

## Bombing Modernism: graffiti and its relationship to the (built) environment

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Paris subway car. Photo: Adam A.

### The curse of modernism

The search for truth can take us to the most unlikely places. As post-war domesticity and prosperity settled over much of America, the growing rift between haves and have-nots exposed serious doubts about the promise of modernism and a modern life. An honest appraisal of a deteriorating American condition didn't come from the cloistered towers of celebrated universities or intellectual cafés thick with smoke. It came from the heart of the ghetto where new voices were quick to take up arms against the status quo. Holstered with felt tip markers and spray cans, truth was recognized in a colorful show of force and bravado. For graffiti artists, manipulating letters became lifeblood and fighting back meant getting ill, and ill-legible.

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Because modernism was considered positive, rational, and objective, architects like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe championed its capacity to facilitate a new social order. They prophesized that technological progress and a reconsidered urban plan would result in "better living through architecture." Although Le Corbusier applied his concepts to a series of theoretical, large scale housing projects, cities like Paris were wary of the plans and rejected his ideas. But by the end of World War II the need for new housing stock (both in Europe and the United States) persuaded a generation of architects and urban planners to embrace Le Corbusier's Utopian vision. The dream that modernism could somehow ameliorate living conditions never came true. Instead, just the opposite occurred. Anonymous, cheap, high-density housing isolated its inhabitants from the greater city and exacerbated socio-economic problems. It prompted Charles Jencks, the architect credited for popularizing the term post-modernism, to date the symbolic end of modernism as July 15, 1972. That's when the prize-winning Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis was demolished. Designed in 1951 by Minoru Yamasaki (who went on to design the World Trade Center towers) the project included 33 eleven story buildings, 2870 apartments, and when it was initially conceived, not one playground.



Pruitt Igoe Housing Project. Photo: [www.affordablehousinginstitute.org](http://www.affordablehousinginstitute.org); Tags. Photo: Graffiti Research Lab

It's easy to see how a generation of restless teenagers growing up in high-rise and low-rise ghettos doubted and eventually rejected modernism and its oppressive reality. For them, modernism represented systemic irrationality, negativity, half truths, poor education, and limited access to economic empowerment. However, when a self-aware subculture rose out of the urban core to embrace plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy, something clicked. In retaliation they shaped an honest reflection of their lives from a fundamentally post-modern lens that pitted them against larger forces that had denied them individual value and cultural identity. Adventurous teens did this with no capital and no organizational power. They fought back with one of the few things they could control, words.

By focusing on just their name, "bombing" (tagging) it over and over again in different styles, teenagers developed an intuitive understanding of how the building blocks of language could be controlled for their specific needs. No wonder these artists referred to themselves as writers and their work as writing.

#### The power of language

Hegel wrote that, "To learn to read and write an alphabetic writing should be regarded as a means to infinite culture." The post-structuralist French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote that, "Language is oppression," because it is developed to allow only those people who speak it not to be oppressed. During the late 1960s overcoming socio-emotional hurdles necessitated both Hegel's key to unlocking infinite culture and Foucault's understanding of language's deeper power. Once harnessed, an unusual torrent of creative, language-based experimentation and expression flowed from inner cities like New York and Philadelphia. It turned tables, oppressed the oppressor, and lit the fuse for a contemporary graffiti movement.

It all started with the tag. The first were rudimentary in contrast to today's complex signatures but were steeped in a layer of political and social dynamism that is no longer possible. Loosely derived from territorial gang marks, early graffiti artists like TAKI 183, JULIO 204, and LEE 163 included their name and street numbers as a first step toward identity, attention, and respect in an otherwise stark and ruthless city. During his day as a foot messenger TAKI 183 was able to tag office buildings, subway stations, mail boxes, and the inside and outsides of subway cars. He was the first to go "all-city" a title of reverence reserved for the graffiti artist that gained visual prominence throughout all five boroughs of New York City. Recognition for TAKI

183 and enthusiasm for the burgeoning graffiti scene was stoked when, in 1971, the New York Times published an article about the omnipresence of the messenger's curious mark. It quickly led to surge in tagging.

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"Getting up", the recognition that comes with the near constant act of tagging your name, became the driving force in the nascent graffiti scene. As a result the application of tags proliferated through crowded urban housing projects and high-traffic public transit systems until surfaces were covered in permanent inks. The competitive nature of graffiti, a hold-over from urban gang activity, was played out in non-violent "battles" that featured spray cans and skill instead of knives and strength. (The competitive nature of graffiti would seep into and boost the related youth sub-culture of hip-hop dance and music.) More importantly, competition brought about the stylistic innovations that were necessary to distinguish one tag from the rest. These revealed themselves in unique hand styles and lettering including the use of bubble letters, complicated scripts, calligraphic flourishes, flexible ascenders and descenders, new ligatures, simple illustrations, and cartoon characters. In many cases a combination of these left tags illegible to all but the graffiti artists. By focusing on just their name, "bombing" (tagging) it over and over again in different styles, teenagers developed an intuitive understanding of how the building blocks of language could be controlled for their specific needs. No wonder these artists referred to themselves as writers and their work as writing.



Bubble letters. Photo: Graffiti Research Lab



Rome subway car. Photo: Phil Moore

#### A post-modern condition

Post-modernism, with its distrust of universal judgements and hostility toward hierarchies of value, reflected a shift away from the establishment toward the pluralism of an increasingly global society. The interconnections of globalism not only increased communication, trade, and overseas manufacturing but also decentralized accepted political and commercial power bases as well as their centers of intellectual production. They allowed for cultural pluralism to succeed where previously it had not and exerted further pressure on the concept of stylistic unity. Wide-spread sharing resulted in a democratisation of taste where the values of struggling social classes could survive and thrive in micro-economies that performed outside the well-oiled machine of mass commercial markets. Contemporary graffiti's connection to post-modernism certainly began as a response to the flaws of modernism but it was able to establish itself as an independent discipline that understood how to manage and employ meaning within a cultural context.

In arts and architecture the post-modern was evident in the way familiar styles and spaces were recreated and reviewed. Wit, ornament, and historical reference collided in an eclecticism that was best summed up by the architect Robert Venturi when, in his watershed book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he turned Mies van der Rohe's favorite doctrine, "Less is more," inside out by noting, "Less is a bore." Venturi argued for a pluralism of meaning in architecture that adequately reflected a diverse society. He wrote, "I like elements which are a hybrid rather than pure, compromising rather than clean, distorted rather than straightforward, ambiguous rather than articulated, perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as interesting, conventional rather than designed, accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity."



Vanna Venturi House. Photo: JPMM; Michael Graves Denver Library. Photo: ©2007 Paul McAleer

Applied to graffiti, Venturi's ideas on a valid architecture described one of writing's most interesting characteristics: its ability to reconsider letter forms, reformulate language, and destroy the accepted hierarchies of communication. With no artificially imposed order and the inherent decentralization of postmodernism as its guide, graffiti writers used irony (in the form of the oppressor becoming the oppressed), double coding (writers communicated simultaneous messages to different social groups), and paradox (the inherent illegibility of their work), as tools to change our shared expectations of how, where, and why we communicate. It is an archetypal study in semiotics where signs and symbols are used to recognize how meaning is formulated and perceived. It is also an example of how information can be transferred and data decoded between sender and receiver.



Wall. Photo: Graffiti Research Lab

### Change happens

In just over a decade graffiti writers were able to evolve their work from one color tags to kaleidoscopic subway cars and then to "wild style" pieces with highly ornamented and intricate lettering. This evolution is proof of the inherent competition that forced writers to consistently experiment and of graffiti's incongruous relationship with the marketplace. Unlike traditional applications where type, layout, and design serve the needs of buyers and sellers, writers had no allegiance to anyone or anything. With no pressure and no labels such as "success" or "failure" to limit them, writers moved from student to teacher, directing a hip-hop revolution that would eventually position their urban culture as the predominant commercial lifestyle in America.

Graffiti artists did reach a crossroads in the 1980s. As teachers, they provided for (but couldn't cash in on) a generation of profitable hip-hop products that were scooped up, repackaged, and sold by marketers from coast to coast. As artists, some tried to find acceptance through mainstream cultural outlets but ended up playing muse to the likes of Keith Haring or Jean Michel Basquiat. As writers, with too much time and too little money, they were on a collision course with a political system that was coordinating their demise. City Hall saw graffiti not as the effect of social ills but as its cause. Between 1984 and 1990 New York City adopted George Kelling's Broken Window Theory and veraciously targeted graffiti. Subway cars were buffed clean on a regular basis and any car that had been tagged was taken out of service. Penalties for those caught writing were increased and access to subway and commuter train layover yards obstructed by new barbed wire fencing. Eventually graffiti proof, Teflon coatings were applied to subway cars, denying writers their best canvas and all but killing their pursuit.



COPE Photo: Vito Street

Even as politicians and police continued to attack writing as a serious crime, the 1990s saw the acceptance of graffiti writing grow until it became an integral part of global fashion, music, graphic design, and illustration. In trying to understand how counter intuitive shifts are eventually accepted by society architect Bernard Tschumi wrote in his treatise, *Violence in Architecture*, "If the Sistine Chapel were used for pole-vaulting events, architecture would then cease to yield to its customary good intensions. For a while the transgression would be real and all-powerful. Yet the transgression of cultural expectations soon becomes accepted. Just as violent Surrealist collages inspire advertising rhetoric, the broken rule is integrated into everyday life."

While deconstructivist architects, including Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, and Daniel Libeskind, have avoided this or any other title that might place artificial restrictions upon them, graffiti writers have been going about their work oblivious to the fact that they, more so than architects, are defining both a visual and spatial representation of deconstruction.

#### New interpretations

Graffiti, in its most pure form, had fulfilled its promise. By this time the original rebirth writers that came out of the ghetto could no longer sustain their participation. Time and times had inevitably changed. The freedoms of postmodernism gave way to a technological and information revolution. No longer confined to the urban core and no longer propelled by one socio-economic identity, tech-savvy writers used the cumulative work of their predecessors as a palimpsest to violate what had come before and reinvent graffiti writing all over again.

It was inevitable that new tools and a dose of cross-fertilization would force the complete pliability and subversion of letters and language as part of a wave of deconstructive thought. Deconstruction, as it relates to philosophic applications, was posited by Jacques Derrida who challenged existing theoretical texts by exposing them to the innate ambiguity of language. He suggested that words have different meanings based on each reader's past experiences, cultural connections, or social influences. Under these circumstances absolutes disappear and an author's original intent is open to infinite subjectivity. In a Domus magazine interview from 1986 Derrida described his intent, "Deconstruction...analyzes and compares conceptual pairs which are currently accepted as self evident and natural, as if they had not been institutionalized at some precise moment, as if they had no history. Because of being taken for granted they restrict thinking." It is important to note that rather than a negative process of dismantling, deconstruction is more accurately defined as affirmative because it frees concepts from their historic foundations and opens up new possibility. (Even Nietzsche said that all perception is interpretation.)

Marcel Duchamp was the first deconstructive artist when he questioned value and authenticity by releasing everyday objects from their traditional meaning and proudly proclaiming them Readymades. Duchamp did it again with analytical cubism where form could be viewed from multiple perspectives. Today architecture is considered best positioned to interpret the visual and physical expressions of deconstruction. What constitutes a deconstructive architecture is still an open question: a non-linear design process, manipulation of surface or skin, geometric imbalances, distorted spaces, rejection of historical precedent, influence from Russian Constructivists, or just controlled chaos. Architect and author Mark Wigley says it's simply, "the ability to disturb our thinking about form" that makes a project deconstructive.



Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Photo: Tennis Vermelho; Thom Mayne's Diamond Ranch High School. Photo: Suntom

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Zaha Hadid painting. Photo: Mangtronix

The best examples of this are cross-fertilizations where language and architecture merge. Hybrid "typogritecture", breaks apart and reprocesses letters through a deconstructive filter only to be re-engineered into unrecognizable symbols that carry graffiti's unique message. JOKER has stretched the letters of his tag into a series of highly gestured tectonic plates that shift and dip on the page and in public spaces.



JOKER. Photo: [www.jinscoe.com](http://www.jinscoe.com)

DAIM's writing, reminiscent of Zaha Hadid's large scale paintings, relies on heavily layered dimensional tags that simultaneously leap off the wall and drop into deep space.



DAIM. Photo: Sebastian Gondek / PLphoto

DELTA has transcended traditional elements like spray paint, using sculptural devices to create complex tags more suited to robotics and the electrosphere than to the street.



DELTA. Photo: [www.deltainc.nl](http://www.deltainc.nl)

In one of the more interesting hybrid explorations the Dutch writer ZEDZ has teamed with the architecture studio of Maurer United Architects on a proposal to build his tag into large-scale street furniture for the campus of the Eindhoven University of Technology.



ZEDZ and Maurer United Architects. Photo: [www.zedz.org](http://www.zedz.org)

Recognizable in the work of all these writers is the easy integration of technical elements derived from the computer and architectural drafting software. The results are true and the writing has obviously pushed the boundaries of how language can be visualized and communicated. Yet there is something unreal about it. There comes a point in which upsetting narrative content and violating a utilitarian need causes these technically perfected and abstracted tags to become at once meaningful and meaningless. The writing is iconographic and each piece lives as a magnet for our attention, but they are increasingly difficult to connect to personal experiences. Lacking the raw energy and power or the history and shared experience that comes with racking paint and cutting chain link fence, these pieces float in a world of fiction. They are unreal and it's easy to doubt their authenticity.

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Language dissolves, communication fails

Watching from the sidelines as a new language is formed, evolves, and falls apart is a rare opportunity. Having the activity compressed into just a few decades is a rare treat. That graffiti writing is dead is not to say that it doesn't happen anymore (just ask the owner constantly cleaning tags from his building). But after a meteoric ride and the market's slow strangulation, graffiti has none of the rocket fuel that post-modernism provided and the academic nature of deconstruction isn't able to infuse writing with the personal narrative that has gone missing. To recognize that letters, like architecture and other modes of meaning, have limits to their effectiveness, is part of the exciting experiment. It may be that, as Bernard Tschumi describes, this is just a pause in which our current violation can be absorbed.

More likely we have come to a definitive moment. Not because writers are unable or unwilling to conjure up new constructions. They keep at it. But without tension, sincerity or a revolutionary message the constant re-combinations are, like deconstruction itself, just exercises open to doubt. The truth is that Le Corbusier's hope for an age of technology and progress that could improve the lives of so many has finally arrived. A new global level is doing today what the architect wanted his craft to do almost a century ago. Information, access to it and the ability to manipulate it, is fulfilling the promise of a new social order. And in the end it is the sheer volume of data being sent and received through rational computer-based systems

that is rendering graffiti writing impractical. Bombing is losing out to blogging and modernism has made a triumphant return.

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