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Graffiti and Architecture: A Case Study of Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan

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Abstract

In 2007, graffiti totaling 1058 were copied off the walls of Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan. The graffiti were grouped and analysed to determine what this researcher calls the 'mind of society'. The same exercise was done 10 years later in 2017, and results of the comparison are presented in this essay. The results show that there was a significant decline in the number of graffiti found on the walls of the library in 2017 and while the general distribution of the content remained the same, there appeared to be a noticeable drop in sexual and obscene comments. This trend is rather inconsistent with studies of the same nature in other climes. This deviation may be linked to behavioural adjustments of graffiti authors who now use online platforms as their primary choice for expression. More importantly, the study finds that the significant decline in the number of graffiti on the walls of the library doesn't necessarily suggest that the act of graffiti writing in dwindling, instead, it confirms that the culture of the use of physical libraries is endangered. This phenomenon therefore raises another issue – the dwindling relevance of architecture as a platform for intuitive expressions. Should architects, social scientists and environmental scientists be concerned?

Keywords: Architecture, Communication platform, Graffiti, Kenneth Dike, University of Ibadan

1. Introduction

Man is a social being, and our need to communicate is intrinsic. We possess a primal intuition for the expression of inner thoughts as evident in the earliest examples of cave paintings and semiotic inscriptions. These visual expressions are the proto origins of graffiti and the beginning of the act of depicting individual thoughts and topical themes prevalent in communal living. Paleolithic wall writings are indeed some of the earliest evidences of man's documented thoughts and it helps us understand the inner nature of man with respect to stored visual data, and the desire to narrate our environment and experiences.

Beyond cave inscriptions, etchings or symbolic arrangements of megalithic stones, our 'written language' gradually morphed into a more organised form of pictorial and communally accepted ideograms. Through this entire journey, the walls of architecture, presented us with the earliest and probably the most enduring platform for the art of self-expressions. Long before modern media, architecture has been a readily accessible surface and

medium for communication. In this study, we can safely propose that architecture has--or might we say, had--a well-developed symbiotic relationship with visual communication. While we can argue that the early man had few, if at all any alternative platform for visual expression, still, walls of habitation were the most accessible option at the time owing to several imaginable exigencies.

Beyond the 'lithic' eras and on to the more modern age, we will find that the content of graffiti in the classical world--as it is in most eras--is comprised mainly of expressions reporting frustrations from politics, philosophies or hopelessness, ideologies or alignments to sexual desires and loose thoughts. Graffiti discovered in ancient Pompeii depicted curses (in Latin), magic spells, literary quotes and happenings in everyday Rome (Keegan, 2014). Unrequited love was also a theme as well as explicit sexual imagery and imaginations which some early 20th century physiologists such as Freud (1915) and Kinsey et al (1953) believe to be as a result of repressed sexual fantasies. Indeed, graffiti, as an aspect of culture, can unobtrusively measure patterns of customs and attitude of society (Stocker et al, 1972).

This paper will investigate the thematic content of graffiti on the interior walls of Kennett Dike Library, University of Ibadan. In 2007, during a long break, the author was privileged to document the graffiti inscriptions on the walls of all the reading floors of the library except the ground floor. 10 years later in 2017, and now through a research assistant, the same exercise was carried out. To this end, and with the data gathered, this study embarked on a comparative analyses of the graffiti content on the library walls for the two different years. This gave an insight into the topical issues prevalent in the mind of the student community of the two periods. More importantly, it helped to determine if there was a shift in the number and issues most important to the student community of the periods under study. The study is interested in seeing if the major thoughts and concerns of society remain the same. Beyond these, we will discuss the relevance of architecture to public communication and to see if architecture's role has waned.

2. Some Early Studies into Graffiti

For clarity, it is important to define the scope of this paper's use of the word graffiti. The word graffiti refer to incised writings and it is derived from the Italian word *graffio* which means to scratch. In recent years, the word graffiti has been used to refer to a broad spectrum of public wall writings that range from individual texts to elaborate spray-paint wall art in different styles. For the purpose of this study, we will assume and restrict graffiti to mean writings or drawings on the walls, doors or other surface of buildings as seen in most schools and public buildings. This study may refer to, but is not centrally concerned with spray paint graffiti that is quite popularly identified with street artists, groups and sometimes gangs.

The earliest modern studies on graffiti were done in the Humanities and they focused on thematic and contextual inclinations of graffiti as a vehicle for the expression of all manner of thoughts emanating from the human mind in an age of 'purity' as Schouwenburg (2013) notes. One can quite easily see why these early works (Kinsey, 1953; Webb, 1966; Dundes, 1966: Read, 1977) may have concentrated efforts on toilets as a study area. Besides the very obvious concentration of graffiti in lavatories, another important index, and frankly a possible reason for the abundance of graffiti in lavatories, is the aspect of anonymity that the space presents. It allows close to total cover for the author while in the act. Nwoye (1993) also notes this stating that graffiti thrive in lavatories because they afford the 'author' relative privacy in which to express their thoughts without fear. This is surely one of the exclusive strengths of graffiti as a medium of communication – the ability to genuinely express oneself, even on matters of a most intimate nature, without reservation or fear of discovery. This feature is atypical and almost exclusive to graffiti as a form of communication. This freedom however, is heavily criticized and widely prescribed to be amoral and irresponsible, especially as some see it as an act of defacing architecture. Generally, no one wants to be seen writing on a wall because of the perceived moral depravity attached to the act. To a certain degree, anonymity is still desired today when creating wall graffiti, but what has remained rather constant through the ages is the primary intention for the graffiti to be open to, and seen by all. The feedback mechanism inherent in graffiti allows people see and respond to an inscription fostering continuous conversations in an anonymous setting.

Perhaps one of the biggest critic of this act of wall graffiti is Austrian theorist and modernist architect, Adolf Franz Loos. Loos (1901) in a very provoking essay, fervidly condemns what others agree to be an inherent impulse in man, which is the uncontrollable desire to express the innermost thoughts in whatever available media there was. Loos states that the man of our times who daubs the walls with erotic symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or degenerate […] With children it is a natural phenomenon: their first artistic expression is to scrawl on the walls, but what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneration in the modern man. Suffice it to say that Schacter (2014) disagrees. Erotic symbols and blabbering are in fact the oldest and most popular content in wall text graffiti all through modern history. And while the more modern societies have done everything necessary to contain the expressions of such aspects of human thoughts, it continues to present itself as a strong force that seeks to be heard. One of the earliest modern-styled depiction of graffiti discovered in the city of Ephesus now Turkey is believed to be an advertisement by a prostitute for her service. The inscription shows a heart-like handprint, a footprint, a number and a carved image of a woman's head. The very nature of graffiti encourages this type of expressions and it is seen mostly as a release valve for the more 'dirty thoughts'. Most inscriptions on men's toilets are 'erotic', i.e. referring to sexual intercourse, and also homosexual (Schouwenburg, 2013). In another study, Schouwenburg (2013b) also notes that erotic writings and images are a common place occurrence particularly with male authors. In the study, he examines graffiti at the Utrecht University Library and uncovers the plentiful use of phallic images among fraternities to symbolically construct and communicate a corporate identity. By highlighting their own fertility and sexual skills, they define themselves against other groups. Further, the study concludes that there is a strong connection between fraternity culture and stereotypical gender attitudes, male dominance and hyper-masculinity. Kinsey et al (1953) also argued that [toilet] graffiti, like Freud's erotic jokes or dreams, are 'uninhibited expressions of sexual desires'.

In more recent times, the art of graffiti is linked to vandalism and deviant behavior. Street graffiti in particular, has been viewed by authourities as an act of protest or disruption aimed at instigating the public. Nwoye (1993) disagrees with this blanket ideology about graffiti of any form. The study argues that graffiti is a social outlet and a template for sociopolitical consciousness. It further states that the interaction of architecture and graffiti does provide some validation for the medium and a platform for the expression of the mind of the people. Reisner (1967) already presented this position before when he argued that graffiti are a good index to study social thought. It must be seen as a repository of raw data that gives insights into the goings-on of the time. While eroticism may prevail, there is more to the issues raised and discussed on the walls of architecture, particularly in historically erogenous environments like university campuses.

3. Method

Data gathering was by physical observation and documentation at the Kenneth Dike Library. The graffiti were copied off the wall in a manner that mimicked the original wall text. The data was then appropriately counted, tabulated and catalogued into seven main subgroups. The categories are Sexual & Obscene, Political & Social Issues, Religion, Educational Stress, General Life Issues, Love & Emotions, Salutations. Mimicking the writing style, ink colour, and peculiarities in the arrangement of the graffiti in the study area, the entire corpus was copied by the researcher into a handbook while paying attention to visual character of the works. This copy was properly labelled to show which floor and wing the data was extracted from and it became the reference point for the rest of the research. The raw data were assigned into the different subgroup and through simple frequency analysis, the study was able to derive a distribution and the various issued as represented in the collected data. The same process was done for data of both years and a comparison of the trend and frequency was done.

4. Study Area

This study chose Kenneth Dike Library as case study mainly because it presents the oldest and most consistent template for the study of graffiti within the context of a university community in Nigeria. Kenneth Dike Library, being the first purpose-built library structure for university education in Nigeria, offers a type of consistency in the character and scope of users. This peculiar opportunity helps preserve the quality of the graffiti data under study, as we can confidently define the psychographics of the graffiti authors as young adults exposed to university education.

Kenneth Dike Library of the University of Ibadan is named after Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, the renowned historian and the first indigenous Vice-Chancellor of the University. The Library's main building designed by the duo Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew opened in 1954 and the Research Library which is an extension to the main structure was opened for student use well over a decade later in 1968. Situated on the Agbowo main campus of the University, Kenneth Dike Library building ranks as one of the most iconic structures on the university campus alongside Trenchard Hall, the main administrative block with the Clock Tower and undergraduate residential hostels like Mellanby, Tedder and Sultan Bello Halls.

The main structure of Kenneth Dike Library is comprised of a basement, ground floor and four other mounted floors. It is to these four upper floors that this study has focused. The internal layout of the building is divided into wings--the North and South--with a centred staircase system which takes you to the different floors. The library building is a first-rate example of tropical modernism architectural style. The repeated slightly curved-edge-square patterned screen wall arranged in a simple grid layout gives a deceptively simple character to the exterior of the building but not the type one can misinterpret for long. The intermittent strong concrete spine that frames the curved-edge-square screen elements, reinforces visual order and gives an undeniably sublime demeanour to the otherwise simple-minded elongated cuboid form. See Figure 1. The simplistic geometric form, presents the building with charm and forthrightness even in the most optically unflattering tropical sun. On the inside, the structure flaunts Bi-fold (concertina) wooden partitions attached to the inner walls. These open for circulation of both air and human traffic and very well extends the area of functional use of the library interior space. The reading floors are low energy consumption spaces with functional cross ventilation features reminiscent of and in line with the culture and style of the tropical living. The dual wing open floor interior is flanked on the East and West axis by end to end verandas which are deftly covered by the curved-edge screen blocks arranged in a manner that allow for reasonable natural ventilation, fine lighting and a hint of Afrocentrism in the screen pattern's shadow imprints on the veranda floor on a sunny day. In recent times, to accommodate more library users, rows of reading tables and chairs have been positioned on the verandas along the length of the building on either side close to the interior walls. It is mostly at these locations that numerous graffiti were found.

Figure 1: Exterior view of the Kenneth Dike Library from the Eastern side. Photo by Author.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1. Graffiti in Kenneth Dike Library

This study has deliberately excluded lavatories from its study area because ample early works have covered the dynamics and thematic analysis of lavatories (Kinsey et al, 1953; Dunes, 1966; Matthews, Speers and Ball, 2012; Schreer, G. and Strichartz, J., 1997; Haslam, N., 2012) and it will be unnecessary to repeat that in the context of the study's location. Instead, this study focused its attention on the writings on the interior walls of the main reading floors of the Library. Graffiti on the walls are mostly done with ink from biros and coloured markers.

The data (graffiti) collected, in both the 2007 and 2017 exercise was grouped into seven categories already mentioned earlier. Assigning data to these different categories aided the process of content analysis where one will identify the pattern and prevalence of the issues seen in the data. In all, a total of 1058 graffiti were documented in the study area in 2007 as against 324 in the exact same area in 2017. This is a significant 70% decrease in the total number of graffiti. Of the 2007 corpus, General Life Issues were the most prevalent making 23% of the whole graffiti found in the study area. Interestingly, this trend remained consistent in the 2017 data but a slight drop was noticed to bring the figures for General Life Issues to 20%. Some examples of what was found under the General Life Issues in the 2007 data include life philosophies and experiences, aspirations, and plentiful instances of general word play possibly out of boredom or a need for creative outburst. Some examples are given here: *'What you believe determines how you behave, and both determines what you become'; 'To play safe, is not to play at all'*. Another example; *'Something is gravely wrong, someone is mad! I jacked the book until the pages went blank! Who is mad, the book or I?* Salutations were the next most common item in the 2007 data making 22% of the lot, followed by religious matters with 18%. See Figure 2. It must be noted that under the religious matters, a further subdivision was created to capture a more accurate nature of the religious data. The data was divided into the three most popular religions in the area – Christianity, Islam and Traditional belief (here designated as others). Christianity had the largest presence in graffiti writings with a huge 85%, while Islam had 11% and traditional belief, 4% for the 2007 data and the 2017 was not significantly different. (See Figure 3).
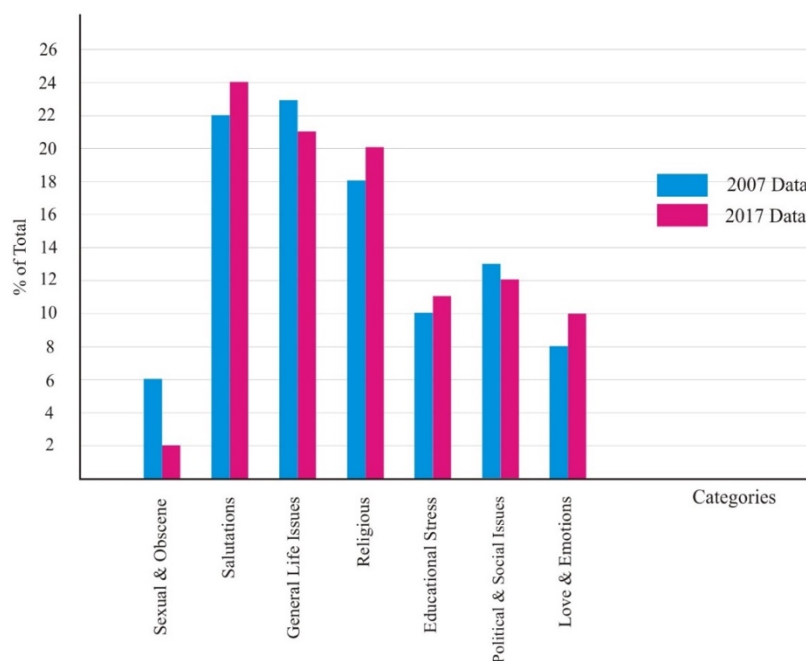

Figure 2: Showing the comparative group percentage distribution of graffiti data from Kenneth Dike Library for 2007 and 2017.
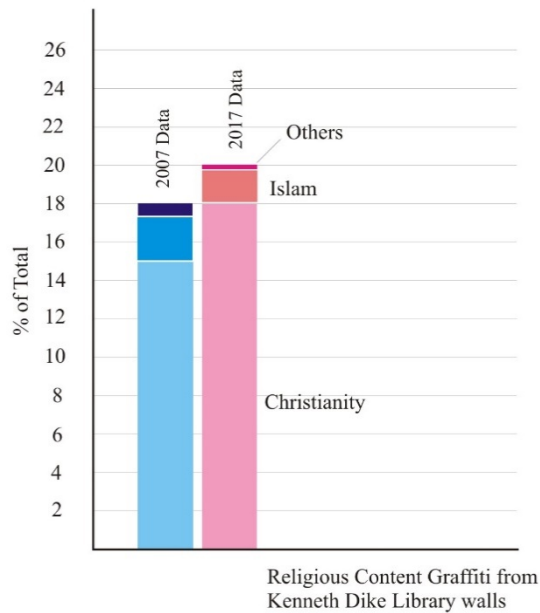
Figure 3: Showing the percentage distribution of religious content graffiti for the three main religion groups

Many of the Christian content are targeted toward evangelism and enunciation of Christ. '*Jesus is the way; He can give you rest. Accept Him now before it is too late'; 'May the blood of Jesus set all you ppl free and take control'*. See Figure 4. Some were however hard lined, warning of impending damnation to those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as redeemer. The Islam writings were also annunciatory in nature, proclaiming the sovereignty of Allah; *I bear witness that there is NO deity worthy of worship except Allah (S.W.T)*. In some cases, the Islam graffiti shrewdly antagonise Christian ideology and approach of soul awareness. This trait was however seen on both sides. An example is seen here – '*Be born as many times as you like, die not except as Muslim'*. Some examples of General Life Issues carry some humour and in other cases, they are just ambiguous words written for the fun of it. Some examples are seen here: '*In the examination hall, chickens are allowed but NO CHIPS!'; 'I came to symbolize my symbolical symbolism'*. Graffiti of a sexual or erotic nature were the least found on the walls of Kenneth Dike Library, accounting for only 6% of the total. It is however interesting to note that despite the relative paucity of sexually explicit graffiti text, the few that were available stood out, giving an impression that there were a greater number that actually existed. This study reasons that the cause of the perceived high number might be related to the fact that the Sexual and Obscene sub-category had the highest number of images and diagrams making it appear more frontal and copious than it actually is. Less than 5% of the total number of graffiti items in the study area for 2007 were images and diagrams. This figure rose in the 2017 data to approximately 10%. In the 2007 data, 75% of the images were sexual or obscene in nature. See some examples in Figure 5. Some of the images are rather reminiscent of the 2013 Schouwenburg's study of the Utrecht University Library titled *The Tale of the Four Foot Phallus*. In the 2017 data however, there were no obscene images at all. Diagrams were mostly academic in nature except for a few heart shape and stick-animal diagrams. Generally, the data of documented graffiti on the inner walls of Kenneth Dike library for the years under study show a reasonably diverse content with general salutations, religion and issues of life being the most prevalent. This will suggest a vibrant and intelligent community of diverse individuals with varied interests.
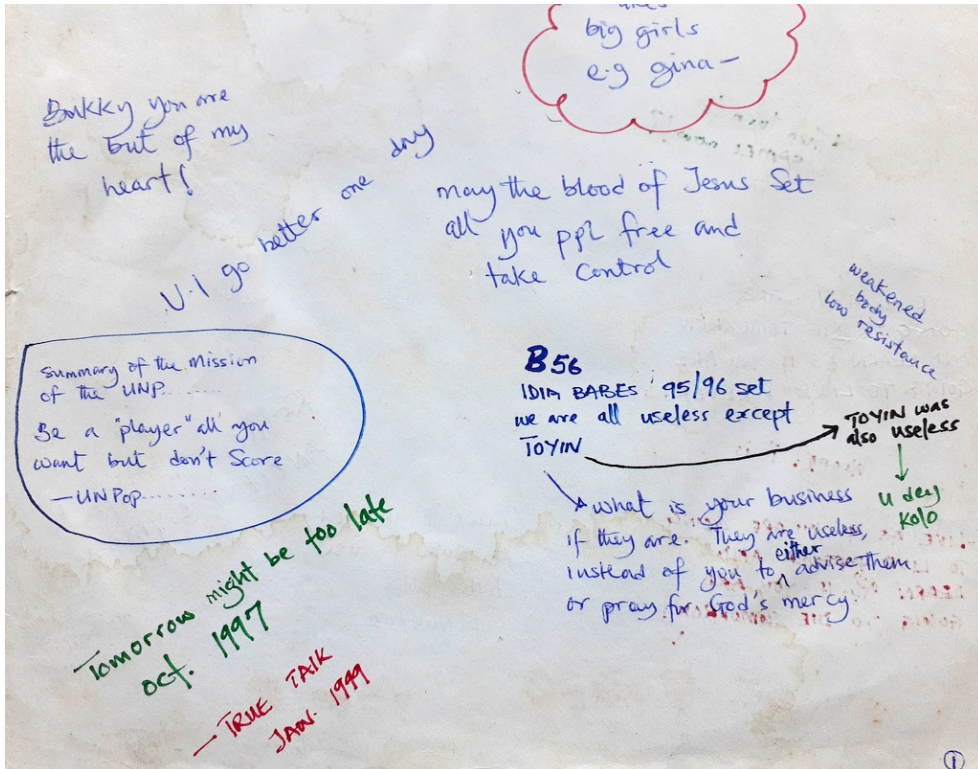
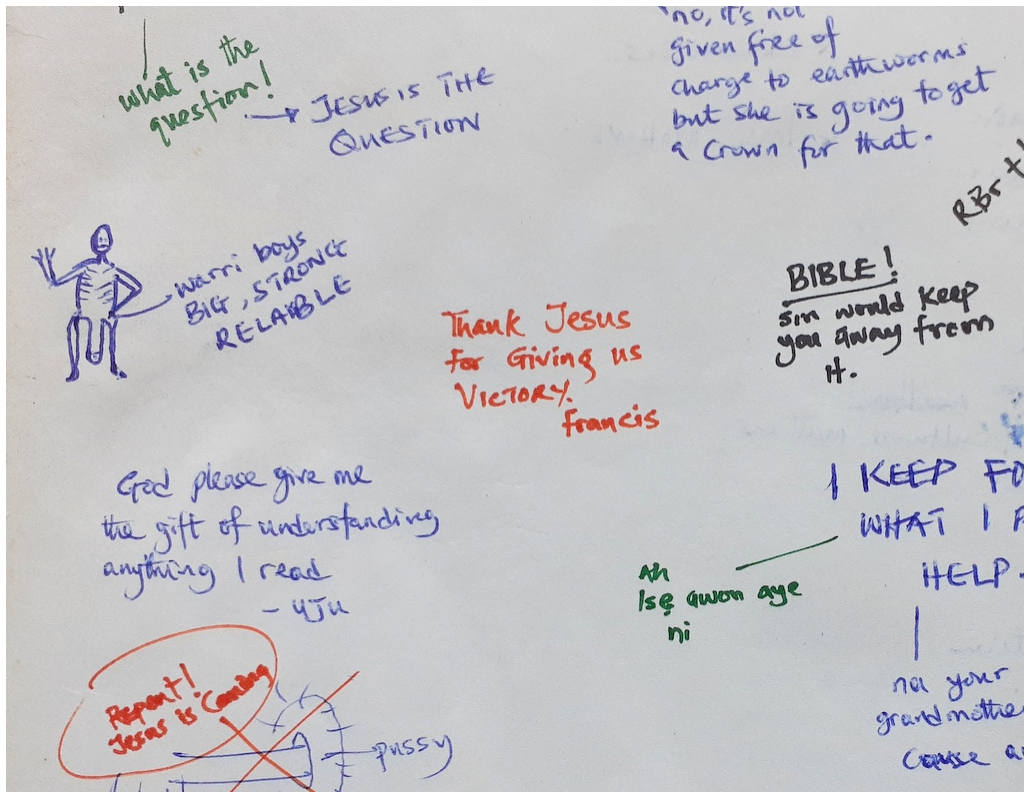Figure 4: Graffiti showing a Christian post as copied off the wall of Kenneth Dike Library in 2007. Source: Author

Figure 5: Graffiti showing a sexual and obscene images as copied off the wall of Kenneth Dike Library in 2007. Source: Author

6. Discussion of findings

Deductions from the 2017 data clearly show that Kenneth Dike library was stripped bare of the graffiti scribblings that covered its walls ten years prior. This did not happen through the painting over of the walls as this study made ample enquiries about the last dates the walls of the library were painted. It will appear that architecture is gradually being reduced to its barest function as habitable space and nothing more. Users are finding alternative media for the expression of self beyond the proverbial four walls of the room, or the building. Must this concern social scientists?

This study opines that while there is a drastic reduction in the number of graffiti seen on the walls of Kenneth Dike Library, this does not directly mean that the practice of wall graffiti and *Latrinalia* (graffiti found on toilet doors and walls) is dwindling. In fact, contrary to the results shown by this study, the act itself is greatly increasing, but elsewhere. What the result of this study shows us is that there appears to be significantly less usage and patronage of physical libraries around university campuses. There is a direct correlation between rate of human activity in a building and number of graffiti on the walls. The less human activity in a space, the less graffiti will be seen. Therefore, because of the changing nature of data storage, where students find more information and academic resource for assignments online, there is significantly less actual library time hereby resulting in evidently less physical prove of the use of the space. In the 2017 data, it was noticed that some of the spaces used as reading spaces in 2007 have now been converted to offices, while some to computer rooms. This is a clear indication of the significant rate of reduction in the physical use of the library by students. This is perhaps not unexpected. Shill and Tonner (2003) already echoed the minds of academic librarians, saying they have debated the future of the library as a place for more than twenty years. Many asserting that the virtual library would replace the physical library, that the library as a place would no longer be a critical component of an academic institution due to technological advances. Students in 2017 found it strange to 'travel' to Kenneth Dike library when they have what they referred to as well functioning and stocked departmental libraries. The departmental libraries seem to offer more bespoke materials to students and the location, often nested within the department, is certainly of advantage to both the facility and the students. All, of course, at the expense of the University main library – the Kenneth Dike Library.

A thing must be said for the reading culture of these two eras. While it was popular to use the main library years ago, 'libraries on devices' have taking over the labourious dynamics of physical use and restrictions of the old style libraries. The availability of online resources for students in more recent times, makes it unnecessary for them to move out of a comfort zone to buildings dedicated to studying. Proper online access to resources liberates the individual and he or she may create a new reading environment for him/herself while making timely adjustments to accessibility and comfort levels. These factors play a role, however minuscule, to the changing tides of the relevance of physical libraries for basic studies. One must note, that special collections and archival materials, which appear to be the last frontier and the key value now attached to old libraries, are also frantically being digitised. This means, a time may come, when it would be totally unwarranted to travel to a physical library to get knowledge.

With these thoughts as a backdrop, the diminished number of graffiti on the walls of the library under study, does not suggests that the practice of graffiti wall writing isdisappearing, rather it points to another factor which is the lessened use of the library. Further investigation shows that there are sustained numbers of graffiti in other buildings the students still use often. For example, the student hostels and classrooms. This buttresses the notion that the practise of graffiti wall writing, while it is finding alternative platforms in online social media, has not in any way significantly affected the original practice. The findings of this study also imply that graffiti can then be seen as an index for the evaluation of human interaction or general success of building-use with certain architectural typologies.

7. Architecture as Communication Platform

Evidently, social media platforms have become a more popular method of sharing thoughts and it appears fewer young people, particularly university students, are turning to physical wall graffiti to express themselves. The appeal of the unobstructed visibility the internet offers presents a challenge for architecture and its nature of

immobility in the contest for 'followers'. Social media sites are helping individuals, who were once thought of as voiceless, gain significant recognition. Hence, the contemporary thing to do if one has a point to make, is to turn to the internet - the new platform for communication without boundaries. With this development, there is a direct consequence for architecture as a platform for communication. While architecture battles on the front of identity and cultural integration, it appears to be losing relevance as a canvas for expression. Our buildings and structures which once sacrificed their pristine facades to take on the important role of hosting the opinions of the masses have now relinquished this role to social media leaving them bare and lifeless. More graffiti authors are now drawn to the enigma of the internet, leaving behind what may now be called the 'old media' - building or bathroom scribbles. But, has architecture really lost its role as a platform for communication or is the decline of graffiti on some walls an indication of something else?

It is important to note that despite the availability of convenient alternatives, some wall graffiti and *latrinalia* may still be found and are still being created. This, perhaps is as a result of the resilience of purists or oblivious individuals who find themselves fulfilling the inherent urge to mark spaces they find themselves with physical markers of identity. To explain this, we need to go back to the reasons why people make graffiti in the first place. Blume (1985) identifies some of the general motives for writing graffiti, including furnishing proof of one's existence; acting on a need to express oneself; documenting one's membership of a group; taking pleasure in aesthetic, creative and physical acts; boredom; expressing criticism, protest, rejection and agreement; marking out territories; and searching for contact with others. Sometimes it runs much deeper than just boredom. It's the idea of permanence; giving one's ideas and opinions a tangible form. While your tweets and Instagram posts might live on forever in the cloud, there is nothing quite like having it engraved in a wall or table. The thought that it's going to be a long time before these drawings and writings are removed does something in favour of the 'old media'. It could also be for a better visibility. Although social media allows for a message to reach a much larger audience, the sheer amount of content almost guaranteed it would be swept away from the frontlines in a few minutes. The fact is that unless you're incredibly famous on social media, your scathing criticism of local politics, for instance, might be read by just a few people and swept into the sea of forgotten tweets. But a spray–painted message on the school wall is sure to catch everyone's eye no matter who wrote it. It has and will always be a way for the voiceless to make their opinions their opinions seen by the masses; to get their message out to the public.

Further, should this apparent popularity of social media, take away from architecture's role as a platform of communication, posterity might judge us as a people so disconnected from their physical environment to such a point that they failed to humanise their spaces and leave signatures of their existence. If one considers this from an anthropological point of few, then any degeneration of the one platform that characteristically encourages authenticity in communication, must be of concern to social scientists. While the dexterity and multiplicity of opportunities that the internet brings is welcomed and possiblyinevitable, indeed if not properly served, it may subconsciously promote a type of populist identity. The art and craft of graffiti has been criticised and resisted for a long time. Measures have been enforced to prevent, criminalise, and suppress it. Extreme measures designed to moderate the act has been recorded to include banning sales of graffiti instruments, even creating special graffiti walls for the very purpose of writing on, and yet, it still finds a way to circumnavigate these restrictions and seek for freedom. Although it is seen by many, technically as vandalism, over the years, it has become a part of architecture itself. While people may love the look of the clean polished concrete wall, there's something about seeing *skillachi wuz ere* or *Geo 325 is HELL* scribbled on the wall that immediately gives life and locational meaning to that wall. In some way, graffiti are in fact a testament that students actually use this building. Ultimately, it is the users of a building that bring life to it. The life of a structure does not end when construction is done, how it is used by the people is as much a part of the building as the shape and form.

The role of architecture in this form of self-expression has not and will likely not be usurped by social media anytime soon. The same reason people still prefer physical books to much more convenient ebooks is the reason people will continue to draw on walls. Real tangible objects have an air of gravitas around it that feel more alive than the words in the virtual space. So, while the internet and social media may be the future of self-expression, architecture still has a huge role to play and must not be so quickly dismissed.

8. Conclusion

The graffiti of the classical era depicted political murmurings, literary quotes and sexual themes of that time. In the same vein, graffiti today are a depiction of repressed emotions of all the above concerns within a structure of anonymity. This study has shown, that the act of graffiti writing continues to reinvent itself. The various and emerging platforms become significant in the presentation of graffiti only to such extent to which the platforms respond to the needs and assertions of graffiti as a communication conduit.

While the act continues to transform itself in line with cultural and technological mobility, the fundamental framework of the idea remains the same. Continued attention must be paid to the several templates through which society expresses itself freely. Architecture, being the oldest and most consistent surface available to man for intuitive expression remains significant in the examination of the 'mind of society'. A blank wall will not remain blank for long. As long as people exist, they will always have opinions to share and they will see the environment--built, virtual and natural--as canvas available to them. Therefore, social thinkers must not relent in fostering the centrality and importance of architecture in communication.

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