









BETWEEN WALLS AND MOUNTAINS: ART THAT GROWS OUTSIDE THE CITY'S VIEW

In a quiet corner of Minho, among green trees and the rhythm of skateboard wheels on the concrete at the *Skatepark do Couto* (Couto's Skatepark), has emerged a mural that speaks louder than it appears. In Couto, Barcelos, there is no traffic or crowds, just a village, a skatepark, the enthusiasm of the young people involved, and a wall that, over several days, became a meeting place for artists, skaters, and local residents. The mural was not created just to decorate, but to provoke, reflect, and care. In the lettering designed by Eldr and Soldier, questions about inequality, community, and belonging reverberate. This is the story of how urban art, often associated with the chaos of big cities, found new fertile ground to grow in Minho's countryside.

The challenge issued by the Couto Park Association – Barcelos Skate Club was to create a mural with a message to fight racism and xenophobia, promoting inclusion, diversity, and respect through urban art and skateboarding. The main objective is to "raise awareness in the community about the importance of equality and welcoming everyone, reinforcing skateboarding as a space for freedom, expression, and overcoming obstacles," says Flora, a member of the Couto Park Association.

The intersection between urban art and rural areas helps to generate new ways of belonging and collective expression. When transposed to less populated areas, urban art takes on a symbolic and social role, transforming the space visually and stimulating local memories. In these contexts, graffiti and murals become vehicles for intergenerational dialogue and identity affirmation, placing these regions on the contemporary map of cultural creation.



Fig. 1. Skater at Couto's Skatepark. Credits: João Salgado (2025)

Furthermore, the success of urban art in recent years should be interpreted in light of an urban planning paradigm in which arts and culture play an increasingly prominent role and in which the arts and culture sector has been considered an important asset for promoting the image of cities and their development (Campos, Júnior & Raposo, 2021), which can also be exploited by rural areas, since it mainly relies on open-air galleries. Urban art serves the dual purpose of enhancing the aesthetic identity of buildings and of visually and culturally engaging visitors to certain places, contributing to the development of rural communities through tourism (Zhu, Zhang, & Liu, 2024), given the new trend among travelers to share the feelings, experiences, lifestyle, and perceptions of local residents (Vallbona & Mascarilla, 2020).

This case study analyzes the creation of a collaborative urban mural at Couto's Skatepark in Barcelos, designed by two Portuguese artists—Hélder Duarte (Eldr) and Miguel Silva (Soldier).

The Project at Couto's Skatepark

Background and invitation

The Couto skatepark, located in a rural area of Barcelos, was conceived by a local group with support from the City Council, through the IPDJ and Programa Geração Z, with guidance from the President of the Couto Association, João Miguel Araújo, and with the participation of the association's skaters, Pedro Bessa Menezes, Francisco Vilas Boas, and Jota Ferreira. Hélder learned about the project during its construction and through social media, and offered to volunteer. He was later invited to participate as the main artist. The managing association, **Couto Park**, selected the participants for Live Painting based on the artists' styles and the relevance of the inclusive message they wanted to communicate.

The briefing focused on a **mural** with an explicit message **against xenophobia and racism**, promoting **inclusion, diversity, and respect**. The chosen phrases were: "Greed has poisoned the soul of humankind. We need humanity more than machines. We need kindness and tenderness more than intelligence."

The "Couto Park" logo should also be included and executed in graffiti or calligraphy, in harmony with the artists' style. The message was aimed at both regular park visitors and the general public on social media and in the press.





Figs 2 and 3. Eldr and Soldier initiating the mural. Credits: João Salgado (2025)

Planning and execution

Preparation began with a site visit and meeting between the organization, artists, and volunteers, followed by an analysis of the space and a photographic survey. Simulations in Photoshop allowed design and composition issues to be resolved in advance. On the day of the event, the foundations were laid out and each artist painted their area as outlined. The intervention took place during Go Skateboarding Day (June 21), with parallel activities: skateboarding, music, barbecue, and Lais Recs' testimony on the inclusion of women in skateboarding, with the special "Girls Meeting." More than 80 people participated.

The operation involved collaboration with local volunteers and even a young man who was participating in the event, who, upon expressing interest, received a paint roller to help fill in areas of the mural. The collaborative and inclusive environment marked the entire process.

Hélder Duarte (Eldr) and Miguel Silva (Soldier)

Hélder Duarte, known artistically as **Eldr**, graduated in Graphic Design from the Caldas da Rainha School of Arts and Design. According to him, he began "doing calligraphy more assiduously around 2015" when he finished his degree. The choice of the name Eldr also marks a visual and conceptual identity linked to contemporary artistic writing. His initial immersion in calligraphy had academic origins, starting with the study of medieval typography in the context of his design course. Learning historical alphabets and techniques sparked his interest, and only later did he begin to observe urban artists who integrated calligraphy into murals, leading him to explore this aesthetic convergence.

Eldr[1] reports that, since 2015, he has been intensively engaged in the creation of visual alphabets, focusing on robust letters and geometries filled with lines: "I adapted a font so that I could achieve a well-filled line of text with not much of a blank space." In addition, the artist states that he likes "*to see how different text sizes work together, different colors and contrasts, and, more recently, the use of spray paint to give a more dimensional effect to the design.*"

Miguel Silva goes by the name **Soldier** in the graffiti world. He grew up in Portugal and, since childhood, has shown a strong inclination for drawing: "*at the age of 6, I was already walking around with a pencil in my hand, copying everything I saw.*" He started graffiti at 16, initially with tags, then moved on to throw-ups, pieces, and eventually calligraphy, drawn to the emotional power of words: "*I like the power of words, how a letter can convey emotion even before it's read.*" Despite his background in graphic design, it was on the streets that he found his most authentic artistic voice.

Soldier describes his style as "*a fusion between classic graffiti and more graphic elements, with some influence from design.*" He prefers vivid palettes, strong contrasts, a mixture of letters and symbolic shapes, adapting each intervention to the specific space in which he works: "*It's a conversation between me and the place.*"





Figs. 4 and 5. Eldr and Soldier working on the mural. Credits: João Salgado (2025)

Influences and Visual Aesthetics

Eldr points to two influential artists: Dutch artist **Shoe**, who evolved from graffiti to the *Calligraffiti movement*, and Russian artist **Pokras Lampas**, known for his large calligraphic murals. Both combined historical calligraphy techniques with contemporary scale. As for Soldier, he mentions **Does** and **MadC** as early influences, adding that he later became interested in Portuguese artists such as **VhilsE** and **Esma**. In addition, he studied the Portuguese graphic tradition—cities, embroidery, and Portuguese patterns—to integrate cultural elements into his work.

Eldr uses dense, well-filled alphabets, prioritizing calligraphic compositions that completely fill the space and minimize empty spaces. He employs geometric shapes and contrasting colors to create depth, also using spray paint for dimensional effects. Soldier, in turn, constructs murals with a strong graphic presence: stylized letters aligned with visual symbols, thanks to his training in design and his sensitivity to colors and shapes adapted to the physical context.

Community and Cultural Impact

Relationship with the local community

The mural was well received by neighbors, representatives of the association, and residents of the neighborhood: "*It was a neighbor of the skatepark who gave us the wall to paint the mural... people in the neighborhood shared it on social media with messages of pride.*" There were no reports of opposition; on the contrary, there was community enthusiasm, attests Flora, a member of the association, stating that locals liked the work and say that the space became even more beautiful and colorful. The presence of a mural in a rural environment, within an already established skatepark, seemed natural and well integrated, with no tension between urban art and the non-urban environment.

For Eldr, painting in a rural environment "*means practically the same as painting in a more urban environment,*" as long as the space—such as a skatepark—is already identified with urban culture. However, for the artist, being further away from the city creates opportunities for expression that would not be possible, for example, on a busier city avenue. According to Soldier, this experience reinforces the ability of urban art to bring contemporary culture to areas where it rarely reaches, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

Both emphasize that, with dialogue and proper planning, urban art can transform perceptions about public spaces: "*a mural can be born from a participatory process, where everyone has a voice. This strengthens the sense of belonging*" (Soldier).

As Flora points out: the Skatepark is a space that "*has become a meeting place for young people living in the surrounding area. The creation of the Couto Park association has further revitalized the space, with skateboarding classes and events for the entire community. This skatepark has become a meeting point between the young people who live there and the world, as people from all over, including other countries, pass through there.*"

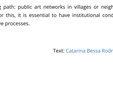


Fig. 6. The celebration of the mural. Credits: João Salgado (2025)

Individual learnings

The experience was remarkable for Eldr: "*It was the first time I painted a mural with other artists, and I didn't know it could go so well.*" He highlights the *companionship, coordination, and good communication* among the participants.

Soldier, for his part, emphasizes listening—to the place, the people, the time—and learned that respectful art can open doors and change perceptions about the territory.

Evolution of the relationship between art and place

Eldr indicates that the project has not changed his view of art and territory: his method is always respect the space and those involved, regardless of the context; Soldier, on the other hand, says that he now recognizes more clearly how "*territory shapes art as much as art shapes territory*"; a mural is, in essence, a dialogue.

Both wish to return to working in rural contexts. Eldr awaits future invitations to continue expanding his art outside major urban centers; Soldier wishes to conduct workshops, educational activities, and participatory processes involving young people, teaching techniques and showing graffiti as a possible path in life.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that urban art—graffiti and calligraphy—can transcend the urban environment and generate symbolic, social, and cultural impact in rural contexts. The Couto skatepark has become a stage for artistic expression, community dialogue, and inclusion. The collaborative process, from pre-design to execution at the event, reinforces the importance of planning, local participation, and sensitivity to space.

Eldr and Soldier show different but complementary trajectories: one more focused on aesthetic calligraphy and typographic graphics; the other on the expressive power of graffiti with design. The intervention in Couto became a catalyst for local communities, highlighting the potential of participatory muralism to transform perceptions and create a sense of belonging in a place where there was no precedent for this.

This project suggests a promising path: public art networks in villages or neighborhoods that value local identity, inclusion, and artistic dialogue. For this, it is essential to have institutional conditions, community support, and an openness towards real collaborative processes.

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Images: João Salgado

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Notes:

[1] All testimonies in this short essay were gathered exclusively through informal interviews by the author.

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LOCALIZAÇÃO



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