

GRAFFITI ARCHAEOLOGY



BY ANGIE HEILE

“Every surface in a city conveys a message,” asserts Cassidy Curtis, creator of the website Graffiti Archaeology (grafarc.org). “It could be ‘Isn’t this a cute picket fence?’ or ‘I painted my Victorian with this color scheme by this hoity-toity designer.’ When you see an advertisement on a wall that’s been buffed [painted to remove graffiti], it’s telling you, ‘Expression will not be tolerated unless you pay for it.’”

Curtis admires graffiti writers, who risk life, limb, and jail to make art they give away for free. “Graffiti writers are acrobats of incredible virtuosity,” he enthuses. “They’ll draw something and say, ‘This thing is a letter. In fact, it’s the first letter of my name.’ After that, anyone who looks at it will say, ‘That shape is the letter A.’ Enjoying graffiti style is enjoying the route they took from the alphabet to the shape they call ‘A.’”

He often goes out with friends to photograph graffiti, and in 2003 was inspired by a series of pictures of one ever-changing wall. “I wanted to make a time-lapse movie, but the changes were too abrupt,” he says. So, to showcase the layers of graffiti that grace the face of a city surfaces over time, he developed the Graffiti Archaeology web site—first in HTML, then in Flash. To script the interface, he enlisted high school friend Eric Rodenbeck of Stamen.com. “We just got a six-pack and drew ideas on weekends and evenings.”

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Since most of his source photos are unidentified, Curtis uses peripheral clues to place them. “You look at everything except the graffiti. You go, ‘Where have I seen that pipe sticking out ten feet off the ground?’” Then, using Photoshop, he meticulously arranges them into a series of panoramic snapshots of each wall. “I chose the name Graffiti Archaeology on a whim, but it’s turned out to be incredibly accurate,” he reflects.

The painstaking reconstruction makes it archaeology for Curtis, but the navigation seems to be what captivates others – including *Wired* magazine, CNN, USA Today, and the Webby Awards. A simple slide show of graffiti being written, whitewashed, repainted, and scribbled over might document history, but would highlight the losses inherent in every change. Instead, Graffiti Archaeology’s interface enables you to switch instantly between views of a wall as it looked in 2002, in 1998, and in 2005—and zoom in to peruse any detail at your leisure. It appeals to the nostalgic collector’s desire to subvert time by preserving and organizing the ephemeral. That’s what makes Graffiti Archaeology more than just a showcase for cool pictures: it’s an ongoing public diary, a weblog in movable and removable layers, showing the story of street art in the city.

Graffiti Archaeology at <http://www.grafarc.com>