

Urban Art Mapping and How to Deal with Hot Spots—The Vagabundler Project

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Abstract

This paper presents the non-commercial online graffiti archive “Vagabundler”, which holds numerous articles, interviews and city maps on urban art. The text explains the archiving system developed by the Vagabundler Collective, with examples from Buenos Aires in Argentina, Montréal in Canada and Berlin in Germany. Finally, the North Side Gallery in Berlin serves as an example to highlight the potential political influence of documentary evidence in legalising graffiti creation.

Keywords

Archiving; Berlin; Graffiti documentation; Legalisation; Localisation; Networking; North Side Gallery; Spot history; Street art photography; Urban art mapping

1. Introduction

As a start, a comparison by Jurij Paderin from the Graffiti Lobby Berlin, with whom we had an interesting interview for the Vagabundler project (Vagabundler, 2021): “In Berlin there are thousands of children who like to play football. There are soccer fields for them and new ones are constantly being built. There are thousands of children who love to play basketball. New courts are being built for them. There are many other athletes, there are musicians, actors. Practice places are designed for everyone. But for the children who want to paint on outside walls, there are no places for them. Actually nearly none at all”. That is an ongoing observation; one can read all about it on their website <https://www.graffiti-lobby-berlin.de> and the Graffiti Lobby has been working on the legalisation of public spaces for artistic activities for many years. Before we go any further, here is a quick addition to Jurij’s statement, because that really gets one thinking. Jurij: “What would happen if you took from the children who play football or basketball, the children who play the guitar or the saxophone, the children who do acrobatics or performances, what would happen if you took their places away? If you take away their football fields, the basketball courts, the music schools and all that? What would happen? They would do it anyway! Because

they love it and because they want to do it. The kids would just play soccer in the streets, and the basketball players would nail their hoop to a tree and play basketball there. You can not suppress it. You have to understand it and create space for it.”

At the goINDIGO Graffiti Symposium in June 2023, Gunther Michels presented the “Vagabundler” project and the idea behind the platform <https://www.vagabundler.com>, which this paper presents. The members of the Vagabundler Collective are not the ones who paint or create works of art. Nor are they the ones doing politics. But they are the ones who archive, take photos and document. Meanwhile, as time passes, people understand the importance of archiving. However, we would like to explain further steps one should think about. We live in the communication age, so everything “must” be communicated, from important things to nonsense. But everything must also be “proven” to get permission for anything. With documentation like digital photos, one can do that very well, especially if needing to prove to municipalities, for example, that a place “is artistically and creatively valuable”. This paper will give some insights about what the Vagabundler Collective does, how they think and how an individual can contribute.

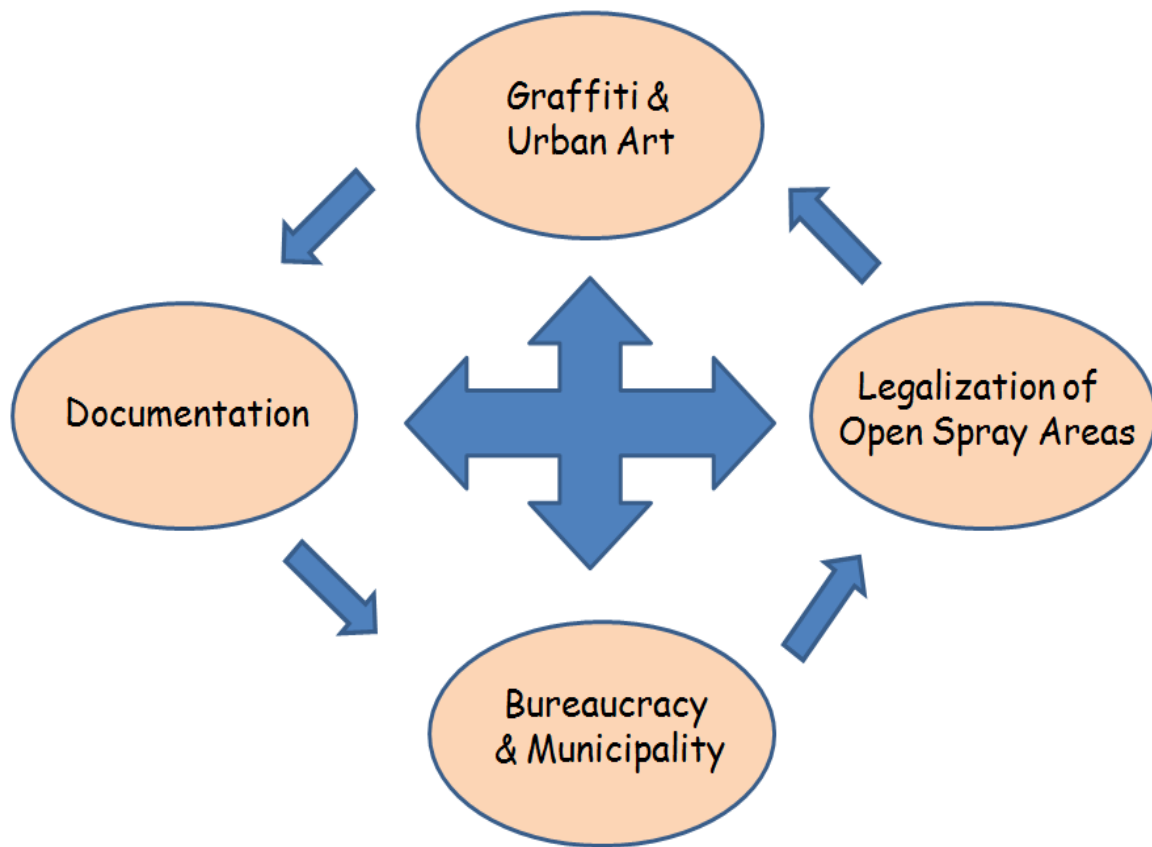


Figure 1. More graffiti locations via evidence-based value of a spot.

2. Some Facts about Vagabundler (September 2023)

- Vagabundler Collective:
 - o Contains around 16 crew members in the core group and 100+ contributors.
 - o Is non-commercial and non-profit. New people are welcome.
 - o The website is online since August 2017.
- Contact:
 - o <https://vagabundler.com>
 - o info@vagabundler.com
- Archive:
 - o 150,000 photos online on around 15,000 pages.
 - o 134 maps (4 world maps, 83 country maps, 47 city maps, and 2 spot maps).
 - o >170 artist profiles & interviews, >300 podcast included, >500 reports (90 % art-related).

3. Our Mission—Why Are We Doing This?

Some explanation about our “Vagabundler Project” and the people behind it. First, and foremost, we are lovers of art, colours, diversity and creativity. In addition to the joy of observing, we enjoy taking photos. But that is not enough; we also want to show others these photos. However, it is not just about our photos; it is much more about the motif itself, what is behind it, and those who made it. Our online platform is a collaboration of many creative, lovely people from all around the world, who are passionately involved in this non-profit project. Partly, it comes out of our interest, but the entire team has the solid additional motivation to make urban art, and everything that it defines and entails, better known and to provide information about it. In addition to the photo galleries, we try to let the artists and makers have their own by doing interviews. The

Vagabundler collective is a small creativity-interested family which informs, documents and archives. Many works of art in public spaces are no longer available after a short time, and often, there are no photos of them. Our website offers a database of beautiful works from places around the world. Apart from the art perspective, which is already a huge reason the works must be documented, it is also clearly a socio-cultural phenomenon. It must be reported and we try to mediate, explain, create access and even connections. Urban art, and art in general, is a form of human expression in our society. There is great value in it, and there are many messages included. We try our best to show this fantastic, colourful world and the creators behind it, explain it, and bring it closer via vagabundler.com.

4. How Do the Maps Work?

The posts, photos and interviews on the Vagabundler website (<https://vagabundler.com>) are linked to maps. The basic navigation is thus based on the maps. There is a world map and then maps for each country. Actually, there are several world maps, such as one with all interviews or one with all participants so far. There are city maps of the places from which we have a considerable amount of material and

to which crew members also regularly contribute new photos (one could call them city ambassadors). That would then be the next “zooming in stage”. Each map features markers that lead to further levels or individual pages with spot reports, interviews, or extensive articles. The idea of locating urban artworks on online maps is not new. There are already many such maps. However, most maps have the markers attached to the respective artworks. At Vagabundler, the marker is not the artwork’s identifier but the spot itself. This means that if new artworks are created at that location, future photos will be added to the page that belongs to that marker. In this way, pages have already been created that show the history of a single wall with countless works of art over several years. So we can also go back in time in our documentation and add to the database content from today but also from the past. Likewise, everyone is invited to participate in this open data project. Participation is simple and can range from individual photos to extensive articles and photo collections; videos are also possible. The extent of the documentation basically depends on the person who wants to participate. If one has many photos and wants to contribute more extensively, then entire city maps or even village maps can be created. If interested, contact can be made via info@vagabundler.com.

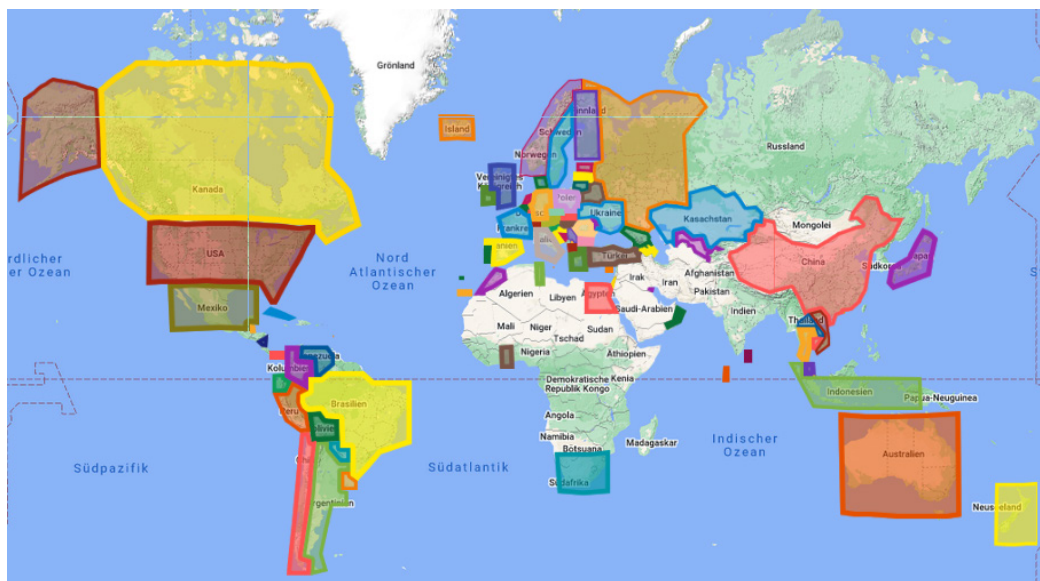


Figure 2. The “World Map” – First level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘Level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023. <https://vagabundler.com/the-map>

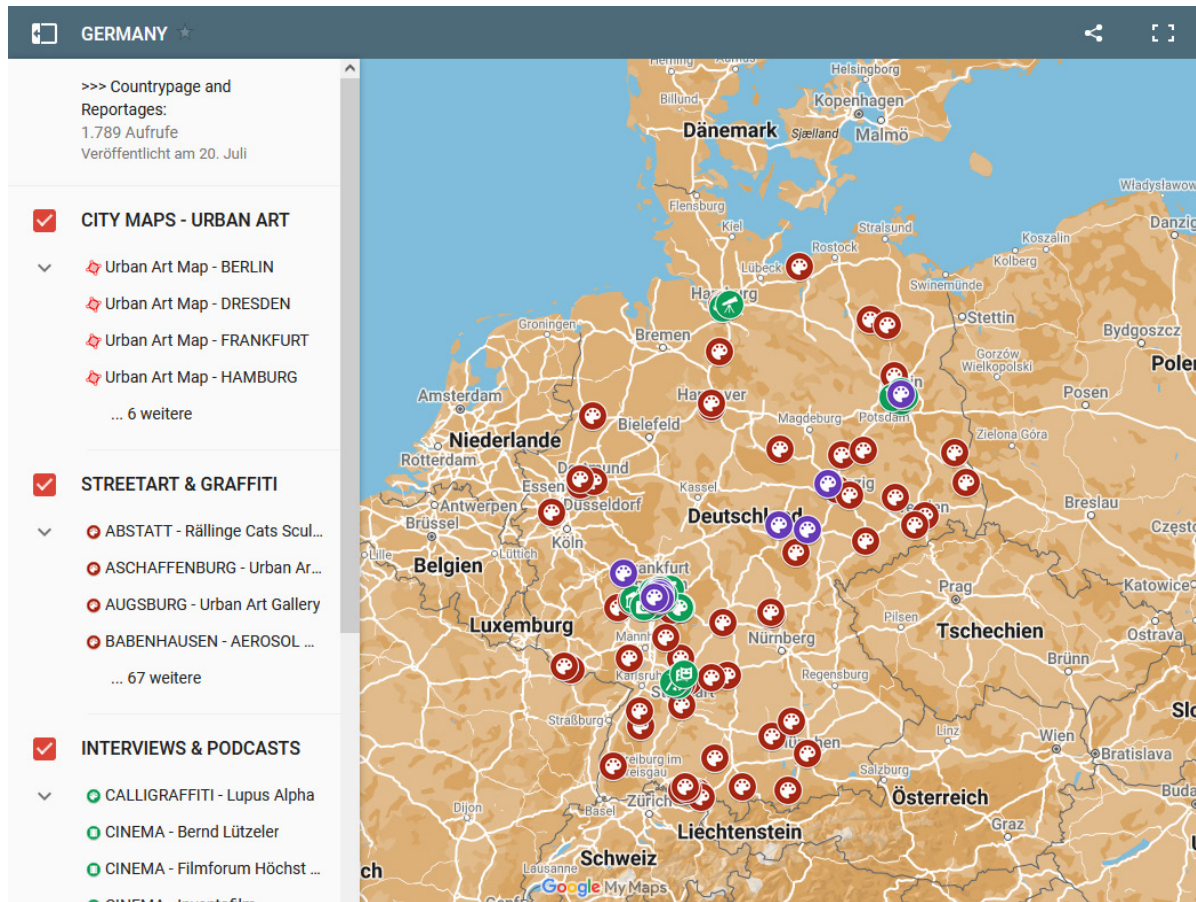


Figure 3. Example “Germany Map” – Second level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023. <https://vagabundler.com/germany>

All the buttons on each city map are link to a photo gallery of the spot, sometimes with only one photo, sometimes with dozens of photos or even a full report. The different symbols explain various categories like street art, urban creations and graffiti artworks. In the navigation of the map on the left, one can find the markers sorted by categories, and it is possible to hide or fade these layers. With the map application, it is only possible to include ten categories, which is restricted to this number by the app. We would use a lot more, but therefore, it also means that the many different maps on the website have evolved according to the contributing collective members. So there are different categories on the maps depending on the focus of the photographer or which art forms are often represented in that city. Some categories can be found on every map, such as “Mighty Murals” or “Halls

of Fame”. Some maps also feature sculptural urban artworks, while others focus on bombing. Holger from Berlin is a big fan of electricity boxes, and there are many of them, so after hundreds of photos, it made sense to introduce a separate category for them. However, there are cities without train services, where the categories to the railway stations are omitted. Some places have hardly any bridges, while other places have many. Therefore, a separate category for “bridges” exists. It varies with the place and the choice of the photographer.

Moreover, new categories can always be developed. For example, a brand new category is “Temporary Diamonds”, which was recently created for artworks on temporary wooden construction fences on the map of Gothenburg,



Figure 4. Example “Buenos Aires Map” – Third level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023. <https://vagabundler.com/argentina/streetart-map-buenos-aires>

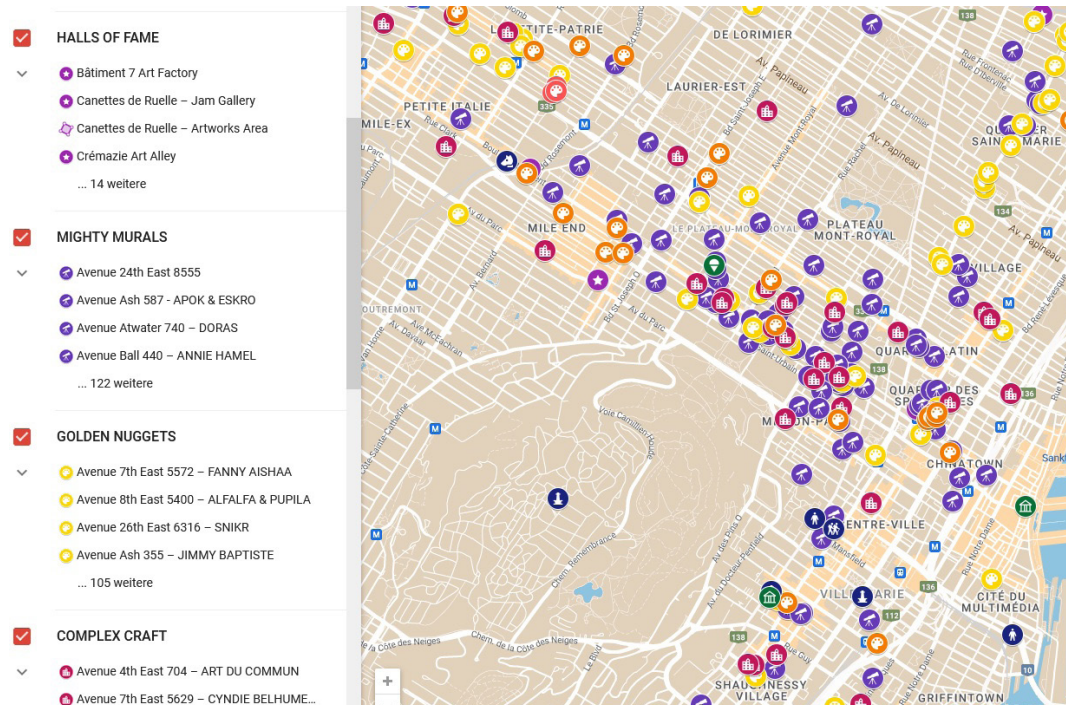


Figure 5. Example “Montréal Map” – Third level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023.
<https://vagabundler.com/canada/streetart-map-montreal>



Figure 6. Example – Category “Temporary Diamonds”; Streetart Map Gothenburg – Södra Vägen 61 – Appear37 & Sagie.
<https://vagabundler.com/sweden/streetart-map-gothenburg/soedra-vaegen-61>

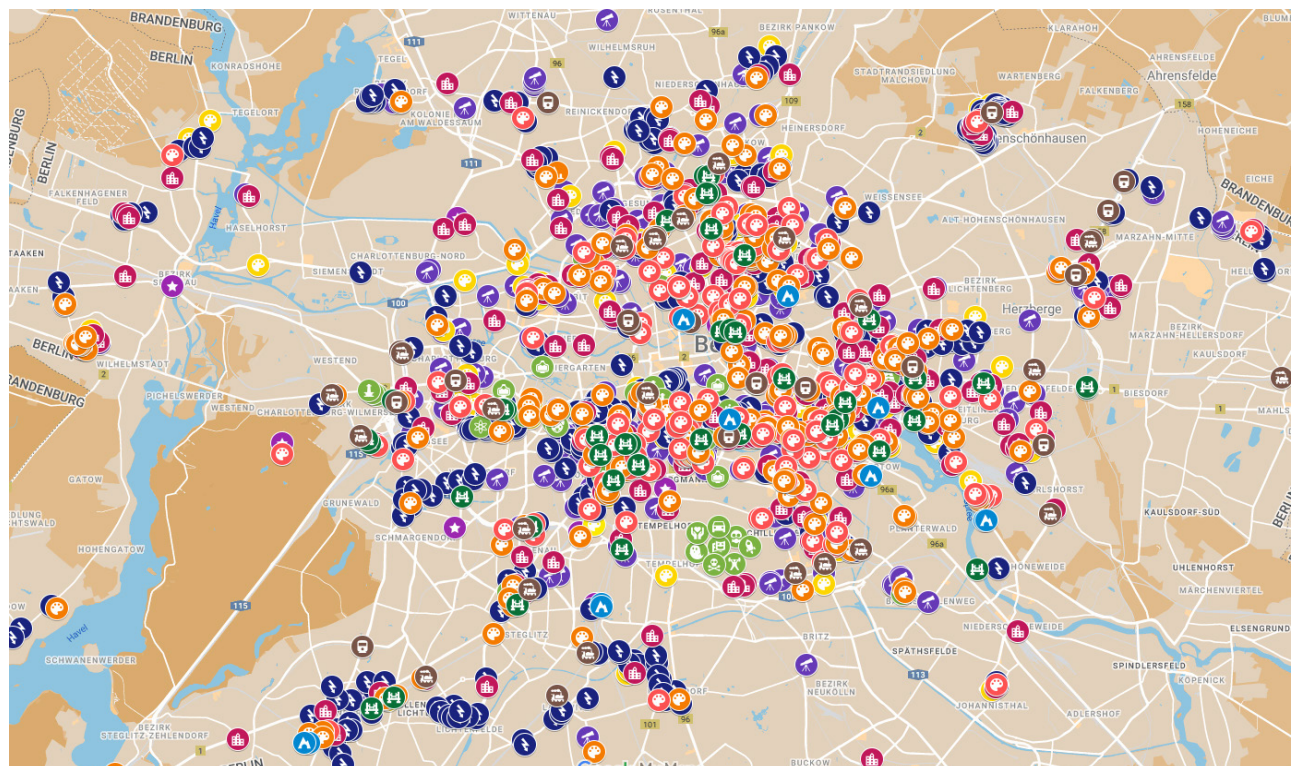


Figure 7. Example “Berlin Map” – Third level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023.
<https://vagabundler.com/germany/streetart-map-berlin>

Sweden. The word “diamond” was chosen not because the artworks show diamond-shaped elements but because they are incredibly valuable and beautiful creations that can only be seen briefly during construction work on the wooden fences.

5. How to Deal with Hot Spots and Halls of Fame?

But how to proceed with the big hot spots, the Halls of Fame and the places where vast amounts of new works are created every day? One motivating reason for developing the presentation with those maps was how the content is handled on most of the usual social media platforms. A picture or a post is always placed on top of the previous one; after a specific time, the posts disappear in the feed, get forgotten, and hardly anyone scrolls back years. Although the photos are great, and the works were or still are fantastic, the photos are swallowed and buried by every new posting. A representation on a map definitely opens up an additional dimension and offers an equal representation of all the spots. But if we lined up all the artworks from, for example, the Mauerpark, which is one of the biggest spray spots in Berlin,

on one single page, then we would have the same unwanted effect as on Instagram or Facebook. It would be an eternally long page and a jumble of information. That is why the hot spot pages are subdivided into further levels, and each artist has a separate sub-page in alphabetical order. This means that these sub-pages present the history and development of a single artist at precisely this spot.

6. Development in Difficult Times—Or Development Because of Difficult Times?

We also want to paraphrase Gunther Michels’ Facebook post from the 26th July 2021 during the pandemic times, as it explains the situation quite well (the entire post can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/gunther.michels.7/posts/10165518792105603>): “A few words about the Vagabundler project and all the interesting things that have happened in the meantime. Over 1000 articles, 70 country maps, 38 city maps, 7700 individual pages and more than 100,000 photos later. I am overwhelmed, excited and also very proud of our creative and international team! Thank you to everyone involved in this project! Despite the

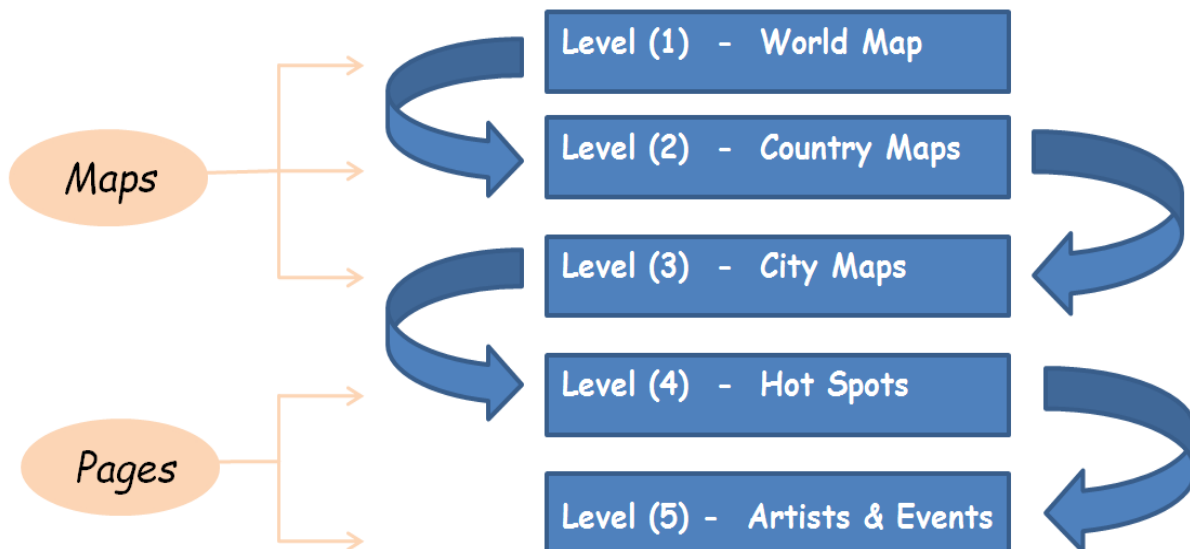


Figure 8. Mapping Design – Focus level concept.

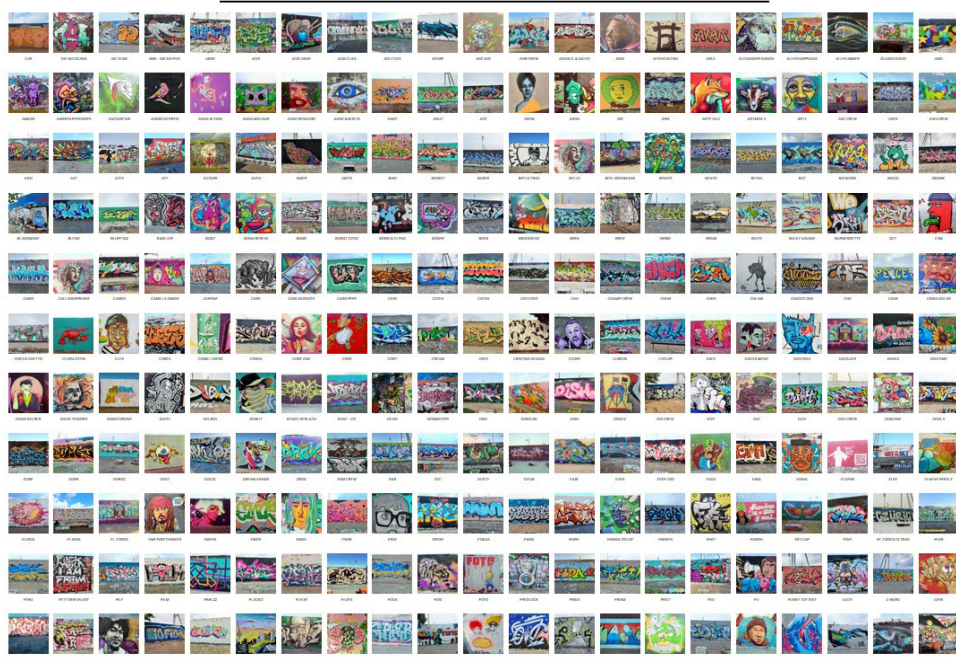


Figure 9. Example “Berlin Mauerpark” – Fourth level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023.

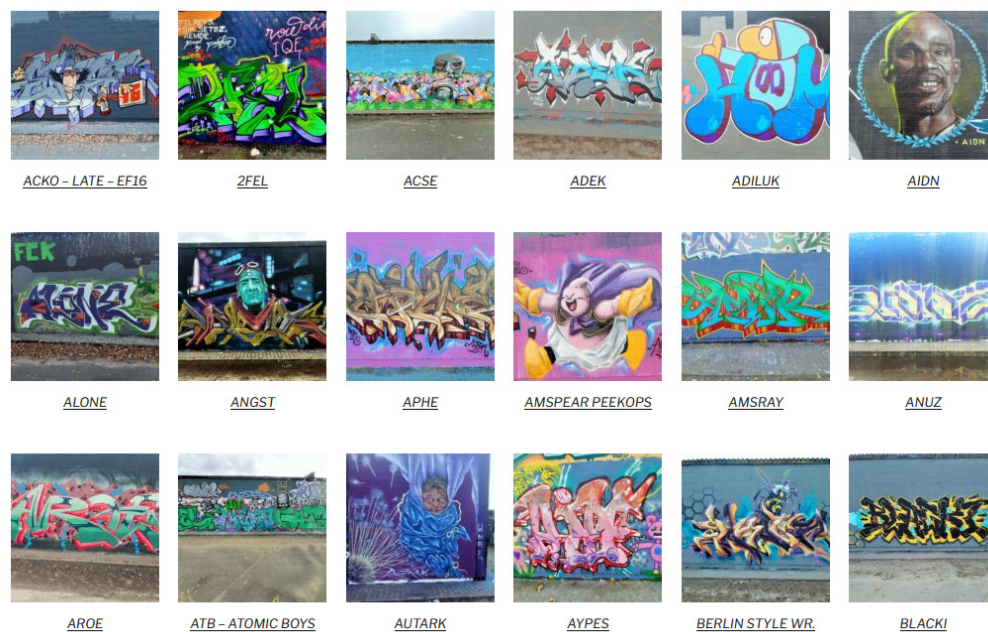


Figure 10. Example “Berlin Jungfernheide” – Fourth level (see Figure 8 for an explanation of the ‘level’ concept). Screenshot 15.09.2023.

many unceasing negative events in the world, something wonderful has emerged here.”

The fact that this “Vagabundler Project” grew into a bigger network would have happened sooner or later because it was designed and planned like that from the start. The concept was to build up a great magazine, an interesting archive, a database, and a smorgasbord of entertaining stories. For those who are just interested in those things and by people passionate about it. But with a particular focus on street art and graffiti. I started with some first puzzle pieces, but then more contributions came from other people. And step by step, it beautifully evolved. With all these lockdown stories worldwide, we started communicating in other ways. Travelling or seeing each other was impossible, but one could still work on ideas via Internet communication and implement projects and creative things together. Vagabundler, initially a small blog by an individual, has become a collective, a team, a group, a small family that passionately works together. In addition, many people contribute with individual photos or writings.

It is nice to see how this project and idea grow and thrive. Despite the current situation with many adverse events worldwide, which does not seem to be stopping, there are also many positive things. I do not want to say that a team would not have formed around this platform without COVID-19, but it turned out differently than expected. It has even intensified many things. And in a good way, with even more deliberation. Despite lockdowns and social distancing, we were able to create things together, and thanks to the Internet, we were not that far from each other anymore. Over 150,000 photos from over 70 countries are online on over 15,000 individual pages and more than 100 maps (as of September 2023). Countless articles, reports, interviews, audio podcasts or videos are included. With a lot of research work on background information and links to the artists and cultural workers. Sometimes just photo galleries, sometimes very detailed reports or just an amusing story. Some team members already have profile pages, some send photos for posts, others write extensive articles, and others build entire graffiti maps of a city with lots of background information about the creators of the works. We try to support the art



Figure 11. Vagabundler Collective – Worldwide Network.

and culture scene, especially the artists and creators of the works, as well as the organisers of events and owners of art spaces. We do that by providing information, presenting works, explaining the background and showing how cool it is. Most of all, we want to show that creativity is everywhere, all over the world, in each of us. We humans can do both. We can destroy, and we can create. With Vagabundler, we definitely promote creativity and want to motivate everyone to be creative themselves. We also try to support the ones who already are."

7. The Legalisation of the North Side Gallery

Back to here and now. However, a little explanation and a review are good for understanding how it started and showing transparency about our actions. Of course, there have been many other developments as we look ahead and towards the future. Because even if we are more the journalistic documenters, we still have a strong supportive intention for the scene. We are in favour of there being more space for graffiti and creative design everywhere around the world. By working together with other actors, we can initiate such plans, set them in motion and implement them.

An example of this is the story about the "North Side Gallery" in Berlin. An immense respect and super thank you goes to the Graffiti Lobby Berlin (<https://www.graffiti-lobby-berlin.de/north-side-gallery.html>), which never gives up and has stayed with its cause for many years with full passion. They deal with the politicians, they discuss and argue until there is more freedom for creativity. Not everyone likes these bureaucratic discussions and political arguments, and not everyone can do it. Any documentary material helps, of course, and can provide argumentative support because it shows evidence of the "artistic value" of a place.

The Graffiti Lobby Berlin had been discussing several spots with the municipalities for years. One was the "Park am Nordbahnhof", the park at the former northern train station, which is now the "North Side Gallery". Finally, the area was accepted as a legal spray place, but there was initially a two-year test phase to observe what was happening there and how everything was developing. During that phase, the Vagabundler Collective tried to document as much as

possible. There are thousands of photos from hundreds of artists and several jams. Those municipalities' offices received extensive folders with prints full of the documented graffiti, sorted chronologically, alphabetically and thematically, as well as extensive reports and videos. The documentary work by Vagabundler, Graffiti Battle (<https://www.youtube.com/graffitibattle>) and Urban Presents (<https://www.urbanpresents.net>) helped a lot. However, also the work of many other actors and supporters has contributed to the fact that the positive decision has now been granted. Since June 2023, the "North Side Gallery" in Berlin has been an official, legal art space where spraying, painting and other creative activities are permitted. But like everywhere else: Please do not leave any rubbish to help preserve this artistic space for a long time.

8. "Wem gehört die Stadt?" or "Who Owns the City?"

To conclude, here is a fitting and even deeper metaphor story from Jurij from the Graffiti Lobby Berlin (Vagabundler, 2021): "Little Hans sprays a lot of graffiti in Berlin. He sprays his name everywhere; his tags are all over town. Still, he is depressed. He comes to the table at noon, his head is sad and he looks dejected. His mother asks him, "Hans, what is the matter, why do you look so sad?" He then says, "Mom, I am really trying my best. But I just cannot keep up with these other writers. No matter what I do, they are always better and paint even bigger". His mother tries to say some good words: "But Hans, you did a very cool one here and another cool one there. The people really liked it!" Hans answered: "Yes Mum, but the next day those other writers made something a lot bigger over it". Then his mother says: "But Hans, if you go to other places and try it there?" Hans then says: "I really tried everything; they tag just much faster than me, and they are everywhere. They put their signature on every corner and much more often than I can manage. I cannot keep up with them." Then the mother asks: "What are these other writers actually called?". Hans replies: "Those writers have such strange names: one is called 'Coca Cola', the other 'Apple', there is one called 'Nestlé'..." "

Of course, this story is about ownership and, above all, about the view of ownership rights. Who has what right to what? Who has the right to the water, air, or neighbourhoods?

What is allowed to own? What is common property? What can one “buy”? This entire text does not provide any answers to these questions, but intends to raise and challenge them. Who owns the city? The people who live in it or others who “buy” space? It is not just about the walls for graffiti and free artistic expression. It is about thinking about how one wants to live and under what circumstances. Because at least in countries with democracy, we can all have a say. Even if it takes a long time and is complicated, it is possible. However, for that to happen, we must work together. The artists, the documenters, the organisers, the fans, the supporters, the advocates, everyone. One family and colourful creativity all over!

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

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