

Urban Art, Identity, and Contested Cities: The Case of the Xerión Mosaics in A Coruña

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ABSTRACT

Since 2021, a series of mosaics depicting Xerión—a mythical giant linked to the foundation legend of the Tower of Hercules, a World Heritage Site and identity symbol of A Coruña (Galicia, Spain)—have appeared throughout the city. Emerging from an anonymous, DIY-driven artistic movement, these mosaics reinterpret local identity while engaging broader dynamics of urban appropriation and revaluation through art. Despite broad social support, the nominally progressive municipal government has removed many of these mosaics and adopted a hostile stance toward the initiative. This response reveals deeper tensions between citizens, art, and institutional power in shaping the city's symbolic landscape. This paper situates the Xerión mosaics within theoretical frameworks on urban identity recovery and art as a tool for intervention in public space. A cartographic analysis maps their locations, forms, and motifs, alongside instances of removal, illustrating a conflict between grassroots artistic practices and municipal control over urban aesthetics. The erasure of these artworks raises critical questions about the limits of artistic activism and governmental resistance to non-institutionalized cultural expression. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the study explores how urban art contributes to the symbolic reconfiguration of the city and challenges official narratives. In a context of increasing interest in citizen participation in the production of urban space, the Xerión controversy stands as a paradigmatic case. It reflects broader disputes over memory, identity, and the right to the city in medium-sized urban environments, and underscores the role of art in negotiating public space and collective meaning.

Keywords: collective memory; public space; right to the city; urban art; urban conflict