**A journey through public art in Douala: framing the identity of New Bell neighbourhood**

Marta Pucciarelli and Lorenzo Cantoni

*Me voici donc à Douala. Douala, océan de bonheur immense. Douala, ville improbable, du magnifique tiers-monde. Douala, avec ses hauts et ses bas*. [*So here I am in Douala. Douala, ocean of an immense happiness. Douala, improbable city, of magnificent third-world. Douala, with its with its ups and downs*] (Oho Bambe 2014)

# Introduction

We have to admit that we barely visit an African city for cultural or artistic purposes, unless we are (or feel like) critics, researchers, curators, anthropologists or experts in art with a specific interest in the African art production. Compared to what happens to others developing countries, the African cities' artistic sphere is often ignored and moved to the background. Going to Berlin without visiting the Wall or to Venice without considering the dates of its biennial festival limits our knowledge about the city immediately, not only from the artistic and cultural point of view, but also from that political and social ecosystem which these kinds of events represent. Even if we are not art experts, we do need to experience such an important area or event, but this feeling of being included or excluded from the city is not considered when we think about developing countries.

Cities like Douala, Dakar, Johannesburg or Luanda, for example, have a huge contemporary art production, both in public art and in the organisation of international events, starting from the '90s (the Biennial of Dakar is in its 12th edition, while the Triennial of Luanda and the SUD – Salon Urbain de Douala have around 10 years experience). In spite of this, communication at an international level is lacking, except for few experts, and these festivals have no impact on people's perception of the African reality.

This does not happen just because it is hard to find information concerning these countries on the Internet (Douala shows more than 300 pictures on Wikipedia), but because such information has very low impact on the collective unconscious. Thinking about an African city from the point of view of contemporary art produces a change in the perception that people have of reality in cultural, geographical, economic and social terms and this means leaving the stereotypes which make us think about a poor, rural and static Africa. In artistic terms, the African unconscious is still deeply linked to masks, wooden sculptures, rituals or traditional ceremonies.

In spite of this, the artistic and cultural landscape has shown a striking growth in the last 20 years, especially around the expanding metropolis. Douala, for example, has experienced an impressive growth in the production of site-specific public art installations (including around 40 works such as monumental, architectural, murals and small scale installations) and in the organization of international event (the Triennal SUD – Salon Urban de Douala).

This chapter examines one of these installation: ‘Les Mots Écrits de New Bell’, a series of six murals produced for the SUD 2010 by the artist and poet Hervé Yamguen, who lives and works in the district of New Bell, the largest popular settlement of the centre of Douala. Les Mots Écrits de New Bell are fragments of texts extracted from songs by two local rappers, Picsou and Moctomoflar, that highlight social and safety issues affecting the districts. This study is based on several sources: a field-trip done by its first author and a survey of locals aimed at exploring their understanding of Douala’s public art installation; interviews with the commissioner (the president of doual’art), artist and rappers who produced the murals; and reports from tourist guides. The chapter is organized as follows. First of all, it provides an overview on Douala, its neighbourhoods and dynamic environment; then it focuses on New Bell, to present and discuss the murals, and their role and interpretations according to different stakeholders – this chapter’s authors, visitors and inhabitants.

# Framing Douala and its neighbourhoods

Douala is considered the economic capital of Cameroun and the most populated city of the country. It is usually defined by inhabitants as a cosmopolitan city, constantly growing and attracting every year thousands of national and international young people looking to emerge, economically and socially, within the metropolis. The ‘dreamt Douala’ (Simone 2005) offers a wide spectrum of job opportunities, a dynamic lifestyle, and freedom from rooted traditions. Its harbour is indeed the largest of central Africa, strategically placed between the mouth of the Wouri River and the Atlantic Ocean. However, it doesn’t produce enough employment for its 3 million inhabitants (while the last census dates back to 2005, this is the most likely estimate for 2015), and often immigrants’ expectations remain unsatisfied (Sween and Clignet 1969; Séraphin 2000).

Tourism, especially business tourism, is playing a key role in the city. Douala offers hospitality solutions for the two classes of tourists it attracts: top level hotels addressed to international business tourists and low-medium hostels for missionaries and adventure tourists stopping-off in Douala before moving to the inner Cameroonian’s regions. In both cases, hotels, hostels and restaurants are concentrated within the four costal and most prestigious neighborhoods: Bonapriso, Bali, Bonanjo, and Akwa. These areas constitute respectively the residential (Bonapriso and Bali), administrative and commercial centres of the modern/western-style Douala inhabited by the richest class of the city.

The flourishing economy around the harbour has attracted many new inhabitants who can’t afford to live near to the rich dockland but instead live in the popular neighbourhoods spontaneously grown around it. After the economic boom of the 1960s, Douala is continuously extending horizontally, with 118 neighbourhoods divided into six districts (Evina Akam and Honoré Mimche 2009). Despite many social, economic and political problems, people in Douala do not like revolutions, after having experienced the dramatic consequences of failing revolutions (such as the *ghost cities* in 1991[[1]](#endnote-1), the *Commandement Opérationnel* *[[2]](#endnote-2)* in 2000, and the *Emeutes de la faim* in 2008*[[3]](#endnote-3)*) (Malaquais 2009). The community prefers to count on the ‘genuinely endogenous strategy for change’ (Bayat 2013). In particular ‘reunions’, regular meetings held by associations have been legalized since the 1991 (Seraphine 2000). They can have different goals (religious, developmental, educational). Often the street is the place where these associations gather to discuss and to take popular decisions to face specific problems: this phenomenon has been labelled ‘street politics’ (Bayat 2003; Jones III 2000; Martin 2004).

# The cultural boom

Since 1991 several cultural institutions and a collective of artists have operated in the urban space of Douala. First of all, doual’art has to be mentioned: it is the oldest art centre of Douala, addressing its work to the urban environment in order ‘to provide the city with human identity’[[4]](#endnote-4). Doual’art, besides hosting an exhibition space, is a hub of experimentation for public art, inviting artists from all over the nation and the world to reflect on the city and to produce permanent or ephemeral public art installations. Since 2007, doual’art has been organizing the SUD – Salon Urban de Douala – a triennial contemporary urban festival in which permanent and ephemeral art installations are presented and offered to the city. Other important cultural institutions in the city are the MAM gallery, an exhibition space founded by Marem Malong Meslin Samb in 1996; ArtBakery, an art centre located in Bonendale, a village outside Douala usually known as the artists’ village; and the Cercle Kapsiki, a group of five Cameroonian artists in Douala who gathered as a formal group in 1998 to set up the K-FACTORY, a contemporary art space in the district of New Bell. After numerous cultural and artistic initiatives – started by doual’art in 1992 by promoting Art Venture, the first mural installation of the city (Babina and Bell 2008) – SUD 2010 promoted several public artworks, among them Les Mots Écrits de New Bell by Hervé Yamguen: a series of six murals and lighting installations located around the district of New Bell Ngangué. These installations showcase written messages coming from the lyrics of songs by two local rappers.

# The cultural experience of visiting murals

Today, Douala's murals represent an important touristic offer of the city: we can define it as alternative cultural experience and they are recommended to the few visitors who arrive in the city for business reasons, for a school trip or thanks to a doual’art invitation. It is no coincidence that the president of doual'art has a socio-economic education. In fact, she caught the ‘human nature’ of a city where beauty is hardly considered and not supported by the public authority and she was able to transform not only the artwork but the whole production project in an artistic and cultural proposal. These socio-politic artworks are set in public spaces and clearly refer to the urban metamorphosis, which includes problems and hopes linked to Douala's nowadays life.

The power and the impression of the murals and of the artworks in public spaces do not depend only on the holiday package offered to visitors, which allows them to explore areas where they would never go alone, but also on the production process of the artwork: an artistic and cultural experience which first of all involves the locals, who experience it everyday as first addressees and beneficiaries. Even if the artworks have a different goal, a sequence of urban transformations have followed this effective production. That is the exceptional case of Douala: the urban and social impact of art becomes an essential part of the visit and makes tourists understand the artworks.

Consistent with Rasheed Araeen's post-colonial studies claiming to rewrite history (Araeen 2010), the production of artworks, which are textual in this case, in public spaces allows to write a real time story of a city. Involving the community in the process means offering the locals an instrument to tell their own social wars and to express their fears and hopes through contemporary art. It is not the description of a past conflict, this is the present, the everyday life's story told through rap music, murals, light installations, big and small sculptures, sometimes using agonizing words, sometimes showing lines full of hope.

Moreover, Douala's public administration intervention struggles to fight against this cultural system and, as we already know, it has silenced the insurrections generated by the locals' dissatisfaction. According to the inhabitants, the cultural institutions and the visitors, the real meaning of these artworks goes beyond the aesthetic of the city, showing clear political and social messages. On the other side, the public administration considers them as a mere urban decoration, which could be more or less likeable, that the authorities have made available to the city without taking on responsibility of them. Even if the artworks can be considered as permanent, their deterioration is fast and it is not only due to the use, but also to the extremely damp weather during the arid season (90% of humidity in the air) and to the exposure to the bad weather during the rainy season.

In few words, doual'art represents the only institution which provides maintenance to limit the artworks' deterioration, while the locals themselves handle the urban maintenance, in particular in New Bell, by taking care of the spaces where the artworks are set, by demanding the public administration intervention (concerning, for example, the garbage collection around the murals or the realisation of new streets) and even by paying the electricity in order to allow the installations to work.

# The exceptional case of New Bell

The district of New Bell in Douala represents one of the most exceptional cases where art participates directly to the citizens’ life, assuming their political and social conditions and, at the same time, modifying the community’s life through new forms of urban management. Set close to Bonapriso, the most fashionable residential area of the city, New Bell is the typical *kwatt* of Douala: an open air slum where ‘you’re going to walk and fall down in the mud, you’re going to cross dirty rivulets to go to the sub district, you’re going to enter people’s homes to go to yours’[[5]](#endnote-5). During the era of German colonization (1884 to 1916), the indigenous citizens were segregated in New Bell and isolated from Western settlements by a green area about one kilometre long in order to prevent any form of infection. After the French took over in 1916, the district became the main focal point for immigration of non-native people coming both from other regions of Cameroon and from abroad, especially from Nigeria, Ghana and Ivory Coast (Njoh 2007; Schler 2008). Today, the area’s extension (including a total of 32 neighbourhoods) together with its population density have turned New Bell into one of the six administrative districts of the city.

Being historically the foreigners’ district, New Bell has been completely excluded from any form of control and regulation, producing a seriously unhealthy and unsafe environment. In New Bell, sewers and gutters are open, used as garbage dumps, causing floods during seasonal rains. In addition, public fountains have been closed down and the community supplies water from shallow wells that are full of insects which cause infection and disease. At the same time: the widespread poverty and unemployment; the presence of the central jail and of the market of Douala - which are respectively the worst and the biggest of Cameroon (Amnesty international 2008; Loe, Meutchehé Ngomsi, and Nken Hibock 2007); the huge concentration of night clubs; the absence of a public lighting system of a police station and any form of social control, are all factors which contribute to increase the risk of aggressions and the diffusion of criminality through the area.

In the district of New Bell, there is no centre. There is not a square, or a public place devoted to entertainment, relaxation or civil discourse and the democratic exchange of ideas: it does not exist and it is even hard to imagine. In New Bell, as well as throughout the city of Douala, the concept of public space includes the idea of *shared space:* an area which is not private, which does not belong to anyone and, for this reason, anyone can take possession of in a completely free and anarchical way. The centre of New Bell is historically created by its streets where both commercial and not commercial activities developed following the Douala’s immigrant communities’ lifestyle and/or their spirit of survival (Simone 2008b; Simone 2006; Simone 2008a). New Bell’s life is not concentric, but it’s a flux(Malaquais 2005): it does not develop around a centre but it expands inside a widespread and permeable network of physical and social intersections that follow the branches of paved streets as well as the entrances corresponding with the blocks of the neighbourhoods and with the so called *mapans. Mapans* are a network of narrow streets connecting roads with the simple houses right inside and dividing buildings in blocks where people can pass only one after the other.

As an immigrant area, the district has a negative reputation. And yet, its lively art and cultural scene stimulates new interests, approaches and aesthetic visions of slum dwellers. From the 2000s, New Bell has become a theatre of art and cultural activities promoted by local and international institutions. Between 2001 and 2002, Cercle Kapsiki in collaboration with Scu2[[6]](#endnote-6), proposed Scenographie Urbaine (‘Urban scenography’), an itinerant festival devoted to urban art. This event was an exceptional success, so much so that it has been replayed in Alexandrie, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Paris, Dakar. The triumph of *Scenographie Urbaine* is due to a special characteristic of the play: artists from all over the world were hosted by dwellers in their houses and got inspired by the sharing of living spaces for their art projects, so that several urban art installations – both permanent and ephemeral - were produced during the three weeks. The festival concluded with a fashion show that was also a resounding success reaching a wide audience, reaching both locals and people coming from the wealthiest areas of the city[[7]](#endnote-7). Following this exceptional event, the *Cinema du Kwatt* (2005-2006) was the second event achieving a relevant success involving the inhabitants of the districts and of the city. The goal of the shows was to invite people to reflect on the value of their popular culture, contemporary and decolonized, through the viewing of documentaries by Jean Rouch, certainly the most popular theorist of the visual anthropology. This was accompanied by works produced by African artists and intellectuals including Goddy Leye. At the start, the shows took place in Rue Napoleon, in New Bell Ngangué, but soon they had been moved out to the football field at the crossroads of New Bell Aviation and later to the CBC Babylon school courtyard. In addition to open air shows, theater shows (like *Allah n’est pas obbligé* by Amadou Kouroum) and movies strongly related with the Cameroonian background (such as *Les Saignantes* by Jean-Pierre Bekolo) were all staged. Not long after they had started, the emotional charge and the intellectual value of these events - which took place in a district that was barely accessible at that time - started to attract not only a middle-class audience but also international promoters and financiers. The Institut Français (<http://www.ifcameroun.com/programmation-culturelle.html>) and the Goethe Institut between them have funded the initiative to allow them to include international guests and troupes, and thereby maintaining free access to the events.

This kind of activity allowed New Bell’s inhabitants to overcome their troubled daily routines and to face afresh the external world, to reflect on their past and the forthcoming future, to develop new interests and so – accordingly to an organizer’s words - ‘renewing the people’s way of living’[[8]](#endnote-8). Moreover, this initiative allowed the inhabitants of the district to have an active role in the promotion of the city’s cultural life, and to welcome people coming from different neighbourhoods and social classes, giving them the possibility to discover the liveliness of a district historically considered to be dangerous. Together with Cercle Kapsiki’s work, doual’art selected New Bell as a privileged neighbourhood to host permanent art installations. Since the first edition of the SUD – Salon Urbain de Douala in 2007, New Bell developed a local pride in the presence of public artworks realized by internationally renowned artists. Among them there are two monuments and several other installations: the *Njé Mo Yé* by Koko Komengé, considered to be the *father* of contemporary Cameroonian artists; and the *Colonne Pascal* by Marthine Tayou, one of the most famous African artist of the world. This is in addition to *New Walk Ways,* a 500 meters long installation by Kamiel Vershuren, a Rotterdam-based artist; and two mural projects including *Oasis* by Tracey Rose (South Africa) enclosed in the walls of the CBC Babylon School, and *Les Mots Écrits* by Hervé Yamguen, artist, poet and member of the Cercle Kapsiki living in New Bell.

# Les Mots Écrits de New Bell

The SUD2010 edition dedicated to the theme of water, allowed the artist Hervé Yamguen to work on a pressing issue concerning his district. Les Mots Écrits de New Bell is a work composed by six wall installations which show segments of text extracted from the songs of two New Bell’s rappers employed by the artist. It represents the words on specific building’s facades, using materials which are deeply linked to the context and to the audience. By doing so, Les Mots Écrits de New Bell describes the unhealthy situation in which the district is forced to live. The lack of an access to drinking water does not mean that there is no water in New Bell. Rivulets of polluted water overwhelmed by garbage cross New Bell and often define the borders between blocks. The songs that inspired Les Mots Écrits tell how pure and clean water reflects the population’s wish to feel well, to live happily – a happiness which today is in decline because water pollution causes diseases and suffering and raise infant mortality rates. New Bell’s rappers compare water with a thief: it is an element which escapes from the inhabitants in spite of its proximity and abundance. Artworks, which became part of the inhabitants’ everyday life, converse with this public ‘reflection’ on their condition, their thoughts and deepest sensations, troubles and fears. On the corner of Entrée Source of New Bell Ngangue two murals show two lines: ‘*Se sentir bien*’ (Fig. 1) and ‘*La vie saine, la joie de se sentir bien, l’envie de vivre de bonheur*’ (Fig. 2). The texts literally mean ‘feeling good’ in the first case and ‘The healthy life’, ‘The joy of feeling good’, ‘The desire to live happily’ in the second.

Figure 1, Les Mots Écrits de New Bell - Entrée Source, Hervé Yamguen (2010)

Figure 2 Les Mots Écrits de New Bell - Entrée Source, Hervé Yamguen (2010)

The choice of the place and of the material is never random. They are placed at the entrance of the sub-district where in the past there was a public fountain that was then closed by the local administration. A big amount of waste dominated the landscape of the Entrée Source and poured out in the drainage canal which follows the perimeter of the street a half meter away from the wall where the artworks were installed. In this scenery, small phrases patterned on an iron tube lie on a mesh made by a light blue wall and four squared mirrors. The colour selected for the work changes completely the look of the street, bringing a breath of fresh air to the place. It catches the pedestrians’ attention, inviting them to engage fully with the meaning of ‘feeling good’ and the joy of conducting a happy and healthy life. The use of mirrors is obviously linked to introspection and to the observation of the surrounding environment: it invites the observer to change their own views, to wonder about the quality of life in a proactive way, producing a subtle and intimate impact at a personal level. Les Mots Écrits also shows the troubles that characterize the familial environment such as the fears parents have about their sons who live in an uncertain society which does not assure a rosy and encouraging future. On the one hand, New Bell’s sons and young people rebel but, on the other hand, they try to be positive and to trust in a society which is going to change, mobilizing on the tiny streets of the neighbourhood, as reported in an artwork[[9]](#endnote-9), attempting to build their future and to establish themselves. At the same time, they are worried about how to reassure their parents about their ability to be independent and to survive in a society that is hostile to their future. Referring to this, the artwork set outside the CBC Babylon School says: *Apres le temps mort vient le temps vif. Comme un coup de foudre. Ne pleure pas maman. Tous les yeux de la ville pleuvent sur moi. Tranquille papa on ne panique pas* [*After the dead times, there are living times. Like a thunderbolt. Do not cry mom. All eyes of the city are raining down on me. Be calm, dad, do not panic*] (Fig. 3)*.* Ceramic - which in Douala is a synonym of hygiene - was used as the first material with the choice of the mosaic as a channel of communication: flying swallows drawn by the text, together with the selection of pink and light blue as main colours, are all elements which refer to the essential need for self-awareness in the school’s pupils who want to grow up and build their future in a healthy, transparent and encouraging environment.

Figure 3 Les Mots Écrits - CBC Babylon School, Hervé Yamguen (2010)

This need is also narrated by the other artworks which show a rebellious, lively and dynamic youth who ask for a city finally cleansed and free form its rubbish, another synonym for its corruption, instability and illnesses. In this regard a mural show the pidgin text ‘wash ma live, lave mon âme, wash mes ways, lave mon kwatt’ [wash my live, wash my soul, wash my ways, wash my neighbourhood]. The pursuit of happiness is the *leitmotif* of Mots Écrits, an incitement to reflect, to fulfil personal growth and to react in spite of the dirty water of the district (*les eaux sales du quartier*) and the ‘*mousitques*’ that cause malaria and from which people have to protect themselves in order to spend a safe and pleasant night (‘*nuit de bonheur*’, Fig.4).

Figure 4 Les Mots Écrits - La joie de Ndogmabi, Hervé Yamguen (2010)

# Listening to the authors

*‘Energie à Douala…energie pour nous même…la vie est belle à Douala!’* [*Energy in Douala … energy for ourselves … life is beautiful in Douala!*]

These are the words chosen by Sadrake, the most famous Cameroonian rapper who lives in Germany, to spur the young people of his city while introducing his concert during the SUD 2013: *‘tout le monde se plaindre de qui va nous sauver, il faut pas se negliger, on a tout à Douala!*’ [everybody complains about what will save us, we should not neglect, everything is present in Douala] (Sadrake, 2013). Sadrake gave of his time and energies to actively contribute to the production of the album *Wash mes ways* byPicsou and Moctomoflar, the two rappers from New Bell. The album wascommissioned by the artist Hervé Yamguen who extracted the lyrics for his artwork Les Mots Écrits de New Bell. It featured two rappers and five songs whose rhymes adopt a common ground language often using the local pidgin dialect that combines words with a specific posture, to an intention or to an interpretation. The artist and poet Hervé Yamguen gathered correctly the socio-cultural value of this work, shaping it in a new language, the language of visual art. That is why he involved the two rappers in his project, allowing them to tell their own reality. Rap is characterized by a vocal expressiveness which is rooted in the ghetto and, by its nature, criticizes and contests society ‘in an open and frank manner’ (Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner 1975). According to Yamguen, a good artist is a good citizen[[10]](#endnote-10). The idea of citizenship is really important in his work and his art is inspired by the district’s lifestyle. For this reason, the artist must have an active role in the place where he lives and has to be a good citizen to be an effective example for the inhabitants. This is an important role assumed by the artist, in particular in a neighbourhood like New Bell where corruption is a consequence of the struggle for existence prevails on the social sensitivity. The art value is, first of all, a human value. The artist is never external from his work and artworks have to be the representation of the ethical space where the artist lives. Yamguen, who is living in New Bell as well, believes that ‘art has to feed the aptitude towards life, towards community life’[[11]](#endnote-11).

The participation of two local rappers was essential to the development of the project that was two years in the making. They organized together several performances and concerts in the district to allow the inhabitants to familiarize themselves with the project, its actors and with an ever growing and ever more varied audience. Slowly, locals started to feel involved in the event so that they made the facades of their houses available for hosting public art installations. Eventually it reached the stage that the artist felt embarrassed when he had to choose between so many offers. Dwellers started to feel proud to give a concrete contribution to the artistic project, increasing their self-esteem and their feeling valued at the same time. The places chosen by the artist to install his artworks are mainly well-known passageways, popular with the inhabitants: the specific intention was to introduce the district’s reality to an international audience and to make the inhabitants think about how to have a better everyday life. Les Mots Écrits de New Bell was officially presented to an audience composed of inhabitants, government stakeholders, and national and international visitors in December 2010 during the SUD – Salon Urbain de Douala. At that occasion, a concert of the two local rappers was organized in the CBC Babylon School’s courtyard, a gathering with an estimated thousand of local and international visitors.

# Tourism in New Bell

In a city like Douala, where a city map is hard to find, tourism intended as a leisure experience is quite limited. Travel agencies mainly deal with flight tickets for business or migration, car hiring, accommodation services, airport assistance and travel insurance. Only in a few cases do they take care of tourist trips both to Cameroon and in Douala. Their mission is to draw the tourists’ attention to the risks they can face within the city, providing information as to how to avoid them: for example, do not go around during the night, do not show your wallet in public places, do not leave the wealthy districts (such as Bonanjo, Bonapriso, Akwa), be always accompanied, catch only *à depot taxis –* better if reserved by the hotel - and do not even talk with the locals: sometimes communication could be difficult and, in some cases, aggressive. Even if this last advice could seem overstated, the others are good suggestions that an inexperienced tourist should consider to have a safe stay in Douala. When visitors decide to have a guided tour of the city, travel agencies turn to doual’art. In fact, travel agencies do not have tour guides and doual’art is the only tourism or cultural reference point for the city which can guide visitors to discover Douala. Together with their public artworks production and with the organization of SUD, doual’art invested a lot in tourism through the creation of a city map (the only one available), providing specific training for bilingual and expert tour guides, and proposing tours that go beyond the most wealthy areas, the only popular ones with Western visitors.

With reference to a survey realized in New Bell which sampled a group of 100 inhabitants, it is not only the tourists’ flow that has grown considerably as a consequence of the installation of public artworks, but it is also constant (they suggest between three and five tourists per month) and, in addition to the peak of the flow reached during the SUD festival, 75% of the interviewees believed that tourists are safe in the district.

Beyond this data, which refers to the individual perceptions of inhabitants, it is important to show that doual’art registered 77 guided tours for a total of 487 paying visitors in one year and half (from May 2011 to December 2013). This is three times the level suggested by locals. Half of the visitors (49%) came from Europe (mainly from France, Belgium and Germany), while the other half (45%) consists of Cameroonian visitors, both from Douala and from the rest of the country. Within the latter statistic, half of the Cameroonian tourists are composed of groups of students on school and university trips coming from the only high school of Art of Cameroon (300km far from Douala) and from the University of Yaoundé. The remaining 6% comes from the rest of the world which includes ten African countries, the USA, and China. The extraordinary nature of the tourism in a district like New Bell is not limited to artworks, whose contemplation by a foreigner results as fascinating as introspective: the arrangement of an artwork in New Bell becomes a chance to look around and to visit a district that a person would barely enter alone. Moreover, artworks interact not only with the environment but also with the inhabitants and with the owners of the buildings that host them. In this way, the tourist’s experience in New Bell gives the possibility to observe the artwork giving an interpretation based on the personal cultural background but it also allows one to deepen his knowledge through a direct dialogue with the actors involved in its production - sometimes visiting the atelier of the artist or discussing with the owners of buildings where artworks are arranged, together with local neighbours. Public art spurs the visitor to play an active role, to enrich their experience by discovering New Bell’s *mapans* far and wide and to understand how, inexplicably, art succeeds gently in having such a strong impact on locals and on the urban transformation of the district.

# Impact on locals

In New Bell, Yamguen’s artworks have become part not only of the environment, improving it, but also part of people’s mentality. They represent a real cause for cultural and educational reflection linked to the idea of beauty. Moreover, they allow the inhabitants to have a local and aesthetic reference point that they can imitate and transform as they like. Artworks are not elements which just beautify and decorate the district, rather, they become reflective of local aesthetic values that slowly and deeply transform the neighbourhood. In this case, they are still transforming the image of New Bell: one example is that homeowners have begun to paint their house walls blue after being inspired by the installations. As one teacher of the CBC Babylon School said, what really matters is that this kind of action *‘Ça réveille. Ça réveille des grandes personnes, comme ça réveille des petits enfants’* [*It wakes. It wakes grownups as it wakes small children*][[12]](#endnote-12). The qualitative, personal and intimate impact that these artworks generated on people is clear also considering the meaning that dwellers give to them. According to inhabitants artworks express not only beauty, but also innovation, education, reality and uniqueness. Some people[[13]](#endnote-13) think that Yamguen’s installations contributed to the requalification of the district: ‘It makes the neighbourhood shine’ (‘Celà fait briller le quartier!’); ‘It’s the aesthetic to the service of society’ (‘C’est l’esthétique au service de la société’). Others think that artworks have made New Bell more modern - ‘For our neighbourhood, this means opening to modernity, it is a rebirth!’ (‘C’est l’ouverture de notre quartier à la modernité, c’est une renaissance!’) - modifying its external perception. ‘It is the originality of a district considered as wild!’ (‘C’est l’originalité d’un quartier jugé sauvage!’), or even ‘For me it represents the difference, as I do not see it everwhere!’ (‘Pour moi cela représente la différence, comme je ne vois pas celà par tout!’). Other inhabitants believe that installations have allowed them to disclose frankly the conditions of the district -’It’s another vision of our realities in terms of a shout of alarm’ (‘Une autre vision de nos réalités en terme de cris d’alarme’). But, at the same time, they represent a turning point: ‘It is the young people’s desire for awareness’ (‘C’est le désir de conscientisation des jeunes’).

In New Bell, art works did not revolutionize the environment and people’s life, they rather influenced the citizens’ capability to adapt themselves daily to the environment in innovative ways. Space metamorphosis represents the model on which people shape their lives. The director of the CBC Babylon School, where mural interventions were installed inside and outside, was inspired to plant flowers in order to improve the environment surrounding the school. She also put up signage in order to avoid people throwing garbage on the ground. The owner of the bar hosting the lighting installation ‘La nuit le bohneur c’est dans les moustiquaires’ modifies the facade of his bar every year with new murals and is committed to pay electricity costs personally in order to maintain the installation on all night long, in a context where the electricity costs affect significantly the monthly cash outflow. Those kind of private activities (the school and the bar) have experienced a huge impact in terms of economic revenues. Since the installation of *Les Mots Écrits* outside the school, the number of students enrolled has doubled (passing from 200 students to 400 in 2012). The school has further invested the new income from the educational offer by introducing the Anglophone session, employing new teachers and funding a new wooden building. On the other hand, thanks to the earnings due to the increasing clientele, the bar owner could enlarge the surface of his bar, tile the floor and exchange old wood tables with plastic ones, more practical to move and to clean. Such examples show how people’s sensibility towards urban space and artistic experience has changed: dwellers are no more extraneous with regard to the installations placed in the district but, on the contrary, they strongly demand them and ask for a renovation of art works and their surrounding space.

# Conclusion

The presence of public art installations in the form of murals in the neighbourhood of New Bell contributes not only to define and reflect on the identity of the district, but also to increase the urban mobility of inhabitants and foreigners in and across the city of Douala. This mobility allows and makes sense to a process of city discovery, enhancing the cultural understanding of local and foreigners. From the locals’ point of view, the role and the presence of artists into the district reveal to be really important to open young people to new experiences and new interests, and to prompt them to react. Experimenting the aesthetic of the ‘ephemeral’, they get in touch with the environment and they are inspired by it to react to its challenges, artistically or not, by questioning their own behaviour. Furthermore, the presence of public art enhances the inhabitants’ possibility to expand their social and international networks: in Douala, expanding networks are a means to increase trust in other people, to improve self-esteem and to contribute to building individual identity.

From a foreigner’s or tourist’s point of view, the visit to public art installations in New Bell becomes something more than a guided tour of the city: it is rather an intense cultural experience reflecting the reality of a part of a city. New Bell, considered as one of the most dangerous district of Douala, has slightly changed its negative attitude to a positive one thanks to the presence of public art in the form of murals. Tourists demand to visit the neighbourhood and to discover not only its public art, but also its *mapans* and its bars. They wish to visit to artists’ ateliers as well. The character of being an immigrant district with murals has become an opportunity for New Bell, a factor that allows foreign visitors to feel welcomed by inhabitants, rather than rejected, even if what the neighbourhood can offer is still limited.

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1. The Villes mortes (‘Ghost cities’) is the denomination of the historical period prior to the first multiparty election in Cameroon in 1991, characterized by a slaughter of the population, including arrests, violence, and tortures to the exponents of the opposition party. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The *Commandement Opérationnel* (‘Operation command’), is a special paramilitary body instituted by the government of Cameroon the 20 January 2000 to fight insecurity and city banditry in Douala. The result was a second butchery, a legalized violence against the population including a thousand people fallen victim of extra-judicial killing, and an unknown number of people disappeared (Malaquais 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The so-called Emeutes de la faim (‘Hunger riots’) are violent social movements organized by citizens of Douala in 2008 asking for a balance in the price of bread as a consequence of the strong inflation of the CFA franc and the diffuse unemployment rate. During these periods several thefts, rackets, armed violence, and burning shop were an everyday issue. Government repressed the manifestations with the army [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Personal conversation with Marylin Douala Manga Bell, President of doual’art, 8 January 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Personal conversation with Junior Ndalle, journalist living and working in Douala, 19 December 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. scU2 is a collective of two scenographers, Jean-Christophe Lanquetin et François Duconseille [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Personal conversation with Hervé Yamguen and Hervé Youmbi artists and organizers of Scenographies Urbaines, 9 January 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The mural text says ‘Dans les eaux salles du quartier, dans ma ruelle ma jeunesse rebelle’. [In dirty waters of the neighborhood in my tiny steets my rebellious youth] [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hervé Yamguen, Personal conversaton, 19 November 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Personal conversation with teacher David from the CBC Babylon School 11 December 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Quotations from the survey [↑](#endnote-ref-13)