Recontextualizing Neglected Space in Community

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by

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ABSTRACT
Neglected areas are everywhere. They are seen as foreclosed homes, commercial properties, rundown lots and even small spaces like broken signage and over-sized potholes. My investigation, Abandonment explores how graphic design can be used to identify neglected areas and add meaning that challenges existing perceptions of these areas. This becomes a way to suggest revitalization without actually redesigning a specific space. Abandonment matches carefully designed phrases, inspired by first hand research of community members, with neglected urban environments of Atlanta. The camouflaged environmental graphics, created by means of DOT signs, chalk drawings, and blackboards recontextualize environments to softly build curiosity, activate new thinking, and potentially spark reinvention. Perhaps if citizens question these neglected spaces, they may begin to imagine new purposes for these spaces and reclaim them?

The investigation is thoroughly documented and will continue to mature over time. To follow the project online, visit urbanartatlanta.com.

INDEX WORDS: Urban design, Public art, Abandoned buildings, Vacant lots, Atlanta, Community, Environmental Graphics, Signage
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To all of my teachers… academic, professional, and personal.
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1 Introduction

Abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and neglected spaces are everywhere. In Atlanta, this is no different. They are seen as foreclosed homes, commercial properties, storefronts, and even small spaces like broken signage, over-sized potholes, and rundown lots. At first glance, you may not notice abandonment and overlook neglected spaces... perhaps because you have become so accustomed to their whereabouts that you no longer question their existence. However, when you start to pay attention to the topic, it may become difficult to not find someplace or something in your community that is neglected and you may begin to wonder, how can I challenge abandonment in my community?

Abandoned areas can benefit from design in many ways. If you look at urban design and architecture disciplines, their roles often change community on a high level, working from the top down. In other words, design is used to strategize new community developments or renovate the old, proving most effective when plans are constructed to improve the greater good. Top down design strategies can improve urban landscape, it can renovate building exteriors, and it can rebrand the visual essence of a community. This can be a great solution for abandonment; however, this will not be my intention. I will not attempt to redesign an abandoned building nor will I attempt to brand a neglected space. My interest lies in how graphic design can change perceptions of neglected areas and introduce a community narrative that could become beneficial for promoting change.

With this idea in mind, I designed my project, Abandonment which inserts provocative questions and statements in neglected areas, inspired by first hand research from community members. My primary focus was to develop a strong narrative between written content and neglected spaces. Each phrase is carefully constructed, intended to transform meaning in neglected areas. Rather than forcing solutions over a short period of time, I hope to promote change at the community level. This tactic should have a long lasting but softer impact than high-level executions. It also promotes change desired by individuals rather than executive solutions. I believe that my method may be more beneficial because the community can evolve at a natural rate, allowing visitors and residents to grow with their environments. Perhaps as
the narrative expands, definitions surrounding neglect will change over time and residents will begin to reclaim these spaces. This could be a way to revitalize areas without actually redesigning a specific space. Disguised as city street signs, chalk drawings, and boarded up blackboards, the narrative is inserted within the physical design of the urban landscape. They are not presented, but instead, discovered. Each piece recontextualizes a particular neglected location by manipulating meanings, building curiosity, and provoking interest.

In order to understand the context of the investigation and build an appropriate narrative, I conducted primary research in my local communities of Inman Park, Edgewood and Kirkwood. I chose these neighborhoods because I know them well and there is clear opportunity for growth. My investigation incorporates concepts pulled from many disciplines such as graphic design, environmental design, and urban design to create a flexible series of signage that asks the community to challenge the defined. The concept of *challenging the defined* plays a big role in my investigation. Are neglected spaces defined and therefore overlooked? Where do definitions and meanings come from and are they definitive? I believe what makes my investigation different and perhaps what distinguishes it from a standard high-level renovation project, is the importance of meaning in design and the perceptions of people in community. Can impressions and opinions of these spaces change? Is it possible that communities can redefine or reinvent existing abandonment? My long-term goal is that people will discover solutions for abandonment over time, almost sub-consciously, rather than “fix” the problem immediately through expensive and possibly unnecessary or unwanted renovation projects. My intervention also means to drive discussion among community about vacant areas and generate ideas on how to rediscover or repurpose these areas so that they are beneficial and productive for each unique community.

2 Why is Abandonment a Problem?

As my research progressed, the macro-level issues surrounding abandonment that cause big problems for community became more apparent; the effect on neighboring property values, the effect on pub-
lic safety, the effect on public health, the effect on fire safety and the effect on tax payers. Abandonment, even on a state level, can severely affect property values of others. In other words, if there is an abandoned or neglected home in the same neighborhood as your own, your home’s property value will decrease. This is a big problem in Atlanta as the city has high vacancy rates due to an abundance of fast growth in the 90s and 2000s prior to the recession. Abandonment also has an effect on public safety and public health. For one, abandoned properties can become havens for criminal activity like prostitution and drug trafficking. Crime rates are often directly related to uninhabited areas of urban environments. For example, in the article “Public Art Program Instrumental in Reducing Crime,” MacAuthur Park Public Art Program restored a park that “police report cut crime down 50%.” The author goes on to explain that the park was once celebrated in the community but after neglect, was redefined by assaults, robberies, rapes, drugs, and murder. Fortunately, with the help of MacAuthur Park Public Art Program, the crime rate decreased.

Other concerns like public health, fire safety and increased taxes are problematic. Neglected areas invite pollution, trash build up, decay, and fire hazards. In response, often tax increases are implemented in an effort to clean up these spaces in community. According to Alan Mallach, author of Bringing Buildings Back, abandoned properties directly affect community engagement. He states, “the sight of abandoned properties, whether boarded row houses or the shells of old industrial buildings, affects the morale of residents, fostering social isolation, discourage community engagement, and breaking down the community’s social controls.” By eliminating abandoned spaces completely, it’s possible that many inner city problems like crime and pollution could be improved. Not to say that all community problems could be repaired by solving this issue, however, it is important to realize the severity of abandonment and how it can lead to more problems in other outlets for the community.

2.1 Neglect in Atlanta

Our communities require consistent care and consideration if they are to thrive. When a building is left neglected, it quickly begins to fall apart and decay. Windows must be boarded up to prevent unwanted visitors. Tagging becomes the wallpaper of the exterior. Landscape becomes overgrown and parking lots become unpopulated, dirty, and even dangerous. From visual research, I have witnessed and documented this neglect in Inman Park, Kirkwood, and Edgewood that have resulted in my investigation.⁴

Beyond what we see on the day-to-day, city statistics tell us more about the problems regarding recession, unemployment and vacancy in Atlanta proper. Atlanta’s homeowner vacancy rate of 5.4 percent is the fourth highest among major U.S. cities. Atlanta’s unemployment rate of 9.7 percent is well above the national average of 9.2 percent. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the city had lost nearly 25,000 jobs between June of 2010 and June of 2011. Between 2008 and the first quarter of this year, homes have lost more than a third of their value, dropping in price by nearly $50,000.⁵

2.2 Efforts to Reclaim Atlanta

In an effort to make change, Atlanta has seen some civic work in select areas like The Window Art Project in Edgewood that showcased art in abandoned buildings’ windows at night and the Flux Project in Castleberry Hill that wakens up the streets of the neighborhood with performance art, projection art, and other installation projects. These efforts teach how an unproductive space can be transformed by the simple act of adding meaning in otherwise static environments, much like my investigation.

The Window Art Project in Edgewood keeps the empty storefronts populated and lit at night, encouraging activity in the area while discouraging crime in a previously “sketchy” stretch of road. This is a great example of repurposing abandoned areas. Unfortunately, the event lasts only one night so the reinvention of the space does not mature over time. Also, because guests are invited into the interior space, the transformation is more of an interior solution rather than a public space solution. Flux is another one

⁴ See Appendix for Visual Research  
night only event that takes place in Atlanta. Peters Street in Castleberry Hill on a day-to-day basis is very similar to the neighborhood of Kirkwood. Residents and business owners are pushing to make their community better but the area still struggles with abandonment and crime by the MARTA rail. During Flux, the streets reawaken with public performances, light installations, dancing, music, and art. On one dimension, the project accomplishes much of what I am trying to do by reinventing and engaging community. However, on another dimension, the event lacks an effort to evolve over time, and become a bigger movement for change.

Annual events help to raise money for communities, bring neighbors together, and result in many positive outcomes. These formal efforts in many ways achieve much of what I want I want to accomplish with Abandonment except that they are high-level, immediate solutions to a much bigger question. Abandonment is more flexible and dynamic, and requires a longer commitment of time to yield impact on communities. It lives in an array of places and time, forever possibly changing and evolving. Artists, Christo and Jeanne-Claude created massive environmental pieces that were often controversial due to their size and aesthetic impact. In an interview with Christo, he explains how his art is almost legendary as it never truly exists. “I am an artist, and I have to have courage… Do you know that I don’t have any artworks that exist? They all go away when I’m finished. I think it takes much more courage to create things to be gone than to create things that will remain.” A community is constantly changing and adapting to new spaces, new residents, new ownership and must be malleable. Christo describes his art’s lifespan in a similar manner, not necessarily beginning or ending, just existing. In the same way, I wonder how communities could develop organically and how could people in the community inspire these changes? Are we always redesigning space?

The idea that urban environments are always organically evolving is something that I have been particularly interested in witnessing in my community and wish to participate in with my investigation. There is so much effort spent on designing and redesigning spaces that often, as designers, we forget that

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the people of the community are the true meaning-makers of their neighborhoods. So then, what happens when you take designers out of the picture? Do neighborhoods stay forever unchanged?

The answer is no, of course not. Communities develop as they need to develop, organically and usually in a less intrusive manner. Communities are accustomed to adapting with the needs of their citizens. Some examples of this are the clothing swap on Whiteford and a playground made up of old toys on Moreland. The clothing swap on Whiteford is a drop off and pick up for old clothes in Kirkwood. It’s possible the idea spawned from people “trashing” their old clothes (which could be considered an abandoned and neglected space) but soon the spot became known as a place to find clothes and therefore provided a function for the community. In this example, people were able to redefine this unused place by adding clothing to the site. People inserted meaning in an otherwise neglected space and the result of this was productive. Another example in the area is the playground on Moreland. This space has been repurposed by adding toys in a vacant yard, creating a shared park for children. This is similar to what I am trying to do with Abandonment by means of signage. By placing new context into unproductive spaces, will people think about these spaces differently and reclaim them?

3 Who is community?

Discovering community was quite influential for creating the narrative of Abandonment. Ronald Fleming introduces a concept called “environmental profiling” in an article titled, “Strategies for Defining the Non-Place” which basically means, learn about the environment and design for it. “The act of living in an environment, no matter how banal, no matter how homogenized, no matter how frankly tacky in the eyes of the artistic elite, is full of meaning.” My investigation attempts to give voice to residents, accommodating for the community’s stories whenever possible.

Firstly, I approached five property owners by phone to find out more about the owners and ask them directly about issues regarding neglected buildings. I asked how they were working to improve upon

the look of the area and introduced some of my ideas for Abandonment. Property owners had mixed feelings at best regarding the effects of neglect in community. Most of the property owners that I spoke with did not live in the area or see the establishments on a normal basis. Because this is the case, I believe that some do not truly understand the detriment associated with neglected areas, empty lots, and over-grown parking lots. How can one if they are not present to see the issues? The property owners that diligently worked to keep their buildings intact visit the site about once per month to clean, repaint, pick up trash, and trim landscape. However, this is not enough maintenance to upkeep a vacant space. Many of the property owners take care of multiple lots around the city. These owners insist that it is not feasible to visit each property and maintain it on a weekly basis. One property owner from the Coin Laundry vacant building in Little Five Points refused to answer any questions regarding my efforts to repurpose neglected areas and instead repeated incessantly, “all I care about is money in my pocket.” None of the property owners I spoke with supported my vision for Abandonment.

Residents, on the other hand, responded much differently to the issue. To further my investigation, I polled about 16 residents and business owners from the Kirkwood neighborhood and asked for their opinions about abandonment and thoughts for improvement. Many of the residents seemed interested in the project and wanted to learn more about my objectives. From the people polled, 10 were female and six male, mostly in the age bracket of 25-49 years of age. The range of professions include students, stay at home moms and dads, architects, attorneys, doctors, realtors, IT consultants, freelance editors, journalists, marketing associates and therapists. Race and ethnicity were not polled. The questionnaire included three questions.

1. What are your thoughts on the vacant buildings in the downtown area?

2. How do you think the community would best be improved?

3. What are your thoughts on crime in the area?

Some commonalities included general views on vacancies and how to improve upon them. For example, both men and women responded similarly that “vacant buildings make the neighborhood look like

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8 See Appendix for detailed responses
it hasn’t progressed” and that Kirkwood “looks like it is run down and not thriving.” Some recognized that vacancies “bring down property values and can attract squatters and other crime.” Most agree that they would like to see the downtown area be revived, possibly by highlighting the historical charm of the area, but are unsure that it will ever happen.

Most commented that small things can really help the community thrive. For example, picking up trash in neglected lots, cleaning vacant storefronts, and adding ample lighting could help the downtown area when businesses aren’t occupying the space. Residents also commented that creating a farmers market or community garden, painting empty storefronts in new colors, adding lights, increasing the amount of green space, driving diverse businesses into the area, discouraging excess empty parking lots, and increasing police presence could improve downtown. In contrast, others believe that there is little the community can do to fix the problem. One resident suggested “we should totally demolish the area and start over.” A few responses included “there isn’t much we can do” and argue that the issue is out of hand and “the market will need to fix it.” Another resident confessed, “The city of Atlanta does not follow through about complaints regarding abandoned houses and overgrown yards.” If the community can’t help the situation and the city of Atlanta does nothing, then who can help? Interestingly, men rationalized issues of vacancy by discussing economic downfall where women did not.

The most discrepancies across responses were thoughts on crime. Some responded that they had no worry while others had much. “I am very bothered by crime in Kirkwood. I will not walk alone at night and look out my front windows before checking mail. Sometimes I drive around the block if an unfamiliar person is near my home. I have lost faith that Kirkwood will develop further and am hoping to move.” Another wrote, “My house has been broken into. Every morning I check to see if my house or car has been broken into. Crime is a big stress for me.”

4 About the Project

Abandonment focuses on promoting change in community by adding meaning through narrative. It is an investigation of how people can redefine and reclaim neglected spaces if given a catalyst to encour-
age it. My intentions are to softly encourage change so that views on neglected spaces may alter over time. By the simple act of adding meaning into neglected spaces, I begin to transform these spaces. The rest of the work is up to the viewer. Perhaps by recontextualizing these spaces, definitions will become less concrete. If people can accept new meanings in neglected spaces, then perhaps they will begin to approach them differently, use them differently, and in turn, create change.

The work contains a series of phrases and iconic imagery meant to ask patrons and visitors to question and challenge neglected spaces. These phrases are carefully designed to tell a story that adds implications about a particular site. All of the written content is inspired by insights from residents of the community. Some of the phrases are exact quotes while others are a response to a quote or a compilation of more than one’s thoughts and questions. For example, instead of implementing a phrase like “Pick up the trash” (that is a declarative solution suggested by a Kirkwood resident), I create the phrase “It’s the little things”. The rewording of the phrase and the ambiguous voice, suggest many interpretations for the audience. What are the little things? Who is speaking? Why is this here? The placement of the phrases plays a major role in the interpretations as well. When found adjacent to a particular site, you may interpret it differently than you do while reading this paper.

Over the last four months, I placed signs in Kirkwood, Edgewood, and Inman Park constructed of chalk, painted wood, and vinyl. Some of the phrases included in the series are:

- Are you afraid of the dark?
- Did you notice?
- Don’t worry. It’s the economy’s fault.
- I spy with my little eye, something empty.
- Isn’t this beautiful?
- It’s the economies fault.
- It’s the little things.
- It’s a false sense of security.
- Loitering encouraged.
- Parking lots drive business.
- Run don’t walk, be careful.
- Isn’t it obvious?
- The market will fix the problem.
- There isn’t much we can do.
- What attracts you?
- What can we do?
- What does this represent to you?
What makes you feel safe?
What would Atlanta do?
WWAD?
What’s in this window?
What’s the connection?
Where did the trees go?
Who is the #1 offender?
Who lives here?
Why is this here?

The design of content is highly strategic and in some ways so are the physical objects created to place the content. Because the pieces are subtle, the signage is camouflaged by mimicking designs that exist in public spaces. Therefore, the design of the signage itself is not unique, nor is it community specific. However, it remains to be strategic because of the importance of location. Each piece resembles where it lives. In my past work, I explored how interior spaces can connect with exterior spaces, specifically regarding window frames, that placed similar importance on how language can be placed in environments and how location can alter meanings and perceptions. Call your mother (Figure 1) introduces my interest on locational value. Although not in neglected space, it speaks toward how thoughts can be implemented in three-dimensional spaces.

Regarding my current work, I chose to mimic three consistently active components of neglected spaces to showcase my phrases; street signs, chalk drawings, and boarded windows (i.e., blackboards). The street signs live on sign posts and fences, the chalk drawings live on pavement, and the blackboards fit on top of boarded windows. Although I chose these three mediums to work on specifically, the mediums for Abandonment’s purposes could be endless as long as they fit within the urban landscape. Sites are chosen with two major check points in mind. For one, the space is determined public. This can be defined as residential or commercial space with no owner (or no obvious owner) and shared spaces like sidewalks, telephone polls or street signs. The second is whether the space has been neglected or forgotten about in some manner. Some visual keys to determine this aspect are overgrown landscape, broken fences, unused parking areas, boarded up windows or missing artifacts of a building or space.
There are few design constraints except one; no signage installed within community should permanently harm or leave any long-term footprints. All of the work is created by temporary or movable artworks placed within the boundaries of public space. Some of the objects sit and lean against abandoned buildings or sit inside the boarded up windows. Other objects fit inside street signs but are not permanently adhered to any surface. Others are not objects at all but simply chalk drawings that wash away with the rain. This is important because I wanted to ensure community that no permanent artifacts that require financial investment from the community would be implemented. No buildings or sidewalks are painted and no signage is bolted or glued into place.

4.1 The Work

The first series of work I created is the Street Sign Series. (Figure 2) This series employs DOT (Department of Transportation) street signs in order to camouflage with the designs of existing street signs.
The signs implemented in the series are the state-issued white reflective material with black lettering. Some of the artwork is inverted where the letters are reflective with black background. There are 15 signs designed in total, some of which are hand-painted while others are created with vinyl. Each sign contains a unique phrase that is inspired specifically for a particular location, however as mentioned previously, meaning is open to interpretation. The recipient is responsible for providing implications.

The second series works with chalk and stencils to create signage. This series, called the Chalk Drawings Series is the most temporary of all the work but is the fastest and easiest to reproduce. The Chalk Drawings Series includes all of the phrases and iconic imagery of the other series in stencil formats. Stencils can be printed or hand-drawn at multiple sizes and are accessible from the project website, urbanartatlanta.com. For my investigation, I drew one reusable stencil on poster board and stenciled multiple sites. I chose the piece that I felt had the most potential for multiple meanings in multiply locations called Who’s Pointing Fingers. (Figure 3) This piece addresses neglected areas through iconic imagery rather than with text. With this stencil, I traveled around my community finding my small and big abandoned public spaces of interest and colored in stencils by hand. There are six pieces chalked all together distributed on parking lots, sidewalks, and street corners.

The last of the series I completed for this project is called the Blackboard Series (Figure 4) and is named so because of the blackboard material that is used to make these pieces. Each piece created is constructed with chalkboard paint (creating the blackboard) and letters are hand-painted with white reflective paints. This series contains the largest pieces of all the other series, reaching dimensions of 36’’x 24’’ and is designed to camouflage with abandoned building exteriors. The work leans or sits inside and around abandoned sites, most often they can be found within boarded up or broken windows. Like the other works, each piece corresponds with a particular site appropriate for the language.
**Figure 2.** Cat Normoyle, *Street Sign Series*, 2012.

**Figure 3.** Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers, Chalk Drawings Series*, 2012.
Figure 4. Cat Normoyle, *Blackboard Series*, 2012.

Figure 5. Cat Normoyle, *There isn’t much we can do*, *Blackboard Series*, 2012.
4.2 Creative Influences

Many artists and designers have influenced my work, particularly those who work with repurposing abandoned spaces, temporary environments, and text. Some of these artists include Candy Chang, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jenny Holzer, Norm Magnusson, and Tyree Guyton.

Candy Chang’s work thrives on community involvement. In the project, *Before I Die* (Figure 6) she creates temporary environments that repurpose abandoned buildings in the New Orleans area. This particular project was temporary and lasted six weeks, until a new owner purchased the building. Chang explains, “This was public art in its truest sense, stemming not from policy ordered in from on high, but via the creation of an interactive space where people were simply asked to share what was important to them.”9 *I Wish This Were* (Figure 7) encourages citizens to contribute insights of what the abandoned spaces should become. Chang’s project helps promote ideas in her community without necessarily projecting her ideas. Her work fosters communication in public space.

In Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Fake Estates* (Figure 8), Matta-Clark acquires small bits of useless land from property auctions. These small bits of land could be deemed as neglected because of their inability to build on them. Matta-Clark’s work challenges these spaces and how they are used. He doesn’t necessarily solve a problem here but focuses more on drawing attention to this interesting issue. He assembles maps and images to show the unusable areas. Another piece by Matta-Clark, *Day’s End* (Figure 9) displays his strong ability to work with existing spaces. He argues, “why hang things on walls when the wall itself is so much more interesting”10 This piece cuts and works out sections of an abandoned dock.

Jenny Holzer is an artist who works primarily with text in public spaces. She works with phrases and sentences, some of which she writes and some of which is repurposed copy that becomes recontextualized. She works with many mediums, most of which are public like exteriors of buildings. Her current work relies heavily on huge light installation pieces that are projected onto exterior buildings but my particular interest lies in one of her earliest pieces, the *Truisms Series*. (Figure 10) While describ-

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ing Truisms, Holzer quotes, “I try to make my voice unidentifiable – I find it better to have no particular associations attached to the voice in order for it to be perceived as true”\textsuperscript{11} She eliminates the use of images all together and relies only on text in her artwork. The unbiased voice that Holzer references is something that I am trying to convey in my creative writing.

Norm Mangnussum’s \textit{I-75 Project} (Figure 11) is a series of historical markers, each containing a small story from one personal point of view. The project is gently assertive and non-confrontational because of its subtle presentation and how it blends into the environment where it lives. However, the content is very specific, containing to individual testimonials in a thought provoking manner. My work resembles some of his camouflaging techniques which soften immediate impacts on the public, however implicate long-term benefits. His ability to tell people’s stories is inspirational.

Tyree Guyton’s work from \textit{The Heidelberg Project} (Figure 12-13) focuses on the reinvention of abandoned homes in Detroit Michigan. Detroit has suffered from high vacancy rates since the demise of motor city. His work, exemplified in \textit{Dotty Wotty} and \textit{The Obstruction of Justice}, shows how he applies objects and paint directly onto abandoned houses. Over time, this process blossomed into a massive art project that repurposed an entire block. His work is influential because he finds a unique way to give abandoned homes on Heidelberg Street a new purpose. Not only does he repurpose abandonment but he also educates the public about neglected homes in the process. The long-term project of over 25 years has helped reduce crime in the area and promote change in his home town neighborhood.

Figure 6. Candy Chang, *Before I Die*, 2011.

Figure 7. Candy Chang, *I Wish This Was*, 2010.

Figure 9. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Day’s End*, 1975.

Figure 11. Norm Magnusson, *I-75 Project*, 2007.

5 Execution & Personal Reflections

Over a four month period, I went out into my community. My community that I had researched quantifiably for months but also lived in for years and began my investigation of adding meaning. I started slowly and uncomfortably with one piece from the *Street Sign Series* in walking distance of my home. Creeping out in the evening, I installed the piece, *The Market will fix it* (Figure 14) which camouflaged into the urban landscape of N.Highland and Cleborune in Inman Park. I viewed this particular location in a few ways. The sign itself was neglected with tagged signage falling off the posts. Also, the language “no dumping” and “it’s the law” encouraged thoughtful interpretation when I placed next to them, “the market will fix it.” This particular location also had a residential development lot across the street that was left unfinished for some time. My sign could be referring to this vacant lot area across the street. This is what makes the interpretation part of the project so interesting. What is the sign referencing? This sign may have been my favorite possibly because it was so close to home and I could visit it frequently, but also because I saw it mature over a month. At one point, my sign had been stickered and the bolts disassembled. I had to go back to the site and re-secure the piece. After about six weeks, the sign was taken.

During this time, I had placed quite a few more pieces from the *Street Sign Series*. The process for putting the signs up required some simple hardware to attach the art pieces to the breakaway post. After some trial and error with placing them, I found that the best spots for the pieces were in high traffic intersections but set back away from the main road slightly. This helped keep the sign in public longer. For example, a piece placed on a MARTA sign or ROUTE sign would likely be taken down by authorities quickly. I also considered safety while working on the project and personally decided that STOP, YEILD, TURNING signs should not be altered due to the accountability of someone driving and becoming distracted.

The second sign I placed was on Freedom Parkway by the Beltline construction site. This piece, *Run don’t walk, be careful* (Figure 15) was inspired by conversations regarding crime and neglected spaces. During the day, it could be interpreted as a motivational tool for runners on the pathway but at night,
the meanings grow deeper. Why do I need to run? Where am I running to or who am I running from? My next piece, *Are you afraid of the dark* (Figure 16) is inspired by similar conversations surrounding fears in urban environments after dark. This piece was designed to live in the Coin Laundry vacant building and lot on Moreland Avenue. It was the most difficult to place as the area is extremely high traffic and very wide open. Unfortunately, *Are you afraid of the dark* was taken down before I could document its existence. Within twelve hours, the piece was taken, most likely by authorities due to its high traffic location and possibly upsetting content. After this experience, I moved forward with working in less high traffic areas. Perhaps if I had placed this sign just off the sidewalk, it may have lasted longer in the neighborhood. Guyton talks about some problems he faced regarding the Heidelberg Project.

“Both times that the project was partially destroyed, the local community was divided and actively fought for and against the destruction of the project. Supporters of the project note that the colors and vibrancy of Heidelberg Street are rays of hope in a blighted area of the city. By contrast, one resident says, Art is not good when it is outside. Art belongs in a museum, caged in. Other residents express similar feelings that the project is not safe, that they do not understand it, and that many people who enjoy it live far away and do not have to see it every day.”

I realize that it is impossible to make everyone happy when you are working in the realm of public space and I appreciate the challenge and understand that similar issues will and already have happened regarding my work. This is perhaps the most difficult personal reaction that I have faced throughout my investigation. When you are passionate about the work and hope that others will feel inspired when they do not, it can be difficult to stay motivated. However, it is important to stay active and persistent, hoping that perhaps I can reach a few people through my efforts in the community who see the value and positive intentions of my work. A minority that sees benefits can be just as effective as a majority.

Most of the remaining signs I placed during the day with more ease and grace than the first few attempts. I found that placing signage with intention eases the mind for pedestrians that may see you working in the community. In other words, if you don’t look like you are doing something wrong, people as-

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sume you are not doing something wrong. I also brought my camera and video camera with me to sites so that I could immediately document their existence. I placed *Who lives here* (Figure 17), *Loitering Encouraged* (Figure 18), and *I spy with my little eye, something empty* (Figure 19) the following week. *Who lives here* was placed by Videodrome at North Avenue and N. Highland. *Loitering Encouraged* was placed by the Pullman Yard abandoned area in Kirkwood. *I spy with my little eye, something empty* was placed in Kirkwood at Hosea and Howard. *I spy* went up easily even with the community being very active at the time of my visit. It almost seemed like the more people that were around and the high commotion level allowed for an easier installation day. This particular piece blended into its surrounding very well, perhaps the best of all the pieces. The last of the *Street Sign Series* includes *I spy (watching), Isn’t it obvious*, and *It’s the little things*. (Figure 20-22) These signs are placed in Kirkwood, Inman Park, and Edgewood, respectively.

*Who’s Pointing Fingers* (Figure 23-29) is part of the *Chalk Drawings Series*. Without using any text, this piece employs iconic imagery to insert meaning. For this piece, I went out twice in my neighborhoods; some locations were predetermined while others were found while out on excursion. I visited three locations on my first trip, a strip of sidewalk on N.Highland, the parking lot at Coin Laundry on Moreland, and 1986 Hosea (a small plaza made up of three storefronts that are all abandoned). Each chalk drawing took about five minutes to stencil and few were concerned about what I was doing during the process. I chose to use drawing chalk instead of spray chalk to raise less concern in the community, as spray chalk can be mistaken as spray paint. Also, the drawing chalk enabled me to use the stencil repeatedly without breaking down the material. My second excursion, happening a week later, included the abandoned Mrs. Winner’s, 2011 Hosea, a Kirkwood sidewalk, and the abandoned white building next to the Funeral parlor in downtown Kirkwood. The trip was successful in that I had no conflicts installing the work however no pieces from this series lasted longer than one week due to heavy spring rain fall. Perhaps this series could have benefited by installation during another season or more strategic placement under overhangs.
The Blackboard Series was the last of the work to be implemented in the community. These pieces, by far, received the most attention during installation due to their size and whereabouts. Long stares and strange looks were received, yet no one spoke out against my work at the time. The first piece I placed, *What attracts you?* (Figure 30), was the smallest and least conspicuous of the work. This piece was paired with an abandoned home located on N.Highland that has been vacant for years. The two pieces, *What’s behind this window?* (Figure 31) and *Who is the offender?* (Figure 32) are both located in Kirkwood. These pieces ask patrons to acknowledge abandoned buildings and very directly make you wonder, who has reclaimed these spaces? Why are they here? Who is at fault? Wherever possible, I placed boards out of reach to expand the line of sight on the project and also discourage them from being taken. I feel that because of the size of these pieces and the intensity of the message, they did not camouflage as well into the environment as some of the Street Sign Series and Chalk Drawings Series did. Perhaps this series would benefit from smaller messages located on the large blackboards.

*Figure 14. Cat Normoyle, The Market Will Fix It, 2012.*
Figure 15. Cat Normoyle, *Run Don’t Walk, Be Careful*, 2012.

Figure 16. Cat Normoyle, *Are you afraid of the dark?*, 2012.
Figure 17. Cat Normoyle, *Who lives here?*, 2012.

Figure 18. Cat Normoyle, *Loitering Encouraged*, 2012.
Figure 19. Cat Normoyle, *I spy with my little eye, something empty*, 2012.

Figure 20. Cat Normoyle, *I spy (watching)*, 2012.
Figure 21. Cat Normoyle, *Isn't it obvious?*, 2012.

Figure 22. Cat Normoyle, *It's the little things*, 2012.
Figure 23. Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers I.*, 2012.

Figure 24. Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers II.*, 2012.
Figure 25. Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers III.*, 2012.

Figure 27. Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers V.*, 2012.

Figure 28. Cat Normoyle, *Who’s Pointing Fingers VI.*, 2012.
Figure 29. Cat Normoyle, *Who's Pointing Fingers VII.*, 2012.

Figure 30. Cat Normoyle, *What attracts you?*, 2012.
Figure 31. Cat Normoyle, *What's behind this window?*, 2012.

Figure 32. Cat Normoyle, *Who is the offender?*, 2012.
5.1 Gaining credibility & Expansion

It was really important that my investigation be credible (or at least seem credible) and be versatile that it could span nationally and even internationally. John Emerson, author of “Taking it to the Streets,” talks about how graphic design was useful in raising awareness of the High Line Project in Manhattan as well as “provide the look and feel of a much bigger organization.”13 In Atlanta, the Beltline Project used similar means of signage to signify where and what the Beltline was before knowledge of the project became more widespread. People created hand-painted signage that marked areas throughout the city to raise awareness around the project. In similar fashion as my intentions for Abandonment, the Beltline grew from the bottom up and has now reached a point where bigger institutions and more investment has allowed the project to blossom into the public transit project that it is today. Creating signs at the community level was a great way to use graphic design to facilitate public participation.

Abandonment uses similar signage strategies to expand knowledge of neglect at the community level. In the case of the Beltline Project, the meaning of the signage is predetermined and a solution has been offered for change. In Abandonment, the meanings are not predetermined, however, it is still important to develop a way to gain credibility and offer a way to expand the project. For my investigation, I created a website that thoroughly documents every sign that is placed in community. On each piece, I included a QR code that can be scanned by a mobile device and will direct you to a project website, urbanartatlanta.com. (Figure 33) The website provides more information about the investigation’s intentions and its importance. Specifically, the site offers more information about “what we think”, “inspirations”, “why abandoned areas,” and “how to get involved.” By providing this information online, it gives the community level aspect a more credible, holistic appearance. It also acts as an online forum for participants to question or comment on the project itself or particular sites of interest. Beyond this, the site includes a way for people to engage physically with the project by downloading one of the multiple stencils on the site and participating by creating signage in their own communities. (Figure 34) Interestingly, the

website has shown positive results as a way to receive feedback from the project however, it is difficult to analyze whether people are finding the QR pieces on the signage or they are finding the site via search engines online.

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**Figure 33.** Cat Normoyle, *Abandonment*, www.urbanartatlanta.com, 2012.

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**Figure 34.** Cat Normoyle, *Abandonment*, *Get Involved*, 2012.
6 Reactions

Reactions are fast and typically emotional. They are not conclusions or even benefits necessarily. Many reactions have been experienced throughout this investigation; by people I don’t know, by people I’ve asked to participate, and of course, by me. Part of this experience revealed that many of the reactions I was expecting or hoping for from others were actually feelings that I, personally was having. Throughout this process, I have been excited, frustrated, angry, happy, and even a bit sad while working with my signage and neglected spaces. I believe that perhaps others have experienced similar reactions to my project. In order to examine some of these reactions quantifiably, I used three different techniques; observation on site, the website, and an exit interview with my test group from Kirkwood.

After observation on site, I found that there were some commonalities across communities regarding general response behavior. I noticed that many people did not acknowledge the signs while running or walking directly by it. Or, if they did notice the signs, they did not stop to make a big deal about it. On the contrary, some people stared, not sure exactly how to respond, perhaps trying to gauge if it was a “legitimate” sign. I recorded these response behavior patterns through photography and video. People seemed wary of the documentation process, primarily the videography more so than the installation process. Because of this, it’s possible that people were acknowledging my presence more so than the actual signage. There were some differentiators in responses across neighborhoods also. Like in Inman Park areas, more people observed the signs than in Kirkwood and Edgewood where less people outwardly paid attention. Perhaps this is because there was less neglected space to reference in Inman and therefore the signage did not camouflage as well than there was in my other test communities.

The website yielded the most positive and direct reactions regarding the project. Some concluded that the project seemed “very interesting and definitely makes you take a second look and think more.” Other responses questioned whether the signage was really placed in the community and if so perhaps it was related to an advertisement. One website visitor expressed much interest in the project, commenting on many of the images of the work. She contacted me about getting involved and I reached out about how
to participate with the project using stencils and chalk. Unfortunately, I haven’t heard back regarding her work at this time. Generally speaking, most visitors of the website were intrigued and excited about the project perhaps because its online existence is separate and therefore more approachable in a conceptual manner than it is in its real life existence.

Lastly, I reached out by email to my initial test group from Kirkwood to find out some of their thoughts on the project. All participants that filled out the original questionnaire regarding abandonment in downtown Kirkwood were asked the following questions as follow up. I received five responses out of twenty. There were two exit review questions.

1. *Have you seen the signage in the community?*

2. *Do the statements persuade you to question / challenge your surroundings? If so, why? If not, why not (or what does it make you think?)*

From the people who responded, all had seen the signage in the community but there were many mixed results regarding the work. Some enjoyed the project, explaining that they “thought the work was an interesting way to protest neglected spaces” however, not many people leaped at answering the question, how can I reclaim this space? A few responses confessed disappointment explaining, “I thought the project was going to directly fix our downtown buildings. I wish that the buildings could have been painted or cleaned up in some way.” This is interesting because I feel like these disappointed responses are getting viewers one step closer to my bigger intentions of the project. If a participant feels disappointed and “wishes” for some change, perhaps eventually, she will make the connection that she must reclaim the space and in effect, make change in her community. Another participant expressed anger, “I think the street signs are not helping anything and just make abandoned spaces look more obvious.” It seems this responder might be keenly aware of the problems I am highlighting, but lacks the resources to address them substantively. Perhaps this person feels that I am pointing out, condescendingly, what she is already painfully aware of. However negative, this dialogue is getting closer to my long-term objectives. Perhaps ignoring abandoned spaces is not the solution? Perhaps bringing them into the spotlight is how we accept them, reclaim them, and make change?
After gauging these responses, I feel that persistence can enrich my investigation by continuing to gain credibility and build confidence in community members regarding my intentions. I do not wish to be condescending or satirical about neglected areas; rather I hope that my provoking content in relation with urban environments will ignite inspired ways to reclaim the space. Perhaps in the future, I can begin to add objects into the space, along with the signage, that encourage productivity similarly to the barrels on Whiteford.

7 Conclusions

By the simple act of adding meaning into neglected spaces, I have transformed them. This was in fact, my most immediate intention for Abandonment. Going one step further, I hoped to persuade people to reflect upon neglected spaces differently than they have in the past. In other words, challenge existing definitions of what a neglected space is. After placing my signs in the community, people have begun to look at particular neglected spaces differently. Perhaps these reflections are not always positive or in line with my own reflections, but they do show how these spaces are being thought about differently. Furthermore, my intentions for Abandonment included a long term goal. After inserting new meanings and challenging the defined, people will begin to use them differently, and in turn, create change.

Reactions have expressed that some have already begun to suggest change for their community internally but have yet to physically create change. This is ok. Understandably, promoting change requires time and consistency to mature. This means that my investigation has truly just begun. Not until the project has matured, can I understand the possibility of outcomes. Community will evolve. We know and understand this because we see it happen every day. My role is to be active and participate with the community. Moving forward, I will continue to create signage and place them in Atlanta. I will continue to gauge responses and record reactions. The website will also play an important role by documenting what has been done and spreading the word about my project. Through continued efforts on my part, I believe that benefits for the community will emerge and neglected spaces will decrease. As one resident from Kirkwood so eloquently expressed, it's all about the little things.
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Appendix

Photographed by Cat Normoyle. 1986 Hosea Williams

Photographed by Cat Normoyle, 2011 Hosea Williams
Photographed by Cat Normoyle. Howard and Hosea

Photographed by Cat Normoyle. Coin Laundry
Photographed by Cat Normoyle, College Avenue

Photographed by Cat Normoyle, Mrs. Winner’s
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