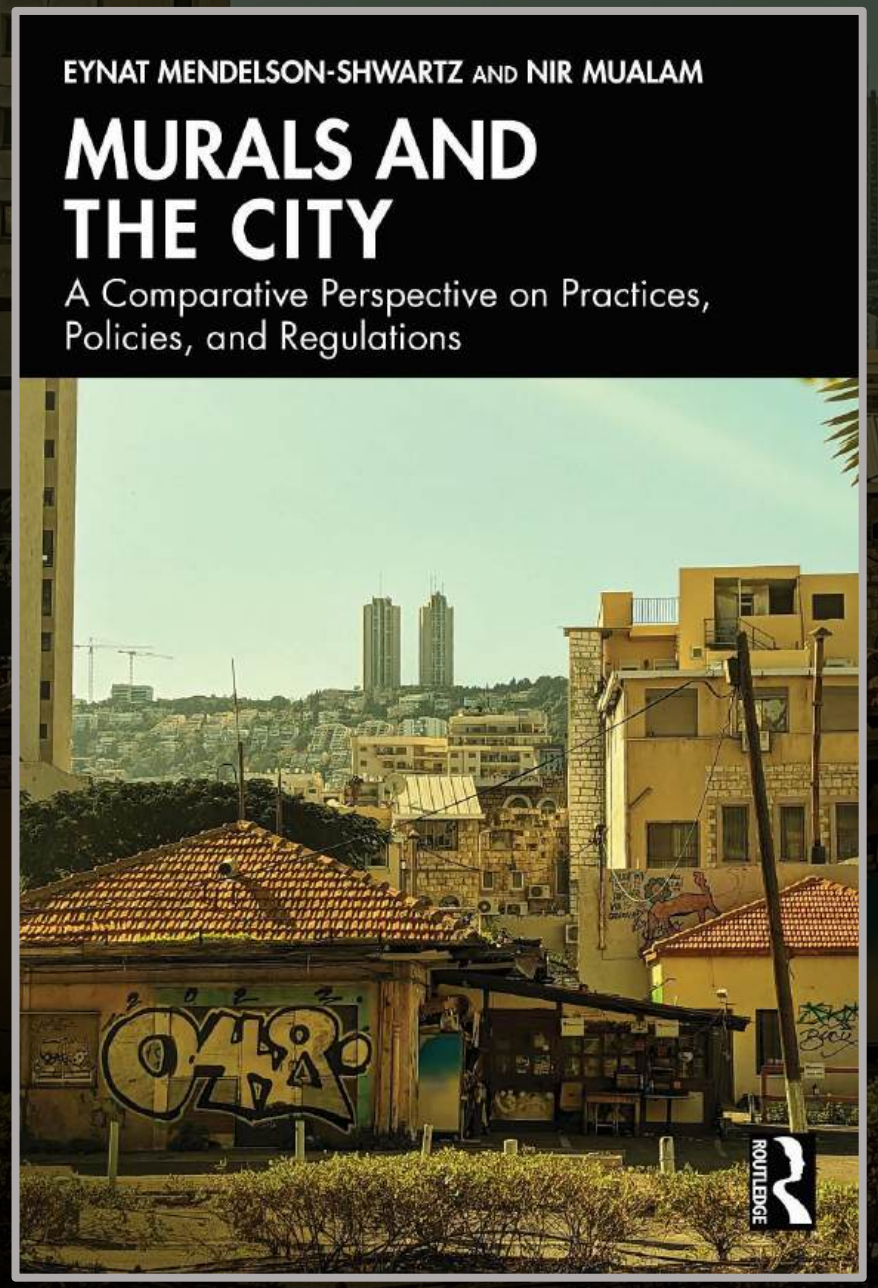
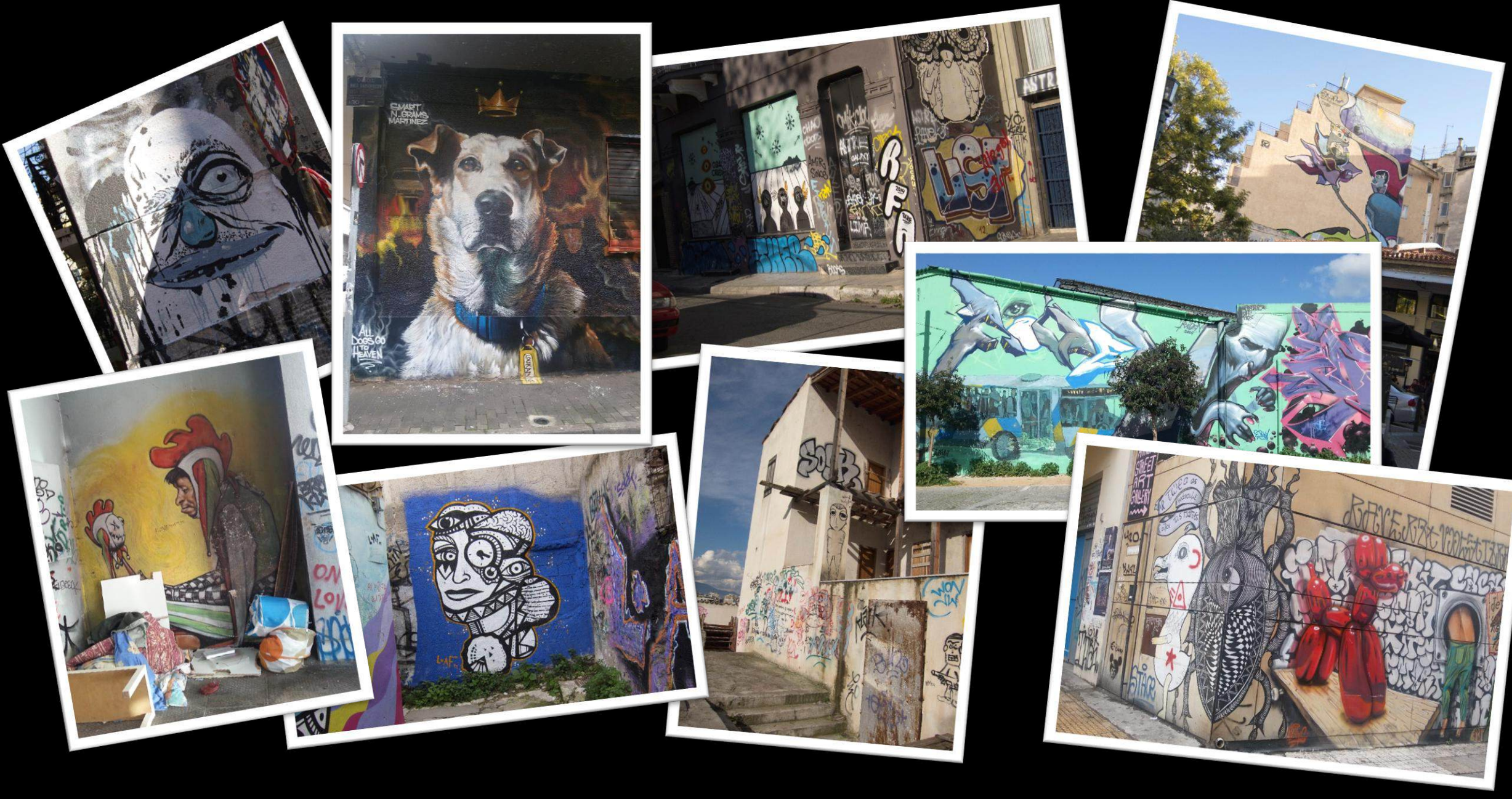


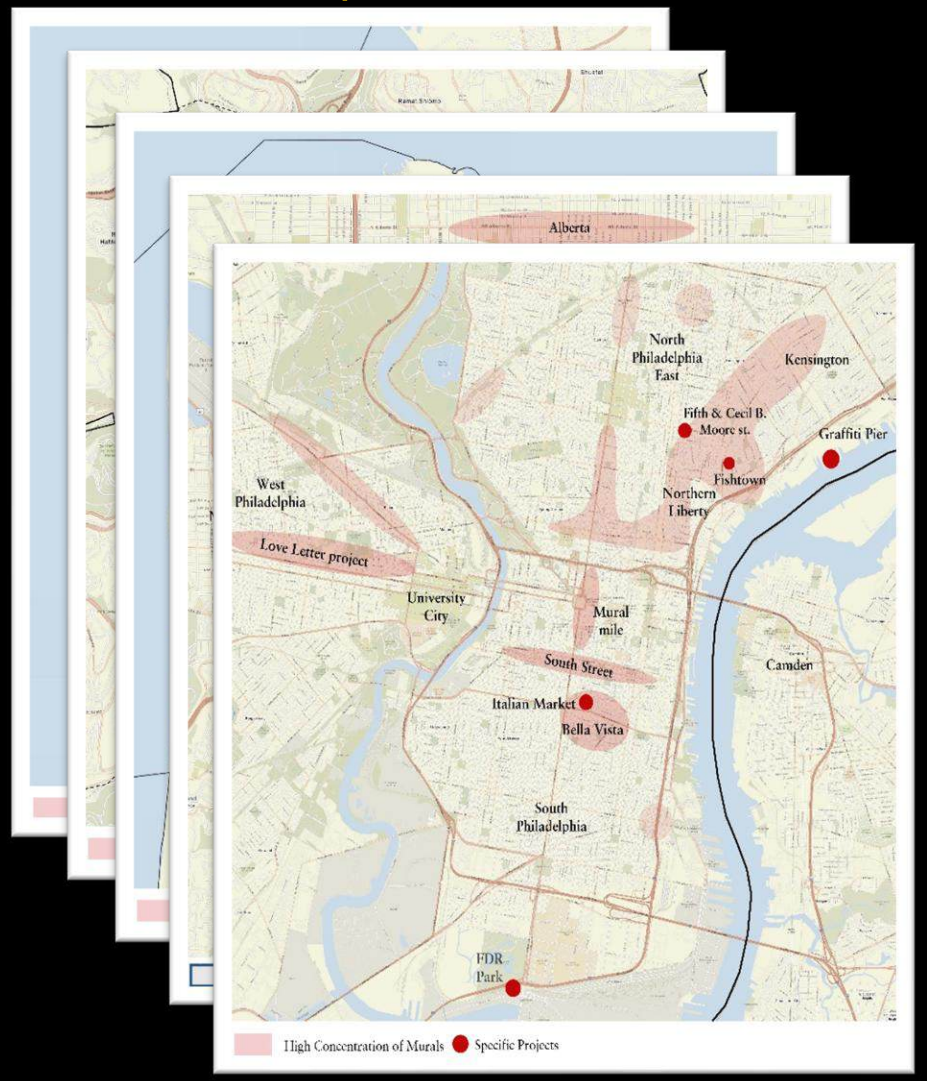
Co-producing Alternative Urban Futures through Experimental Urbanism

Mural Art as Urban Experimentation: Governing the Ungovernable

NIR MUALAM \ 16 Sept 2025


SMART N GRAMS MARTINEZ
ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN
ASTA

In-depth analysis of 5 mural policies



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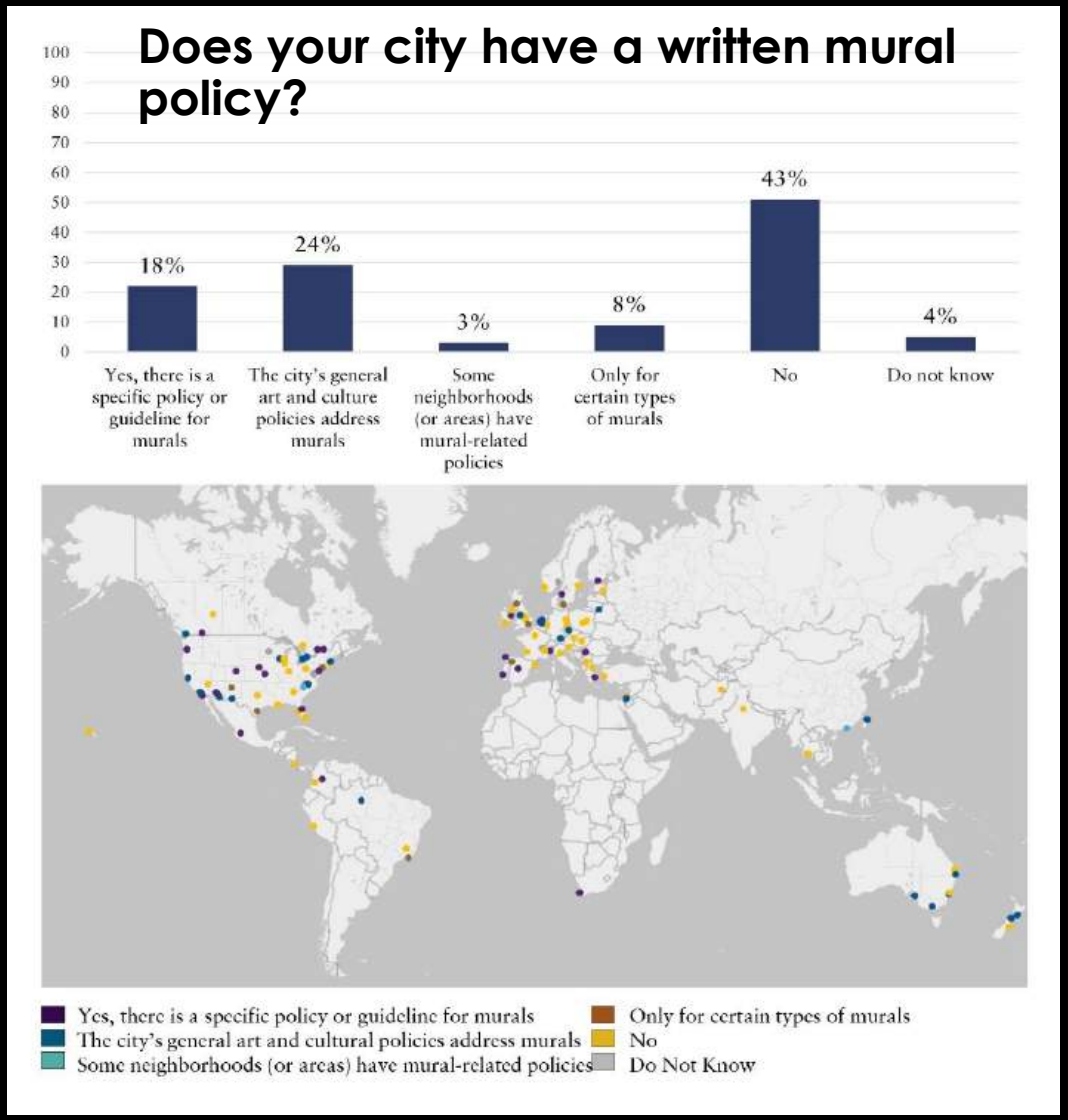
Cross-national survey (119 cities)



Murals

Any surface painting or writing created with or without permission directly on outdoor façades

Murals

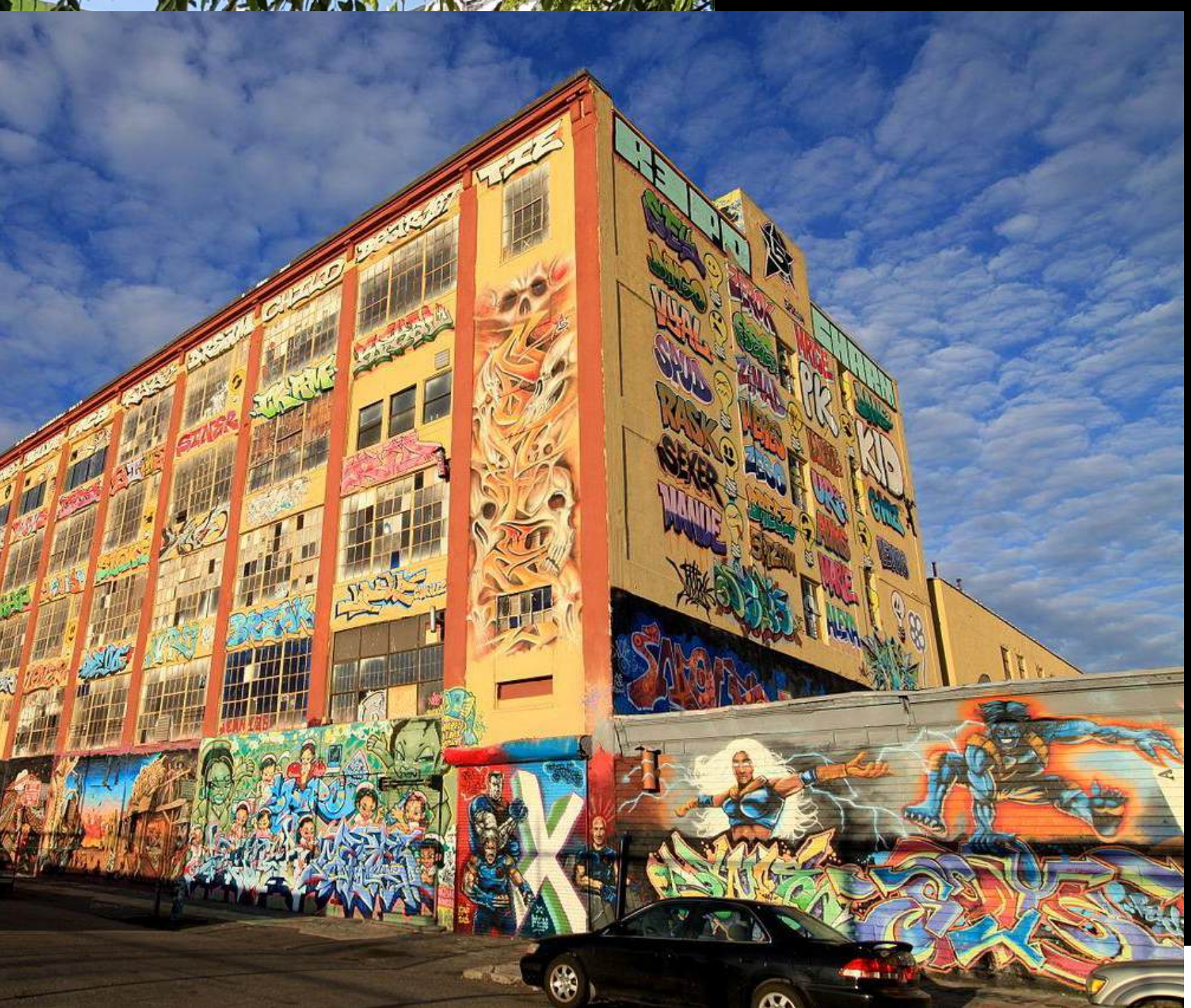
Are not only an aesthetic phenomenon affecting the design of cities

Shepard Fairey

Murals

As tools to promote urban strategies

- Urban branding
- Beautification
- Urban regeneration
- Community empowerment
- Educational purposes



Murals

Phenomenon rooted in experimentation, temporal intervention, and continued dialogue

⬇

Affects policy

Public art as a policy challenge

Challenges decision-making and the governance of the public realm

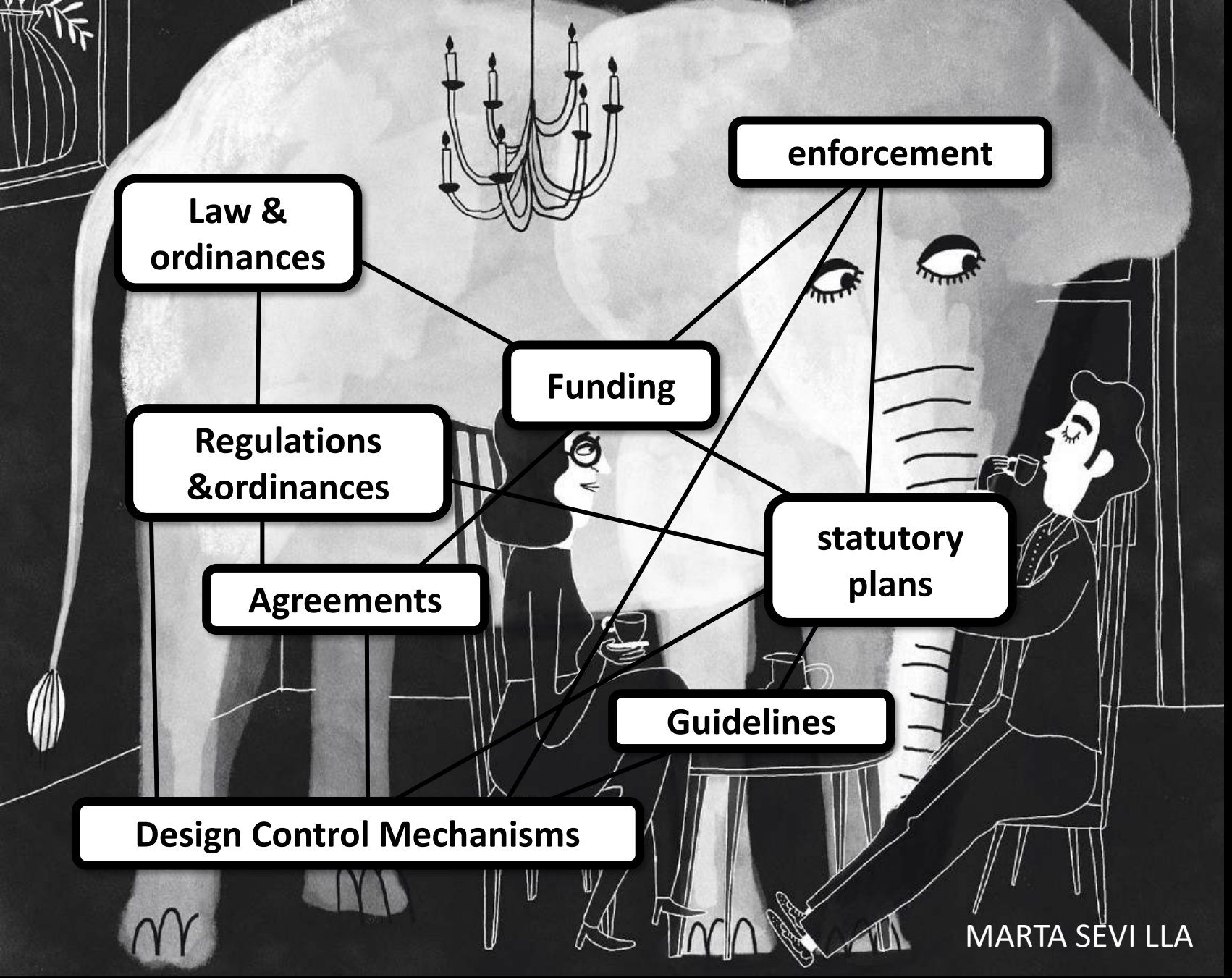
Murals: governing the temporal

The temporality/dynamic nature of murals is largely their key defining characteristic. It also helps explain why they are a tool of experimentation (how the crowd/passerby feels-reacts? encouraging exchanges + continuous debate)

Acknowledging their ephemerality is key in devising policies and programs that utilize them as an urban feature of experimental nature.

Not fossilized!

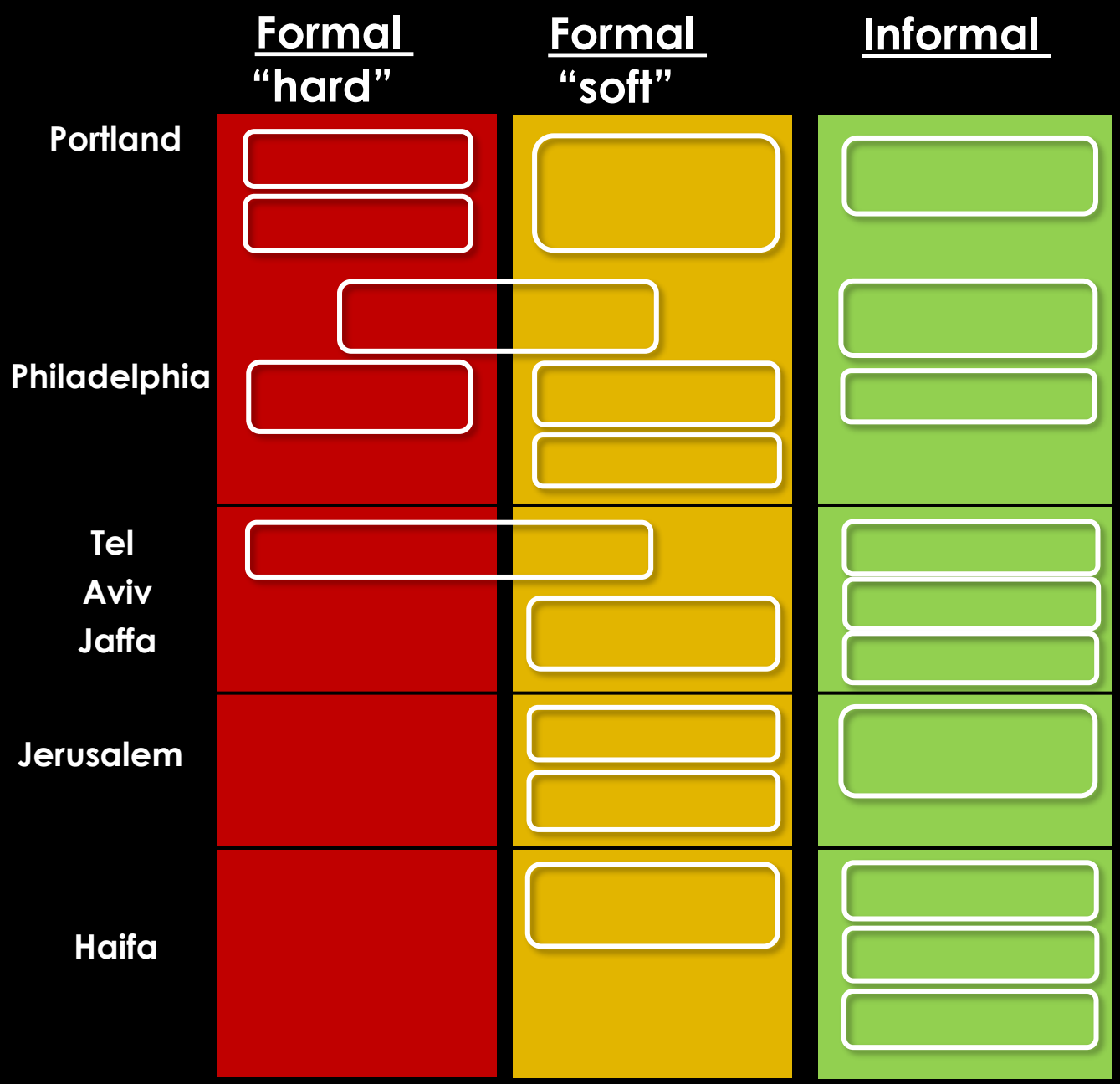
As art in the city is always changing, so is policy.



Mural policies and regulation

A range of governing tools

Autonomous (decentralized) local government initiatives that attempt to govern/tame/ promote murals while balancing diverse interests



Mural policies and regulation

Utilize a mixture of formal and informal tools, procedures, and actions

Mural policies and regulation- Hard rules for governing the public realm: Portland

A mandatory easement requirement (when promoting a Public Art Mural in Portland) as an infringement of rights?

"The easement seems to some a little bit aggressive and at least two property owners backed out. It's like they're pretty flexible and cool but for some people it's an intimating document that tells them they have to keep the mural for 5 years, and people don't like that.

(Expert from NGO, Portland, personal communication,

27 September 2018).

Softer policy reactions: Allowing spontaneity

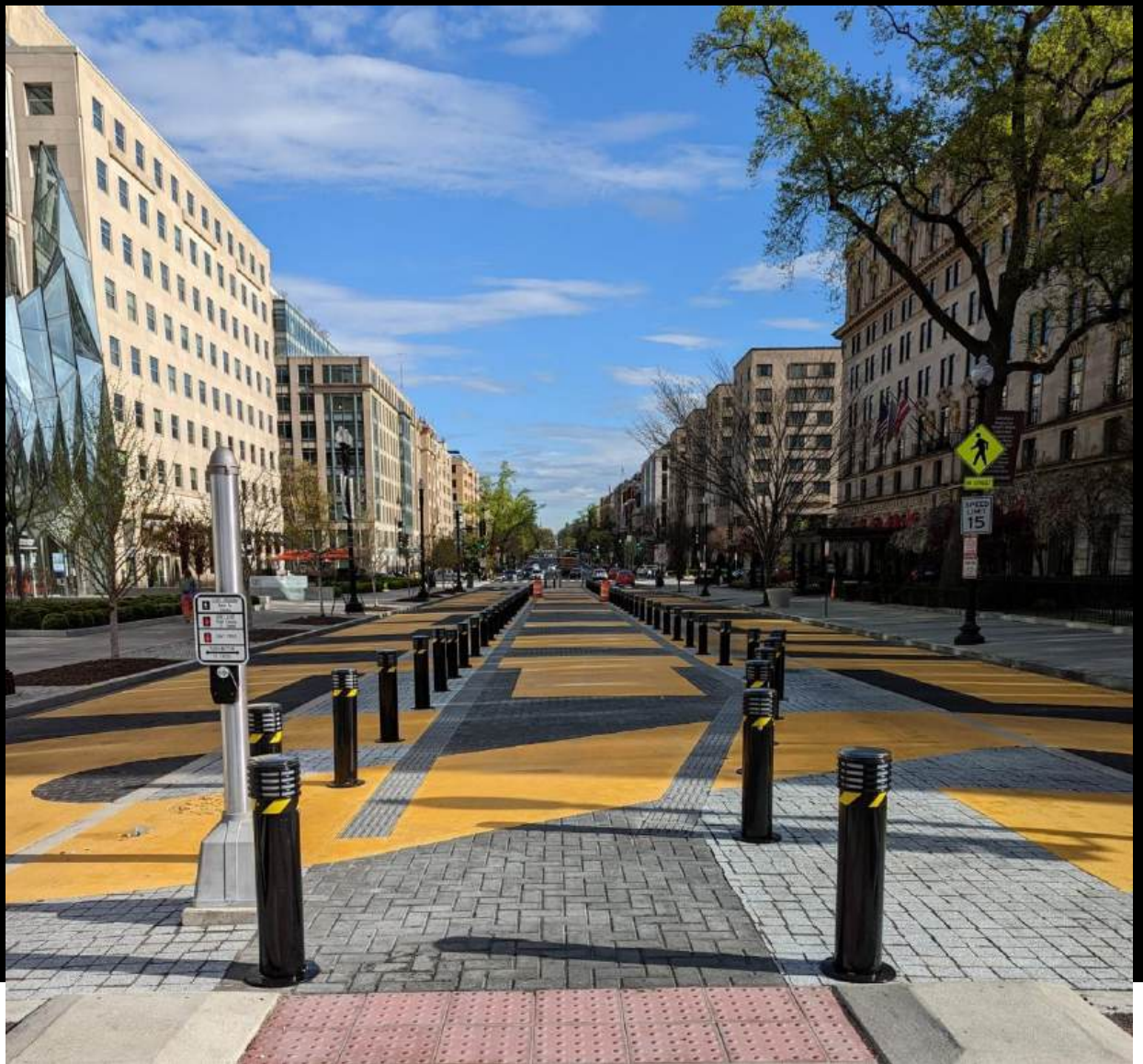
Informal arrangements can be implemented by negotiations, flexibility in the application of rules, making exceptions, reinterpretations of existing policies, nebulous or discretionary decision-making, or through abstention from action.

Softer policy reactions: Murals as Low-risk experiments

From *permission* → *production* → *post-production* governance, murals operate as low-risk "urban experiments."

"**Most of what I do violated municipal procedures…** which is why my project succeeded!" (Enclave manager, Tel Aviv–Jaffa).

Subversive actions/ inactions, flexible policies. As avenues for experimentation



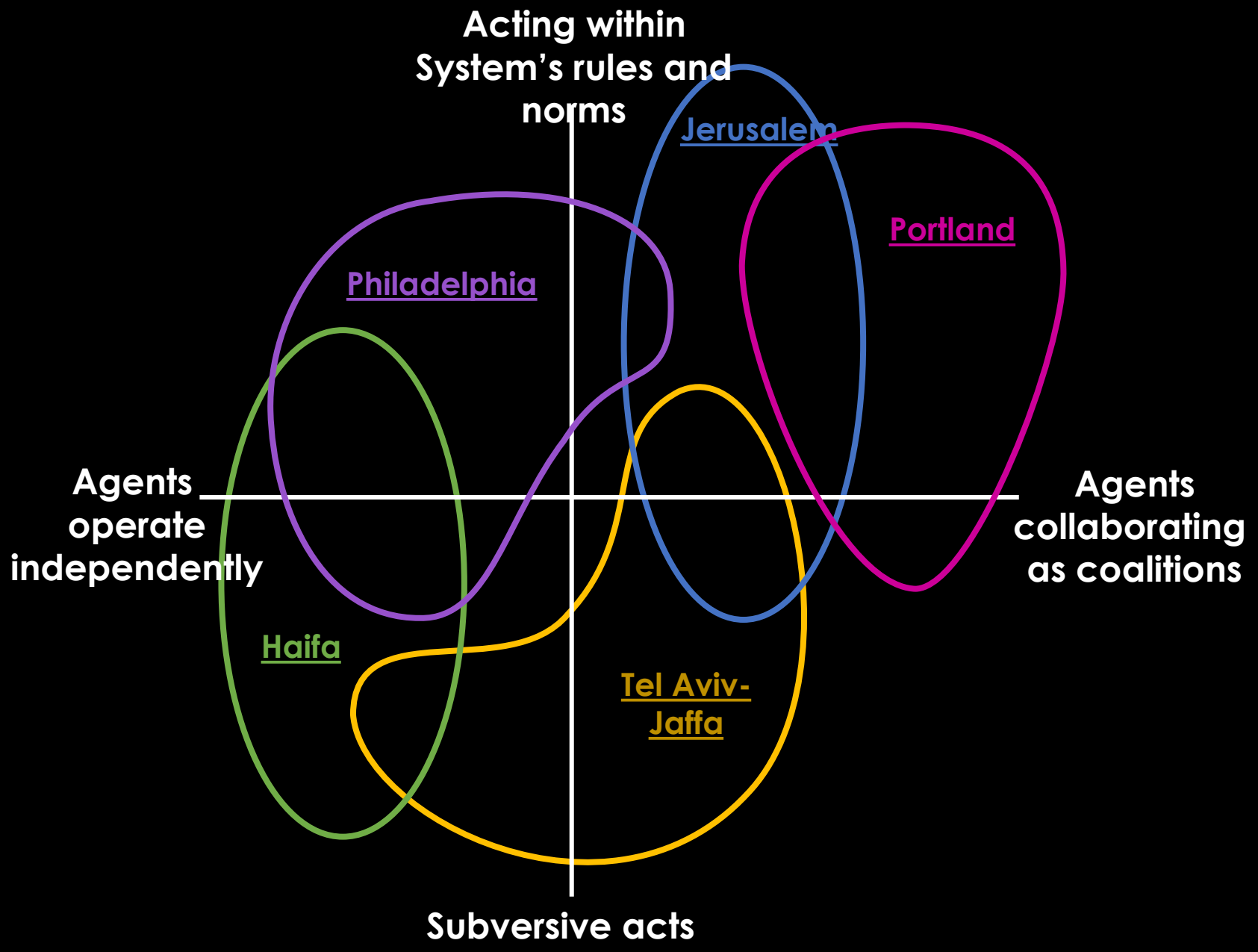
Mayor Bowser summoned an urgent staff meeting. She requested that a two- block street mural depicting Black Lives Matter be placed adjacent to the White House within 24 hours.

“I looked up and I saw tourists and the community helping our people paint the mural. And I thought, “That works too. Now this is not just our mural, it’s everybody’s mural.” (Murals DC employee, Washington, DC, April 2022).

Because it was a city-initiated project on city right-of-way, it proceeded via **internal agency authorization**, not the external permit process a private artist would follow.

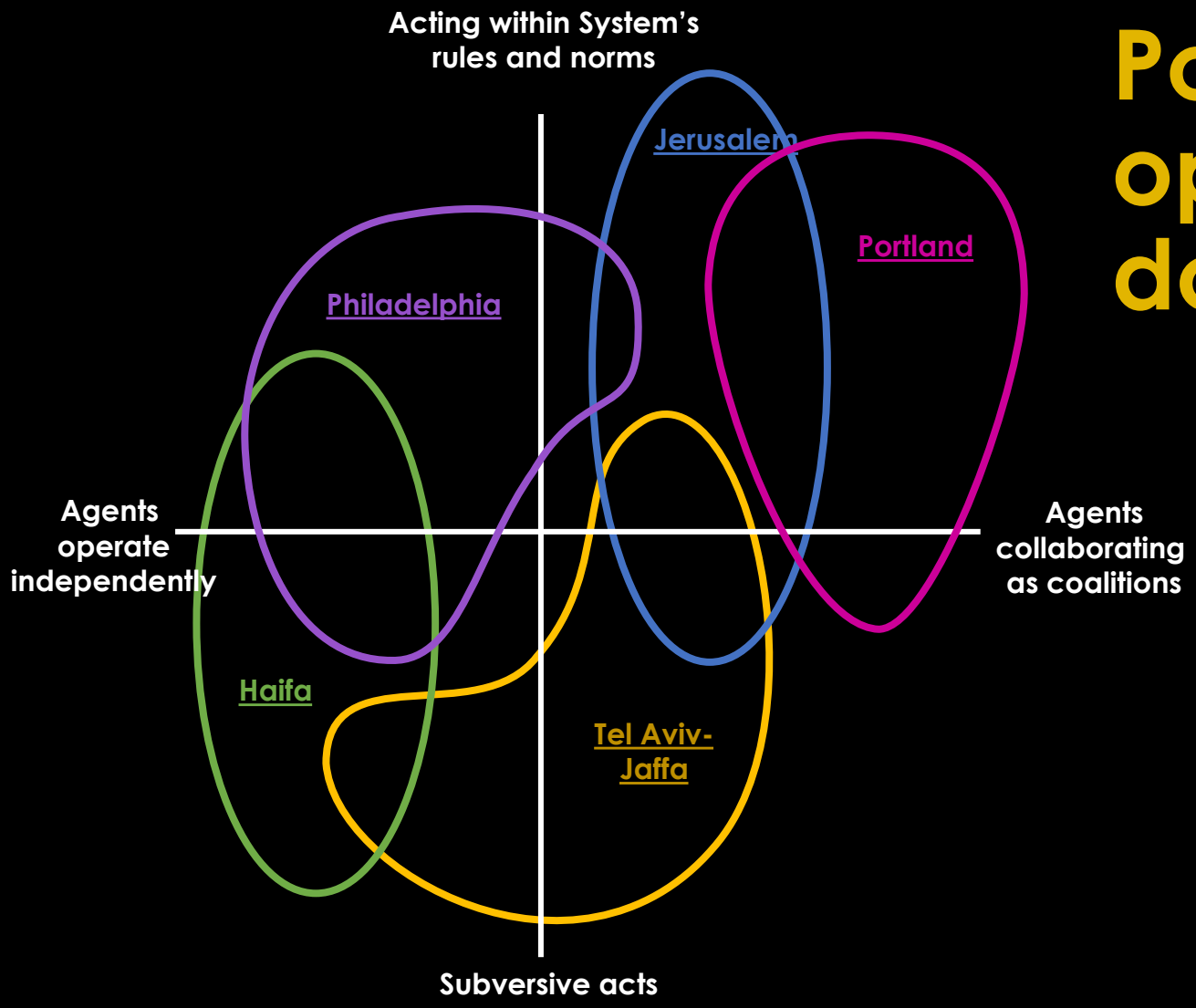
Adoption of flexible policies that allow creativity and spontaneous creations

For example, in some of the reviewed cities, such as Portland and Haifa, graffiti abatement teams have begun to erase murals mostly in response to complaints, rather than actively seeking out and erasing them when they come across them.



Mural policies & regulation

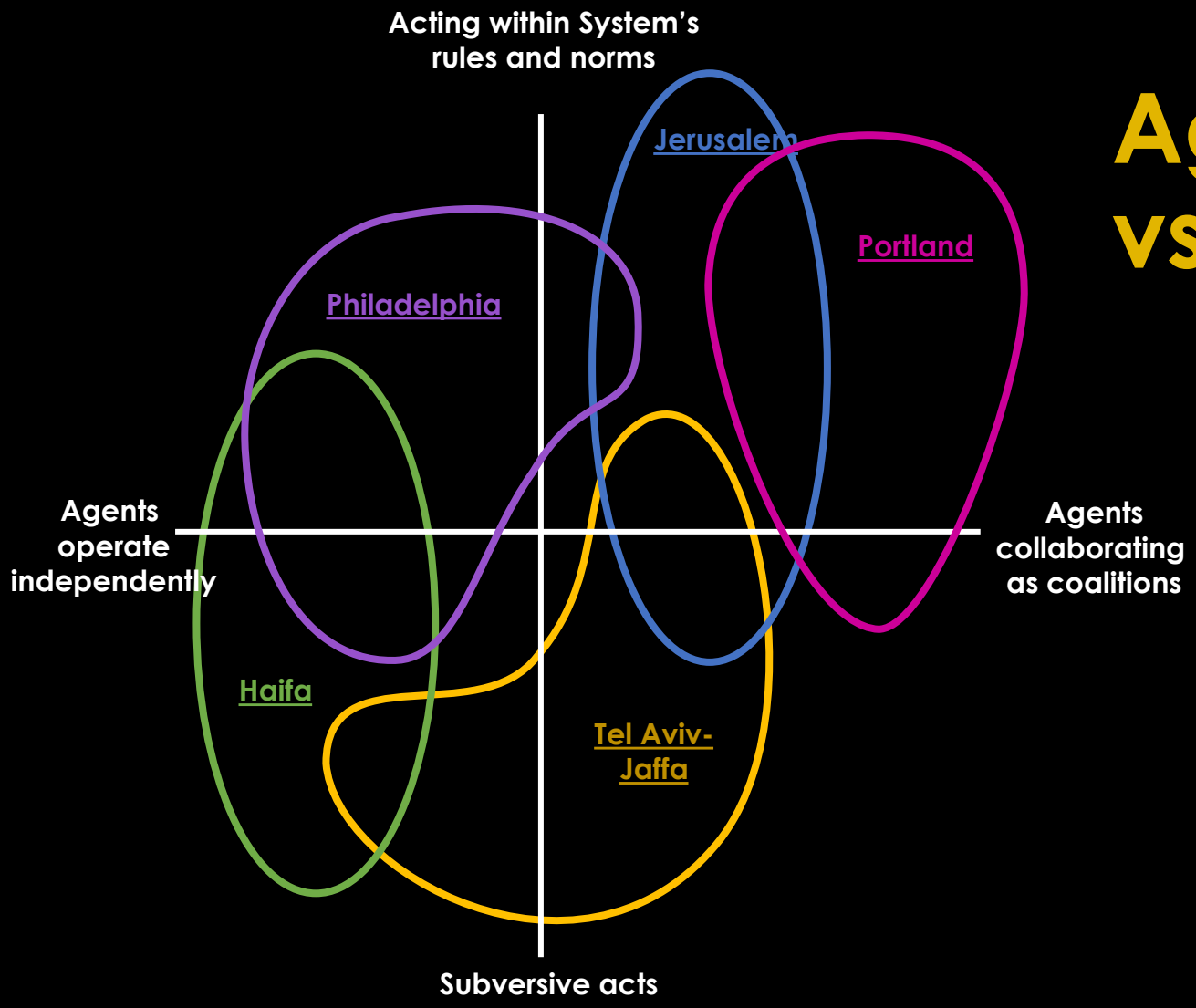
Act as network of governing agents who may allow flexibility and experimentation



Policy Sheriffs: Agents operating alone vs top-down control

Although mural policies are sometimes drafted and regulated 'from above' by city administrations, they may also evolve erratically, with agents acting horizontally, if not sporadically, to monitor and police the creation of murals.

In some of the cases we examined, local enthusiasts and self- appointed 'sheriffs' acted as custodians of murals around the city or in specific enclaves.



Agents operating alone vs top-down control

In Philadelphia: the city's graffiti abatement team removes murals that resemble graffiti, even if they were permitted by property owners.

This occurs despite the city's formal policy, which enables property owners to authorize murals on their property without municipal consent. By utilizing informal actions, the graffiti abatement team is able to revamp Philadelphia's regulations and govern what appears on facades

Four Municipal Pathways that Enable Experimentation

- **Delegation to an arm's-length org** (e.g., municipal partnership w/ Mural Arts in Philadelphia).

- **Municipal company enables temporality** (Jerusalem's Eden) to de-risk approvals.

- **"Ghost policy" coalitions** (Haifa): informal practice, high agility, local sheriffs/ government enthusiasts.

- **Bypass via temporal/private enclaves** (Tel-Aviv–Jaffa): curators & owners control their own premises; minimal intervention by government.

Delegation of power model: Phili

• **The** city builds a dense public-art ecosystem; **Mural Arts** becomes a high-capacity intermediary.

•**Governance caution:** Over dominance / gatekeeping risk (manage pluralism)

• **Experimentation value:** Scale + visibility (“Mural Mile”) → quick learning cycles, city-wide spread.

‘A Tribute to Gloria Casarez’, painted by Michelle Angela Ortiz in 2015.
Mural Arts produced this mural honoring activist Gloria Casarez, Philadelphia’s first director of LGBT affairs, with support from the City of Philadelphia Mayor’s Fund.,

Eynat Mendelson Shwartz | Nir Mualam

Municipal Company Model (Jerusalem, Eden)

- Eden (city-owned) funds/curates **Walls Festivals** and site-specific art as **mid-term, reversible** placemaking.

- **Why it enables experiments?** Easier approvals; “refresh” built-in; owners grant freedom; not going through municipal pipeline and politicians.

"Ghost Policy" & Coalition Governance: Haifa

- Practice precedes policy—artist/municipal collaborations normalize murals, then attract resources.

- **Value:** High agility, bold content;
- **Risk** = fragility to personnel turnover or political shifts.

- **Community co-production:** Place-making & partnerships frame murals as social infrastructure.

Temporal/Private Enclaves Model: Tel-Aviv–Jaffa

- Formal route is slow; **temporal classification + privately governed precincts** (e.g., industrial areas) enable rapid cycles and curatorial autonomy.

- **Experimentation:** Owners/curators test aesthetics, audiences; pieces evolve from unsanctioned → sanctioned.

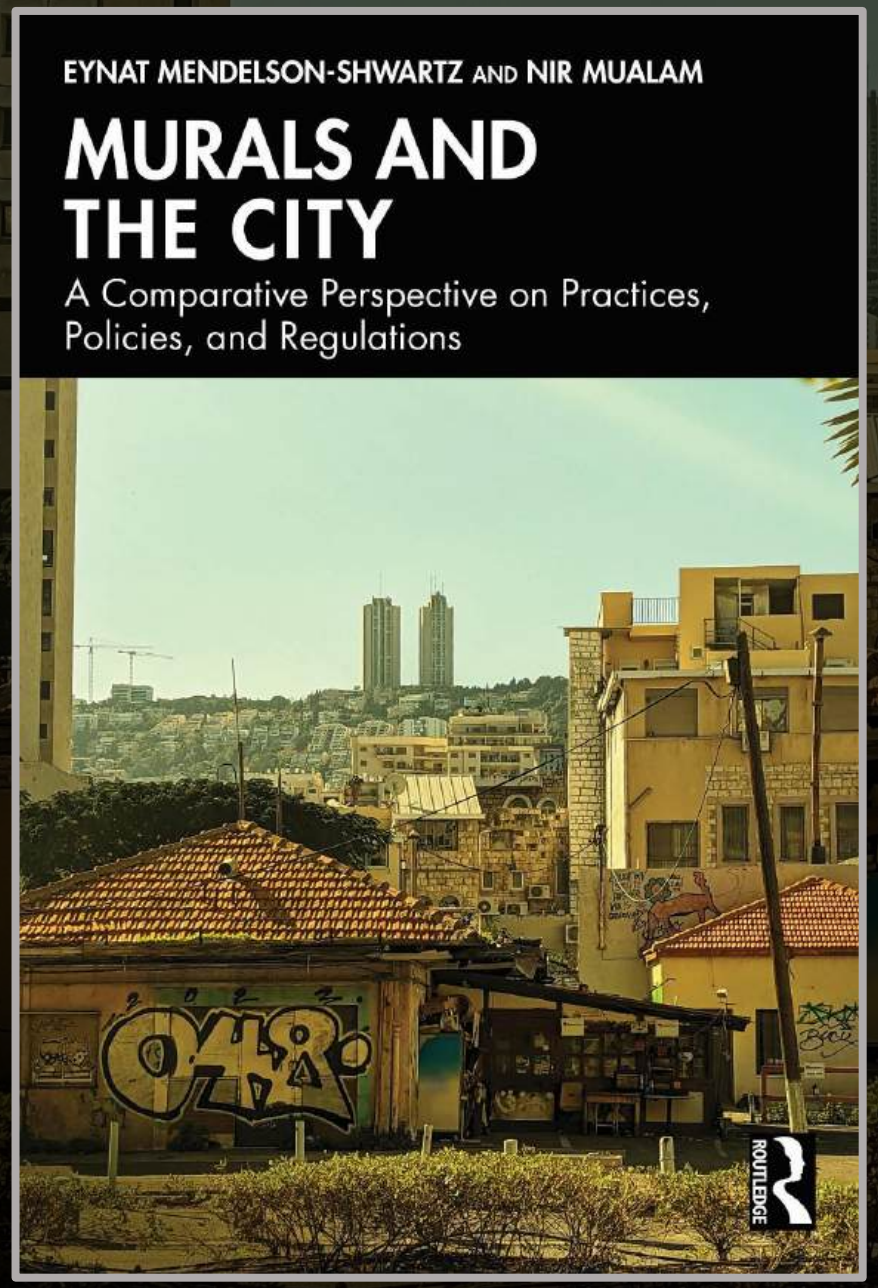
- **Design implication:** interim spaces as “living labs.”

Control over public space?

Excessive control may result in sanitized, overpoliced, and commodified urban spaces that do not leave room for evolution, flexibility, organic development, spontaneity, or enchantment

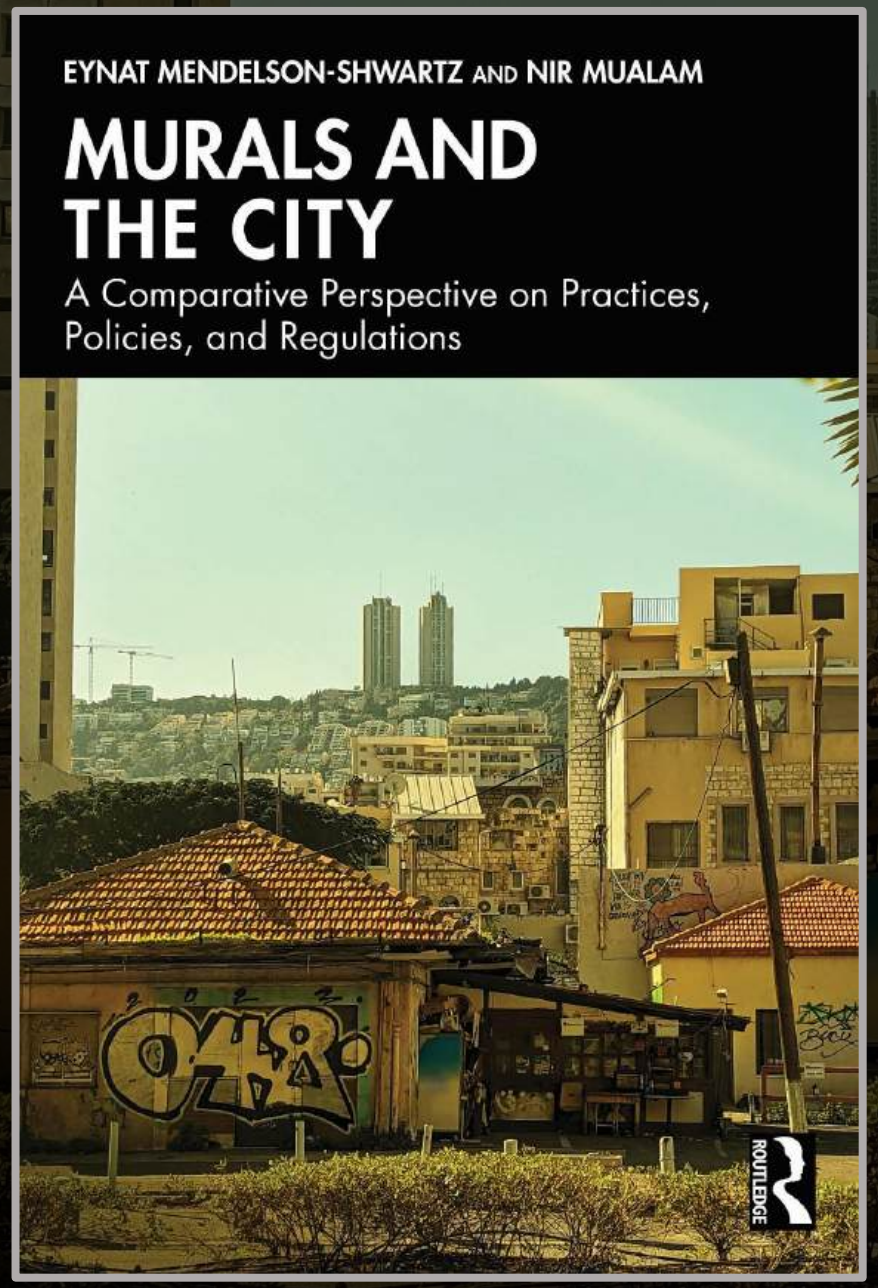
International Survey of Mural policies: Flexibility in non-criminalization (n=119)

While unsanctioned murals and graffiti may officially be criminalized, most cities have oriented their policy climate toward allowing flexibility in terms of tolerating unsanctioned art, refraining from mandatory public engagement, and avoiding the imposition of top- down supervision in approving murals.



Murals are pathways for understanding urban policies, processes, rights, and governance structures

Murals as pathways for policy flexibility and policy-experiments

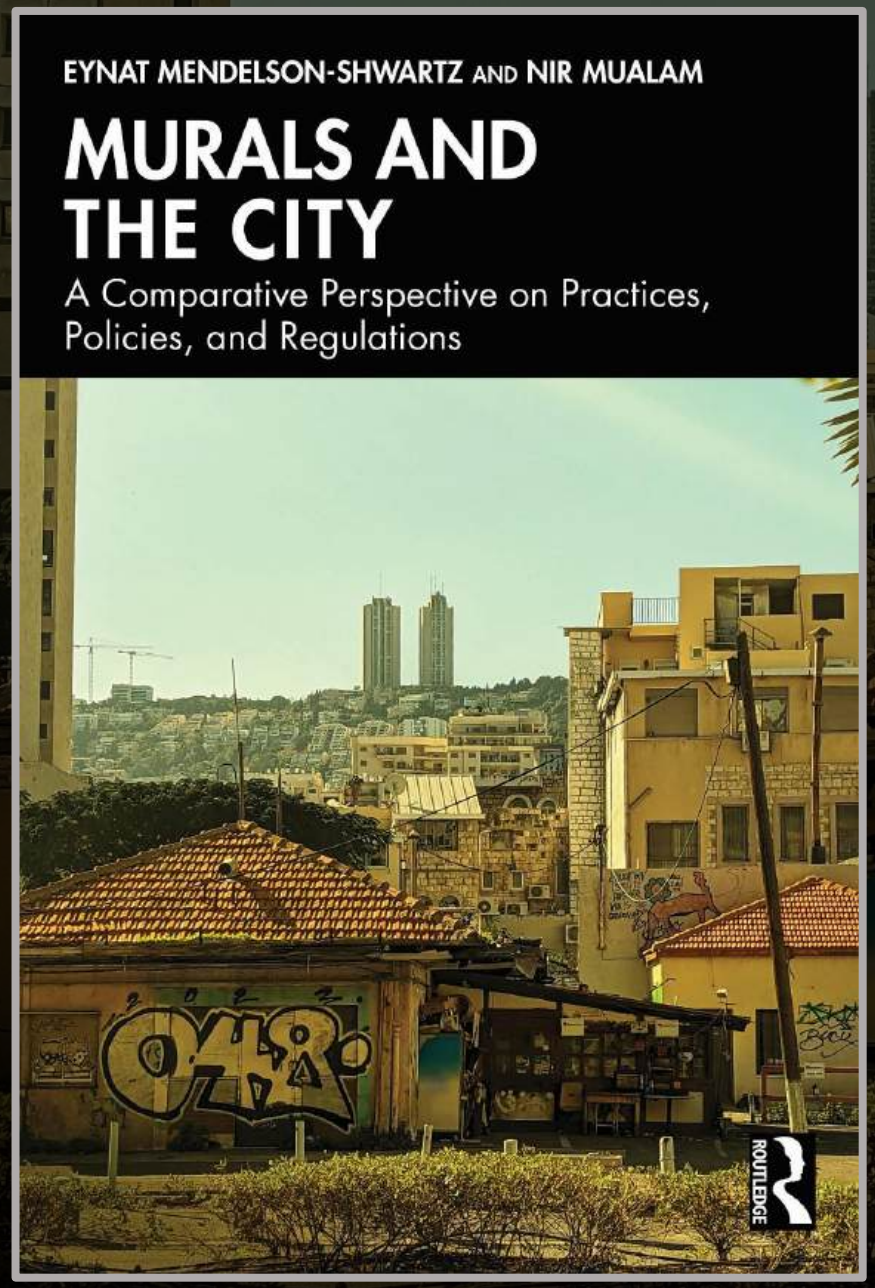


"We do not want to eradicate the city's street art culture, but we also

do not want it to be everywhere. However, we believe that if we

institutionalize it and harshly govern it throughout the city, it will take

a different path; street art was never intended to be strictly regulated".



Thank you

nirm@technion.ac.il