URBAN GRAFFITI AS TERRITORIAL MARKERS*

DAVID LEY AND ROMAN CYBRIWSKY

ABSTRACT. Wall graffiti can be indicators of attitudes, behavioral dispositions, and social processes in settings where direct measurement is difficult. The autographed inscriptions of inner city "graffiti kings" in Philadelphia are analyzed in terms of their style, motivation, and preferred setting. Graffiti written by teenage gangs delineate their turf or area of control; their content may indicate contested space and gang violence. Graffiti in an ethnic neighborhood identify tension zones related to social change. KEY WORDS: Attitudes, Gangs, Graffiti, Indicators, Inner City, Neighborhoods, Philadelphia, Territoriality.

In an era of massive social change and unmitigated erasure of the past, one small feature of man's heritage is making a resurgence—the practice of marking graffiti in public places. Graffiti might be regarded, perhaps, as a rather whimsical element in the sum total of cultural baggage of interest to the social scientist, yet in inner city Philadelphia they provide accurate indicators of local attitudes and social process in areas where more direct measurement is difficult. The quality and location of graffiti display regularities. They manifest the distribution of various social attitudes and intimate subsequent behavior in space; as such, certain types of graffiti forecast both potential and actual behavior. To borrow a current graffito: "Today's graffiti are tomorrow's headlines."

The contemporary reappearance of graffiti dates from 1965, or perhaps a little earlier. The number of articles and commentaries on graffiti in popular magazines and the New York Times increased from only one over the fifteen-year period, 1950–64, to five in 1969, and then to forty in 1972. The rapid increase in 1972 accompanied an "urban epidemic" in East Coast cities.1 Popular media often are more sensitive to the public mood than are the social sciences, and as yet there is limited indication of scholarly interest in graffiti. During the 1960s articles on graffiti had dealt with fairly traditional forms, the amorous, the erotic, the political, the historic, and the intellectual, but a new trend appeared in 1970. Graffiti writing had spread to the inner city. Almost all of the graffiti reports discovered for 1972 and half of those for 1971 were concerned with the newfound popularity of spray-painting among inner city youth.

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Dr. Ley is Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, V6T 1W3, and Dr. Cybriwsky is Assistant Professor of Geography at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA 19122.

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1 By the middle of the year the President of the New York City Council was suggesting a monthly Anti-Graffiti Day, much like Earth Day, under the auspices of the Environmental Protection Administration; The New York Times, May 21, 1972, p. 66.
This rediscovered form of expression will form the basis of our discussion.\(^2\)

Graffiti have not traditionally been regarded as a societal indicator, but rather as a folk symbol in their own right. Consequently, their diagnostic significance has been neglected, and they have been primarily treated in anecdotal and jocular vein in popular magazines. Although it is scarcely surprising that the people's slogans should appear in the people's press, a broader treatment of graffiti is justified. The graffito represents part of "a twilight zone of communication," an outlet for often deeply felt but rarely articulated sentiments and attitudes. Wall inscriptions reveal "developments, trends, and attitudes in man's history... little insights, little peepholes into the minds of individuals who are spokesmen not only for themselves but for others like them."\(^8\)

THE NEW URBAN EPIDEMIC\(^4\)

In 1970 the *New York Times* first referred to the growing problem of graffiti defacement of subway stations and trains.\(^5\) In 1970 vandalism cost the New York Transit Authority $2.6 million, of which $250,000 was spent on removing graffiti.\(^6\) The following year graffiti removal accounted for over $300,000, and in 1972 this figure was estimated to have risen above $500,000.\(^7\) In New York graffiti are regarded primarily as a subway problem, for rapid transit provides one of the few meeting points of the cultural worlds of the inner city and the suburb. As long as "defacement" was limited to low-income residential areas, there was apparently no problem; certainly the media maintained an unconcerned silence. Indignation appears only when the inner city impinges upon the suburbanite; thus an enraged reader of the *New York Times* responded to a cautious editorial suggesting that perhaps graffiti offered "a preservative of social history," by condemning the "cowardly vandalism" and the "defacing morons" responsible for it.\(^8\)

Graffiti are even more prevalent in Philadelphia, which makes a rather abashed claim to be the graffiti capital of the world. Defacement from spray-painting on the subway system is costing the transit authority $1 million a year, and cleaning and removal elsewhere in the city accounts for three times as much again.\(^9\) Since 1971 the city police department has maintained a twenty-five man "graffiti squad." Remedial measures have included the establishment of a Graffiti Alternatives Workshop, and a competition to devise a new design for the transit authority's bus fleet.\(^10\) The pastime nevertheless seems to continue unchecked, and *Time* estimated that Philadelphia might have as many as 10,000 more or less habitual graffiti artists.\(^11\) Stiffer penalties for culprits were an oft-mentioned element in Mayor Rizzo's platform in the 1971 mayoralty election, and early in 1972 legislation was introduced into the City Council to control the sale of spray-paint cans.\(^12\)

THE GRAFFITI LONER

Perhaps the least geographical inner city inscriptions are the products of single individuals, or pairs of artists. In Philadelphia and New York these inscriptions include the work of graffiti celebrities, the self-proclaimed kings of the walls. The majority are black youngsters who range widely through the city, the downtown, the airport, the inner suburbs, and even beyond. They make little claim to the black residential sections away from the main thoroughfares. Their "territory" is overwhelmingly linear, following the main transport arteries, and their targets are city-wide public structures (Fig. 1). Their goal is to leave a mark on exotic space, to make a claim to the

\(^2\) Urban graffiti are not new; Philadelphia walls, for example, were heavily inscribed in the 1850s; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, January 12, 1973, p. G-3.


\(^4\) The graffiti "problem" had developed to this point according to a newspaper editorial in mid-1972; *The New York Times*, May 26, 1972, p. 34.


\(^7\) It is reported that every station porter in the New York subway system spends an hour a day removing graffiti, and the problem has become so acute that priorities for removal of different classes of graffiti have been established; *The New York Times*, February 11, 1972, p. 39.


\(^9\) *Time*, March 13, 1972, p. 44.


\(^11\) *Time*, March 13, 1972, p. 44.

\(^12\) In New York City such legislation was enacted in 1972. The bill was introduced by Mayor Lindsay and toughened in passing by City Council. It prohibits the carriage of opened spray cans and has moved toward closer control of sales. Penalties, including imprisonment, will be enforced.
world outside the ghetto. They leave inner city residential blocks to the local street gang, which has its own claim to the walls of its turf.

The more brazen the spatial conquest, the greater the status, so that graffiti kings seek to emulate each other in the inaccessibility of locations they invade (Fig. 2). Tity Peace Sign sprayed his name in red on an elephant's back side at Philadelphia Zoo; Bobby Kidd sprayed a police car while a friend held the officers' attention; and at the airport Cornbread sprayed a TWA jet which took off to the south bearing his name upon its wings.\(^{13}\) The signs at the airport read "Cornbread welcomes you to Philadelphia." So esteemed is his reputation as King of the Walls that when a city newspaper carried a false report of his death in a gang fight, a number of "Cornbreads" contacted the press to report they were still alive.\(^{14}\)


Sir Smooth. "Cool" denotes confidence, style, suavity, a mastery of the intricate signal language of street life. A title is a common affectation; another is to paint a crown above the nickname. Nicknames often show considerable creativity and originality; North Philadelphia boasts a Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, and even Baron Eric von Schwenk makes a graceful appearance in a solidly black neighborhood.

The signature is distinctive. It is usually spray-painted from an aerosol can and is highly accentuated, embellished with elegant curves and generous serifs. The letters, like the name itself, convey a message of "style," yet imply frustrated ambition, a bittersweet theme.

The conquest of territory, even in fantasy, is always an act performed for an audience. Locations have a meaning; to claim access to an inaccessible location is to make a claim of primacy for oneself. In Cool Earl's words:  

I started writing ... to prove to people where I was. You go somewhere and get your name up there and people know you were there, that you weren't afraid.

The same theme was repeated by Taki 183, a teenager living on 183rd Street in Manhattan, an artist with hundreds of imitators:  

I don't feel like a celebrity normally ... but the guys make me feel like one when they introduce me to someone. "This is him" they say. The guys knows who the first one was.

Inaccessibility rather than socioeconomic status determines difficult space, space worthy of entry. Thus Cornbread or an imitator made a nocturnal swing through Fairmount, a working-class white neighborhood on the edge of black North Philadelphia, closely patrolled by its own white teenage groups, with a history of antiblack harassment. These very characteristics made the area worthy of invasion. Fairmount youngsters strongly resented Cornbread's impertinent foray, and a number of his inscriptions were amended with an obscenity directed against the intruder. An assertive and defama-


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legitimate mastery over space, to claim control of a more ephemeral and chimeric nature. Spray-painting is one example of the adroitness of inner city culture in creating its own institutions in which desired status roles may be enacted.22

To some extent there is a complementarity between the graffiti king and the teenage street gangs. Both vie for the allegiance of adolescents; Cornbread turned to graffiti only after he had rejected the option of joining a gang:23

There isn’t much choice of what to do. . . . I did it because there was nothing else. I wasn’t goin’ to get involved with no gangs or shoot no dope, so I started writin’ on buses. I just started with a magic marker an’ worked up.

In each instance, escalation identifies the “adept” participant, whether the path leads from magic marker to aerosol can, from loud-mouthing to cutting, or from glue to scag. Like the mainstream society from which it has long been excluded, the independent society of inner city adolescents offers recognition to the man who excels, but to many inner city youth only one attainable avenue is offered, to excel at being bad.

The complementarity of graffiti king and street gang is revealed also in their complementary claims for space. The signatures of the graffiti kings are commonly on main thoroughfares, on downtown buildings, and on exotic targets outside the inner city, but they rarely stray into the residential blocks. Should the signature of a black but nonlocal graffiti artist appear within the turf of a street gang in a black neighborhood, it would often receive the same obscene amendment as the Fairmount boys’ response when Cornbread made a nocturnal circuit of their white working-class neighborhood.

In contrast to the graffiti kings, who are free-ranging and make temporary claims to space, the street gangs occupy a more fixed and permanent territory. Some gangs can trace a continuous identity over several decades; a few have shown their strength by reforming uptown after urban renewal cleared their original neigh-


Fig. 3. Gang territories and residences of gang members in a North Philadelphia neighborhood.

borhood.24 Street gangs are strongly place specific; in Philadelphia most of them take their names from an intersection near the center of their territory. Though the relationship is not as exclusive as it once was, the gang remains a block and neighborhood-based organization.25 Its sphere of movement, fixed rather than fluid, confined rather than expansive, is a close approximation to the movement patterns of many inner city residents.

A gang’s claim to its turf is never in doubt in the minds of gang and nongang youth. Neighborhood teenagers have to take care in the paths they follow and the areas they use. A university junior living in a section of North

24 The Barbary Coast gang in West Philadelphia has a continuous history of over thirty years; the Uptown Norris gang in North Philadelphia was named after dislocation uptown by renewal and the expansion of Temple University, from their former turf on Norris Street.

Philadelphia with three fairly active street gangs (Fig. 3) expressed the dangers to free movement.

It used to be terrible, man. It used not to be safe to walk beyond 41st Street without some guys getting at you. I live in 37th's territory but I was never with them. I know cats on Sutton and some on Richmond. Like I was between all three, and that's cool.

In Philadelphia, wall graffiti offer an accurate indicator of turf ownership. As a general rule, the incidence of gang graffiti becomes denser with increasing proximity to the core of a territory. Overwhelmingly graffiti consist of signatures, a nickname, often followed by the gang name (Fig. 4). Occasionally, boastful slogans are painted near the core of the turf. This is true, for example, of the large 39th and Sutton Street gang; despite its size, 39-S is vulnerable, for unlike 45-R and 37-H, which enlist outside groups into temporary alliances, 39-S has no allies.26

The evidence of the walls gives a good approximation of the extent of each territory. Boundaries compiled from the relative incidence of gang graffiti found a ready acceptance by neighborhood youth as an accurate portrayal of each gang's area of control, and the residences of gang members living in the neighborhood also show close agreement with them (Fig. 3). There is some overlap, with several gang members living in an alien turf, but this is both unusual and dangerous; a member of the 45-R gang who lived in 39-S territory fell an easy victim in the incident-ridden summer of 1970.

26 The street and gang names are fictional; life in this neighborhood is discussed in Ley, op. cit., footnote 21.
We have used graffiti to provide insights into the social and spatial order with equal success in a second Philadelphia neighborhood. Fairmount is a working-class white enclave on the edge of the North Philadelphia ghetto; black residential areas are north and east, a weakening Puerto Rican neighborhood is southeast, and a section of young white professionals, recent in-migrants, is to the south (Fig. 5).27

The territories of the Puerto Rican groups south of Fairmount Avenue, the Navaka Soul Gents and 20-G, are not well defined (Fig. 6). Their territorial claims show considerable overlap. Territorial indistinctness mirrors social weakness; both groups are weak, and neither appears in the files of the City's gang control units.28 Both are on the western edge of the territory of the powerful 16-W gang; 16-W graffiti are scattered throughout their area, showing that neither 20-G nor the Gents have been able to assert their independence from their more powerful neighbor.

28 20-G claims to be the main drafting unit for local Puerto Rican youth, and sporadic minor coercion is directed against Puerto Rican teenagers who resist enlistment. The Navaka Soul Gents are unknown to city gang workers.

North of Fairmount Avenue, and east of the jail, there is a sharp break from a biracial population to a solidly black neighborhood. Despite a large number of vacant and cleared rubble-strewn lots, the intensity of graffiti increases, for this is part of the territory of the Moroccans, one of the larger and more violent North Philadelphia gangs.29 At Corinthian Avenue their territory abuts abruptly against the white neighborhood of Fairmount, and there is very little graffiti transgression across this boundary (Fig. 6).

29 The Moroccans and 16-Wallace have a long history of feuding, usually just east of the study area on 18th street.
Graffiti again become intense west of 25th and north of Poplar, in an area which has recently become black. Although a number of small or distant groups (including the Moroccans) make a weak claim to parts of this area, the strongest claimants are the powerful 28-Oxford gang, centered four blocks north, and a recent local group taking the name of the 26th and Poplar intersection (Fig. 7). The thrust of 26-P graffiti south of Poplar on 26th Street and a few blocks west indicates the beginning of the movement of the ghetto edge into Fairmount. The distribution of graffiti in Fairmount itself, more limited but extremely concentrated, has been omitted from the map, and will be analyzed separately. The middle class area south of Fairmount Avenue and west of 22nd has few graffiti, and these inscriptions include a predictably higher representation from the nongang graffiti kings.

GRAFFITI AND ZONES OF GANG CONTACT

Graffiti for more than twenty identifiable nonwhite groups were recorded for the neighborhood around Fairmount. Most of these groups had few territorial markers in the
neighborhood, either because their graffiti represented stray outliers from a distant turf, or because the smallness of the group precluded any real gang status. There were six nonwhite local gangs of some substance (Figs. 6 and 7). In the east the powerful Moroccan gang had uncontested supremacy; Fairmount Avenue marked a sharp southern boundary insulating the Moroccans from close contact with 16-W. The amorphous western boundary of 16-W was confused by the two relatively weak Puerto Rican gangs.

The most interesting boundaries were between the black gangs 26-Poplar and 28-Oxford (Fig. 7). The latter is a relatively well-established North Philadelphia unit with a moderate territory and more than twenty members. The smaller 26-P group is far more recent; in 1960 an overwhelmingly white population lived within a two-block radius of the 26th and Poplar intersection. The emergence of 26-P might be seen as spontaneous once the area contained a majority of nonwhite residents, but the dynamics are complicated; the 28th and Oxford intersection is only seven blocks away, and as one of the more aggressive gangs, 28-Ox might well have expected to expand south following the ghetto edge. Northward expansion was thwarted by powerful neighbors; between 1966 and 1970 eleven serious incidents involving 28-Ox and rival gangs to the north and east were known to city authorities. The appearance of 26-P would clearly have been an obstacle to such southern expansion, and a certain amount of tension between the two groups might be expected.

The area which we might expect to have been contested consists of nine blocks or part-blocks which have tipped from predominantly white to predominantly nonwhite over the past decade. Both gangs have emblazoned on the walls, and thereby legitimized, their claims to this “virgin territory.” Graffiti indicate the northern third has been effectively absorbed.

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80 Youth Conservation Service, City of Philadelphia.
by 28-Ox and the southern third by 26-P. The status of the central section (Girard-College-Poplar-28th) is more uncertain; the proportion of 26-P graffiti relative to 28-Ox ranges from twenty-five percent to seventy-five percent. The graffiti in these central blocks change from self-reinforcing autographs to aggressive epithets directed against the other gang (Fig. 7). These blocks have the tone of a contested marchland. What is the meaning of these aggressive graffiti? Interpretation could clearly lie at any point on the attitude-behavior continuum, including the sublimation of open hostility.

Evidence from the second inner city study area in North Philadelphia suggests that aggressive graffiti represent more than simply hostile attitudes; they indicate dispositions to overt behavior. There are three street gangs in this neighborhood, and turf boundaries again have the highest incidence of aggressive wall markings (Figs. 8 and 9). There is a consistent pattern to the victims of aggressive taunts; wall epithets are exchanged between 45-R and 39-S, and between 37-H and 39-S. If graffiti are indicators of behavior we would expect 45-R and 37-H to be common antagonists of 39-S. Behavioral data substantiate this expectation. 39-S is the largest gang with perhaps seventy-five members; 45-R has around sixty adherents and 37-H has thirty-five.31 On a number of occasions 45-R and 37-H have formed an alliance against 39-S; in May, 1971, for example, after a week of gang fighting, fifty to sixty boys gathered on 37th Street and carried out a sweep along Sutton Street. This conflict has existed for a number of years. City files record ten serious incidents between 39-S and 45-R between 1966 and 1970, and a further ten between 39-S and 37-H, but no incidents between 45-R and 37-H. The articulation on the walls has indeed found its manifestation in the streets.

It would be intriguing if graffiti could also be used to predict the location of potential conflict. The zone of most probable conflict should coincide with the zone of aggressive graffiti, but we do not have enough data to

31 Official estimates of gang size fluctuate between 85 and 200.
make this claim. Incidents involving single boys or small groups are displaced either to a neutral place like school, or away from the boundary by the use of cars. Less spontaneous confrontations, however, involving larger groups of boys do show some concentration within the aggressive graffiti zone. A playground at a point of low aggregate travel for all three gangs is well known as the most common site for gang rumbles in this neighborhood. Three of four fights with known locations occurred in or near the playground (Fig. 8).

GRAFFITI AND THE DEFENDED NEIGHBORHOOD

A third type of inner city graffiti is wall inscriptions and emblems of the defended neighborhood, a neighborhood of some homogeneity, a recognized identity, and with authenticity as a distinct unit in its "foreign relations" with other parts of the city. The wall markings of the defended neighborhood are internally supportive and externally aggressive. They are messages for two audiences. Such graffiti are commonly boundary markers; they delineate an interface, the edge of socially claimed space, a boundary which in the North American city is often ethnic, and commonly racial. Fairmount is a defended neighborhood, a pocket of first and second generation immigrants experiencing encroachment from all quarters; to the north and east from the bursting North Philadelphia black community, and to the south from a burgeoning population of middle-class townhouse dwellers. The threat from the north and east is most keenly felt in Fairmount; the townhouse dwellers are reluctantly viewed as allies who at best will maintain property prices and the racial structure of the neighborhood.

The visible walls articulate invisible sentiments. In a defended neighborhood fettered by

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83 Graffiti in Belfast and Londonderry are solemn heralds of the spatial as well as the social structure of intergroup relations; curbs specially painted for the July 12th Orange celebrations in Protestant neighborhoods take on much of their meaning as discriminatory markers against an excluded Catholic minority; Boal, op. cit., footnote 21.
more powerful neighbors, graffiti promote an introspective self-consciousness. "Fairmount Rules," "Fairmount is Boss," or simply "Fairmount," are the self-reinforcing slogans on the walls of a neighborhood with an uncertain identity. Externally directed racial epithets and obscenities are a neighborhood counterpart of aggressive gang graffiti (Fig. 10).

Fairmount graffiti are strongly localized (Fig. 11). Twenty-three of forty-four recorded occurrences of assertive or aggressive graffiti appear on the walls north of Brown Street and west of 26th. At first sight this distribution is surprising, for the ghetto front is more distinct at the eastern than at the northwestern edge of Fairmount. Blocks at the eastern edge of Fairmount are uniformly more than seventy percent nonwhite, and this proportion exceeds ninety percent on a number of blocks (Fig. 12); the nonwhite proportion on the northwestern boundary is much lower, and in 1970 most blocks had a substantial majority of white residents. Why should graffiti be concentrated where the "threat" in terms of absolute numbers is much less? We assumed that white fears of ethnic encroachment would show a more or less linear relationship with the size of the adjacent black community, and that consequently the zone adjacent to a homogeneous black population would display the highest density of aggressive graffiti. This was not the case; there was no relationship between graffiti density and the homogeneity of the adjacent nonwhite population. Either graffiti were poor indicators of white resistance, or the assumption that a monolithic black community would produce such resistance was erroneous. Investigation revealed that the assumption rather than the indicator was faulty; the northwest quadrant was indeed the section of highest white stress. The reason lies with the areal incidence of racial change. During the 1960s the eastern ghetto edge consolidated, and there was no fresh encroachment; every block which had been ninety-five percent white in 1960 remained ninety-five percent white in 1970 (Fig. 13).

Events were very different on the northwestern boundary, an area which eluded community territorial control in at least one important manner. Almost ninety percent of residential units in Fairmount are owned by neighborhood residents, a very high figure which permits the existence of a largely closed housing market and a firm control on real
estate transfers.\textsuperscript{34} Outside ownership has implied an open housing market; preliminary trends indicate that as much as eighty percent of the apartment units rented by blacks have outside owners. The fact that the northwest quadrant does contain housing units with outside owners certainly aided the initial percolation of nonwhites into this section, and the southward advance of the ghetto edge by at least two blocks during the 1960s.

In 1960 two anomalous outliers of nonwhite population already existed in the northwestern quadrant, two blocks south of Poplar between 26th and Bambrey. Both had one-third nonwhite households. Two developments in the 1960s gave added concern to neighboring white residents. The first was the steady transformation of the section north of Poplar from a white majority to a black majority, a racial turnover which averaged five percent a year and accelerated as the decade progressed (Fig. 13). The second development was the assembling of black youths who eventually claimed the gang status of 26-P on the northern end of these two blocks.\textsuperscript{35}

White response has consisted of repeated attempts to “freeze out” black families, followed by sporadic harassment of black residents on and around the two blocks. In some senses this harassment attained its goals; nonwhite households decreased slightly, from thirty-four percent to thirty-one percent, between 1960 and 1970, but the number of black households on adjacent streets south of Poplar continued to rise. A zone of tension appeared which is located exactly by the evidence on the walls. Fourteen cases of assertive or aggressive graffiti, about one-third of the Fairmount total, are within one block of the 26th and Parrish intersection (Fig. 11). At this point a breach has occurred in the invisible walls defending white Fairmount; the high density of wall graffiti represent an aggressive territorial display by the present claimants to assert continued possession against the newcomers.

The wall display is not idle sublimation but a real threat which promises to have an overt consequence. Several new black residents have

\textsuperscript{34} Detailed examples of the closed housing market are presented in Cybriwsky, op. cit., footnote 27, pp. 373–385.

\textsuperscript{35} Liquor and drugs have been weakening 26-P; the state liquor store on Girard and West College has the graffiti “26 P’s Store.”

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Fig. 12. Proportion of Negro occupants in Fairmount and vicinity, 1970.

been physically harassed near 26th and Parrish. At least one case was reported in the black Philadelphia press:\textsuperscript{36}

Declaring that she “might as well be living in Hell,” Mrs. Emma Black said Wednesday that she will move from her predominantly white neighborhood in the Fairmount section of the city. Since she moved into the house at 814 N. Taney St., four months ago, Mrs. Black said that she has been a target for the abuse of surrounding whites.

In the late summer of 1970 continued harassment escalated into a racial confrontation involving perhaps as many as 400 white residents of Fairmount, and serious enough for a state of emergency to be declared. Two years later fresh racial graffiti indicated that the northwestern section remained a zone of racial tension.

At the level of the defended neighborhood, wall graffiti in Fairmount continue to be diagnostic indicators of an invisible environment of attitudes and social processes. They indicate far more than fears, threats, and prejudices; they are a prelude and a directive to open behavior.

\textsuperscript{36} Philadelphia Tribune, October 31, 1970, p. 1: the victim’s name has been changed; Mrs. Black’s Negro neighbors had been forced from their home two weeks before; her own departure was precipitated by an attack in which her son was burnt by a firecracker. Other sources suggest prior provocation by Mrs. Black; Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, August 30, 1970, p. 1.
and clues to the bounds and intensity of a community's control of its territory. In Fairmount, at least, they pinpoint the location where that behavior will occur.

CONCLUSION

The humble graffito is making a resurgence; our analysis of Philadelphia could profitably be extended to other cities in North America and Europe. An understanding of this resurgence and of the distributions of inner city graffiti requires a delving into social process. In the same way that the biogeographer is not satisfied to record vegetation zones without an attempt at explanation, so the urban geographer turns to neighborhood social processes to explain his distribution maps. Process, however, is more equivocal than form, so that our explanation of the incidence of urban graffiti might best be regarded as an interpretation, although it is based on detailed knowledge of the neighborhoods concerned and a broad and supportive literature.

In our discussion the mutual relationship between social process and the spatial order in the inner city has been a repetitive theme. The graffiti king, the street gang, and the defended neighborhood are all social groups which assert a territorial jurisdiction; each makes a public claim to space through an open declaration on the walls.

Territoriality is a process which has attracted far more speculation and hyperbole than detailed empirical treatment. Earlier literature has described the elaborate territorial rituals and boundary markers of some primitive societies, but in the Western world empirical work has rarely escaped the built environment, commonly the schizophrenic ward or the simulated submarine. Valuable as these and other room scale studies have been, "much remains to be done to identify the basic common features of human signalling behaviour related to territoriality as such." Martin continues:

One field of research which could be extremely fertile is the analysis of artefacts where the signals have been transferred from the human body to an object which is used in a territorial context.

Sommer has shown how such objects are used to defend personal space at the room scale. Territorial graffiti have an identical function at the neighborhood scale, that of ascribing a proprietary meaning to space.

The acceleration of urban crime, information overload, and a complex and often oppressive studies in Philadelphia, see Cybriwsky, op. cit., footnote 27, and Ley, op. cit., footnote 21.


Martin, op. cit., footnote 41, p. 443.

urban experience compound the uncertainty and confusion of inner city life. The restoration of some predictability to one's environment is a prescription for a territorial imperative. To define a small space of one's own permits a higher level of social control to be maintained, by surveillance, by restricting entry to recognized friends, and by limiting the range of acceptable behavior within the area. Establishing the territory generates security; maintaining or embellishing it guarantees status.

The graffiti king conquers a place momentarily; maintenance is impossible, hence embellishment is maximized in the capture of an exotic, inaccessible place with a garnished signature. The gang turf and the defended neighborhood are more permanent territories controlling the flux of the confusing city, but they need visible and unequivocal cues to identify ownership and notify outsiders that they are entering a protected place and must respect the integrity of claimed property. He who is king of the walls claims also to be king of the streets and master of their use. The walls are more than an attitudinal tablet; they are a behavioral manifesto.

Graffiti also have a more explicitly methodological interest to the human geographer. It is recognized that the emerging themes of man-environment interaction are conditioned not only by a tangible physical environment, but also by the invisible contours of a behavioral environment. But how does one identify, let

alone measure, this experiential topography? Graffiti are a visible manifestation of a group's social space. Moreover, assertive or aggressive graffiti represent more than attitudes. They are dispositions to behavior, and as such impress a bolder outline on the fuzzy transition between perception and action.  

The scholar must be sensitive to the nuances of such native guides as inner city graffiti. If he is unable to interpret the visible, then the invisible meaning of place will be beyond his grasp. We must understand the behavioral environment, the complex of socially and culturally determined beliefs and perceptions, and learn to read its diagnostic indicators if we wish to develop social and behavioral theory. To breathe life into the aggregate structural models of the 1960s will require such sensitivity, and perhaps a new microregional geography where the important contours are experiential, those of society and of the mind. Important distributions might then be those showing surfaces of novelty, stress, status, security, opportunity, and social control in the city. Such existential qualities increasingly define the new gradients and the new boundaries to behavior in the contemporary American metropolis.


