
Digital-Cultural Ecology and the Medium-Sized City

2016

01-03 April

Abstract Submission Form

- 1. Paper / Proposal Title:** The Boom in Broken Windows: examining the place of digitized street art in post-industrial urban renewal
- 2. Format:** Written Paper, Verbal Presentation, & (possible?) Photo-Essay
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6. Abstract (300 words):

This paper and presentation are the first to elaborate a theoretical framework for examining the complexities that obtain between graffiti, street art, 'digital-social photography,' and the ways in which these artistic artefacts and communicative technologies have altered the cultures and economies of post-industrial urban space. Graffiti and street art were once regarded as disquieting visual disruptions to sanitized city space. They functioned much like other 'broken windows' in that they required 'fixing' as soon as possible so as not to disturb the fragile aesthetic sensibilities of urban denizens. These illicit markings were, therefore, inherently ephemeral in that any trace of their existence was swiftly eradicated from the urban canvas. In turn, graffiti writers and street artists archived their artwork by photographing it. This paper's first contribution is to underscore the difference between times past and present by emphasising the technologies that currently allow the artist to not only archive their work, but also and much more importantly, share a record of it with tens-of-thousands of others. 'Digital-Social Photography' is a concept that recognizes the influence of social networks on photographic practice in general. Most important to this paper, however, it is also

responsible for metamorphosing graffiti and street art from once-illicit and reviled artforms into one of the most alluring and desirable attributes of any project of post-industrial urban rejuvenation.

In order to argue the above, this paper makes reference to original field research undertaken in Detroit, Michigan; one of the United States' most storied and misunderstood medium-sized cities. The theoretical scaffolding that supports this argument is founded on the challenge posed to Walter Benjamin's ideas regarding the withered 'aura' of mechanically-digitally reproduced artworks by Roland Barthes' examination of photography's *noeme* (trans.: essence). Succinctly, it concludes that in the case of graffiti and street art, digital-social photography's *noeme* revitalizes the reproductions' withered aura by conferring upon them airs of recalcitrant cool that endows their place of creation with qualities attractive to developers and homebuyers alike.

7. Author Biography (200 words each):

Dr. Brian Brown is an Assistant Professor of New Media and Digital Culture in the Department of Communication, Media & Film at the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. In the past he has published on a variety of topics, including: waged immaterial labour, unwaged immaterial labour, research methodologies in the digital age, digital photography, and the political economy of New Media and Web 2.0.

His most recent research project concerns itself with the now-global Street Art Subculture and the manifold cultural implications and political questions raised by the tacit acceptance (and in some cases enthusiastic embrace) of large-scale (il)legal public art within post-industrial urban landscapes. Making his home on the other side of an international border, yet still only a 5-minute drive from the socio-cultural Petri dish that is Detroit, Michigan, has provided Dr. Brown with ample opportunity to critically examine the influence of digital visual culture on processes of post-industrial urban renewal both up close and at a distance.

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