

The role and impact of murals in the urban space of Kraków's Kazimierz, a City of Cultural Heritage

Luiza Górka¹, ✉  0009-0008-0963-2430

Joanna Makowska¹  0009-0007-7927-8345

Magdalena Wilkosz-Mamcarczyk¹  0000-0002-4845-5990

Barbara Olczak¹  0000-0002-9070-9640

Barbara Prus¹  0000-0002-0115-7793

¹ Department of Spatial Management and Landscape Architecture,
University of Agriculture in Krakow

✉ Corresponding author: luiza.gorka@urk.edu.pl

Summary

This article investigates the role of murals in Kazimierz, a historic district of Kraków, and their impact on this unique urban space. The cultural heritage of Kazimierz has emerged from centuries of interactions between Christian and Jewish traditions. The backdrop for its bustling activity is old townhouses and as many as forty murals, which were analysed in the article. The primary objective of the study is to develop a new methodological tool called Mural Evaluation Sheet, for the systematic documentation and cataloguing of street art. This universal tool was applied to document the existing murals in Kazimierz. The analysis was complemented by a review of local policies and national legal regulations concerning murals, as well as an in-depth interview with a Kraków-based mural artist. As an additional result, a Mural Assessment Diagram was developed, highlighting key aspects of artistic design, spatial context, and cultural conditions essential for the evaluation of both existing and planned murals. Fieldwork conducted in April–May 2025 resulted in an inventory of forty murals, revealing the dominance of advertising works and the continuing presence of historic ghost signs. The findings indicate that while murals can strengthen local identity and protect façades from vandalism, those artworks that are disconnected from cultural heritage may contribute to visual oversaturation and gentrification, reinforcing the need for transparent, context-sensitive governance.

Keywords

murals • cultural policy and planning • cultural heritage • Poland

1. Introduction

1.1. Murals in Kazimierz

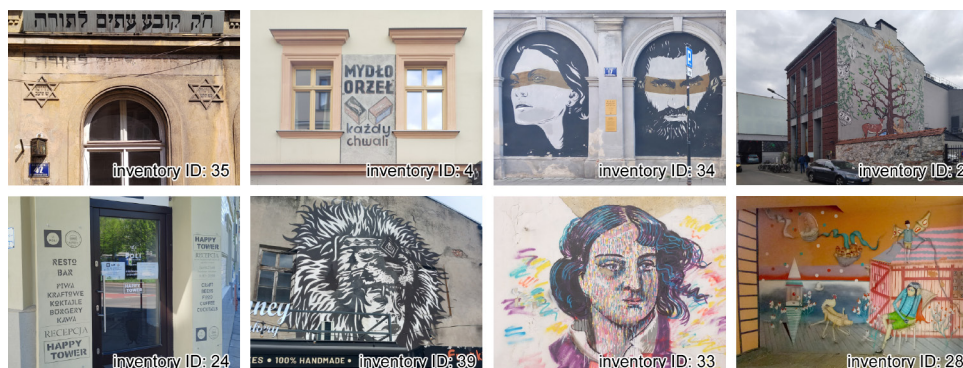
European cities of the nineteenth century witnessed a growing trend to inscribe philosophical texts on house façades, including mottoes, maxims, names of architects, dates from the building's history or its marks of its founders as well as names or functions of the buildings. The oldest existing painted inscription in Kazimierz on record is the writing on the façade at 42 Józefa Street. It is the name of a former prayer house written in Hebrew, *Kowea Itim le-Tora*, the year it was established (1810), and the year it was redeveloped (1912), inscribed in Stars of David [Mysona-Byrska 2023] (Fig. 1). The writings were executed in various techniques, mainly relief, *sgraffito* [Jagiello 2022], and painting. They symbolised high social standing of the owners [Balcerak 2023].

The natural consequence of this trend was that shop owners and artisans would adapt façade inscriptions to their needs by painting shop signs that advertised their wares and services. Even before the Second World War, murals in Poland were used for advertising. They presented the name and catchphrase of the enterprise along with some graphic elements, even simple ones [Smoczyńska nad Łapiński 2019].

There are examples of this type of utilitarian murals, advertising obsolete private enterprises in Kazimierz, such as *Kapelusznik* ['Hat Maker'] (inventory ID 9) at 11 Jakuba Street. They are called *ghost signs* [Kovalska 2023]. Recently, some of the business owners of Kazimierz have decided to align with this style, for example the façade at 97 Dietla Street (inventory ID 24) features a utilitarian sign of *Fryzjer* ['Hairdresser'] painted on it. After the Second World War, artists were able to create large-scale, colourful advertisements and signs on building walls. One such ghost typographic mural (*Warsztat* 'Workshop') can be found at 15 Wrzeńska Street (inventory ID 26).

Street art gained greater acceptance in the 2000s. It was considered socially engaged art. Kazimierz was a place of grassroots graffiti art as well as murals commissioned by festivals. The latter typically draw on Jewish traditions and history, which is only natural considering the historical background of the district [Shemenova 2020]. The Jewish Culture Festival had its mural painted in 2014 by Broken Fingaz at 3 Bawół Square (inventory ID 36). In 2015, some educational and administrative units of Kraków financed *Melancholia 68* ['Melancholy 68'] by Mikołaj Rejs (inventory ID 28). A participatory budgeting project (Budżet Obywatelski Miasta Krakowa, 2025) funded *Kazimierskie Murale Historyczne* ['Historical Murals of Kazimierz'] at 17 Józefa Street (inventory ID 34) in the same year. In 2014, the City of Kraków and the Galeria Kazimierz shopping centre initiated the project *Krakowski Szlak Streetartu* ['Kraków Street Art Trail']. It offered walking tours of Kraków's murals and published an accompanying album [Spacer Szlakiem Street Artu 2014]. Five of the nineteen murals included in the trail are located in Kazimierz. Note that murals are short-lived and require conservation due to the techniques employed in their execution. Failing that, they degrade, bleach, and fade, only to be painted over, like the mural at 3 Nowa Street by David Shillinglaw, Mörny Wörny, Lily Mixe, and Billy Biüy (inventory ID 15, preserved in part). Tourists are attracted to large-scale works [Jażdżewska 2017] that promote local history, such as

those at 3 Bawół Square (inventory ID 37), or those that draw on local identity, like the one at 3 Nowy Square (inventory ID 2). Other notable murals enhance degraded urban space (15 Jakuba Street, inventory ID 10).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 1. Examples of murals from various periods, located in Kazimierz

Many cities perceive murals as an acceptable – and perhaps even desirable – form of spatial intervention [Mendelson-Shwartz and Mualam 2020]. Projects creating mural art are believed to positively influence community engagement and contribute to the enrichment of sustainable urban environment [Petroniene and Juzeleniene 2022]. In order to maintain influence over the creative process, mural policies are being adopted, focusing on the issues of creating new artworks and managing the existing ones, the main objectives being to regulate the number and quality of murals so that they fulfil the roles assigned to them in the public domain.

2. Aim of the study

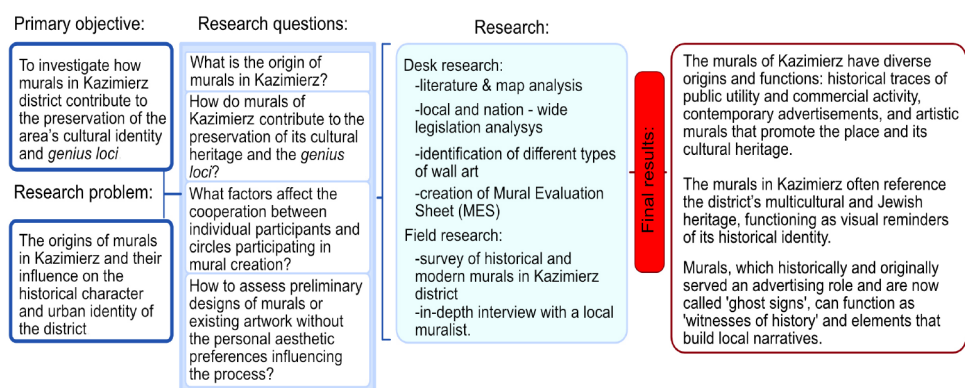
Street art is becoming increasingly prominent in urban spaces worldwide. This inspired us to investigate its situation in Kraków, a city renowned for its heritage and culture. The analysis was narrowed down to Kazimierz, a district with a rich and violent history. The study aims to identify the number, types, origins, and quality of its existing murals. Field research was conducted by an interdisciplinary team, including an artist, landscape architects, an architect, and an urban planner, as we consider murals to be context-dependent; we believe that their impact depends on the origin, scale, content, and governance model. The researchers followed the Mural Evaluation Sheet (MES). An in-depth interview with a mural artist complemented the inventory. The study objective was pursued with the following research questions in mind:

1. What is the origin of murals and wall paintings in Kazimierz today?
2. How do the murals in Kazimierz contribute to the preservation of the district's cultural heritage and the *genius loci*?

3. What factors affect the cooperation between individual participants and groups participating in mural creation?
4. How to assess preliminary designs of planned murals or the existing artwork without personal aesthetic preferences influencing the process? What criteria determine murals' visibility and contextual harmony? To what extent does this depend on the designer?

2.1. Research methods

The starting point for the study was a literature review to determine the characteristics of modern street art and to structure the theoretical background. Next, we investigated the history of wall paintings in Kazimierz and the legislation regulating the presence of murals in Kraków, both at the national and local levels. A summary titled the *Current Mural Classification Criteria* [Balcerak 2023] and its conclusions provided the foundation for the Mural Evaluation Sheet (MES). The summary presented various ways of classifying murals, based on key criteria such as: purpose, function, origin, content, and relationship with the surroundings. While it outlined the scope of international research, it did not provide a holistic method for cataloguing murals. Based on the summary, MES was developed by an interdisciplinary team including an architect, a landscape architect, and a master of art. We tested it the MES by comparing independent evaluations of a random sample of murals carried out by different pairs of experts. The consistent results confirmed the reliability of the tool. We then proceeded to the field research stage, where we compiled the inventory and evaluated the murals using the MES. The research was then expanded with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of ghost signs and contemporary advertising murals. The final stage, an in-depth interview with a mural artist from Kraków, Kamil Kuzko, completes the insight into the domain of murals in Kazimierz (Fig. 2).

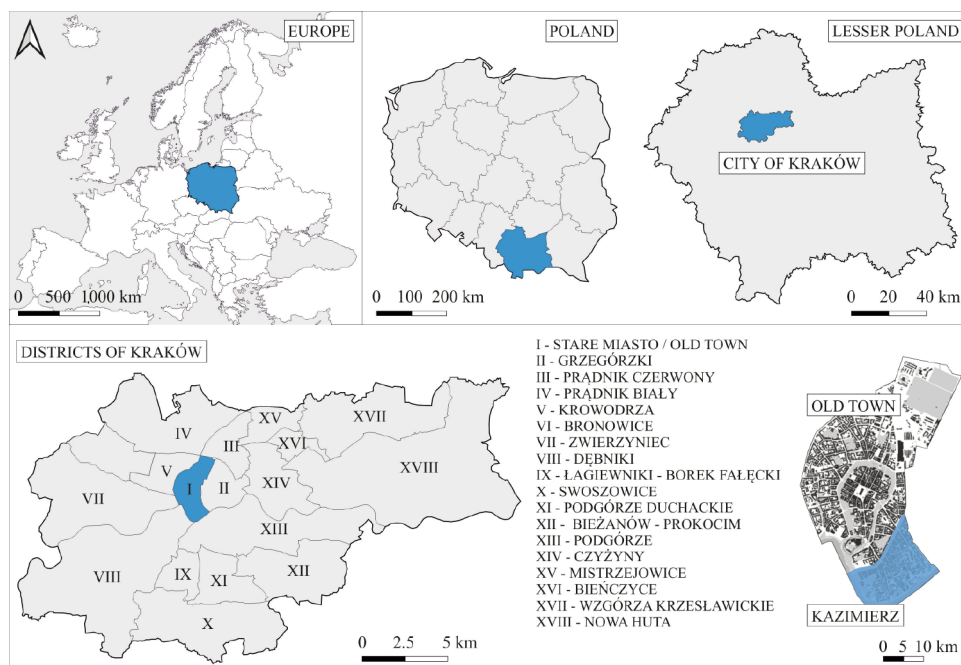


Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 2. Research methodology

3. Study area

The study area is situated in Kraków, Poland's second-largest city. It is the former town of Kazimierz, today officially part of Kraków's Old Town district. Its eastern boundary is the railway line parallel to Starowiślna Street. The district is confined in the north by Dietla Street and the green belt of Planty Dietlowskie. Kazimierz is encircled by the Vistula river in the south (Fig. 3). In 1978, Kazimierz was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Social Committee for the Restoration of Kraków Monuments was established the same year to secure funds for the renovation of neglected buildings. Kazimierz rose from the ashes after the 1989 sociopolitical transformation in Poland. The Jewish heritage was appreciated as part of the city's history. It was then that the Jewish Culture Festival and Centre for Jewish Culture were established, along with other initiatives to commemorate Jews from Kraków killed during the Holocaust. Ever since the 1990s, Kazimierz has seen numerous revitalisation projects aimed at preserving and promoting Jewish cultural heritage. It has become one of the essential cultural attractions of Kraków as well as a highly relevant hub of its cultural life [Korman 2012].



Source: Authors' study based on www.schwartzplan.eu

Fig. 3. The study area: Europe, Poland, Małopolska (Lesser Poland) Region, districts of Kraków, Old Town and Kazimierz

4. Results

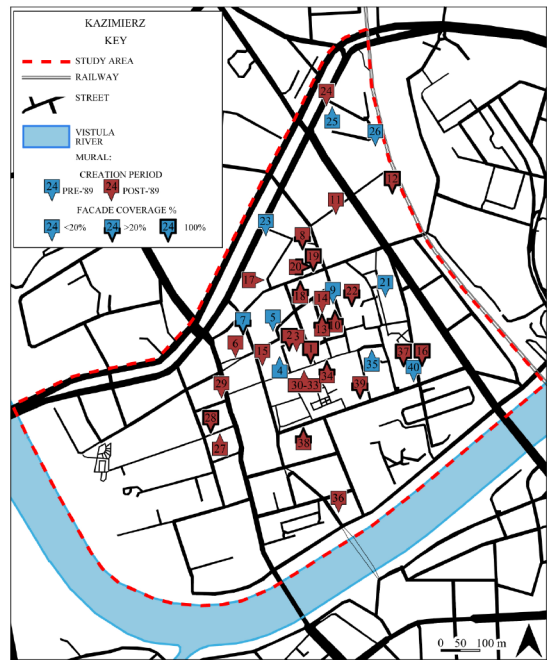
4.1. Listing and evaluating murals in Kazimierz

We have identified and analysed forty murals in the study area of Kazimierz between April and May 2025 (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). Each mural was photographed and recorded in the Mural Evaluation Sheet (MES), consisting of three sections. The first section covers basic data: the location, the percentage of wall coverage, and the source of funding (Fig. 4).

No.	Title/Artist (if known)	Location	Wall coverage %	Source of funding							Period of creation
				Private		Grassroots		Educational institutions		Public administration	
				Artistic activity	Business	NGO	Participatory budgeting	Festivals	Secondary or higher educational institutions, museums	City municipality, districts	Contemporary
											Before the 1989

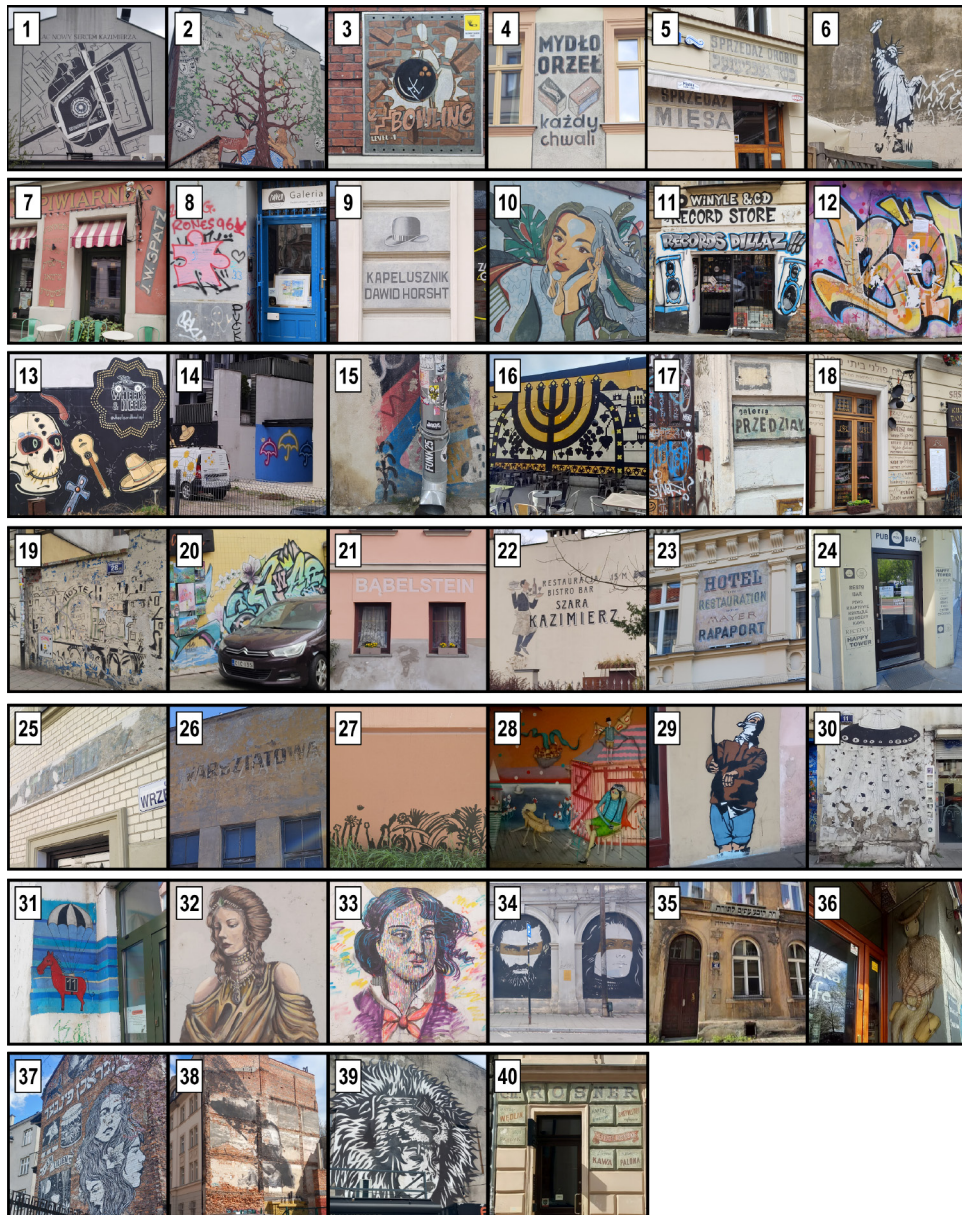
Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 4. Mural Evaluation Sheet: basic data



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 5. Locations, period of creation and façade coverage of murals in Kazimierz



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 6. Thumbnails of all 40 murals of Kraków's Kazimierz to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the analysis (Note: ID numbers correspond with those in Fig. 5)

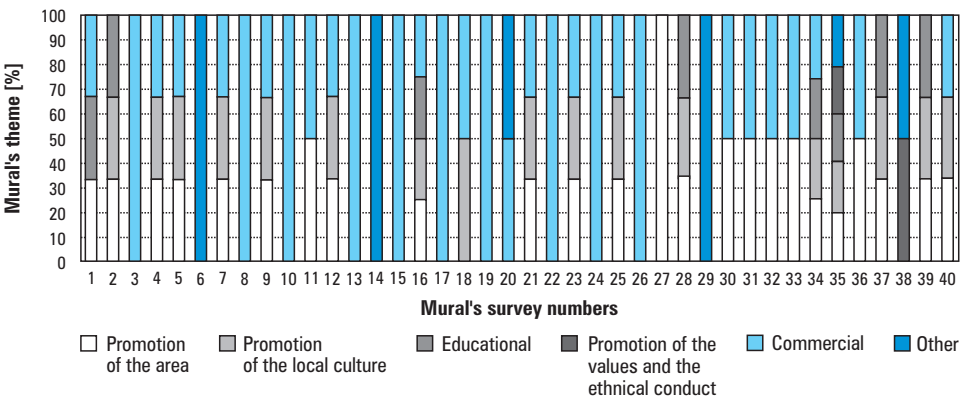
The second section of MES focuses on the themes, styles, and colour schemes of the recorded murals (Fig. 7).

No.	Theme						Style			Color scheme		
	Promotion of the area	Promotion of local culture	Educational	Promotion of values and ethical conduct	Advertising	Others	Abstract	Typographic	Illustrative-narrative	Monochromatic	Toned	Pop

Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 7. Mural Evaluation Sheet: themes, styles, and colours

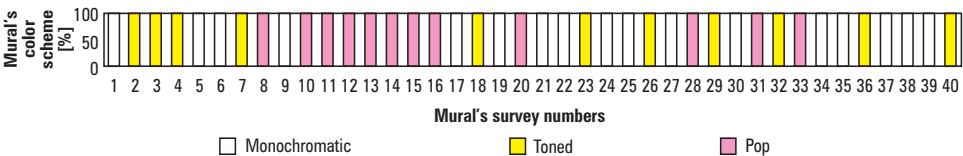
Most murals (30) were identified as serving advertising purposes; this demonstrates the everlasting need for utilitarian functions in public space (Fig. 8). We also noted that murals are multifunctional (promotion of the place, presentation of the local culture, education). Eight out of the thirty murals no longer serve their initial advertising functions as the businesses they used to advertise no longer exist. Today, their role is to be testaments to history and tokens of the Kazimierz cultural identity as *ghost signs*.



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 8. Murals of Kazimierz theme scheme

Seventeen murals are monochromatic, twelve were made in pop colours, and eleven adhere to toned colour schemes (Fig. 9).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 9. Murals of Kazimierz colour scheme

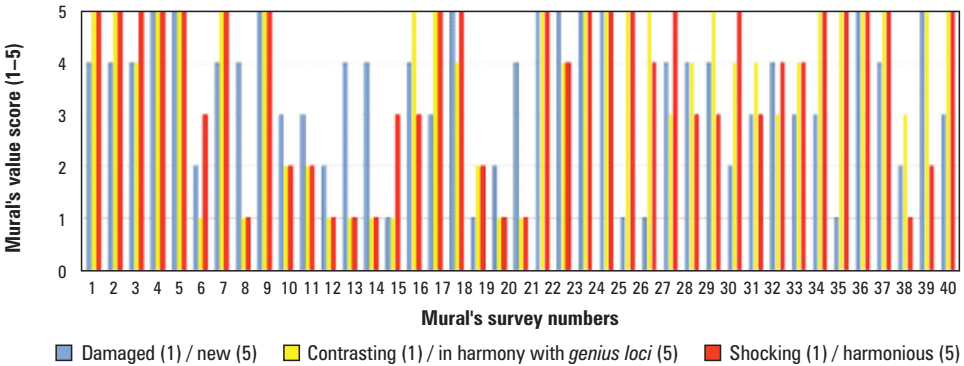
The third section of MES concerns the visual and cultural impact of the murals (Fig. 10).

No.	Visual impression (scale 1–5)			Rating (scale 1–5)				Defaced with graffiti
	Damaged / new (1–5)	Contrasting (gentrification) / in harmony with <i>genius loci</i>	Shocking / harmonious	Complementing the urban space	Composition	The coherence between painting and the architecture with the interior space	Establishing a connection with the local history	

Source: Authors’ own study

Fig. 10. Mural Evaluation Sheet: visual impact

Our study shows that murals of Kazimierz generally remain in good technical condition. Most demonstrate their designers’ understanding of *genius loci*, yet 15% of murals displayed shocking aesthetics (Fig. 11). In this study, the assessment of *genius loci* is based on the criteria of cultural references and contextual harmony.



Source: Authors’ own study

Fig. 11. Score-based evaluation of the murals in terms of their level of damage, harmony with the *genius loci*, and aesthetics

During our field research, we observed an interesting trend in Kazimierz, namely, a tendency to adapt the murals to new needs. Although this type of art is considered short-lived by design, with 10 to 15 years of exposure, we found that some paintings were restored and modified to serve new functions. Heritage pre-war murals were renovated to build ‘local narratives’. Advertising on a contemporary mural at 6 Kupa Street was revived and repurposed: the name of an obsolete Spanish restaurant, ‘Manzana’, was replaced with the name of a new Barbie doll and toy cars museum, ‘Wheels & Heels’.

4.2. An in-depth interview

Kamil Kuzko, professional mural artist, emphasised that there is no single way to design murals, because it is a complex, long-term process that undergoes constant modifications. It is shaped by the specificity of the space, social conditions, funds, permits, as well as the local history and context. Working with commercial entities, which pose severe constraints, is much different from receiving festival commissions. Kuzko states that murals have to be created in harmony with the place and the people. Murals must not be disjointed from the space where they exist. When asked about the City Mural Board evaluating applications for permits to paint new murals, the artist concluded that the more people are involved in a collective decision, the more opinions and problems arise when approving the request. Apart from their aesthetic contribution, murals in urban spaces have specific functions in visual communication. They save people from getting lost in the modernist world of architecture of solids, standardisation, precast concrete, and repetitive components. Colourful inputs allow people to feel safe in the space, to recognise it, and to develop a sense of belonging. According to Kuzko, visual arts would be best utilised to revitalise urban areas by employing holistic thinking, leading to coherent projects by architects and artists.

5. Discussion

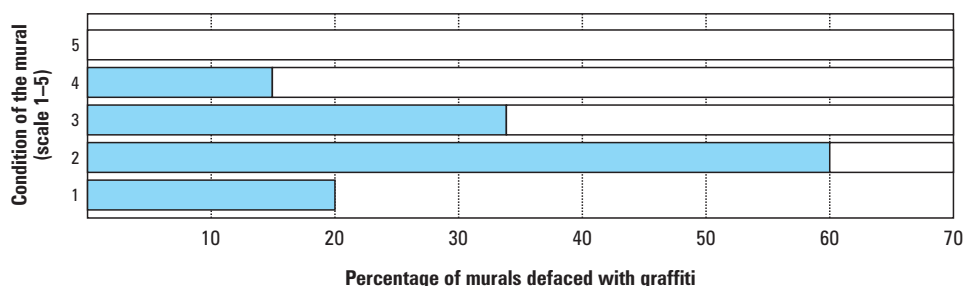
Murals are integral to the cityscape. Their themes and roles vary. They can even be used for propaganda, considering their wide exposure [Eltokhy et al. 2024]. Through interaction, residents and users want to build a shared identity with the city where they live [Özer 2023]. The messages conveyed through visual expressions in public space alter society and the perception of the place through the diverse roles and functions that the works fulfil. Murals are among the central visual determinants of the space they occupy. They express social and cultural identities of societies, link the past to the present, and are tokens of events that have moulded the area and its residents [Eltokhy et al. 2024]. It is vitally important to define principles for the presence of murals in today's urban fabric in order to facilitate their favourable impact on the space, its residents and other users. Advertising murals attract new local businesses and help the existing ones reach customers, which in turn boosts the local economy and tourist traffic [Jażdżewska 2017]. However, international research also highlights the potential risks associated with overproduction of murals, including gentrification of urban space [Dovey et al. 2012]. Similar observations were noted in Kazimierz, where both positive and negative impacts of murals on the preservation of local cultural identity were found.

We identified three types of mural origins in the culturally loaded district of Kazimierz:

- historic, pre-1989 murals, advertising no-longer-existing businesses of Kazimierz, characterised by typographic style and monochrome or toned colours. The existence of these *ghost signs* supports the *genius loci*;

- contemporary murals painted at the initiative of the municipal administration or various NGOs. They are primarily associated with cultural events, they promote the local history and culture, and they occupy over 50% of the wall area;
- contemporary murals financed by private initiatives. These are mainly advertising works. Their colour schemes vary from toned to pop. These paintings do not always draw on the local traditions and culture, and they are potentially contributing to the area's gentrification.

The beneficial influence is primarily associated with the content and aesthetics of contemporary large-scale murals that promote local history and culture. Historic *ghost signs* reinforce local narratives. Today's stylised advertising murals complement heritage spaces, while retaining their important informational function. Artistic murals that are disconnected from local cultural constraints can enhance tourist activity, create street galleries, and improve the aesthetic qualities of neglected buildings. Still, if used in excess, they also have the potential to overwhelm the senses, gentrify the area, and smother the *genius loci*. Advertising murals that promote the place but disregard its history pose a similar threat. As the district is saturated with heritage, it is essential to promote socially acceptable trends in wall advertising. It is worth considering modelling façades of commercial establishments after twentieth-century painted signs. Field research confirmed the protective function of murals against the appearance of graffiti: walls covered with murals in a good condition (rated 4 or 5 on a five-point scale) were less likely to be defaced with tags [Miasto ogłasza założenia polityki muralowej 2022] (Fig. 12).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 12. Percentage of murals defaced with graffiti in relation to their condition (1-5 scale, 5 meaning pristine condition)

5.1. Legal and administrative constraints for murals

City authorities identified the risks of commercialisation of space and overproduction of advertising murals, as well as adverts disguised as murals, and general mural oversaturation, which is used as a means to revitalise space and protect walls against vandalism. An interdisciplinary team of experts known as DNA Miasta (City DNA),

led by A. Celiński, established the Mural Policy [Miasto ogłasza założenia polityki muralowej 2022], which created the concept and operating principles of the City Mural Board. As another step towards greater control over murals, the City established the Cultural Park of Kazimierz and Stradom [Park Kulturowy Kazimierz ze Stradomiem 2021]. These legal acts and the Board are intended to improve the process of creating and maintaining street art in Kraków, including in Kazimierz.

The purpose of the City Mural Board was to 'better manage the city's murals, prevent poor artistic and technical quality works, and prevent overproduction of commercial murals,' as stated in the Mural Policy of Kraków [Polityka muralowa 2022]. It was also designed to avert gentrification of the space. However, if considered from the practical point of view of a mural artist, a centralised 'mural policy' can lead to new problems and, paradoxically, prove ineffective. In the aforementioned in-depth interview, mural artist Kamil Kuzko asked questions central to the issue: who defines the 'mural policy', what is its legal basis, what competencies are decisive when selecting members of the committee for evaluating murals, and is the voice of artists taken into account in the process?

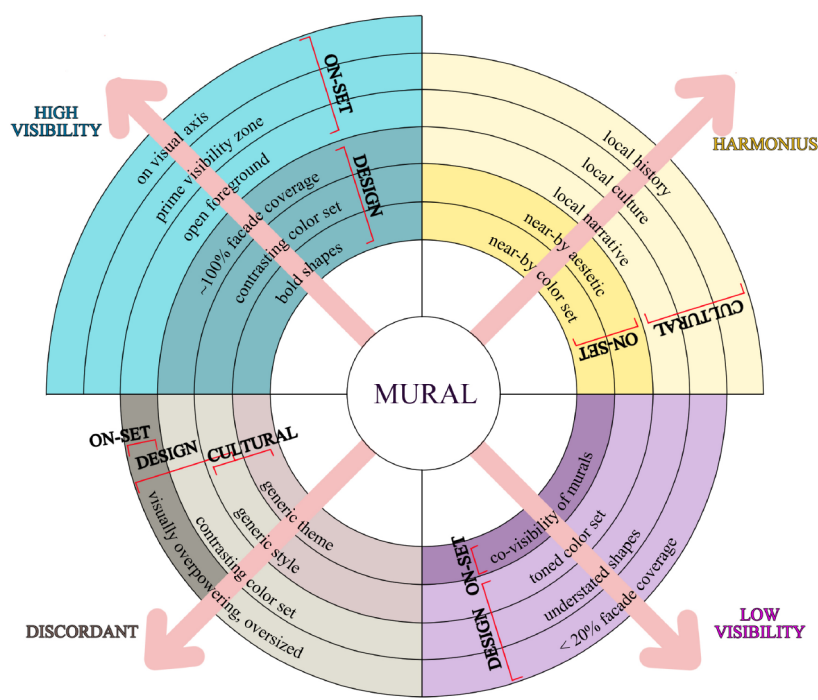
Today, murals to be painted or removed in Kazimierz have to be approved by the Mural Board. The applicant has to describe the context of the place, the method for the planned or ongoing interaction with the residents regarding the design, and the duration of display in the *Request for Mural Assessment* [Zespół ds. Murali 2025]. The last aspect suggests that the City considers murals to be temporary creations.

5.2. Mural Assessment Diagram for the existing and preliminary designed murals

Based on the literature review, the analysis of national and local legislation, the inventory of forty murals in the Kazimierz district, and the interview with a mural artist, we developed a Mural Assessment Diagram (MAD) (Fig. 13). This guide can be used to help evaluate street art, starting from an early-stage design to an existing mural in terms of its visibility (high to low) and its impact on the cityscape (harmonious to discordant) in three categories: design, on-site situation, and cultural references. The framework also highlights how significantly both the mural's creator and mural's location will shape its impact, thereby emphasising the role of decision-making city officials, responsible for selecting mural sites within the urban space.

MAD functions as a set of guidelines, illustrating the equal importance of key evaluation aspects related to on-site conditions, design, and intangible cultural values. A three-point scale (-1, 0, 1) is recommended, allowing for simple comparison and aggregation of results across different design variants of murals or spatial arrangements. In this scale, -1 indicates a negative impact (for example: visually overpowering), 0 represents a neutral effect, and 1 indicates a positive contribution (for example: compliance with local narrative). All criteria are treated as having equal weight.

The final evaluation may be calculated as the sum or average of all criteria, allowing comparison between different cases or design variants regarding visibility of the mural and harmonious coexistence with its location.



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 13. Mural Assessment Diagram (MAD)

6. Conclusions

The study identified murals that emphasize the local identity of Kazimierz. A Mural Evaluation Sheet (MES) was developed by our multidisciplinary team as a tool for the systematic documentation of murals in relation to their surroundings and the local traditions. The MES categorises murals according to their visual value and impact on the urban environment, enabling a more objective assessment that limits individual aesthetic preferences and supports decision-making by local authorities and expert bodies.

The research also demonstrated the potential of adapting heritage *ghost signs* to support local narratives and highlighted the need to use new murals to promote local cultural heritage, confirming the assumptions of the Kraków Mural Policy. As a result, a Mural Assessment Diagram was developed to synthesise the evaluation of murals, both existing and planned.

Further research should focus on developing a measurable scale of the impact of murals on the *genius loci*, with evaluation indicators based on the range of criteria proposed in MES. A useful addition to the tool could also be a set of reference images, creating a comparative scale for the analysed murals. MES should be tested on larger and more diverse datasets, including other cities and cultural contexts.

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