

**Sabina Andron**

*Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*

Abingdon: Routledge, 2024

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‘Surfaces have taught me most of the things I know about cities,’ acknowledges Sabina Andron, an architectural historian and urbanist by training, in the introduction to an ambitious and restless monograph engaged with urban justice through the lens of walls and surfaces (6). Indeed, at its heart, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City* (2024, Routledge) is both a contribution and a confession. This dialectic enables an original position relative to well-established academic discourses around urban justice and right to the city. Its core questions around urban surfaces and surface-ness do the heavy lifting required to fully bring together multiple contemporary strands of semiotics (urban, landscape, geography and media), facilitating, for example, a more direct conversation between WJT Mitchell and Henri LeFebvre. In these ways, the book delivers on the author’s promises. Perhaps even more interestingly, the book is a provocation to discourses around urban pedagogy and knowledge which may be valuable to foreground in the context of the PDF-clad surfaces of the transactions and conventions associated with contemporary academic practice—such as those observed by this journal, *Social & Cultural Geography*.

Andron’s method of gathering different channels of theoretical and historical context, primary visual research, and discourses around graffiti and street art resonate with her appreciation for ‘the multitude of perspectives captured and displayed by city surface writing’ (41). The text is highly structured with each chapter divided into subsections titled with provocative statements, ranging from ‘Surfaces are thick and alive’ (Chapter 1) to ‘Wall writing is a time portal’ (Chapter 2) to ‘Tagging is pro-social’ (Chapter 4). These both ‘surface’ the components of a broader conceptualisation of the notion of a ‘surface commons’ and hint at a compelling interdisciplinary cross-section of historic, contemporary, theoretical, legal and cultural details. Chapter 1, ‘Surface Semiotics’ takes a broad approach to setting up the theoretical context. Chapter 2 provides a wide-scope historical framing of graffiti and street art. Chapter 3 offers a discussion of the legal dimensions with an increased focus on the UK, setting the stage for Chapter 4’s close-range case study based on London’s Leake Street Tunnel, a pedestrian thoroughway underneath Waterloo Station designated as a zone for legal graffiti.

The volume is punctuated with a series of experimental interludes including, for example, an ‘interview with a wall’ composed by synthesising contributions from questionnaires sent to academics and practitioners (including myself, 49-52), as well as lists of “Things surfaces do” and “Things done to surfaces” abstracted from legal discourse (153-154). Andron concludes with a clear distillation of her theoretical intent to frame urban ‘surfacedness’ as spatial production in a LeFebvrian sense: ‘The right to the surface is a right to write, to create, to make space.’

Above all, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and Right to the City* conveys the author’s well-honed instincts regarding the street-level experience of urban citizens. This is expressed primarily through the book’s use of the author’s own photographs, which function as a visual essay running in parallel to the main text and provide an important thread to the argument. They document an exhaustive approach to gleaning, cross-checking and the complicating of key arguments, continuously attending to what’s there, announcing itself to all urban dwellers immediately all the time. This is further supported by careful curation, analysis, sequencing, and annotation. Missing images (not created by the author) are indicated by empty blue boxes with captions detailing the copyright legalities that prevent their inclusion. Other photos are marked up with identifiers and arrows which engage with the relationship between the observable surface and terminologies associated with street art and graffiti. The Leake Street case also includes an example of a time-study of one wall as it evolved over the course of 100 days (Figure 4.9). This becomes more remarkable when juxtaposed with a photograph of a cross-section of accumulated layers of paint (Figure 4.6), propelling the book’s broader argument about surfaces toward questions of technology and

materiality which may require consideration of other kinds of surfaces beyond street art and graffiti, such as digital billboards or road markings.

In general, it is possible that Andron's argument is made through images—seemingly effortlessly—with the text doing double-time to keep up with what is made clearer visually. From my perspective as a graphic designer and urbanist interested in questions about the form and circulation of knowledge, what excites me about this project is the way in which it implicitly, even if unintentionally, exposes a tension between academic and surface-led approaches to knowing the city. In this way, its foregrounding of surface-ness, and surface-led enquiry, can be seen as both a pedagogical and epistemological project which questions scholarly presumptions about urban knowledge as much as it contributes to scholarship.

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