Clear Messages, Part Two

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On July 24, 2019 the then-governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, announced his resignation effective August 2nd, after 15 days of massive protests against his administration. A few days after the July protests, some of the graffiti at Old San Juan was still up on the walls and on the sidewalks, but a great deal of it was already painted over with white paint—patches over the pastel façades of the old buildings. As usual, there were avid discussion on whether graffiti should be painted over vandalism, or be left to wash out with time, respecting freedom of expression.

An important aspect in this issue is the fact that the walls in which protestors wrote their messages in Old San Juan belong to private citizens, not to the public. There is thus an inherent tension between freedom of expression in public space and the property of the store or homeowner. Storefronts in Old San Juan are more than just a membrane between the public space and the private: it frames its merchandise, its tables, its services, but, it is also part of a historic patrimony belonging to the Puerto Rican people. So, where does one draw the line between what constitutes public space, and to what extent does the private façade ought to provide for the expression of the public in the public space from which it feeds? Regardless of the legal interpretations, there will always be the need for this negotiation.

That July, there was somewhat of a cohesive and collaborative attitude towards the graffiti, between storeowners and protestors. Of course, in this case, many storeowners where protestors themselves, but there seemed to be a deeper understanding and solidarity from both parts that is rarely seen in such events in Puerto Rico. Throughout the protests there was a collective effort to clean up and repair damages, after the manifestations wrapped up. Storeowners, volunteers, and city staff members alike took to the streets with white paint to cover the graffiti. The white patches in the early weeks of August were not an erasure of the messages that were written before, but rather a testament to the negotiations that the people of Old San Juan and the rest of the citizens understood to be necessary for their democratic processes.