SCRUFFY CITY, VARIEGATED SPACES, RARE PLACES

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Royal Moore Starr entitled "SCRUFFY CITY, VARIEGATED SPACES, RARE PLACES." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture, with a major in Architecture.

Tricia A. Stuth, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Avigail Sachs, Jason T. Young

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
SCRUFFY CITY,
VARIEGATED SPACES,
RARE PLACES

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Architecture
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Royal Moore Starr
August 2017
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ABSTRACT

The general basis of this thesis is to provide a critical examination of city branding and its implications on the built environment. Geographically fixated upon on the city of Knoxville, TN, Scruffy City, Variegated Spaces, Rare Places explores a unique relationship between cultural identity and architectural form. This project is an attempt to understand and harness an allusive attitude that undoubtedly shapes the architecture of this city. Therefore, the project itself is an open-ended set of design operations that inherently challenge the nature of architectural process in an attempt to study and emulate scruffiness in the built environment.

The project was initially conceived and derives its sense of urgency from an extensive chapter of life spent living on the outskirts of Austin, TX. During my time in this great city, I noticed a general dissatisfaction from residents over the recent influx of Central Texas transplants. I couldn’t help but think, ‘they did it to themselves, they made this city too cool for its own good.’ Upon moving to the Southeast to inhabit a city that has yet to experience a mass migration like Austin, I ask myself: How is cultural value diluted from a place, and what is architecture’s role in either facilitating or preventing this kind of change?

Therefore, the purpose of this project is to establish a notion that practitioners of architecture, local authorities, and members of the general public should critically embrace and evaluate city branding as a metric for studying and shaping the built environment.
This project aims to investigate architecture’s role in the critical assessment and response to a place’s brand. My interest in place branding is indebted to my experiences living in both Austin, TX & Knoxville, TN, where marketable phrases have been used to capitalize upon the qualities of a city that make it unique. This architectural investigation begins with the birth of a city slogan. In the year 2000, the phrase, “Keep Austin Weird,” emerged as an early precedent for a city to formally establish an alliance with novelty. The implementation of weirdness as a commodity became a stronghold for the city of Austin as a rapidly growing urban oasis of eclecticism. The evolution of a branded phrase like this is fairly susceptible to palatable commercialization and reductive appropriation. Living in a suburb of Austin for four years, I was able to see the evolution of an attractive city, continuously drawing a crowd that desired to assimilate itself with a once potent notion of individuality. The resulting development was uncritical of its appropriation of weirdness, inevitably loving the phrase and the city itself to death without a care for continuing patterns of life that once made this city a weirder place. There are many people to blame for Austin’s decline in potency, which is by no means unique to the city of Austin. Knoxville as a once pejoratively coined, Scruffy City, is currently behind the curve in terms of national attention in relation to Austin, TX. It’s continuous population growth is occurring much slower in comparison to Austin, giving Knoxville a leg up in defining and maintaining the qualities that make it unique as a city. This gives Knoxville a unique opportunity to critically prepare itself for defending cultural potency in a time of progress. Scruffiness as an architectural scenario is something most easily experienced by wandering the corridors of Old North Knoxville. In particular, Broadway and Central Street are home to a plethora of early commercial buildings that have evolved into collaged works of unintentional art. Most of the area’s interesting buildings are abandoned, photogenic remains of once fruitful industry. However, this neighborhood has developed quickly in recent years, exponentially spiraling into control. More money is being funneled into the revitalization of these areas, therefore, this thesis aims to discover qualities about architecture that are often lost in the process of revitalization. This means to discovery takes place over the course of six months by way of a constantly evolving design methodology. Therefore, this project is more so an experiment than a means to establish a concise definition architecture as an application of a brand. This issue is one of a municipal nature, which encompasses a wide range of audiences who affect architectural design. Throughout the course of this project, I addressed practitioners of architecture, local authorities, and members of the general public as agents for assuming, assessing, and modifying the built environment as an application and criticism of a city’s branded identity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section One: Architecture & Branding...................................................................................................... 1  
  Character as Commodity..................................................................................................................... 2  
  Designed Purpose & Current Use..................................................................................................... 4  
  Quintessential Contributors............................................................................................................ 5  
Section Two: Modifying Public Perception................................................................................................. 6  
  Architects as Modifiers...................................................................................................................... 7  
  A Public Alteration of Brand............................................................................................................ 8  
Section Three: Approaching Ambiguous Descriptors.................................................................................. 10  
  Happenstance as a Design Substitute................................................................................................ 11  
  The Efficiency of Captivation.......................................................................................................... 12  
  The Value of Instantaneous Generation.......................................................................................... 13  
Section Four: Variegated Spaces, Rare Places.......................................................................................... 14  
  Frugality as Leverage....................................................................................................................... 15  
  The Second-Hand Architect.......................................................................................................... 16  
  Appropriation: Convention to Artifact............................................................................................ 17  
Section Five: A Vision for the Scruffy City.............................................................................................. 18  
  An Urban Exploration...................................................................................................................... 19  
  Architecture and Growing Audiences............................................................................................ 20  
  The Burden of Style....................................................................................................................... 21  
  A Dynamic Visual History............................................................................................................... 22  
List of References........................................................................................................................................ 24  
Appendix.................................................................................................................................................. 26  
Vita.......................................................................................................................................................... 36
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Keep Austin Weird</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Keep Out of Austin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Keep Knoxville Scruffy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Scruffy Merchandise</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Scruffiness in Reality</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>The U-Haul Dinner Party</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>The Cargo Convertible</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Bar Marley, Knoxville</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Sassy Ann’s, Knoxville</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Visions of a Scruffy City</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Guerilla Renderings</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Geotagging</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Public Reaction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Paramount U-Lik-A</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>Broadway Electric</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16</td>
<td>The Captivation Formula</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17</td>
<td>Formulaic Experiments</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18</td>
<td>Bar Marley Field Sketches</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19</td>
<td>Extravagant Frugality</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 20</td>
<td>Knox Rail Salvage</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 21</td>
<td>Modification Comic Bits</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 22</td>
<td>The DIY Bike Rack</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 23</td>
<td>Bar Marley, Urban Beach</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 24</td>
<td>North Knoxville Facades</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 25</td>
<td>Scruffy Propaganda</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 26</td>
<td>Altered Guideline Cover</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 27</td>
<td>Promoting Hybridity</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 28</td>
<td>Stylistic Singularity</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 29</td>
<td>Entirety of a Visual History</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 30</td>
<td>Designing in Layers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 31</td>
<td>Cycling Into Control</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

How to Modify Your Scruffy Building.................................................................Starr_ComicStrip.pdf
Famous Facades of North Knoxville..................................................................Starr_FacadeWalk.pdf
Revised Facade Improvement Guidelines..........................................................Starr_Guidelines.pdf
SECTION ONE:
ARCHITECTURE & BRANDING

CHARACTER AS COMMODITY

The complex character of a city cannot be definitively bought & sold as a retail commodity.

Architects, authorities and members of the general public are indeed shapers of the built environment. These incredibly influential facets of an urban population are both responsible for and responsive to branding strategies. The utilization of branding in a retail setting is indicative of an idea’s popularity, but should be cautiously approached. When does a city’s identity become a liability for itself? Austin, TX has surely experienced the negative repercussions of branding itself upon a particular brand of southwestern eclectic novelty. The tie-dye t-shirt becomes a reward for a pilgrimage to authenticity, a trophy for embarking on a brief detour into a highly modified land of palatable individuality. Weirdness as a public descriptor has turned a land of anomalies into a t-shirt war over its own magnetism, as seen in Figures 1 & 2. Visitors can bask in a culture of esteemed authenticity without necessarily contributing to or criticizing what made a city authentic in the first place. This problem does not stop with brief visitations, but instead falls victim to the reality of mass migration towards desirable places. Residents of Austin have criticized the dilution of their city’s image in regards to retail commodities. I witnessed the

Figure 1: Keep Austin Weird

Figure 2: Keep Out of Austin

ramblings of a disgruntled Austinite in regards to the sale of whiskey infused bacon as an extension of the city’s brand. He writes,

“You’re not keeping Austin weird. You’re engaging in this fake, utterly distasteful blend of irony and feigned enthusiasm that will eventually cause the city to self-implode under the density of its own facetiousness. Soon you won’t be able to identify a single genuine emotion within its borders. You don’t actually care about whiskey-infused bacon. You don’t give a shit about whiskey-infused bacon. You’re pretending to, because that’s what keeps the whole city from feeling like a big lie.”

This rant is a byproduct of a culturally magnetic city; people will attempt to capitalize upon the success of a novel brand. Therefore, what is to stop Knoxville from transforming scruffiness or grit into a palatable extension of itself? The t-shirts, coasters, stickers & koozies (Figures 3 & 4) are already here. Scruffiness is what will draw people to Knoxville, but can it exist as a brand beyond a typical reductive retail setting? What qualities can architecture offer a city, like the scene from Figure 5, that whiskey infused bacon cannot?

4. Image Produced by Author
DESIGNED PURPOSE & CURRENT USE

Scruffiness can be found by embracing a dialogue between designed purpose and current use.

Qualities of scruffiness in the built environment are clearly evident in many forms of adaptive reuse. The transformation of automobiles according to present utility has allowed for provocative and innovative spatial circumstances. The U-haul dinner party in Figure 6 is indicative of this peculiar kind of spatial transformation. Trucks like this were not created with architectural circumstances like dinner parties in mind. This creates a unique opportunity to pair the mobility of a moving truck with the social value of a shared meal. An equally striking example of these kinds of spatial relationships exists in the utility-rich example of the cargo convertible in Figure 7. This Mazda Miata is up for the job of carpentry work, and why shouldn’t it be? Not every car is a truck, but this does not exclude any car from acting in place of a truck. This idea can easily translate into the production of buildings, for there are endless architectural possibilities when structures are assigned a use beyond their designed intent. Scruffiness as a design driver is indebted to the ever-possible circumstance of appropriation. Ascribing new uses to dilapidated places can create both economically beneficial and spatially interesting results.

Uninhibited works of adaptive reuse have become Knoxville’s quintessential works of architecture in regards to scruffiness.

An extremely influential application of branded identity to architecture came to my attention with the discovery of Bar Marley, a vibrant Caribbean bar in the spatially generous remains of a old boiler room for a commercial dry cleaning operation. This peculiar composition of once normative tropical objects in this particular post-industrial location is both extremely unique and quintessentially scruffy. Bar Marley, Figure 8, has successfully challenged a variety of notions on what a bar in East Tennessee should look like. A similar built contributor to Knoxville’s cultural identity is a three-story dive bar in the once-domestic shell of a Queen Ann home. Sassy Ann’s, Figure 9, is a unique example of what can happen when a wild house party becomes a permanent establishment. Smoke fills the air, the music is loud, the drinks are strong & the third floor is indefinitely closed for repairs. A striking relationship exists between domesticity and the strange experiences that seem to always take place in a bar. Sassy Ann’s and Bar Marley embody a quality of scruffiness that Knoxville has chosen to embrace as its branded image.

SECTION TWO: MODIFYING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

ARCHITECTS AS MODIFIERS

Architects as proponents of scruffiness should be thought of as modifiers rather than designers.

If scruffiness is largely evident in the reuse of existing places and objects, architects should be thought of as modifiers as opposed to designers alone.

The importance of modification in architecture is the implication of an existing set of variables. Existing conditions such as site, structure & zoning specifications lay a crucial contextual foundation for architects to begin modification through a process of design. The renderings in Figure 10 are playful visions for a scruffy city, utilizing photographic context in a manner similar to an architect’s modification of built context. These novel vignettes of scruffiness are captured by a similar overarching attitude towards existing spatial conditions.

Essentially, there are wonderfully odd architectural opportunities that lie dormant in many spaces in Knoxville. The charge of this project is a reconsideration of the process behind reading and modifying these kinds of places. This process is not exclusive to architects alone, for it is crucial for members of the general public or those positions of authority to actively envision modifications for their city. Therefore, since the kinds people responsible for the development of a growing city are richly varied, everyone should be recognized as shapers of the built environment.

Figure 10: Visions of a Scruffy City

10. Images Produced by Author
A PUBLIC ALTERATION OF BRAND

Members of the general public should strive to continuously understand & alter their city’s brand.

How can members of the general public be reached, challenged & inspired by the act of theoretical architectural modification? After all, members of the general public are by far the most important force in shaping the built environment. Therefore, architects should strive to inspire a new public discourse about the future of public spaces in Knoxville. This stage of the project took this charge to heart, and in turn involved distributing the previous renderings across physical and digital landscapes. The architectural vignettes seen in Figure 11 were taped to objects on the site where the original image was taken, completed with the hashtag #GreetingsFromTheScruffyCity at the bottom of each rendering. The purpose behind distributing these images was to foster an awareness and creativity about what could potentially arise from everyday infrastructure. How can an inflatable arch over a set of train tracks inspire thoughts for the future of adaptive reuse in Knoxville? Every image created within this particular set of renderings was rooted in my personal opinions about particular sites. For example, the interior of a conventional Taco Bell, like the one in Figure 10, is not nearly as wonderful as the accidental lawn that dormantly sits outside of the building.
A similar attitude towards of anonymous distribution was applied to digital platforms as well. The utilization of geotagging in social media allows for shared images to organize with precise physical locations. Every image that was printed was simultaneously uploaded to a project specific Instagram account. Fortunately, I was able to witness very real and candid reactions to the images that I was anonymously sharing with fellow Knoxvillians. Some of the response were very funny, like the puzzling reaction to a Picnic on the Lawn of Fellini Taco Bell as shown in Figure 12. The Twitter post in Figure 13 demonstrates a bit of public reaction to proposals of this nature, @liberallara wrote, “honestly in what family on good or bad terms would do this shit,” 13 which proves a valuable point: these images were created to make people opinionated about the future of their city’s buildings. Nobody was interested in the Taco Bell lawn before I came along and placed a picnicking family atop of it. The purpose of this exercise was not to sell the public on eating outside of Taco Bell, but to concoct a new dialogue about the future of Knoxville’s architectural resources.

Figure 12: Geotagging 12

Figure 13: Public Reaction 13

12. Images Produced by Author
13. Lara [liberallara]. (2017, Feb 01). honestly in what family on good or bad terms would do this shit https://t.co/Xm8sGRZU3r
SECTION THREE: APPROACHING AMBIGUOUS DESCRIPTORS

Feb. 2017 ~ Mar. 2017
HAPPENSTANCE AS A DESIGN SUBSTITUTE

Scruffy situations are the byproduct of happenstance, which cannot actually be designed.

Throughout the course of this study, one might notice a fascination with the architectural qualities of dilapidated buildings. Whether missing a roof, cladding, or other basic built amenities, these places have a magnetic sense about them. What makes these places so attractive? The roofless Paramount U-Lik-A building as seen in Figure 14 has become an architectural novelty for the city forces beyond designed control. The lack of ceiling was not designed by an architect, or planned by a contractor, but was the byproduct of natural forces. In a similar fashion, the Broadway Electric building in Figure 15 displays a peculiar scattered composition of solid and void upon its outermost surface. The missing shingles have fallen victim to forces of nature, similarly to the aforementioned U-Lik-A building. Essentially, there lack of physical effort exerted by a human being in changing the physical makeup of these buildings has very efficiently created a novel scenario. The real beauty of Knoxville’s early commercial buildings is found in how they have changed and developed as a result of generations of use. This is not the byproduct of one architect alone, but of happenstance as a substitute for design. Therein lies a new question; what can an architect learn from happenstance?
THE EFFICIENCY OF CAPTIVATION

The cost of modifying a place in relation to a change in designed effect creates a metric for evaluating design in relation to happenstance.

Happenstance is antithetical to design; one demands no amount of intentionality, while the other is directly defined by conscious decisions. Architects are designers; therefore, they must make decisions about how they will manipulate objects in real time. A new mental hurdle stood in the way: what lies between lines of design and chance? In an effort to disrupt my frustrations with the allusive nature happenstance, I developed a formula for evaluating my design decisions. This formula, seen in Figure 16, revolves around an invented variable called, ‘the efficiency of captivation,’ which is essentially a measurement of effective frugality. To test my formula and theory on negotiating happenstance, I developed a series of design experiments as seen in Figure 17. These experiments relied heavily on finding an ideal relationship between capital input and design results. One scenario in particular was rooted in a simple design proposal from earlier in the semester, which involved a picnic on the lawn of a local Taco Bell. The picnic itself relied primarily on the use of existing architectural novelty, which allowed for a unique situation to arise from little design input; this was an act of happenstance-driven design.
THE VALUE OF INSTANTANEOUS GENERATION

Architects in search of ephemerality should utilize design platforms that allow for instantaneous generation.

Another facet of scruffiness in architecture is the rapidly changing nature of buildings in real time. A useful technique that was discovered over the course of this project was the ability to capture these events as quickly as possible, while still allowing for the hand to act as a filter between the mind and the built world. Field sketching is vital technique for seeing the beauty of a city’s grit. This technique became a favored approach for demonstrating the beauty of an off-kilter world while still delivering a clear and coherent image, which is indebted to the reductive nature of sketching as an architectural tool. Sketching as a form of design filter was extremely useful in translating the anomalous qualities of North Knoxville’s dilapidated buildings and Bar Marley as a particular case study in Figure 18. Through the lens of sketching, one may begin to notice particular details about a place that can override preconceived notions about what makes a building work. Field sketching is experiential, a tool that can be used to isolate the colors, forms and compositions that work together to make a building magnetic. The unique composition of indoor boats, vibrant conduit, sand boxes and other unconventional building elements found in Bar Marley were studied quickly and extensively.

Figure 18: Bar Marley Field Sketches

18. Images Produced by Author
SECTION FOUR: VARIEGATED SPACES, RARE PLACES

Mar. 2017 ~ Apr. 2017
FRUGALITY AS LEVERAGE

Form finding should be the result of a frugality and improvisation, for limited buying power can produce extravagant architectural results.

Spatial design is rooted in a heavy consideration of form, which has been heavily contested as design driver for much of architectural history. Some argue that form follows function, while others argue that form itself should take center stage. Scruffiness as an architectural theory is dependent upon both schools of thought concerning form. Yet it reframes these considerations to demonstrate frugality as the primary vehicle for successful design. Frugality is not exclusive to either camp because it is ultimately rooted in an alternative attitude. Scruffiness affords the ability to be excessive in design, as long as the components are acquired with as little capital as possible. The answer to the argument of form is not in found in staunch simplicity or limitless extravagance, but in the boundaries of one’s financial abilities. When considering the architectural significance of Bar Marley, Figure 19, one cannot ignore the obvious role novelty and excessiveness in design. However, these striking visual results were not the outcome of a costly endeavor, but of a patient and frugal collection and composition of architectural artifacts.

19. Images Produced by Author
THE SECOND-HAND ARCHITECT

The predictability of architecture is antithetical to scruffiness and can be avoided by embracing a greater tolerance in fit.

The acquisition of building materials in light of scruffiness is heavily rooted in a frugal attitude, yet one cannot begin to acquire materials unless they know where to shop. This idea inspired a series of cartoons that have been partially illustrated by Figure 21. This idea revolves around a notion of second hand stores as the primary mechanism for purchasing building components. Salvage yards are highly useful for finding a variety of useful materials within the constraints of a tight budget. Knox Rail Salvage, Figure 20, is a particularly potent supplier of novelty for builders in the Knoxville area. Their endless supply of materials is chaotically organized in a series of mounds across an enormous plot of industrial land. Venturing into the far reaches of the salvage yard requires a particular kind of bravery and a total commitment to frugality as a designer. An openness to improvisation is crucial when acquiring building supplies from a salvage yard. Ultimately, a scruffy architectural practice is rooted in a loose tolerance for architectural fit and an open mind for the appropriation of miscellaneous objects.

Figure 20: Knox Rail Salvage

Figure 21: Modification Comic Bits

20. Image Produced by Author
21. Images Produced by Author
APPROPRIATION: CONVENTION TO ARTIFACT

Architectural innovation is derived from the peculiar application of conventional objects & materials.

The brilliance of scruffy architecture is derived from how people have used conventional objects in unconventional ways. Take the water pump in Figure 22 for example, which was co-opted by a desperate cyclist in lieu of a traditional parking space. This rather ordinary architectural element was transformed into an odd spectacle, solely on the basis of utility. The improvised bike rack carries an intuitively brilliant quality about it that seems to resonate with undefined tropes of urban life. The purpose of analyzing this situation, along with many other happenstential events, is to understand the underlying principles that make this scenario photogenic. Consider the peculiar qualities of the Bar Marley beach in Figure 23. What is magnetic and strange about this scene? The bar attains spatial novelty by pairing the beach with post-industrial architectural remains. Architecture that draws odd connections between objects that would appear normal on their own is what drives the built character of the Scruffy City. Knoxville is a city of dynamic juxtapositions. It takes established individual scenes like a Caribbean getaway and brilliantly throws them between dilapidated buildings.

22. Image Produced by Author
23. Images Produced by Author
SECTION FIVE:
A VISION FOR THE SCRUFFY CITY

Apr. 2017 ~ May. 2017
AN URBAN EXPLORATION

Urban dwellers should aim to continuously discover new facets of their city by wandering through its corridors.

In an effort to further acquaint myself with the architectural novelties of Knoxville, I decided to start taking extensive walks throughout my favorite urban areas. These walks were primarily inspired by the Situationist’s idea of psychogeographic analysis, which aimed to classify points of intuitive attraction and repulsion in an urban context. The subversive nature of a psychogeographic walk was resonant with the rugged sense of character that pervades Knoxville’s undocumented world of scruffy architecture. Historian Simon Sadler also described these walks as subversive, when he said “wandering around the city, drifting without destination, neither going to work nor properly consuming, was a waste of time in a society where time is money.”

The exertion of physical effort as a means to understanding what makes the city tick seemed to strike a instinctual chord, which I followed on a series of psychogeographic outings. One walk in particular, through Old North Knoxville, stuck out as inspiring in regards to emulating the city’s scruffy sense of character. I began to develop a fascination with the eclectic facades of these buildings as seen in Figure 24.

24. Images Produced by Author
ARCHITECTURE AND GROWING AUDIENCES

Architects who wish to enact municipal issues must be ready to address a wide range of audiences.

The task of distributing a criticism and application of city branding in architecture takes more than speaking to architects alone. Hans Ulrich Obrist writes, “The question is how to make an architecture which can intrinsically be participated, and this becomes a question of language. How can language be such that it favors and pushes participation?”28 An acute choice of language and medium within architectural discourse can determine the scope of one’s audience. In an effort to develop the breadth audience, I began examining the political forces behind areas like Old North Knoxville. The Knoxville Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) caught my attention when I discovered the possibility of a facade improvement grant. It dawned on me that the city was financially incentivizing architectural improvements according to a set of guidelines developed by the MPC. Consequently, I took a personal charge to study the guidelines and learn how they were influencing the cycle of development that seems to spin so many places into complete control. A critical examination of these guidelines proved the need for a revision, which I have attached alongside of this document.

26. Images Produced by Author
27. Image Produced by Author
THE BURDEN OF STYLE

Period-specific restoration and contemporary masking alike will stifle the ingenuity of Knoxville’s early commercial buildings.

An avoidance of stylistic monotony was a natural extension when studying the happenstantial novelty of North Knoxville’s early architecture. This is evident in the language of the flyers depicted in Figure 25 & Figure 27, in addition to the fine print of the attached design guidelines. Municipal authorities and members of the general public alike are highly influential in shaping the built environment, and should not be thought of as separate from emerging architectural thought. The amended design guidelines aim to break the stylistic monotony that plagues the majority of adaptive reuse projects. Concerning aesthetic homogenization, urban designer Eran Ben-Joseph writes, “For what is appropriate to be built and designed should be found not in the vision of an ideal average and social homogenization, but in the facts of cultural distinctiveness and in what is normal given the circumstances of place.” A sensibility to circumstance is often overlooked by designers who choose to either restore an old building back to flawless period specificity or cover the entire building in a historically insensitive facade, like that of Figure 28.

29. Image Produced by Author
A DYNAMIC VISUAL HISTORY

A building’s material palette as seen from the facade should try to preserve the inevitable layers of history left behind by generations of use.

Knoxville’s greatest works of scruffy architecture are in many ways related to happenstance. Weathering, brought about by cyclical periods of vacancy and occupation, has made these buildings into a spectacle. The brilliance of their novelty is directly dependent upon their ability to tell a visual history through layers of material diversity, as seen in Figures 29 & 30. Knoxville’s early commercial buildings are rich with layers of occupation, and in some circumstances, tell a story of rich visual diversity based upon the current cultural occupation of a place. Christopher Alexander writes,

“The homogeneous and undifferentiated character of modern cities kills all variety of life styles and arrests the growth of individual character. Therefore, do everything possible to enrich the cultures and subcultures of the city, by breaking the city, as far as possible, into a vast mosaic of small and different subcultures, each with its own spatial territory, and each with the power to create its own distinct style.”

32. Image Produced by Author
33. Images Produced by Author
A homogeneous rejection of architectural expression is dangerous to not only Knoxville, but any city that values individuality as a design ethic. Consider a new kind of preservation, as described in the Revised Design Guidelines. People are returning back to live in the heart of cities, where old commercial buildings like Knoxville’s scruffy examples stand vulnerably in preparation for insensitive acts of architectural cleansing. The built environment is rapidly spinning into control. Knoxville’s own 920 N. Central Street is a perfect case study for this, as it has cycled rapidly into development over the course of six months. The proof is in the photographs of the building, which serve as headers and section dividers throughout this book. Each section of work, typically one month in length, is paired with a photograph of the building taken during that time. Figure 31 demonstrates the rapid transformation of this building, which might have gone unnoticed while flipping through this book, just as it would in real life. Our subtly changing cities are developing faster than one might think. Therefore, it is imperative for designers, authorities and members of the general public to adopt a fresh outlook on adaptive reuse and historic preservation as a critical assessment of city branding.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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SCRUFFY BUILDING PROPAGANDA
BAR MARLEY SITE PLAN
BAR MARLEY SECTION
BAR MARLEY SECTION

31
BAR MARLEY FIELD SKETCH
ARCHITECTURE AS A PROCESS OF LAYERING MATERIALS
ARCHITECTURE AS A PROCESS OF LAYERING MATERIALS
VITA

Born and raised in the Lone Star State, Royal Starr was brought up believing that 85 mph speed limits were a normal thing. Upon earning a Bachelor of Science in Outdoor Recreation from Texas State University in 2010, Royal split for the southeast to pursue a Masters of Architecture at the University of Tennessee in the Foothills of the Smoky Mountains. While never becoming the professional mountain man he once set out to be, Royal is still finding aspects of adventure in architecture and urban exploration. Upon graduation, he hopes to continue examining architecture’s role in shaping the variegated spaces of the Scruffy City.