

Urban Tourism: The Mapping and Analysis of the Visual Characteristics of Murals in the Prawirotaman Area of Yogyakarta

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Accepted:
6 March 2026

Accepted After Revision:
23 April 2026

Published:
27 April 2026

Abstract

Mural as a form of public visual art has developed significantly in urban spaces and plays a role in shaping the visual character of city environments. Murals are frequently linked to the development of place identity and aesthetic appeal in tourist destinations. The purpose of this study is to map and examine the visual features of murals in Yogyakarta's Prawirotaman neighborhood as part of a visual depiction of an urban tourism region. The study uses a qualitative descriptive methodology that is bolstered by straightforward quantitative mapping. Direct observation and photographic documentation were used to gather data, which led to the identification of 66 murals with distinct visual presence. Independent graffiti expressions, socially focused murals, and commercially oriented murals were the three main categories into which the murals were divided. Formal components like color, composition, illustration style, and typography were used in visual analysis along with a semiotic method to decipher visual meaning. The results show that the majority of murals are dominated by non-commercial expressions, indicating an organic visual landscape shaped by informal artistic practices. Meanwhile, commercial murals appear in limited numbers and are mainly associated with business identities. The coexistence of these categories creates a layered visual environment that reflects both artistic freedom and functional communication. This study concludes that murals in Prawirotaman contribute to the visual complexity of the area and serve as an indicative element in representing the character of a tourism district. The findings provide an initial framework for understanding mural-based visual mapping in urban design and communication studies.

Keywords: Mural, Visual Mapping, Mural Typology, Tourist Area, Visual Communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of visual art in urban spaces demonstrates that visual elements no longer serve merely as decoration, but also as a medium of communication that shapes the meaning and character of urban spaces. One form of public art that has flourished in this context is the mural, which appears directly on architectural surfaces and forms part of the public's visual experience [1], [2]. In the field of visual communication design, murals are understood as a system of signs that convey messages through visual elements such as colour, form, symbols and composition, which are then interpreted within the context of a specific social space [3].

In recent decades, murals have also become increasingly associated with the development of urban tourist areas. The presence of murals is considered capable of enriching the visual quality of a space and

creating a distinctive aesthetic experience for visitors [4]. Studies on street art in the context of tourism indicate that visual elements such as murals can function as visual attractors that enhance a destination's appeal and strengthen the area's image [5]. Furthermore, murals are often linked to the process of place-making—the formation of a space's identity and meaning through the interaction between visual elements, social activities, and cultural context [6].

In Indonesia, the practice of murals as part of the urban visual landscape can be found in various cities, one of which is Yogyakarta. The city is known for its strong arts ecosystem, with artists actively engaging in the use of public spaces as a medium for visual expression. One area that exemplifies this phenomenon is Prawirotaman, which has developed into a tourist district with a distinctive visual character.

In the Prawirotaman area, murals are present on various elements of the space, ranging from the façades



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of commercial buildings to the alleys connecting the streets. The presence of a significant number of murals creates a layered visual landscape and has the potential to shape the visual representation of the tourist area. However, to date, systematic studies mapping the distribution and visual character of murals in this area remain relatively limited. Most research on murals in Indonesia focuses more on aspects of social expression, political criticism, or symbolic meaning, whilst approaches that position murals as part of a tourist area's visual system have not yet been widely developed [7], [8].

Given these circumstances, this study stems from the need to understand murals not merely as individual works, but as part of the area's visual fabric. This study specifically aims to map and analyse the visual characteristics of murals in the Prawirotaman area. Through field observations, the study identified 66 murals with high visibility and a significant contribution to the area's visual landscape. These murals were then classified into several categories based on their dominant function: independent expression (graffiti), socially themed murals, and commercially driven murals.

Using this approach, the study seeks to answer questions regarding the visual character of murals in the Prawirotaman area and how the distribution of these mural typologies shapes the visual representation of the tourist area. This study does not directly measure public perception or the economic impact of murals, but rather focuses on visual analysis as a foundation for an initial understanding of the role of murals in urban visual communication.

The contribution of this study lies in the development of a structured visual mapping of murals and the development of a typological analysis of murals within the context of an urban tourist area. It is hoped that the findings of this study will serve as a foundation for further research examining the relationship between murals, area identity, and social dynamics within urban spaces.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Murals as a Medium of Visual Communication

Murals are a form of public art with distinctive characteristics, as they are integrated into architectural spaces and directly accessible to the public. From a visual communication design perspective, murals serve not only as aesthetic elements but also as a medium of communication that conveys messages through visual elements such as colour, form, symbols and composition [9], [10]. These elements form a system of signs that can be interpreted by the audience based on the social and cultural context in which the mural is situated [11].

Murals have a significant spatial dimension since they are inextricably linked to their physical surroundings, unlike traditional visual media. This implies that a mural's meaning is influenced by its link to the area, the building's purpose, and the social activities that take place there in addition to its visual content [10]. Murals can therefore be viewed as a component of spatial visual communication that influences how the general public perceives a certain location.

2.2 Street Art and the Representation of Urban Identity

Street art, which includes graffiti and murals, is frequently linked to the portrayal of urban identity in the study of urban visual culture. Street art is seen as a form of expression that captures the ideals and social and cultural processes that are emerging within a community [12]. Murals can depict both local identities and global challenges tailored to a local setting through the symbols, visual motifs, and narratives they convey [7].

However, the relationship between murals and urban identity is not linear. The identity of an area is a complex construction influenced by various factors, including history, economic activity, and social interactions within the community [4]. Therefore, murals are more appropriately positioned as one element of visual representation that contributes to shaping the image of an area, rather than as the sole factor determining that identity [12].

Furthermore, research indicates that street art can fall anywhere on a spectrum ranging from independent expression to institutionalised or commodified practices [13]. In some cases, murals that were originally expressive in nature may undergo a transformation into visual elements that support the image of a tourist area or specific commercial interests [5]. This highlights the interplay between artistic freedom and economic function in the practice of mural art in urban spaces.

2.3 Murals in the Context of Tourism and Place-Making

In the context of urban tourism, murals are often understood as part of a visual strategy to enhance the appeal of an area. The presence of murals can create a unique spatial experience and strengthen the visual appeal of a destination [5]. Studies show that tourists tend to be attracted to areas with distinctive visual elements, including street art, as these offer a different experience compared to homogeneous urban spaces [6].

The concept of place-making explains how physical spaces acquire meaning through the interaction between visual elements, human activities, and cultural

contexts [2]. In this context, murals serve as visual elements that help construct a spatial narrative and reinforce the area's identity through symbolic representation [6]. However, some research also cautions that the aestheticisation of space through murals does not always reflect actual social conditions; therefore, a critical analysis is necessary to understand the role of murals in shaping the area's image [4].

2.4 Typology of Murals in Urban Spaces

To understand the role of murals more systematically, several studies have proposed a typological approach to classifying murals based on their function and visual characteristics. This typology generally encompasses murals as independent expressions (graffiti), murals with social or cultural themes, and murals with commercial or decorative functions [13], [14].

A typological approach enables researchers to identify patterns of visual distribution within a given area and to understand how different types of murals contribute to the city's visual landscape [14]. Furthermore, function-based classification also helps to distinguish between murals that emerge organically and those designed as part of a specific visual strategy.

In the context of this study, the typological approach is used to categorise murals in the Prawirotaman area based on their dominant visually apparent function. This approach is expected to provide a more structured understanding of the visual character of murals and their contribution to the representation of the tourist area.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach combined with simple quantification through the visual mapping of murals. This approach was chosen to understand the visual character of murals in a contextual manner whilst identifying the distribution of mural typologies within a given area [15], [16]. In the context of visual communication design, this approach is relevant as it enables the analysis of both the visual form and the meaning contained within visual works in public spaces [11].

3.1 Research Subject and Location

The subject of this research is the murals found in the Prawirotaman area of Yogyakarta. This area was chosen because it is known as a tourist destination with a high concentration of murals and a distinctive visual character.

The units of analysis in this study are murals that are clearly visible and make a significant contribution to the area's visual landscape. Based on the results of the observation, 66 murals were identified that met these criteria.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through direct observation and photographic documentation. Observations were conducted to identify the location, spatial context, and the relationship between the murals and the surrounding architectural elements. Photographic documentation was used to record the visual details of the murals as the primary data for the analysis process [13].

The inclusion criteria for selecting mural objects include:

1. The mural has high visibility and is easily observable in public spaces.
2. The mural is not an additional layer on top of an existing mural.
3. The mural has significant visual dominance within the space it occupies.

This approach was used to ensure that the data analysed constitutes the primary visual elements contributing to the character of the area.

3.3 Classification and Mapping of Data

The mural data collected was then classified according to the dominant function identified visually. This classification is not absolute, but rather interpretative, based on visual characteristics and the context of the mural's location.

Murals are categorised into three main typologies:

1. Independent expression (graffiti), namely murals that visually display a spontaneous character, are not tied to commercial interests, and tend to reflect the artist's personal expression.
2. Socially themed murals, namely murals that contain representations of social, cultural, political, or environmental issues.
3. Commercial murals, i.e. murals that have a direct link to a business's identity or a specific promotional function

The results of the classification show the following distribution:

Table 1. Murals Mapping

Mural Category	Number of murals	Percentage
Independent Expression	45	67.2%
Social Expression	16	23.9%
Commercial	5	9%

There are a total of 66 murals divided into three categories: 45 murals in the independent expression category, 16 murals in the social category, and 5 murals in the commercial category; this classification serves as the basis for understanding the patterns of visual distribution within the study area.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

1. Formal Visual Analysis

This stage aims to identify the visual elements of the mural, including: colour, composition, typography, illustration style. Formal visual analysis is used to understand the aesthetic character of the mural as a work of visual design [10].

2. Visual Semiotic Analysis

This stage is used to interpret the symbolic meanings contained within the murals. The analysis is carried out by distinguishing between denotative meaning (what is seen) and connotative meaning (the interpreted meaning) [16]. This approach enables an understanding of the social, cultural, and ideological messages represented in the murals.

3.5 Validity and Limitations of the Study

The validity of the study is ensured through consistency in the documentation and visual classification processes. However, this study has limitations because:

1. The classification of murals is based on visual interpretation, rather than on contractual data or in-depth interviews with the mural artists.
2. The study does not include an analysis of public perception or the socio-economic impact of the murals.

Consequently, the findings of this study are best understood as a visual mapping and interpretation, rather

than as a generalisation regarding broader social conditions.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Distribution of Mural Types in the Prawirotaman Area

Based on the results of observation and visual documentation, 66 murals were identified as having high visibility and making a significant contribution to the visual landscape of the Prawirotaman area, Yogyakarta. These murals were then classified into three typologies based on their dominant function as interpreted visually, namely independent expression (graffiti), socially themed murals, and commercial murals.

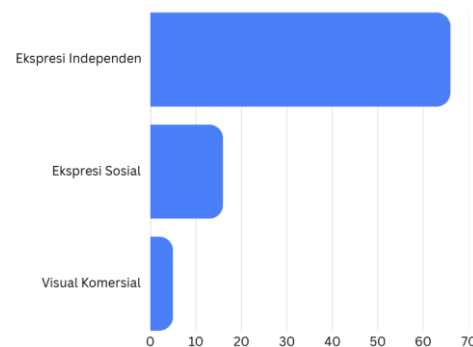


Figure 1. Numbers of Prawirotaman's Murals

The classification results show that 45 murals ($\pm 68\%$) fall into the independent expression category, 16 murals ($\pm 24\%$) into the social mural category, and 5 murals ($\pm 8\%$) into the commercial mural category. This distribution indicates that the visual landscape of the Prawirotaman area is dominated by visual practices that are non-commercial and relatively independent.

The dominance of independent expression murals indicates that visual production in this area has developed organically through the informal practices of artists. This finding is consistent with studies stating that street art often emerges as a form of spontaneous expression not bound by formal institutional structures [12], [17]. Meanwhile, the limited presence of commercial murals suggests that economic function is not a dominant factor in the formation of the area's visual landscape.

4.2 Visual Characteristics and Variations in Mural Expression

A formal visual analysis reveals that murals in the Prawirotaman area exhibit a wide variety of styles, in terms of colour, composition and visual technique. In the 'independent expression' category, murals tend to display a graffiti style characterised by strong

typography, the use of contrasting colours, and dynamic compositions. Visually, murals in this category demonstrate a high degree of aesthetic exploration and are not bound by specific visual standards.



Figure 2. Murals as Independent Expression at Prawirotaman Street

In the social mural category, the visual character tends to be more illustrative and narrative. Murals in this category often feature human figures, cultural symbols, and representations of social and environmental issues. The use of colour in social murals tends to be more harmonious, with a more structured compositional approach, making the visual messages conveyed easier to interpret.



Figure 3. Murals as Social Expression at Prawirotaman Street

Meanwhile, commercial murals exhibit a more focused and communicative visual character. Visual elements such as typography and illustration are used to reinforce a business's identity, with compositions designed to attract visitors' attention. This indicates that murals in this category function as part of an integrated visual communication strategy linked to the area's economic activities [5], [18].



Figure 4. Murals as Visual Comercial at Prawirotaman Street

4.3 The Spatial Relationship Between Murals and the Function of Space

The distribution of murals in the Prawirotaman area also reveals a close relationship between visual character and spatial context. Commercial murals are generally found on the façades of main buildings directly facing the main road, thus enjoying high visibility and serving as visual markers for specific businesses.



Figure 5. Murals with high visibility at Prawirotaman Street

Conversely, independent expression murals and social murals are more commonly found in transitional spaces such as narrow alleys, the side walls of buildings, and residential areas. These spaces tend to offer artists greater freedom to express themselves without the constraints of commercial function. This phenomenon indicates a differentiation of visual function based on the spatial hierarchy within the urban area [4].



Figure 6. Murals in the connecting alley at Prawirotaman Street

Furthermore, in some cases, murals are found on limited spatial surfaces, such as narrow walls between doors and windows. Despite the spatial constraints, murals in these areas are still utilised as a medium for visual expression, particularly to convey brief messages or specific opinions. This demonstrates that every visual

space within an area has the potential to serve as a medium of communication.

4.4 The Dynamics Between Aesthetics and Vandalism

Although the Prawirotaman area is dominated by murals of high visual quality, instances of vandalistic graffiti are still to be found, albeit in relatively limited numbers. Interestingly, some of this vandalism is not removed, but is left in place and even builds up over time.



Figure 7. Preserved vandalism on commercial buildings at Prawirotaman Street

Visually, these layered layers of vandalism form a composition that indirectly creates an aesthetic balance. This phenomenon demonstrates that the boundary between art and vandalism in urban spaces is not always rigid, but exists within a dynamic spectrum [17].

In this context, tolerance of certain forms of vandalism can be interpreted as a form of acceptance of the visual dynamics of public space. This is consistent with research showing that street art practices can undergo a process of legitimisation when they become part of a visual landscape accepted by the community [12].

4.5 Implications for the Visual Representation of Tourist Areas

Based on the results of the analysis, the murals in the Prawirotaman area can be understood as visual elements that contribute to the formation of the visual character of the tourist area. The predominance of non-commercial murals indicates that the area's visual identity is not entirely constructed in a planned manner, but rather develops through interactions between artists, space owners, and the local social context.

The diversity of mural typologies creates a layered visual experience for visitors, where aesthetic elements, social expression, and commercial communication coexist. This reinforces the view that murals are part of a dynamic and contextual place-making process [6].

However, it should be emphasised that this study does not directly measure tourists' perceptions or the impact of murals on the area's image. Therefore, the findings of this study are best understood as an indication of visual representation, rather than as a causal relationship regarding the formation of a tourist area's identity.

5 CONCLUSION

This study shows that murals in the Prawirotaman area of Yogyakarta possess diverse visual characteristics and can be understood through a typological approach based on dominant function. Of the total 66 identified murals, the majority are dominated by independent expression (graffiti), followed by socially themed murals, and a small proportion of commercial murals. This distribution indicates that the area's visual landscape has formed relatively organically through non-commercial visual practices that have developed in public spaces.

Visual analysis reveals that each mural typology possesses distinct aesthetic characteristics and communicative functions. Independent expression murals tend to display free and spontaneous visual exploration, whilst social murals present narratives that are more reflective of cultural, environmental, and political issues. Conversely, commercial murals exhibit a more structured and communicative visual approach in supporting business identity.

The relationship between murals and their spatial context also reveals distribution patterns linked to the function of the area. Commercial murals are generally located on the façades of main buildings with high visibility, whilst expressive murals are more commonly found in transitional spaces and residential areas, which offer artists greater freedom. This suggests that urban space functions not only as a physical container, but also as a medium for visual negotiation between various interests.

Overall, murals in the Prawirotaman area can be understood as part of a visual representation system that contributes to the character of the tourist area. However, this study is limited to visual analysis and does not yet cover aspects of public perception or socio-economic impacts. Therefore, further research is recommended to integrate visual approaches with social approaches in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of murals in an urban context.

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