



Figure 1. ACRE Architects, In Transit, St. John, NB



Figure 2. MECROLOGIST, Freight Car Painting

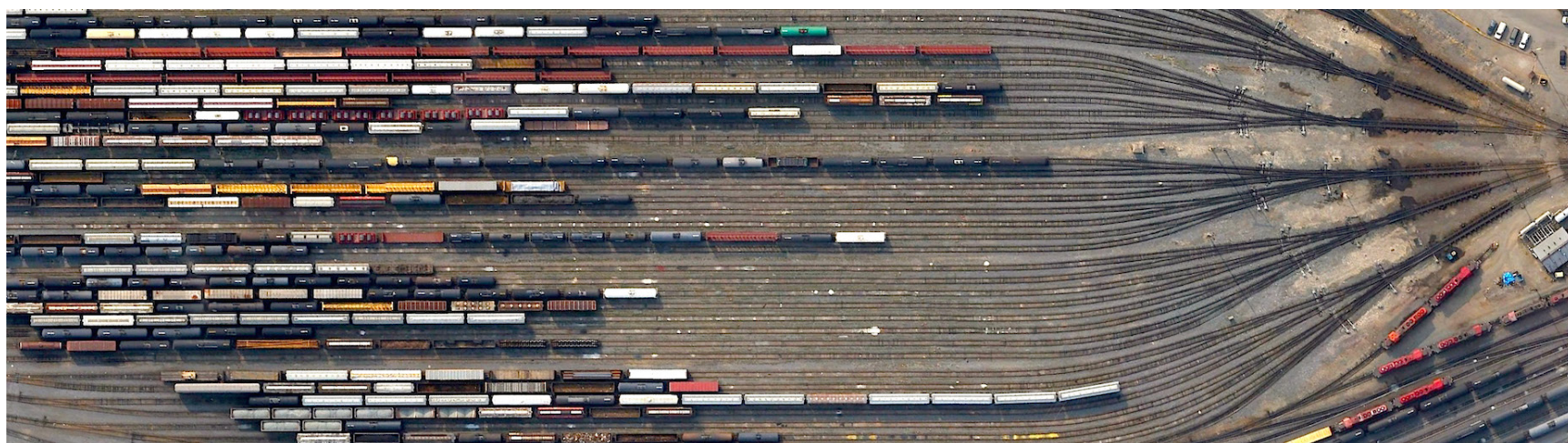


Figure 3. Canadian Pacific Railway's Alyth Train Yard, Calgary, AB

ARCH 364 Competition Essay

"Lost Spaces" presented by d.talks

"The works of the past always influence us. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work."¹ Every design project, it seems, begins at the same point. Conscious or not, it starts with a kind of reflection. A recollection of one's musings; one's experiences; one's past. For Siobhan and I, the initial conversations we had became the mechanism that filtered our pasts into our precedents. These precedents ranged from famous designers like Charles and Ray Eames, to current Canadian architects like ACRE (Fig. 1) and Studio North, to filmmakers, artists, and musicians. These creators and creations along with our physical experiences in what is considered a "lost space" inferred a direction for this project. Our research, which I will expand on later, brought two important points to our attention: Calgary's large number of lost spaces that stretch from the downtown core to the outskirts of the suburbs, and the city's growing problem of vandalism by graffiti.

D.talks, the curators and proposers of this competition, define a lost space as "any space that remains underutilized within our urban environment. [It] might be... a passageway, a roundabout, space between two buildings, a highway shoulder, or tenants of the city's history and memory."² The large number of lost spaces in Calgary, the focus area of this competition, are a result of the city's sprawling suburban neighbourhoods intersecting with the infrastructure needed to maintain them. We believe that these inutile spaces can become points of interest and action while simultaneously resolving some of the city's issues with graffiti. Our proposal is a public graffiti wall that serves the community as an open message board; the first of its kind labeled wall_001. Wall_001 fills these lost spaces with a canvas that presents an image of Calgary's history and culture, allows graffiti artists a legal place to practise their art, and invites the participation of the community to create a mosaic of their thoughts and ideas. We consider this to be truly public art.

Wall_001 draws inspiration from both Calgary's history as an epicenter for trains and shipping, as well as graffiti's classic use of railway cars as a mobile art exhibit.



Figure 4. Market Collective, Calgary, AB

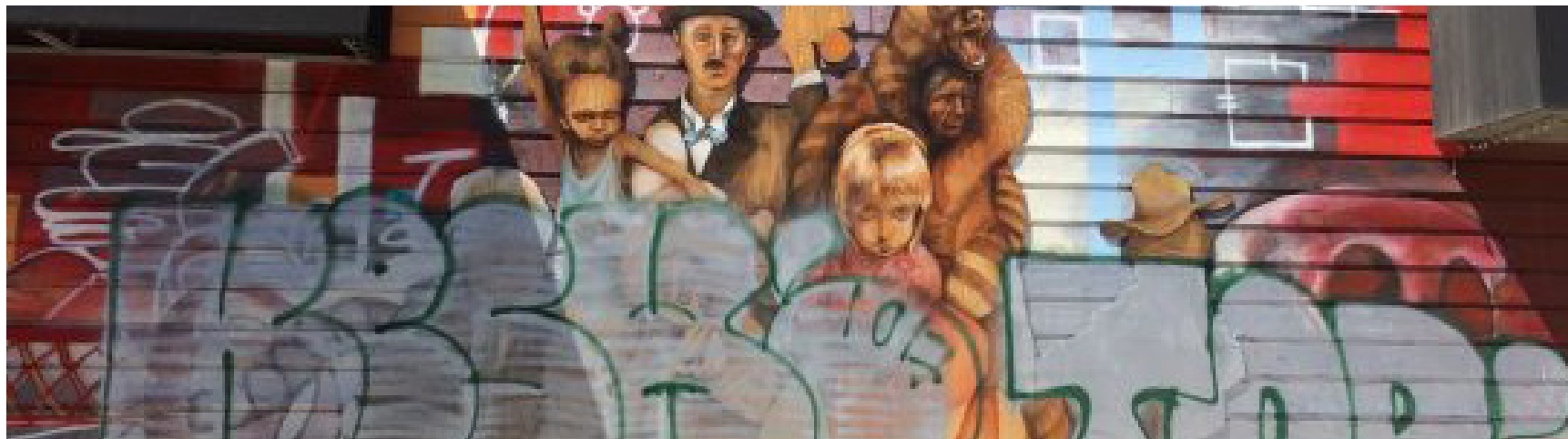


Figure 5. Blank Page Studio Mural by Daniel J. Kirk, Calgary, AB

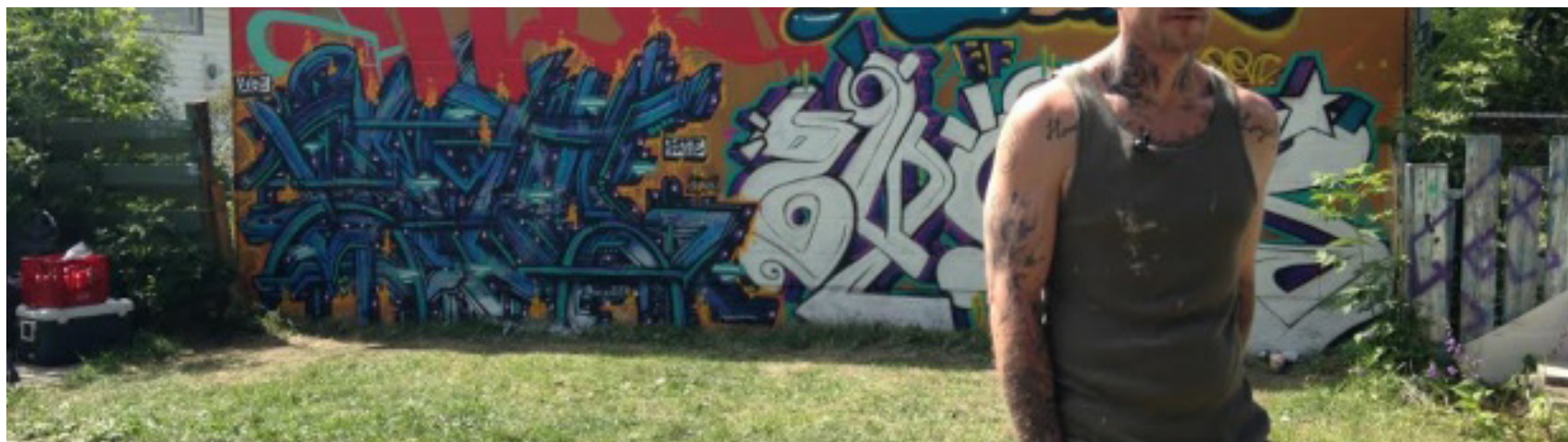


Figure 6. Jay Crawford with "Backyard Jam" Wall, Calgary, AB

Calgary has now become a budding arts and culture center in Alberta. There has been a push from the community, away from a conservative, business-centric city, making Calgary a place where arts and crafts are celebrated. Events like Market Collective, a quarterly crafts fair hosting upwards of 65 artisans per event and attracting thousands of people over a weekend, display the breadth of creativity within the city (Fig. 4). Calgary has also commissioned numerous murals inspired by the history and culture of the city, many of which have been painted by local resident Daniel J. Kirk. These along with other public initiatives like ContainR (an event space using recycled shipping crates) and Contemporary Calgary (an initiative holding public gallery events within the city) have given life to a previously sterile city.

The response to Calgary's growing arts culture has largely been positive, though there have been a number of acts of vandalism to the public art itself; most notably an incident on the wall of Blank Page Studio³ (home of Market Collective and local artists - Kirk included). A large public painting created by Kirk was painted over by street artists, and when Kirk re-painted the mural incorporating the graffiti it was again vandalised (Fig. 5). These acts did not go unnoticed. In fact, they were documented by multiple blogs and news articles, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).⁴ This presents the public with a question: why is Kirk's work an act of art and the "vandal's" work an act of crime?

This is not an isolated incident, either, and while "raids... are becoming more common in Calgary, as police crack down on graffiti,"⁵ there are still a large amount of tags in the downtown area. Calgary has an issue with graffiti, and we believe what makes it truly serious is the city's way of handling the problem. David Brunning, a local artist advocating a public wall told CBC that the public has "airsoft gun-shooting places for people who want to practice playing war, which is crazy, but they don't give us any walls. They don't let us paint what we want."⁵ Graffiti is rebellious by nature and so by trying to exorcise the art, the city is not stopping it. There is a tension being built between the city and the graffiti artists which can only result in the continued painting of public property.



Figure 7. Joe Shuster Way Public Graffiti Wall, Toronto, ON



Figure 8. Leaside Skatepark, Vancouver, BC



Figure 9. Fallen Paint Chip From Leaside Skatepark, Vancouver, BC

Currently, there is no legal place in Calgary for graffiti artists to practise their craft: a heavily enforced act which, for those charged, can result in substantial fines and even jail time. There is, however, an example of the graffiti community taking this issue into their own hands. Jay Crawford, a local graffiti artist, holds weekly “backyard jams” inviting local artists to tag a wall in his backyard, which he repaints weekly (Fig. 6). Crawford said to CBC News that he “wanted to give fellow street artists a place where they can express themselves without the risk of going to jail.”⁶ These events and spaces bring people together to collaborate and improve their skills. Unfortunately, despite the need for this type of facility, the city has remained clear on its stance that “Calgary is an international business centre and so needs to maintain an appearance that is clean, safe and inviting...The city’s attractiveness as a place to visit, conduct business and invest in decreases as graffiti and other destructive acts increase.”⁷ There is a growing culture of graffiti in Calgary that should be allowed to develop rather than being suppressed.

A public art wall would alleviate some of these tensions and by giving these artists a place to practise, the aesthetic quality of graffiti would increase in the lost spaces downtown. These walls are not a new concept either. Major cities like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and even Calgary’s neighbour Edmonton⁸ have public art walls that have proven to generate tourism and make places like underpasses and alleyways more vibrant and used. (Fig. 7)

Leaside skatepark in Vancouver (Fig. 8) is a famous example of a lost space being transformed by the community into a skatepark and free painting wall. A tunnel that was originally built by the Ministry of Transportation as part of a transit loop was abandoned in the late 1990s and quickly taken over by local skateboarders and graffiti artists. What started as a few wooden ramps in a dark tunnel now includes locally funded and built concrete transitions for skateboarders and graffiti artists alike.⁹ The history of this space as a public art facility is exemplified by the chips of wall scattered around the site, showing layers upon layers of paint (Fig. 9). Leaside is truly a lost space that has been consumed by its inhabitants and spit out as something productive, becoming a world renowned installation that is historically significant to these sub-cultures.



Figure 10. Lion's Park C-line Stop, Calgary, AB



Figure 11. Wall 001 at Lion's Park C-line stop, Calgary, AB

As noted above, Wall_001 is a dynamic public art wall that grows and changes as the people of Calgary do. The initial site for Wall_001 is the Lion's Park C-line light rail transit stop (Fig. 10). From a list of suggested sites provided by d.talks, this location was chosen for its relevance to the history of both the city and graffiti artists. Railways served an important role in Calgary's history, as rail transit was the main agency which allowed Canadians to settle in the Western provinces, such as Alberta.¹⁰ In this way, rail systems promoted the development of Calgary into the urban hub it is today. The rail system is also deeply ingrained in the history of graffiti, with box cars being the medium of choice for the original graffiti artists of New York in the 1920s.¹¹ As more modern forms of transportation became more prevalent, however, railways have fallen to the wayside, becoming lost spaces themselves. The walls for this project will be constructed from recycled train metal from Calgary's own altyth train yard (Fig. 3), a recently defunct hump classification yard and repair depot which previously operated in the downtown community of Inglewood as "CPR's (Canadian Pacific Railway) busiest [yard] in Western Canada."¹² In this way, Wall_001 reclaims a lost item from one lost space into another. The nature of this site provides a constant flow of patrons who will be able to view or paint the walls as they wait for their train or bus. The wall would replace what is currently a depressing chain link fence, between the tracks and the platform, becoming a dynamic part of the layers of movement, infrastructure and nature that currently exists at this location (Fig. 11).

Wall_001 will remain in its initial place along the train line for for enough time to gather interest and become painted. Once covered, the wall will be taken apart and each individual panel will be moved into the lost spaces of nearby suburban neighbourhoods. There, they will be accessible to more people and become painted again. They will once again be brought back together as a wall at the train stop after gathering layers of ideas such as political opinions, thoughts or simply the initials of a teenager's crush - displaying a fine grained mosaic to all of Calgary's bored commuters. The hope is that Wall_002, Wall_003 and so on will all be given homes at different C-train stops, where they will seasonally expand to the suburbs and contract to the stops. This ebb and flow creates a constantly evolving sculpture of Calgary's zeitgeist. There is a fluidity to this design that would morph both physically and temporally, creating new memories with each successive coat of paint.

In closing, the protean characteristic this project presents is a reflection of not only the city over time, but of us, the designers, and our inspirations and our inspirations' inspirations, etc. Every work of design is carried forward one way or another as a fraction of an idea, manifesting as a new project in every iteration; in short, each design is a consequence of the works of the past.

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