

MURALS AND PUBLIC ART IN NORTHERN CYPRUS: QUIET WALLS OF KYRENAA, CULTURAL VISIBILITY, AND PUBLIC SPACE

Batu Gündal, Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design (ARUCAD), Faculty of Art,
batu.gundal@arucad.edu.tr

Abstract: This article asks why mural culture has not developed in Kyrenia despite the presence of local artists, an art and design university, and documented mural projects. What does this absence tell us about the conditions that are needed to encourage public art and embed murals into everyday urban culture. Murals should not be seen as just decorative additions to the public space, they are a representation of a community's artistic values, cultural identity and creative expression. Cheung, Smith and Craven (2021) argue that public art in shared spaces has a unique capacity to bring people together and leave lasting impressions on the cities and communities they inhabit. Kyrenia can be described as a city with quiet walls, public art and specifically murals are largely absent. This article follows a qualitative, practice-led and case-based methodology, combining secondary literature, visual documentation and my direct experience as a practising muralist, examining five cases: Heerlen, Philadelphia, Paphos, North Nicosia and Kyrenia. The findings identify three key conditions behind Kyrenia's visual quietness: Limited public familiarity with mural art, insufficient and geographically concentrated institutional support, and the absence of a self-initiated wall culture. This article contributes to existing research by examining a context that has received little academic attention. Rather than focusing on cities where mural culture thrives, it shifts its focus to areas where mural culture has not taken root. The study concludes that meaningful change in Kyrenia requires sustained institutional commitment, broader distribution of mural activity across the city, and greater public visibility of the creative process.

Keywords: Kyrenia, murals, Northern Cyprus, public art, community engagement

1. Introduction

Public art, especially murals have become a major component of cities identities (Cheung, Smith & Craven, 2021), they do not only serve as representations of the culture and values of the communities they reside in, and although can be seen as beautification projects for cities, they are much more than just a pretty painting on a public wall trying to make the area look aesthetically pleasing. Murals help strengthen the identity of a culture and build a sense of belonging to the community (Petroniené & Juzeléniené, 2022). They

provide a platform and a stage for the artists of that community to express themselves and to showcase the creative potential that resides locally. Murals can give us ideas about the social and political views of a city. They have historical and cultural references painted which help strengthen and build a community's identity (Cercleux, 2022). But what does it mean when a city's walls are quiet? What does that say about its people and culture? What is the reason for a city's walls to be without art and without creative public expression?

The importance of murals and their impact on the area and community can be seen in various examples from around the globe. This Article will examine the absence of mural art in Kyrenia, the small coastal city North of the island. Mural art is present in Cyprus although there is a significant difference in the quantity of murals throughout each city. While some areas have a high concentration of artworks some have significantly less and this uneven distribution is worth investigating and analysing (Korols, Dynyak & Asanti, 2025). The Main argument is focused on the visual quietness of Kyrenia. Although there is no shortage of artists or creatives in the area, as it is the only city in Cyprus with an Arts and design-based university. Also, many local artists conveniently reside in and around the area. The issue seems to be pointing in another direction. The general public is not familiar with public art, so much so that they actually don't realise the absence of it and are not aware of the possibilities and benefits that it can have for them and their community. Limited public awareness along with insufficient help from institutions and local community body's such as the Municipality and the Arts and Culture department has had a direct effect on the presence of murals within the city.

When there is no framework encouraging or supporting public art, it simply doesn't happen. When murals do occur, it tends to appear in the form of commercial murals, painted for businesses and brands, rather than community-driven works that reflect the identity and culture of the people who actually live there.

2. Methodology

The core of this article is framed around the question; why has mural culture not developed in Kyrenia despite the presence of local artists, an arts university, and

documented mural projects, and what does this absence reveal about the conditions needed for public art to become a genuine part of urban life?

To investigate this, I have taken a qualitative, practice-led approach. As someone who has been painting murals in Cyprus for over a decade, and has participated in projects both locally and internationally, my direct experience forms a key component of how this research was conducted and understood. Candy (2006) describes practice-led research as an approach where the primary focus is advancing knowledge about practice itself, which is exactly what this article attempts to do. Sullivan (2010) similarly argues that the inquiry carried out by artists is a legitimate form of research, one that can generate knowledge that more conventional methods cannot easily reach. My position as a practising muralist should therefore not be seen as a limitation of this research but as a strength.

The materials come from four sources: secondary academic literature, published news reports and online documentation, photographs and visual documentation, and my own direct experience as a practising muralist. No interviews or surveys were conducted. The personal observations I describe throughout the article come from my own professional practice, including my participation in the Açık Hava Müzesi project in Kyrenia in 2014 and the Pafos2017 Street Art Square initiative in Paphos. Since no other people were involved in data collection, no informed consent procedures were required (Candy, 2006).

Five cases were selected for comparison, each case represents a different aspect of what is happening when murals are created, and how they affect the community. They all show different patterns in the way communities interact and use public art and murals. And in the case of this article, what is not happening in Kyrenia. Heerlen in the Netherlands shows how a structured institutional and community framework can transform a city's visual identity through murals. Philadelphia demonstrates how an informal graffiti culture can evolve into an organised community-backed mural programme. In Cyprus, Paphos was chosen because of the Pafos2017 Street Art Square initiative, which shows what concentrated institutional support can achieve. North Nicosia

was selected for the Hatırlamak Güzeldir project, which shows how art connected to local memory works differently from externally driven projects. The focus of the study is on the quietness of public spaces, especially the walls of Kyrenia.

I am aware that writing about a place I live and work in, about a practice I am directly involved in, means my perspective is not neutral. My familiarity with Kyrenia's arts community and my own experience of the barriers when making public art inevitably shape the way I read and interpret the evidence. In practice-led research this kind of awareness, known as reflexivity, is understood as a methodological asset rather than a problem, because it provides insight and knowledge that outside researchers simply would not have (Sullivan, 2010; Candy, 2006; Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017).

It is also important to make clear what this research does not claim. The cases selected are few and purposely chosen. They are not statistically representative of mural practice across Cyprus or anywhere else. What this article offers is a situated, practice-informed perspective on a specific context that has received very little academic attention, and that in itself is part of its contribution.

3. Theoretical Framework

It is crucial to this article that we explain the terms Mural, street art, graffiti and public art, as they are commonly used interchangeably. It is a common mistake made by the public to see any form of painting in the public space and call it Graffiti, as from personal encounters. On-goers and people walking by seeing a mural will not say “oh are you painting a wall?” or “that’s a nice painting”. They will use the term graffiti. “So, you are making graffiti?”. Although they are referring to images or works painted in the public space they all differ from one another. May it be technically, theoretically or conceptually. So, I believe there is a need for a brief description of these terms so as to clarify the terminology.

A mural is described as an artwork made directly onto a wall, ceiling, or architectural surface, generally with wall paint or spray paint. Murals are physically inseparable from the environment in which they exist (Martyka et al., 2025). Murals have been referred to as the Urban canvas, which fits appropriately as they are generally

intended for the outdoor space, to be seen by the public and to be for the community. This is not to say that murals cannot be found indoors. Murals are categorised under the Umbrella term that is known as public art.

Graffiti is widely considered the foundation from which contemporary street art and mural culture grew. Although its origins date back to cave paintings, its first contemporary appearance was in the late 60's in America, specifically Philadelphia and New York. It gained popularity with Tagging which is a way of writing your name in a stylised manner. Spray paint was usually the weapon of choice, although markers, wall paint, stencils and paste-ups are also common materials and methods that are used (White,2018). Graffiti is widely considered the foundation from which contemporary street art and mural culture grew. Many of today's most recognised muralists began as graffiti writers. (Cercleux, 2022)

Public art, as described by Miles is the making, management and mediation of art beyond conventional institutional settings (Miles,1997). This includes murals, sculptures, installations, monuments and works that are outside of the traditional gallery or museum; they are open to everyone and are available to whoever might encounter them. Generally, Public art is site specific and needs the public domain to exist. Public art interacts with its environment and over time becomes part of it (Riggle,2010).

4. Findings and Discussion

To give a solid starting point for my article question, Heerlen in the Netherlands provides an interesting insight into how murals were initiated, and gives insight into how it affected the city itself. Murals are not intended just to become a makeover and create a pleasant visual for people to look at, although this is one of their outcomes, it's not the main goal. It does call for a great deal of planning, organisation, funding and a specific vision. Heerlen provides us with the insight of what is needed for a public intervention to take place, even though the resources may be there, the creative minds, designers, artists, funding, concepts, walls and a desire to create. There has to be a reason and motivation that creates the right environment for all aspects to come together as an organised form of action. There is a need for people who are actually invested in the

community and feel connected to their streets, their neighbourhood, town or city and are willing to work towards improving or changing their community towards a better place. Heerlen was an industrial city, suffering from financial issues due to its coal mines closing in the 1960s, and with that came unemployment, crime, poverty, and this led to a change in the identity of the city. A once safe and proud city suddenly became, abandoned and without meaning and a broken cultural image. Heerlen today is known as the street art capital of the Netherlands. During the project, 75 large and small murals were painted and distributed around the city in a span of 10 years (URBACT,n.d.). This was due to the vision of “The Sticking Street Art Foundation” which set the goal of transforming Heerlen into a city with a positive cultural identity using murals and street art to do so. This project couldn’t just exist with the foundation alone; it also needs support and funding, which is where the Municipality stepped in. By providing walls and obtaining the permissions to paint them as well as financially supporting the project. This aspect strengthens the argument that these projects are not just a one-man job; they often require different organisations to work in tandem. Enforcing the idea of community work, public unity, and collaboration amongst a community are all important aspects of work done.



Figure 1. Heerlen Mural & Street art.

What Heerlen shows us is more of the type of attitude that is needed, the approach is to create a framework and a community that can interact and work together to make this kind of mural project come to life, it would have been impossible if this project was left up to only a few artists. As a muralist, myself I know first-hand that there are many elements that need to come together to create just one mural let alone a project of this scale. Just the permissions alone can be very tedious and time consuming, adding in all the costs of paint, brushes, ladders, lifts etc. the design process and finally the labour to create the physical mural is exhausting and not a job for a single individual. When community bodies such as the municipality and foundations like the Sticking street art foundation work together is when it truly becomes a community project. Especially if the public is involved with workshops, tours and painting sessions. Suddenly it starts to become more than just murals on walls, it begins to become a public performance, strengthening the community bonds and developing cultural and public identity.

Structured systems along with support from community bodies and organisations can change the face of a city, from randomly chaotic tagged city streets, unsanctioned mark makings. A graffiti-bombed city like Philadelphia can be an example of how a city can actually move towards a more organised and legal way of expressing frustrations, dreams and identity. With the Mural Arts Program established in 1984 (Greaney, 2002), Philadelphia was given the opportunity to transform its run-down walls into a public canvas. Commissioned community murals began replacing the graffiti tags, and what had once been seen as vandalism gradually became a celebrated and supported form of public expression. This demonstrates how a culture of unorganised and illegal acts of expression can change and develop into a supported and community lead Project, leading Philadelphia to become not only the birthplace of graffiti (White 2018) but also showing how graffiti evolved into an art movement when backed by the Community.

Another case can be investigated from Cyprus, Paphos in 2017 was deemed the European Culture capital and during this time, many artistic and cultural events took place, one of which was the Street Art Square Festival. It was organised and curated by local artist Yiannis Sakellis (*Pafos2017 - Street Art Square - Graffiti Festival*, 2017). This event was divided into two parts, the first leg was in 2016 and then the second was in

2017. I was also invited and took part in the event both years as a muralist representing Cyprus along with renowned artists from Greece, Switzerland, Germany and South Korea. Walls had been arranged, permissions were covered, designs had all been created and submitted by the artists weeks in advance. Paint, equipment, travel and accommodation were all taken care of by the organisation. As artists, the only thing left was to create our works. The main concentration of artworks was made on the walls in the old town of Paphos, an area which had been going through major renovation throughout 2016. There were also walls that were further out from the town centre but the main focus was to create a vibrant and creative old town with contemporary street art. Emphasising the culture of Cyprus with artworks of local icons such as Aphrodite, Eros and the Mouflon goat, were contrasted by other artists bringing in their own heritage, culture and style to some of the walls. The festival created a concentrated environment where artists from very different backgrounds were working simultaneously and publicly, each one bringing their own distinct techniques, visual languages, and approaches to life. Watching other fellow artists as they encounter and work through problems in real time, being able to experience their unfamiliar methods of painting and naturally just being among so many creative minds and practitioners is an experience not just for an artist but for the public and the community itself. Witnessing this experience, seeing what is possible when artists are given genuine support and visibility, is a powerful demonstration of what a supported and visible mural culture can look like in practice.



Figure 2. Millo mural in Paphos before and after removal.

World renowned Artists, including Millo, Usugrow, Bane, BillyGee, Alex Martinez, and Lune82 produced large scale pieces that were difficult to ignore, and over time these works moved from being new additions to Paphos to becoming parts of the City itself, and even considered landmarks of the old town. To understand how these murals became treasured by the community and were accepted as a part of the urban landscape and their identity, we can look at the Removal of Milo's mural and how the community came together to protest and react towards the loss of the Piece. Evidently, the mural was erased during renovations to the building which led to widespread anger and disappointment within the Community. Millo was subsequently invited back to Paphos to produce a new work (Browne, 2021; Agapiou, 2022). This is a statement on how a mural enters the public memory and identity. Internalising it as their own having lived alongside it for several years. Research into the long-term effects of street art on communities supports this observation. Boffi, Rainisio, and Inghilleri (2023) found that over time, sustained exposure to murals that were connected to local history and culture would significantly increase the residents' place attachment, with murals becoming embedded in the cognitive map of the neighbourhood as recognised landmarks. The process of repeated exposure and that leading to familiarity, then familiarity becoming attachment, and finally attachment to a sense of public care and identity takes time to happen. It needs the works to be visible for a long time to really engrave itself into the consciousness of the public and to form a genuine relationship. This is not established by having one or two murals or public artworks. It needs an abundance and variety of them. When we look at Kyrenia, and its lack of public art and murals, we can say that this is partly because it hasn't become an expected part of the city's visual experience; there isn't the expectation that something meaningful may appear. Kyrenia does not reject Murals, it's not aware of its absence.

A work seen every day stops being unfamiliar quite quickly; it does not necessarily have to be appreciated but in time it will become expected and this is what matters. Nicosia's walled city was home to a project which can shed some more light on the effect of continuity and being exposed to public art. A joint project between a local art community, "Studio 21" founded by Derviş Zeybek and the Lefkoşa Türk Belediyesi

brought to life the “Hatırlamak güzeldir” (it’s nice to remember) project (Haber Kıbrıs, 2021). Well-known local figures were portrayed in various locations around the walled city; these were not just any random portraits but familiar faces that everyone knew, loved and had a visual recognition of. They were already woven into the identity of Nicosia. The murals and artworks were placed in specific places where there was a lot of foot traffic, mostly Pedestrian movement and this made the works become repeatedly encountered by the community.



Figure 3. Mural From the “Hatırlamak güzeldir” Project in Nicosia walled city.

Kyrenia does not yet have this same density of mural encounter. Public art exists within the city, but it does not feel woven into daily life in the same way. Walls are there, but many of them remain, unused. The Ciklos wall on the Lefkoşa-Girne highway has been used for public mural work on more than one occasion, and this history is worth examining. The first was the “Açık Hava Müzesi” (the open-air museum) project in 2014, organised by ARTTERAPI and EMAA with sponsorships from the Kyrenia Municipality and local hard ware store and paint supplier Tayf Ltd, which brought together 37 artists

and painters to paint the walls at the Ciklos junction with the aim of creating an open-air museum, representing Turkish Cypriot painting (Kıbrıs Postası, 2014).

I was amongst the participating artists of that project. Years later, the same wall became the site of the ARUCAD Ciklos Mural Art Project, in which students and artist-academics from the university applied new work to the same surface (kyreniacommentator, 2021).

Two separate projects, organised by different institutions, years apart but returning to the same wall. We can see here that although there are institutions like the municipality and the university involved that the murals and public works stay in one specific site and seem to be stuck to that one location, without being able to expand further into the city, these projects just become contained events rather than becoming a public identity. Nearly all of the other murals in Kyrenia are situated in the ARUCAD main campus (Korols, Dynyak & Asanti, 2025). Which again shows that projects take place in specific locations and cannot evolve and spread into a wider public space. The problem is not that there are not artists and creatives willing to create works, but an issue with getting permission to create in other locations, other institutional support as only having all the responsibility of sponsorship and financial support as well as permissions on one or two institutions, makes for a very limited reach.



Figure 4. The Ciklos / ARUCAD mural project on the Girne-Lefkoşa road.

It is also important to state here that informal and unofficial mark-making (graffiti, tags, stencils, stickers) has been considered to help develop and spread more official public art and murals that we know of Today (Cercleux, 2022). This isn't to say that graffiti should be encouraged in any way, but it is this part of street art that influences and ignites a more guerrilla-style approach to public art making, it is visible and captures the attention of the public. The graffiti community is known to have a strong sense of collective identity that influences each other and can organically spread throughout an area. They have a way of making themselves present, known and seen. That kind of organic spread is something that commissioned mural projects struggle to replicate, and in the case of Kyrenia, it is precisely what is missing.

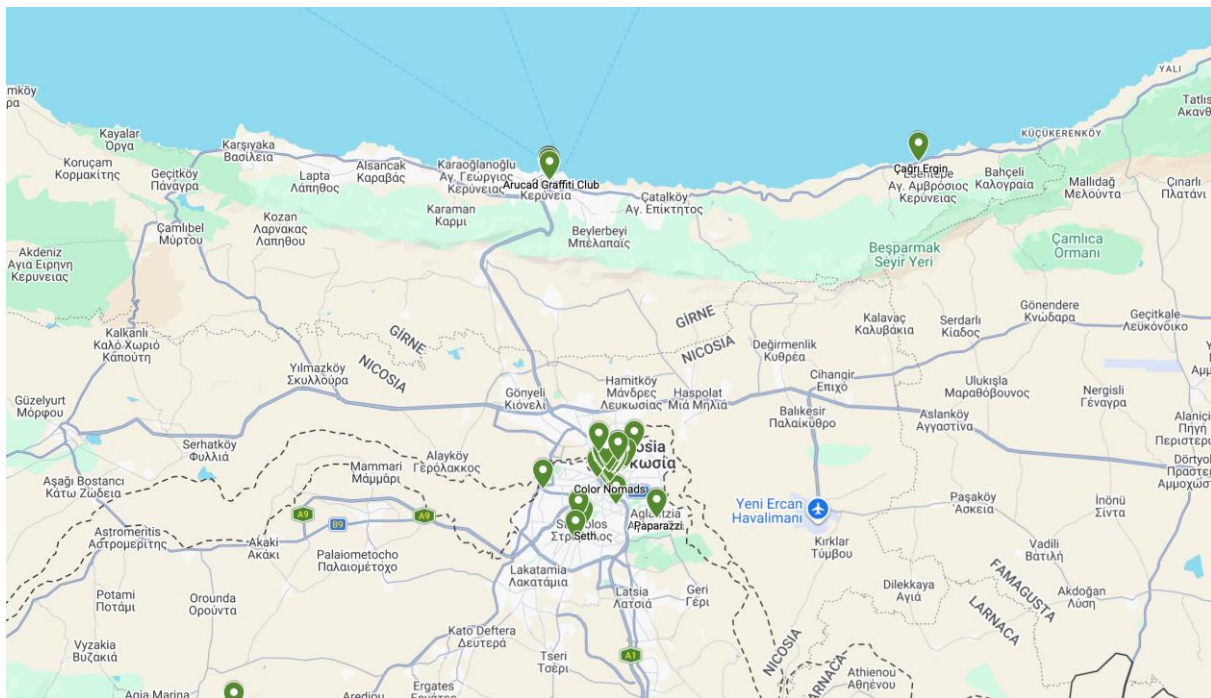


Figure 5. Map from Walled Island: Street Art of Cyprus showing selected mural locations in Northern Cyprus.

Looking at the social structure of Cyprus and Kyrenia we know that it is a small country and an even smaller city, this creates a community with close social interactions and connections, where everyone knows each other or is familiar with one another. This type of community structure with so many close ties can be discouraging for artists who need or prefer anonymity. The risk of creating spontaneous wall art in itself is an issue,

the works not being appreciated or being referred to as vandalism can have a negative effect on the community and discourage the artists. Without planned and organised mechanisms that offer support for local artists, open call programs to encourage local and foreign artists, and clear wall access in the form of free-walls or events that help encourage the growth of street art and murals in an official manner is a strategic way of normalising and integrating murals into the public space. Otherwise Artists have little reason to take risks creating public artwork (Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, 2005).

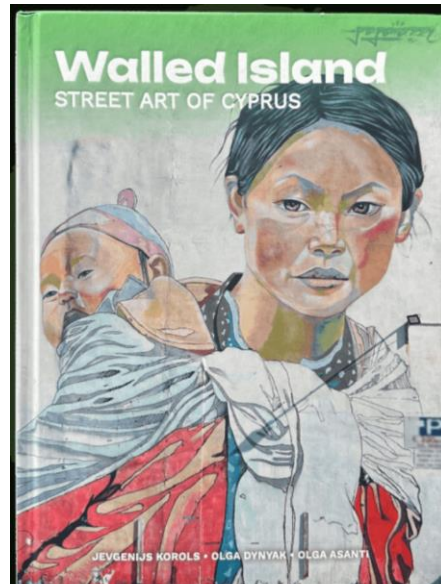


Figure 6. Cover of Walled Island: Street Art of Cyprus

The result of these conditions creates a situation where mural art has not been rejected but has not yet been fully normalised. A wall without art is still seen as ordinary. This is a very different condition from one where murals have entered the public memory deeply enough that removing them produces a reaction, as happened in Paphos. On the opposite side of the island In Kyrenia, public art is still occasional rather than woven into the shared visual experience of the city, and because of this absence, it does not register as a loss. There is no expectation. The community have nothing that they can relate to or feel attached to in the same sense as in the Milos Paphos mural.

Building this expectation through programs similar to Heerlen and Paphos's art square street art festival is vital. There is an important factor that must be addressed, and that is the experience of witnessing the creation. Allowing for the process to be visible to

the community creates an interaction and association with the artworks that cannot be replicated any other way. The act of creating a mural can be seen as a public performance; the public is allowed to enter into the sacred presence of the artist. This is a powerful moment as ordinary everyday people suddenly get a chance to see the artist's process, they can interact and feel a part of the artwork itself. People stop to observe, they ask questions to the artist(s), learn more about the artwork and the details of actually creating a mural, suddenly the mural is engaging with its inhabitants. I have personally shared some interesting conversations with curious by passers. Generally, at the beginning stages of the mural when there are only rough sketches and lines, doodle grids* you can see the uncertain expressions and even concerned looks of locals, trying to make sense of the process. These negative and unsure emotions start to become more enthusiastic and appreciative as the image develops over the hours or days. More often than not commenting with gratitude and appreciation to the artist for bringing colour, meaning and creativity to their neighbourhood. This was the case when painting the Beige café (Figure 7.) A wall which is on the main street where there is always a lot of foot traffic and cars passing by, people would constantly, interact with us while painting and we were asked dozens of questions throughout the day about who we were and the mural itself, people would stop and pause for a while and experience my assistant and I gradually painting the wall and bringing it to life. Although this was a commissioned work for a commercial brand the effect that the mural has is the same. Petronienė and Juzelėnienė (2022) argue that this kind of visible process can create meaningful communication between artists and communities, supporting a form of engagement that the finished artwork alone cannot produce.

Note: Doodle grid is a method of transferring images to the wall.



Figure 7. Process of the Beige Café mural being created in Kyrenia.

Using mural and street art practices to inspire and establish a strong community identity is only achievable when more than a few elements are simultaneously present. Creating projects which are more geared towards the happening aspect of art, making the process visible and highlighting the experience, actively including the public and allowing them to witness the creation of a piece is a powerful component that cannot be overlooked. In the case of Kyrenia's quiet walls, there is an infrastructure present, but it needs to be more organised, and coordinated. Creating opportunities through accessible walls, consistent exposure for artists to work in the public domain, and encouraging artists to experiment, and the opportunity to collaborate and work beside foreign artists and institutions, funding and as mentioned public involvement can make a change in the overall perception of public arts importance and create that awareness that is missing.

5. Conclusions

Kyrenia is not missing artists, creative intention or the desire to express. What is missing is the decision to build something continuous. Rather than the occasional mural or graffiti on a wall, it needs to be open enough that it can spread beyond the institutions that made the first murals possible in the first place. This will not change with an event or

specific project which is confined within a certain area. Public art needs to be distributed on a wider scale rather than contained within specified locations.

When we looked at Heerlen, Philadelphia, Paphos and North Nicosia, three key conditions emerged that help explain why Kyrenia's walls are quiet. The first is limited exposure which creates unfamiliarity. When a community has never been consistently exposed to murals, they do not recognise the absence. It doesn't register as a loss nor as something missing. The second is insufficient and geographically concentrated institutional support; the projects that have happened in Kyrenia have been dependent on one or two institutions and have stayed within specific locations rather than spreading across the city. The third is the absence of a self-initiated wall culture; without a history of informal mark-making (graffiti) that typically evolves into organised mural activity, there is no organic foundation for a wider mural culture to grow from.

This is not to say that Kyrenia hasn't had its moments; the "Açık hava müzesi" with the intention of creating an open-air museum, brought together local young and established artists from the island. Years later, Cyprus's only art and design university ARUCAD used the same wall again to create murals inspired by local motifs and cultural elements of Cyprus.

What makes Kyrenia worth examining academically is that it represents a case that rarely appears in research conducted on public art. Most existing literature focuses on cities where mural culture is already present and/or is growing (Cheung, Smith & Craven, 2021). Looking at a place where public art is absent, asks a different question. Not what murals do for communities that already have them, but what their absence reveals about the conditions that need to exist before they can take root. This shifts the conversation away from artistic capacity and intention and directs it towards factors that affect the realisation of public art whilst acknowledging the importance and relevance towards Cultural identity.

For things to change in Kyrenia, what is needed is not another project that is isolated within itself, but projects that have continuation, that are committed to expansion and become distributed around the city. ARUCAD, as the main arts institution in the city, has an opportunity to extend its mural activity beyond its campus and into different

neighbourhoods. The Kyrenia municipality similarly has a role to play; helping to establish walls for mural work, and providing areas like free walls that could encourage the youth to paint outdoors in the public space without the issue of doing anything illegally and most importantly feeling supported by the institutions. Finally, making the process visible to the public, not just the finished works but the act of creation itself, because that is where genuine community engagement begins. Ultimately, a city that has walls that speak also says something about how it values the voices within it.



Figure 8. ARUCAD mural event inside the main campus during orientation week.

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