisions based on religious and sectarian differences have disappeared, and as if they were plain murals, not murals painted on 'blast walls'. In such cases, images speak of unity and pride, whereas the walls these messages are painted on themselves – which, again, often demarcate urban spaces along ethnic and sectarian lines – contradict these messages. They dramatize an urban space which becomes the backdrop for a staged, fantasized common past, a set advocating a fragile Iraqi unity constantly challenged by the political incapacity and/or reluctance to rule the capital as a unified entity. In that sense, the murals can be said to be the visual expression of a double discourse (national unity in words versus antagonistic reality in facts) which is a recurrent *topos* in Iraqi politics.

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[9] See: Hafez Sethom, 'Urban Renaissance in Baghdad,' *Albenna* 4 (1985): 76-79; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Bagdad: une métropole moderne et tribale, siège de gouvernements assiégés,' *Monde Arabe Maghreb-Machrek*, 143 (1994): 225-242; and Caecilia Pieri, 'Modernity and its Posts in Constructing an Arab Capital: Baghdad's Urban Space and Architecture,' *Middle-East Studies Association Bulletin* 42 (2008): 32-39.

[10] Florine Ballif, 'Les traces de la guerre civile: la pérennisation des peacelines à Belfast,' in *Pérennité urbaine ou la ville par-delà ses métamorphoses*, col. I: *Traces* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

[11] Elisabeth Dorier-Apprill and Philippe Gervais-Lambony, eds., *Vies citadines* (Paris: Belin, 2007).

[12] Sam Dagher, 'Baghdad safer, but it's a life behind walls,' *Christian Monitor*, 10 December 2007<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1210/p01s04-wome.html>.

[13] Hiba Bou Akar, 'Contesting Beirut's frontiers,' *City and Society* 24 (2012): 150-172.

[14] Kareem Risan, written correspondence with author, 15 April 2012).

[15] Antonio Vicenti, ed., *Beirut Street Art* (Beirut: Artlounge Publishing, 2009).

[16] Kareem Risan, *op cit.*

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