



Territories of Gentrification: A Visual Essay of Philadelphia Graffiti in Spaces of Transition

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Abstract

Along the territorial edges of urban development, graffiti visually dominates the space, even if extremely temporarily. New condominiums, fenced-in lots, and plastic traffic barriers are marked repeatedly by graffiti writers that take claim over their neighborhoods through their tags. Graffiti as a medium has been highly politicized and commonly associated with vandalism, crime, and lower property values by city governments, law enforcement, and traditional media. In contrast, murals are utilized to inhibit graffiti painting, preserve communal history, and protect the commercial value of spaces through aesthetics. This visual essay explores how graffiti challenges spaces of gentrification in Philadelphia and the materials that facilitate the art form. Three areas that are currently undergoing prominent development in Philadelphia are Northern Liberties, Fishtown, and West Philadelphia. We argue that these territories represent a dialogue between the local community and developers regarding property ownership, cultural/demographic shifts, and the commodification of space. Our research considers the ephemerality of graffiti as it relates to the materials used in the construction of these developments. The impermanence of the structures graffiti is created on makes this medium a useful tactic in opposing urban developers and speaking to their community through citizens media. In these territories of transition, graffiti writers visually disrupt capital movement and investment. These spaces of urban development are representative of present and future private investment, and the complex relationship between graffiti writers, developers, and the larger community.

Keywords

gentrification, graffiti, urban development, Philadelphia graffiti, citizens' media

The edges of gentrified spaces serve as unique boundaries which speak to the relationships between ownership, value, and communal art practices. In the city of Philadelphia, graffiti and murals are heavily impacted by the changing terrain that comes with gentrification. These areas exist in a transitional state, going from abandoned or vacant to renovated and resided in. In this process, previous graffiti tags and murals are destroyed, at times unevenly, yet new construction materials and surfaces present new opportunities for

artists. However, this temporality is only part of the full picture. The deciding factors of which art images and sites are preserved through these developmental trends, emphasize the complex relationships between the interests of local communities and private developers. And although more value is often placed on historic and publicly commissioned murals, some graffiti spaces are also preserved in the interest of continuing some of the illegal artform's legacy. Due to these factors, public art existing in and around gentrified spaces serve as visceral

illustrations of the competing interests between private capital and artists, developers and local communities.

Known for its historic relationship with modern graffiti, Philadelphia serves as a great example to showcase these complex relationships between graffiti art, public murals, and commercial values of residential areas. In an effort to combat illegal graffiti, officials created multiple organizations that focused on promoting public mural art programs instead. The "Anti-Graffiti Network" is now known as Philadelphia Mural Arts and embraces graffiti writers by hiring them to paint the commissioned public murals, rather than their unsanctioned renegade pieces. This is one example of how territories have been negotiated between members of the community and city officials. Further, it represents how the city government values public art and what they deem as "acceptable" forms of art. This collection of photographs examines three neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Northern Liberties, Fishtown, and University City. These three areas were chosen due to their historic and ongoing relationship with gentrification. These photos seek to illustrate how development impacts graffiti and other public art, and how graffiti artists utilize new and temporary spaces in response to gentrification processes.

The boundaries of gentrification are often marked by vacant properties and empty lots, areas with low lighting and less omniscient surveillance than more densely populated areas. These conditions are perfect for graffiti writers who seek to display their work in a less protected location. As properties become abandoned and fall into disrepair, graffiti artists utilize these surfaces, creating a visual environment that some perceive as decay and lawlessness. The semi-permanence of vacant buildings allow for some graffiti tags to live on for years and even decades, however their longevity relies on private interests and future development. In this way, graffiti art, especially pieces with longer permanence, embrace spaces between communities and developers, visually dominating the peripheries of development and local communities.

During the process of constructing multi-use residential complexes new, ephemeral canvases for graffiti are uncovered or created. The placement of temporary fencing, blockades, signs, and construction materials in addition to the demolition of existing structures to reveal new wall space make these sites ideal for graffiti writers to create on. The tags found on these structures are temporary, and as construction progresses it is unknown when they will disappear again. The material conditions of construction are determined by the ruling class and impact modern architecture that applies to both elites and working class families. "At the core of these conditions we naturally find an authoritative decision-making process that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction" (Debord, 1995). The material conditions of these gentrified areas require individuals that reside there to conform with a mediated conception of their being, abstracted from their natural state of being. The ruling class determines when and where this development occurs, and replaces the natural environment with an engineered territory that is constructed to align with capitalistic values that disconnects individuals through a representation of what that natural environment should be. This causes the residents there to accept these material conditions through passive consumption in a commodified space.

Gentrification also creates new opportunities for graffiti presence in construction zones through nonstationary and impermanent materials. Surfaces like traffic barriers, boarded windows, plastic tarps, and property related signs serve as temporary canvases for graffiti artists. The use of these materials as opposed to the buildings being constructed, allows for graffiti tags to potentially last longer, as they will be less likely to be buffed over than active, commercial buildings. Certain reusable materials like traffic barriers, cones, and signs can also act as vehicles for graffiti tags, being used in certain locations, and then being reused in another. The temporality of these materials also informs the types of graffiti tags which are most often employed on such surfaces. Graffiti artists will often use handstyles (single line signatures) and throwies (abbreviated and/or quick

names). These two types of graffiti are often employed due to their quickness and more economic use of paint material. These types, as opposed to pieces or burners (multi-layered, complex designs), make up a large proportion of graffiti found on construction material due to the understanding of said materials' ephemeral quality, and the space's proximity to capital and thus law enforcement.

In Northern Liberties, skeletons of warehouses and textile mills that have been abandoned through the deindustrialization of the city have been either gutted for reconstruction and demolished entirely to make space for new construction. The working class environment of rowhomes and factories has been transformed into a space boasting luxury lofts and condos with names that reference their original purpose: Iron Mill Lofts, Cigar Factory Condos, Schoolhouse Lofts are a few examples. Recently, an art gallery hosted a graffiti and street art exhibition series called "Step Outside," which is curated by and for Philly based artists. Artists featuring their work in this show also sold many of their pieces, which is representative of how graffiti aesthetics have become commodified and transitioned into a high art space in which artworks are purchased by the residents of the housing complexes that were at one point sites for graffiti by those same artists.

The neighborhood of Fishtown is known for the trendy bars, restaurants, galleries, and modern housing design that populate this area in North Philadelphia. This neighborhood is home to many upscale art galleries and artist studio spaces in reconstructed warehouses that were once lively industrial centers of production that employed the working class of Philadelphia. Fishtown gets its namesake from its historical roots as a major center for the maritime industry. Developers take advantage of the high crime and poverty rates in the neighboring area of Kensington that make this area less desirable to buy property while the value is low and then flip it into luxury housing.

University City, a sprawling neighborhood in West Philadelphia, has a long history of demolition, displacement, graffiti art, and communal mural projects alike. Tension between educational and medical institutions, and the surrounding working-class neighborhoods began through demolition and redevelopment projects during the 1960s. They have partially materialized in our contemporary moment through disputes over mural placements, historic sites, and new development. This neighborhood illustrates the dialogue between residents, community leaders, and private developers as organizations vie for the permanence of historic murals and commemorative artworks.

While murals are often coveted by community members, graffiti is seen as a result of degradation and crime in the area. Older tags on abandoned properties are not considered for historic protection, and most graffiti messages with anti-gentrification encoding are considered to be a nuisance and reactionary to the area's development.

Although murals are often valued more than graffiti, there are graffiti spots in Philadelphia which are valued by community members, and have been allowed to thrive. The graffiti pier, located in the northeast corner of Fishtown, is an abandoned coal loading pier which has been used as a graffiti playground for decades. The city of Philadelphia has attempted to purchase the land in an effort to convert it into a park, however, the landowner has stalled on selling, citing competing interests of development companies and others who want to reopen the pier. In 2024, a section on the edge of the pier broke off into the Delaware River sparking new concern over use of the land and stalling this decision even longer. Another space that has been given recent attention is a wall stretching along Cecil B. Moore Street and 5th Avenue. For over three decades this area has been curated by a local graffiti artist who gets international artists to come paint their tags. The curator, Christian Rodriguez of Tameartz, met with the property owner in 2018 and received explicit permission to continue this curation even as development of a new space began. This wall wraps around an empty lot

that has been under development since 2018, when the property owner announced that the space would house a new multi-use building equipped with office, retail, and residential spaces. This plan did not come to fruition as construction began and soon halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For a brief year and a half the lot was then redesigned into an outdoor venue called The Sunflower, which vanished as quickly as it appeared, all the while Rodriguez continued the wall's curation. The site is still in limbo as there are signs announcing construction to continue in December of 2025. At the time of writing, there is still no semblance of new construction for the lot, however the graffiti on the walls continues to rotate as it has done since at least the 1990s. And although there is no guarantee of future preservation, the graffiti wall at Cecil B. Moore presents an example of communal engagement and advocacy for continuing a graffiti site due to its historic and artistic relevance, outside of publicly funded art.

Beyond the foundation of graffiti as citizens' media, graffiti challenges the value of private property and how public space may be utilized - and by whom. The historical criminalization of graffiti, in contrast to sanctioned street art and murals, represents the value of private property ownership and the efforts to legally protect such rights. While property owners maintain their rights over how their land is used, this creates a tension with street artists and the preservation of their art (Bonadio, 2018). In some cases, graffiti is fought to be preserved based on the period of time it has "lived" on the wall and how it may benefit or harm property owners through the proposed new use of the space. Further, interests of the general public are taken into consideration to determine if the new construction or the aesthetic interests are more beneficial. Most graffiti writers understand that by illegally writing on private property they are relinquishing their right to preserve their art on the basis of private property ownership rights that exist in the United States, specifically (Bonadio, 2018). The ephemeral nature of graffiti is inherent to the art form, however as this subculture evolves alongside the larger social value of art and aesthetics more artists are striving to preserve their work.

Graffiti and murals, and the public advocacy for their preservation, illustrates a powerful dynamic between communities, landowners, and public funding. Along the territorial borders of gentrified spaces, these public artworks serve as reminders of transitions of space and power. For private developers, the potential profitability of urban spaces creates a balancing act between preservation of communal history and aesthetics on the one hand, and new uses and sterile comfortability on the other. While some developers and landowners embrace historic public art spaces, such as the owner of the plot at Cecil B. Moore, most private firms do not consider communal ties to public art and instead consider full destruction of said areas. However, the public interest held in both murals and some graffiti sites, sometimes mark a potential for capital gain, presenting a challenge for urban developers as they balance between the value held in public works and their possible development. In the end, gentrification and its borders serves as a powerful insight into the values placed on certain public artworks compared to others. These transitional spaces present challenges for communities and artists alike, directly impacting what was and what has the potential to become in a given space. Because of the non-permanence and ephemerality of these spaces as they relate to public images, these borderlines deserve more attention from scholars, researchers, and photo-journalists. In this way, the spaces at the edge of gentrification demand our attention and documentation as they change under the fluid conditions of communal attention, property values, and the flows of private capital.

References

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UNION TRANSFER

- APR 20 • CIRCA WAVES & FRIDAY NIGHT PILGRIMS
- APR 21 • THE LINDA LINDAS
- APR 23 • MAGNOLIA PARK
- APR 25 • RESTLESS ROAD
- APR 29 • ELDERBROOK
- APR 30 • SHARON VAN ETTEN & THE ATTACHEMENT
- MAY 2 • GEORGE CLANTON
- MAY 3 • THE DAMNED
- MAY 4 • BOB WOULD
- MAY 5 • NAPALM DEATH & MELVINS
- MAY 7 • MARIBOU STATE
- MAY 8 • LARKIN POE
- MAY 10 • CLAP YOUR HANDS SAY YEAH
- MAY 11 • MEMPHIS MAY FIRE
- MAY 12 • DEAFHEAVEN
- MAY 14 • DURAND BERNARE
- MAY 16 • SUPERHEAVEN
- MAY 17 • KNUCKLEPUCK
- MAY 18 • RAVEENA
- MAY 22 • LUCIUS
- MAY 28 • MATT BERNINGER
- MAY 29 • ANEES

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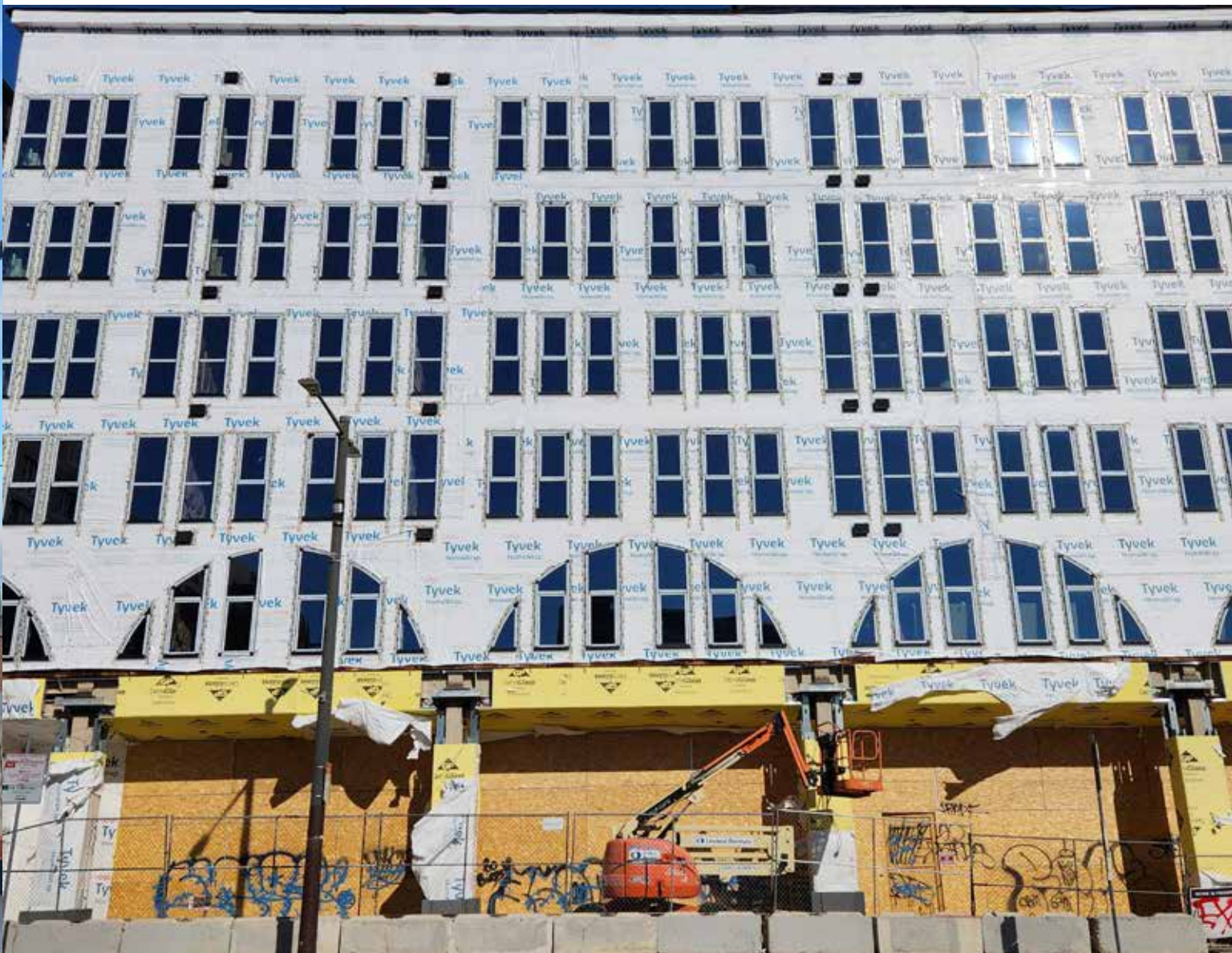








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