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Considering graffiti as active ambiance creation in public space

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Abstract. *Understanding graffiti and other non-verbal communication as a form of ambiance may open professionals to more participatory methods, deepening the quality of the city for the user. This project offers an approach for planners and designers to learn from the active resistance of the norms of use in public space. By a brief review of graffiti literature and a discussion of observations of graffiti tags made on walks in the Montréal City borough Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, tactics for encouraging participation and conversation with liminal space through the lens of the non-verbal communication of graffiti are proposed.*

Keywords: *graffiti, public space, participation, urban design, tactics*

Introduction

The graffiti artist uses space to experience the city in a different but meaningful way, through self-mapping exercises, expressing the moments they experience through visual but non-verbal markers that many other community members do not communicate openly. Graffiti is a design exercise that encourages, whether or not it is actively participated in, stewardship with the urban landscape by finding liminal spaces as opportunities for communication, probing a reaction from the community. Questions about the creation of ambiance and the user through the lens of graffiti writers are considered: How do graffiti writers, particularly taggers, engage with liminal space to highlight design intervention opportunities and to create or detract from ambiance? How can individual and group design interventions encourage more creative methods and direct public participation in the design and planning professions? This paper offers an approach for planners and designers to learn from active resistance to the norms of use in public space to better understand the experiences and motives behind included and excluded users, through a brief review of previous literature and a discussion of observations of graffiti tags made on walks in the western Montréal City borough Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

Understandings of graffiti

Most urban landscapes have the unifying presence of graffiti, whether it is from the quick and messy scribbles of taggers to carefully planned and executed pieces by street artists (Cronin, 2008; Mubi Brighenti, 2010). Academic literature on graffiti also has ubiquitous themes based on the polarization of graffiti's meaning in the urban landscape. The main recurring binary themes include: Graffiti as art or as vandalism, graffiti as pollution, public space versus controlled space, graffiti as cultural exchange or graffiti as a deviant activity. Early academic texts on graffiti focused on using private, bathroom graffiti text as a reflection of societal attitudes, especially towards gender, sexuality and race. Although analysis of bathroom graffiti continues today, much of the polarized conversations around the meaning of graffiti are based on graffiti in public spaces. The literature around graffiti follows the

trends in graffiti, where it begins with private graffiti (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999) in the bathroom and expands outwards on to the streets.

Researchers like Castleman (1982) use interviews of graffiti writers, police, public officials as well as media sources like magazines and newspaper articles to understand the process of graffiti. This descriptive approach, though similar in method to Lachmann (1988), avoids the art/vandalism binary that had been well established by this time. However, Castleman's (1982) interviews do lead him to this observation, "the significant feature of the new graffiti is its sense of purpose, the particular emphasis it places on 'getting around'... only a youth with a sense of vocation can put in the necessary amount of work" (p. 19). Here the wider literature too begins to recognize that street graffiti is purposeful and may have meaning to the writer. Whereas in criminological theory, graffiti has long been characterized by a juvenile, gang related act of vandalism on private property requiring debate over removal, prevention or preservation (White, 2001). But Halsey & Young (2006) and Gomez (1993) attempt to look deeper into the meaning of graffiti beyond the traditional approach to understanding graffiti as a dialectic relationship between graffiti as art/vandalism. For Halsey & Young (2006), "graffiti authors write in ways that rupture orthodox senses of urbanity – of order, cleanliness, purity, integrity and so forth" (p. 296). Here in this sense, graffiti writers gain pleasure from the act of graffiti, in an almost Kevin Lynchian response, highlighting that no city surface is pure, that graffiti reveals the unseen (Mubi Brighenti, 2010; Carrington, 2009; Truman, 2010).

Grffiti as territorial marking has in contemporary literature been framed to be also an act of an autobiographical understanding of the urban landscape, creating a personal narration or a spatially expressed mentally mapped experience. Carrington (2009) focuses on graffiti as visual communication through text, where the meaning can be read by understanding that, "graffiti writing on the city... is about writing oneself into existence. Rather than examples of civil disobedience or simple vandalism, graffiti texts can consequently be read as artefacts of a DIY narrative" (p. 420). Echoing a similar tone of self-narration, Sheepers¹ and Fuhrer (2004) also frame graffiti as a personalized geographical understanding or confession of the self in the urban landscape. Here, the expression of graffiti could be a way of understanding and experiencing the city for the writer and the observer.

As Ferrell (1998), Lachmann (1988), Carrington (2009) and Truman (2010) find, this subculture has actually produced social capital for the individuals participating. This active participation is more than a personal conversation with the urban landscape; it is also a community dialogue that is a sign of political citizenry. Augé (1992) and Hajer & Reijndorp (2001) apply the term "non-places" to many public spaces like road infrastructure, which are the "expression of the super-modern condition: it is marked by loneliness and constant change" (Ibelings, 1998, p. 9). Graffiti in these "non-places" or even "liminal spaces" (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001) is almost expected. The literature identifies transit routes as opportunities for graffiti writing and a means of exchanging graffiti². These "non-places" in the context of graffiti literature and then in the larger urban design literature have resisted becoming removed of their meaning or permanence because they have been recognized by the subculture as useful spaces. They have used them in creative new ways (Hou, 2010; Crawford, 1999). In this sense graffiti is a design exercise that encourages stewardship with the urban landscape, finding liminal spaces as opportunities for communication. Planners and designers can learn from this active resistance to better understand the experiences and motives behind the user of space. Understanding graffiti artists and other non-verbal communi-

1. www.graffiti.org/faq/scheepers_graf_urban_space.html

2. As reported by authors like Ferrell (1998), who studied graffiti on freight trains, or Ley & Cybriwsky (1974), who studied graffiti in inaccessible and difficult spaces, or Castleman (1982) and Lachmann (1988), who understood New York City's transportation system as a place of graffiti dissemination.

cation as design may open the professions to more participatory methods, deepening the quality of the city.

Walking with graffiti

One must have a critical and reflexive eye when looking at the systematic oppressions that play a part in making and remaking neighbourhoods. The *dérives* of the Situationists International in the 1960's were meant to spur "new situations", to create a utopian ideal, as Lefebvre³ says in a later interview with Kristin Ross in 1983. Here in a sense, I am using walking to look for graffiti to understand its contribution to the neighbourhood. While watching for graffiti, I had an idea of where my walks might take me in the neighbourhood, setting up a loose boundary for a set walk, but I also allowed for the possibility of new routes because of how graffiti artists choose their own routes. Two walks were taken, limiting the scope of the paper to routes taken in April of 2012 through the Borough of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) in Montréal, Québec. The focus was on three main streets, Monkland Avenue, Sherbooke Street West, Maisonneuve Boulevard West, but also included a couple of residential side streets and alleyways. Additionally, the focus was on graffiti tags because they are type of graffiti that is messy and less appreciated by graffiti art enthusiasts. Tags appear to be quick scribbles of the writer's name. The community of NDG has identified graffiti tags as an eyesore and recently has implemented a by-law, which forces larger building owners to remove graffiti⁴.

Discussion of observations

Although this was a simple walking exercise to observe a particular action in a neighbourhood, it seemed that there was a common trend in the location and intensity of the tagging. The location of visible graffiti, being graffiti that was not removed, was dependant on the type of street that was traveled on. As the use of the street changes, so do the tags. The quieter, residential side streets have minimal tags. As the streets and buildings become less clear with their use, there was an increase in tags. Common places that tags were found, unsurprisingly were spaces of underuse, with a level of neglect or lack of clear ownership of space. This was true on all streets no matter at how active the majority of the properties owners were at removing graffiti. One can assume, the better cared for buildings were the ones that were not subject to visible graffiti. The act of graffiti actually performs another function, where it encourages users to take notice of the underuse or low maintenance of the space. How we can understand the act of the tagger, despite having their own motives, is that act allows all users to see how that space is functioning or is not functioning well.

When a tagger is walking through the city, they are prepared with their tools to be on the lookout for appropriate spaces to place their work. For instance, on the residential side streets most of the tagging was on the back of traffic signs, on telephone poles, bus shelters or mail boxes. Each of these public furniture pieces are only allowed in the norms of public space to carry a singular function, therefore they are not allowing for other possibilities. On the commercial main streets, Monkland Avenue and Sherbrooke Street West, this tagging of underuse was also apparent, particularly at street corners that offered not interaction with the user of the street. The tagging does not necessarily add to the quality of space, but it starts a conversation about the space perhaps we can consider that the design of blank walled corners encourages user neglect or does not promote user interactions through a lack of design affordance. A blank building wall at a corner with a wide sidewalk and a bench that faces the wall does not in itself encourage users to sit and enjoy this space. Here, a

3. www.notbored.org/lefebvre-interview.html

4. ville.montreal.qc.ca/

designer could start to imagine what could be possible at this space to encourage a variety of uses or affordances for users to use the space in a more flexible way. On Maisonneuve Boulevard, a liminal street that is parallel to a railline, there were many buildings with unclear purposes, or with auto-related uses, facing a fence surrounding the railroad that disconnects the intersecting roads north and south. Maisonneuve Boulevard West offers opportunity to taggers because of the relative isolation on the street. Alleyways on the walks were also isolated and without clear purpose. The cycle of graffiti in these types of spaces starts because the message to users passing through the space is not welcoming. While walking, as one moves north away from this space less graffiti is present. The community reflects this message by how quickly they remove graffiti from the spaces.

Tagging and temporary interventions

The community and the design professional could take the unintentional cue from the tagger, using the tag as a sign that the space needs to be recognized as a place for conversation. Not necessarily for the sake of preventing tagging, rather from the consideration that this space is underused and does not add to the conversation of the street. Tagging promotes a certain stewardship, not necessarily by the tagger intentionally. But in NDG through the tension over graffiti and through the reactionary anti-graffiti by-law, a conversation about the quality of the space has begun. The borough Mayor Michael Applebaum was quoted in saying, “we want to keep our community clean... we want to keep it nice”⁵. However, this notion of “nice” implies that all of NDG offers a nice ambiance for its users. Would the users’ senses be more satisfied with clean and blank surfaces? Perhaps the key to understanding the user experience on the street does not come from working against what currently exists, but rather working with it.

Temporary interventions by the community and by design professionals can work with the current use of these spaces to encourage participation in the design process. If the by-law against graffiti were meant to keep the area “nice”, an evaluation of what the neighbourhood considers to be nice would be useful. An evaluation would help the community’s own understanding of tagged spaces, by determining if once the graffiti is removed, are these spaces contributing to the street and the user experience? Examples of temporary installations are the murals that are seen around NDG. However, the by-law now requires an owner to not only give their consent to have the outside of their building painted, but they also must apply for permission from the borough. This approval process is controlling the nature of the ambiance and what is considered “nice” in the neighbourhood.

Alternatively, the borough could use tactics similar to those used by Candy Chang⁶. The tactics are based on idea of using temporary interventions as a form of community dialogue to encourage all users to share their feelings about a space and perhaps propose how it should change. Chang has painted outside of condemned buildings with chalkboard paint in neighbourhoods in the United States and asked passers-by what they think that the building and in turn, the themselves, would want to do “*Before I die...*”. Another example is Chang’s “*I wish this was*” project, where she provided people in a neighbourhood with stickers that said, “*I wish this was*” with space for the individual to fill in what they thought. They could then place the sticker in an appropriate space. Using “play” as a premise for design could be a way to ensure that affordances are created into space for people to exercise agency over space. For urban design to have meaning and for it to be able to respond to pluralism, one could include the idea of play, but also look to popular education in collaboration with professional technical knowledge. Urban design professionals should consider how people are designing for themselves in public space. Chang’s tactical responses to a neighbourhood

5. www.freepresspaper.com/pdf/FP-Oct-11-2011.pdf

6. www.candychang.com

condition have the potential to increase participation in a neighbourhood. In a sense, these activities could expand tagging, engaging users of the space in a way that lets users to see space in a new way.

Conclusion

As a response to the rigidity and control over public space, Stevens (2006) writes, “two specific potentials are illustrated, through two different types of play: the first is physical exploration of the space, which leads to a bodily sensation; the second is engagement with the meanings of a space, and here the choice of site and the outcome are directed to the goal of communicating with other people who share the space” (p. 822). The tensions in NDG over graffiti speak to a broader question of underused liminal “public space”, those who use it and those who own it. What can be learned from the struggles of NDG’s graffiti is that there is the call for higher quality space in the neighbourhood. It is a call for residents and businesses to fill these “empty” targets with something more useful and inviting for people using the street so they will recognize its collective value.

Every time that an individual or a group uses space or creates place in a new way, outside the prescribed program of a space, they are actively (re)designing, or playing with, space. Crawford (1999) writes, “everyday space stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated and often underused public space that can be found in most American cities.... [It is] a zone of social transition and possibility in the potential for new social arrangement and forms of imagination” (p. 9). The everyday is the space in between official design and plans. It is the actual expression of place, as Candy Chang’s tactics explore. One must recognize that users, even the unintended user, like the graffiti tagger, can shape space and what is important for designers to learn, is to create inherent flexibility in their design to loosen the control and prescriptions of the space (Stevens, 2006; Hou, 1999). User experience requires consideration of pluralism, inclusion, exclusion, oppression and new, resistant uses to the large normative powers. Urban design is an interdisciplinary endeavour. It requires the acceptance of the layered complexity of urban life and the increasingly challenged notion of the collective or the public domain. Professionals must work together across science and social science, but also across experiences, class and culture of users and those who are excluded. Urban design is not a set of instructions on how to make a good city or how to better a city, rather it is the recognition of the importance of cities and their inherent context based development in an increasingly shrinking world and resources.

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