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Agnieszka Glińska

DBWA: Graffiti, a Geographic Mark

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Dąbrowa is a housing estate in the south-eastern part of Łódź. It is built in the pre-fabricated system between 1966 and 1975 (Szafrńska, 2016). While walking through the streets of this big post-communist neighbourhood, one cannot help but notice numerous graffiti. It is not an uncommon practice in this city, which is known for the ongoing wall-tagging war between the two local football teams, RTS Widzew and ŁKS (Desperak, 2008).

Every time I walk in this neighbourhood, I wonder how the graffiti artists understand the official name of the neighbourhood. It is not always geographically correct, e.g., "DBWA" graffiti appears in Zarzew, which is another neighbourhood. If there were no street signs telling me where I am, I could probably figure it out by reading the graffiti, e.g., "RTS Chojny", "RTS Dąbrowa", "RTS Zarzew".

In general, wall tagging and painting in cities can be understood in many ways. Its contemporary form derives from hip-hop culture (Desperak, 2008). To this day, one can spot its artistic and official examples. For instance, Lodz is known as the City of Murals and takes pride in them, posting about them on the municipality's webpages and social media profiles, and organising tours (Łódzka Organizacja Turystyczna, n.d.; Urząd Miasta Łodzi, 2017). For about a decade, creating murals has been a conscious action taken by citizens, mainly members of the Urban Forms Foundation. However, Łódź is also full of graffiti understood as an act of vandalism and a form of hooliganism. It is created without the property owner's permission. This practice works as territory marking (Bogacka & Sinięcka, 2017), and I will look at it in my essay.

I went for a walk to document numerous examples of graffiti with a camera and wonder about the meanings they communicate.

I find it interesting that the creators of such graffiti use the official name of the neighbourhood, but often use a shortened version (Figure 1). Thinking about explanations, I came up with two possibilities: "DBWA" is easier to write than the full name of the neighbourhood, or it works as local slang.

Figure 1. RTS DBWA



Source: own work (2023).

Here (Figure 2), Dąbrowa is described by the adjective "Widzevska", which derives from the full name "RTS Widzew", to show territorial affiliation.

Figure 2. WIDZEWSKA DBWA!



Source: own work (2023).

It seems like some of the graffiti is modified (Figure 3). My guess is that this “RTS DBWA” came from blurring out “ŁKS”, which shows the conflict between the two football teams. It reminds me of a map created by Trzepacz, in which he showed how divided Kraków really is in terms of football clubs. He highlighted places where certain types of graffiti remained unchanged, even after ten years, and other places where some were being changed to another football team. Interestingly, he found that there are “frontlines”, where graffiti artists fight to keep only the name of their team (Trzepacz, 2020). It seems that Dąbrowa could be one of these frontlines, but I was not conducting thorough research, so, for now, it remains a guess.

Figure 3. RTS DBWA



Source: own work (2023).

In this photo (Figure 4), we can see an example of graffiti being painted over, probably by the owners of the building, as they perhaps see it as an act of vandalism and something to get rid of.

Another type of graffiti that I find interesting describes the neighbourhood as “young” (Figure 5). It probably does not come from demographic data, since Dąbrowa is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Lodz regarding inhabitants’ ages, as the buildings were created in the 1960s and 70s (Szafrńska, 2016). The graffiti perhaps highlights the fact that younger people are the artists and want to show the older generations that they are carrying on the “tradition” of supporting the same football club.

Here (Figure 6) we can see an example of an emblem and colours (black, red and white) carrying a totemic meaning, facilitating the visual division of space

(Bogacka & Sinięcka, 2017). The abbreviation “DBWA” is written into the emblem as a way of tying the neighbourhood with the team.

The “Dąbrowa pany” (Dąbrowa masters) (Figure 7) graffiti that appears on the same row of garages as the one presented in Figure 6 could be a way of showing the neighbourhood (unofficially seen as being dominated by RTS) as masters.

Figure 4. RTS DBWA



Source: own work (2023).

Figure 5. MŁODA DĄBROWA! (Young Dąbrowa!)



Source: own work (2023).

Figure 6. DBWA emblem



Source: own work (2023).

Figure 7. DĄBROWA PANY (Dąbrowa masters)



Source: own work (2023).

As can be seen, graffiti, which is sometimes invisible or annoying to the residents, can be a way of interpreting the cityscape. It is not always unwanted, as we can see with murals, but it often devalues the cityscape. In 2007, Desperak conducted a focus group interview with young, excluded people who, surprisingly, were all illegal graffiti artists. They all knew they were socially excluded and marginalised. They used to paint walls when they were bored and had no money or anywhere to go. It made me wonder if the lack of space for teenagers is one of the elements

of the phenomenon. Children have playgrounds, adults have their workplaces, but teenagers are often ignored when designing urban space. They are no longer wanted in the playgrounds, and they are not old enough to have paid jobs. They have a strong need for privacy, which is hard to achieve in the city while still living with their parents. During a lecture by Kubacki (Facebook, Muzeum Miasta Łodzi, 2022), I heard the opinion that more spontaneous city greenery would let teenagers hide and socialise in this way. Maybe it would help to meet some of their needs and limit the amount of illegal graffiti. However, there are perhaps also some bigger problems, such as the exclusion and marginalisation of specific social groups, which may also be one of the reasons behind illegal graffiti.

In the end, what interests me the most is that graffiti can be seen as a geographic mark, especially as it underlines the name of the neighbourhood in which it is made – not always correctly, but roughly allowing someone to orientate themselves in space. While researching this essay, I found it surprising that despite the amount and popularity of “ŁKS/RTS graffiti”, there is no “Łodz football graffiti map” like the one Trzepacz made for Kraków. It seems that such an initiative would help to understand the geography of the city.

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