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Graffiti: a visual vernacular as graphic design source

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Graffiti: A visual vernacular as graphic design source

by

Sung Hun Choi

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Graphic Design

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
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2007

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ABSTRACT

Vernacular design, the language of the everyday locale, has perhaps always been a source for graphic designers. Graffiti, as one of the newer art forms to make the transition from vernacular design to graphic design is graffiti art. Graphic designers should understand something about the language and symbolism of this design resource if they are to use it wisely in their designs. Due to its short lifespan in the urban environment, designers must begin to record, understand, and study this evolving symbol system and art form. This study records and compares graffiti art forms in two regions of Chicago. Through case studies comparing Little Village and Wicker Park, the use of this language is examined, and parallels showing how this form of communication can inform graphic design.
CHAPTER 1. Introduction

According to Webster’s Dictionary, “vernacular” refers to the “common everyday language of ordinary people in particular locality (Webster, 1973).” In general linguistics, it is used to describe local languages as opposed to linguae francae, official standards or global languages. The term “vernacular,” is sometimes applied to nonstandard dialects of a global language. Vernacular may also be applied to design practice such as vernacular architecture, meaning architecture that had grown out of local cultural traditions. Local vernacular is sometimes reflected graphically in the styles of naive/vernacular typography & hand lettering seen on signs and shop fronts.

Many graphic designers are influenced by other design traditions in producing their own work. Taking something that might not be considered design into a different context can create a communication that’s great for people to look at and understand the message. Vernacular design is such a source. This transition can occur even when we don’t know why it looks great to some people or why it’s exceptional. Most frequently, these design concepts are drawn from unpublished work and therefore the designer does not credit or acknowledge the source. As graphic designers we draw on the history of design in creating visual communications. Sometimes the history of visual communication is so embedded in our lives and culture we even forget the actual sources. Is Graphic Design just reinventing the past instead of inventing the future? It’s important to have a sense of history, and it is difficult to produce something totally new. We must be conscious how vernacular design can be a source for the new. For this reason, vernacular design has, and should interest the graphic
designer. David Carson is a graphic designer whose work reflects vernacular design. His work in producing the magazines “Raygun,” (Figure 1) and “Beach Culture” demonstrate an understanding of the subcultures of surfing and skateboarding. Carson’s design brings the energy of these subcultures into his designs inspiring and influencing many graphic designers. His work brings something new into graphic design field. He is able to understand the culture and use it as a resource to bring something new into the production of these magazines. His use of with layered images and nontraditional fonts reflected the rebellious nature of the subcultural vernacular.

April Greiman is one of the well-respected graphic designers who helped introduce the computer vernacular (Figure 2) to graphic design through experimental mergers of type and image on the Apple Macintosh computer beginning in 1984. At that point in time, the computer enabled the creation of a new language spoken by a select subculture. Understanding the subculture of computer generated graphics and prints generated a new
visual language, Grieman, appropriately, called this computer vernacular, because she had adopted technology as a tool to generate new types and designs.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 2. Computer vernacular typeface in 1984 by April Greiman.

The purpose of this study is to understand graffiti art as a form of a vernacular design system in urban Chicago. Looking at graffiti as symbols we can see different cultural or ethnic markings applied to businesses in a given region. We will examine graffiti art as an active organic symbol system. This study will map the city using graffiti as an indicator to distinguish the territories marked by gang signs and symbols or different types of tagging (graffiti artists nicknames) on the walls. This study will also note standard signage in these areas for purposes of comparison. It will be interesting to see how vernacular designs are used to identify different regions of Chicago.
Problem statement

Graffiti is a form of vernacular design that is best identified by the fact that graffiti is a tag. This tag can be translated into signs or symbols, and as a symbol, the graffiti has meaning. The symbolic aspect of graffiti can tell us about the culture and mentality of those who created the image or symbol. In graffiti, symbols can be used in many ways. Each graffiti has its own unique system of symbols that can be read and interpreted. Reading graffiti can tell us about the culture, social networks, and beliefs that produced that particular work. In a large city, such as Chicago, graffiti reveals a regional mix of cultural origins, beliefs, and influences. Perhaps a knowledgeable observer could interpret these various nuances in graffiti art to read the cultural regions of the city. This careful reading of graffiti symbology is the purpose of this study.

Graffiti has become a significant influence on graphic design and contemporary visual artists. Figure 3 shows the 2012 London Olympic logo by London Development Agency (LDA) which according to columnist Brendan Carlin was influenced by graffiti:

“Aimed at the younger, ‘internet generation’, it will also be used as the logo for the Paralympics and will be crucial to hopes of raising private sponsorship for both events. Based roughly on the figures 2012 and apparently inspired by graffiti artists, the image—which replaces an earlier logo devised for London's bid to host the Games—was hailed as ‘dynamic’ and ‘vibrant’ by organizers (Carlin, 2007).”

Figure 3. Logo of 2012 London Olympic.
Graphic designers may admire the bold aesthetic of the work, but may know little about its history or meaning. As graffiti enters the artistic arena, it is important to develop a record of how graffiti developed. Naturally, recording graffiti isn’t always easy. This art form is often considered vandalism and removed from the surface as soon as possible. In Chicago, major artworks are lost within 24 hours by law. Chicago's mayor, Richard M. Daley created the "Graffiti Blasters" to eliminate graffiti and gang-related vandalism. The bureau advertises free cleanup within 24 hours of a phone call. The bureau uses paints (common to the city's ‘color scheme’) and baking-soda based solvents to remove some varieties of graffiti (Keep Chicago Beautiful, 2002). Nonetheless, it is time to write a lively account of the nature and development of graffiti as an art source. This study will attempt to create a cultural diagram (Figure 4) of the Chicago area based on the rich resource of graffiti art.

Figure 4. Cultural diagram of relationship between graffiti and graphic design.
Terminology

Some background in the terminology commonly used to describe graffiti art will be essential to the understanding the material presented in this study. The case studies identify various instances of these identifiable graffiti practices. It will be useful in the context of the case studies to identify these instances by their recognized names.

“Back to back” is a graffiti term that means that the graffiti covers the wall from end to end as we see in Figure 5. When one finds an example of back to back graffiti, it can be an impressive experience.

Another word common in graffiti language is “the crew.” A crew is a group of writers or graffiti artists who interact and occasionally work together. The image in Figure 6
is an example of a doorway where all the members of crew have written their names. The name of the crew itself is written over the doorway.

Figure 6. Example of the crew.

The crew practice of marking a doorway is called "dress-up" (Figure 7) which means to completely write all over a specific area like a doorway, wall or window that is previously untouched. It may indicate that a member of the crew lives here.

Figure 7. Example of dress-up.
“Graffiti” is a term that means many things to many people. The most common definition would be the illegal or unauthorized defacing of a building, wall or other edifice or object by painting or otherwise marking it with words, pictures or symbols (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Example of graffiti.

Graffiti art is a form of “Vernacular design” (Figure 9) Vernacular refers to the native language of a country or locality, most frequently a subculture. In general linguistics, vernacular is used to describe local languages as opposed to linguae francae, official standards or global languages. It is sometimes applied to nonstandard dialects of a global language. Vernacular can also be a visual language, and sometimes applies to graphic design as is occasionally reflected in naive, vernacular typography and hand lettering seen on signs and shop fronts.
Figure 9. Example of vernacular design on the shop front.
CHAPTER 2. Literature Review

Vernacular design as a source for graphic designers

Vernacular design has perhaps always been an unseen source for graphic artists. For the graphic designer, vernacular design serves as an inspirational source helping us to see different cultures, ethnic groups, and people that speak or communicate differently. Vernacular design is communication, a language, from which graphic designers, can adopt and share ideas. Graphic design, can therefore, utilize the aesthetic ideas of the original graffiti artist in communicating to the general public. The problem is that graphic designers often do not understand the languages symbology of the graffiti and therefore the actual message may be inappropriate to the finished design. Graphic designers, should understand something about the language of contemporary graffiti art before incorporating these markings into their designs. These case studies will provide graphic designers with a better understanding of the connotations that they may transpose into their designs.

The term vernacular is used in many different ways. It would be beneficial to take a closer look at what vernacular design means to graphic design, including how vernacular design has been used in signage, and symbols.

“The term vernacular design refers to the commonplace artistic and technical expression broadly characteristic of a locale or historical period; it closely relates with retro design. Vernacular design is the paraphrasing of earlier, more commonplace graphic forms, such as baseball cards, matchbox covers, and unskilled commercial illustrations and printing from earlier decades. (Meggs p. 447)”

In 1990 the Museum of Modern Art held the “Exhibition High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture,” this exhibition showed how modern artists have used elements of lower culture in their art works. The exhibition showed uses of newspapers, advertising, comic books and graffiti in artist’s work. This exhibition inspired Ellen Lupton a writer,
curator, and graphic designer to write an article entitled “Low and High: Design in Everyday Life” published in Eye Magazine in 1992. In this article, Lupton observes that graphic designers have incorporated vernacular design into their work, intentionally or perhaps unintentionally. She points out that many modern graphic designers look at design from high to low. They believe that the only suitable sources are those already accepted by the professional community. This view gives designers nothing really new upon which to draw from. Historically, new initiatives in design have frequently come from vernacular design forms, and this continues to be a valid practice. In this article, the Lupton argues

“…that in order to take a renewed critical view of contemporary life, designers must find a place to speak from within culture, and not position themselves above it. (Lupton p.72)”

As graphic designers, we communicate with our audiences visually. In design, there are different ways of showing the visual dialects within our designs or our conceptual thought process. This paper will examine the visual and symbolic dialects made visible by graffiti signs and explore how we can represent this information in the form of a territorial mapping of the urban Chicago area.

Looking into the language of contemporary graffiti

Contemporary “Graffiti” is an intentional drawing or inscription made on a wall or other surface, either private or public. These drawings that can be seen in low-income neighborhoods, or industrial areas in cities. Graffiti usually takes the form of publicly painted art, drawings or words and often constitutes vandalism. Graffiti can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as classical Greece and the Roman Empire. The word “graffiti” expresses the plural of “graffito,” the word used to refer to works of art made by scratching the design on a surface. This word has evolved from the Italian language, most likely descending from “graffiato,” the past participle of “graffiare” (to scratch); ancient graffitists scratched their
work into walls before the advent of spray-paint, as in murals or frescoes. These words derive in their turn from the Greek graphein, meaning, to “write.”

Graffiti, to the general public, is known only as an act of vandalism. For some, however, it is a form of art, often referred to as “Spray can art,” “Subway art,” or “Street art.” Graffiti has developed as a sub-culture of graphic design in recent years, and has created a crossover from graffiti art to graphic design. An attentive observer would notice many similarities between the work of the more famous graffiti artists and their contemporary graphic design.

Although the art of graffiti evolved during ancient times, it didn’t acquire important role in society until the mid 1960s with the exception of one person in 1942 that went by the name “KILROY.” Kilroy would write with white chalk on the walls of urban Detroit, “KILROY WAS HERE!” or “KILROY IS HERE!” (Figure 10). Kilroy was a favorite graffiti symbol for American service men during World War II (Mick, 2007).

Figure 10. “KILROY IS HERE!” 1942.
In late 1960s the word graffiti was used by political activists to make statements and also by street gangs to mark territories. Graffiti was known as an underground art form and started developing as a sub-culture by the late 1970s. This graffiti sub-culture shared many ties to other pop-culture expressions, such as hip-hop/rap music, B-Boys (break dance), beat box, and fashion. These groups shared similar goals in using their particular talents or interests to express either their own identities or other issues that they felt needed to be addressed publicly.

Many people believe contemporary graffiti started in New York City but it actually started in Philadelphia during mid to late 1960s. It eventually made its way to Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Harlem in New York City where it is still practiced today. Two of the pioneers of graffiti art are “CORNBREAD” (Figure 11) and his partner “KOOL EARL.” They wrote their names all over the city using spray paint, and their style of writing became an important inspiration for the lettering styles to come. They gained recognition among the community of graffiti artists and also from the local press.

![Image of Cornbread's tag](Figure 11. “Cornbread” tag.)
In late 1960s, New York became the mecca of graffiti art. Manhattan spawned some of the most famous graffiti artists such as “TAKI 183,” and Keith Haring. In 1971 the New York Times published an article on “TAKI 183” and Keith Haring and both became celebrities overnight. This public recognition attracted the attention of many young people, especially those involved with rap music. This movement of “subway art,” “street art,” and “spray can art,” became a sub-culture in American society. For these people, the goal was to write as much as they could on anything to gain respect on the streets and “street cred.” As graffiti art gained popularity by younger generations of people in America, it also gained popularity across the world. Over the years, the number of graffiti artists has grown and the influence of graffiti art has reached artists in Europe and America. Some of the most famous graffiti artists include: Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Richard Hambleton, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mear One, and Shepard Fairey. According to Tristan Manco who wrote “Street Logo,”

“Current graffiti art is reflective of the world around it. Using new materials and techniques, its innovators are creating an original language of forms and images infused with contemporary graphic design and illustration. Fluent in branding and graphic imagery, they have been replacing tags with more personal logos and shifting from typographic to iconographic forms of communication. Subverted signs, spontaneous drawings, powerful symbols and curious characters represent a worldwide outdoor gallery of free art. (Manco p 1)”

Graffiti art is constantly changing. It is an art form that feeds on different ideas and is sensitive to changes in art forms. These artists are constantly absorbing other art forms such as graphic design, in order to produce more original personal trademark signs, symbols, logos, typography, calligraphy, and graphic iconography. Many of these graffiti artists focus on the visual language of signs, icon, logos, and characters in their arts. Keith Haring was one of the first artists who crossed the line between pop art and graffiti art. In the early
1980s, Haring created a whole urban mythology of symbol, drawing with chalk on to the found surfaces of blacked-out billboards in New York subway stations. Some of the iconic graphic signs that Haring developed as his trademark were “Radiant Baby” (Figure 12), and “Pack of Dogs” (Figure 13). Haring may have been the only artist who used these types of signs in his work, but he inspired the notion of using personalized symbols or logos in the art. Haring’s work influenced the advertising, fashion and graphic design industries. In Haring’s symbols and logos he used basic graphic design principles such as line weight and simplicity of line drawings. Many of his drawings or painting are well known throughout the world. Haring was one of the few who truly influenced and inspired many aspiring graffiti artists, and also one of the first to make the crossover from graffiti art to pop art then to graphic design.

Figure 12 "Radiant Baby" by Keith Haring

Figure 13 “Pack of Dogs” by Keith Haring
According to graffiti artist “FREEDOM”

“If you look at Keith Haring, every mark, or line has to offset every other line. It’s the same with Paul Klee. In wild-style, every shape has to bounce off another shape. That’s to me what it’s about. Now when you’re doing it in such an intricate form, plus you have to do that within a scheme of letters, that’s when wild-style comes alive, because everything interconnects with something else. It has a harmonious composition. That whole thing has a story. (Miller, 2002)”

By the end of the 1980s, graffiti artists thought writing tags on the walls or on the train had become too standardized and want to start a new trend. Over time tags, became more about personal style and less about legibility. Graffiti artists start to make faces, characters, and abstract shapes, creating their own iconic logos as their signature. Graffiti had begun converting to more graphic design approach as artists try to express new ideas to a wider audience by using icons, signs, logos, and other visual devices by the end of the 1980s.

At the start of the 1990s, a graffiti artist by the name of Shepard Fairey, developed the idea of creating a brand identity through images of well-known celebrities on their artists logo. Fairey uses image of a wrestler called “Andre the Giant,” creating an alternative brand that is accompanied by the word “Obey” (Figure 14). Fairey’s campaign was making fun of or mocking both the political and corporate idea of branding in American culture. From this campaign, the logo of “Andre the Giant” and the word “OBEY” gained iconic status throughout sub-culture society. Because of its popularity, the “OBEY” campaign became an influence to graffiti art across the world. The “OBEY” logo has been seen in films such as “Batman Forever,” “8mm,” “Phone Booth,” and “Along Came Polly.” This use of graffiti art iconography in pop-culture films demonstrates the influence and popularity of graffiti art in America.
Though they do not necessarily agree with commercial branding campaigns, graffiti artists use many of the aspects of branding to promote their own personal identities and “tags.” They want to remain independent artist and not part of the commercialized world, however, if the campaign gains enough popularity it does enter the commercialized world. The “Obey” campaign is an example of the departure from graffiti culture into popular culture and now serves as a brand recognized across the globe.

Environmental graphics or outdoor signage is a facet of graphic design that was of particular interest to many graffiti artists in the past. The drop-shadowed letters of shop signs, wild graffiti letterforms, and neon lights, these are some of the influences on graffiti lettering. However, today, new graffiti artists are becoming increasingly fascinated by road signage causing an outbreak of printed stickers or painted “tags” on road signs. The road sign represents order, authority, and the feeling of a controlling presence. The signs stand for the the way our lives are regulated, and these stickers serve as a statement against these regulating forces. In 1996 graffiti artist Caleb Neelon aka “Sonik” started a project called
“Sign of Life” (Figure 15); “Sonik” installed more than five hundred signs on the sign poles on streets of Boston. In an e-mail to “Sonik,” the author asked what was his purpose of “Sign of Life” project? He replied with;

“The “Signs of Life” project was a way to make some harmless street art using available real estate, that being the sign posts in the area. (Sonik, personal communication, 2005)”

Well known in graffiti circles in the United States, “Sonik” is a graffiti artist, a graphic designer, a writer, and an accomplished scholar all in one.

“He has lectured at Harvard Law School, Bates College, Northeastern University, and his alma mater, the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Caleb’s artwork has appeared in galleries across the United States and on walls in Kathmandu, Reykjavik, Bermuda, Calcutta, São Paulo, and across Europe (Neelon, 2006).”

Figure 15. “Sonik” road signs.

Graffiti artists have been looking at cities in new ways. They are constantly testing their ability to challenge the “system” by creating their own sign systems or their own
language, even going so far as to repaint roads for way finding systems. One good example of a graffiti artist of making their own way-finding system is a system created by “Cisma” for the roads of Brazil (Figure16). “Cisma” went to the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil to make his own way-finding systems, of how he walks around the sidewalks of the streets. He is also a graphic designer who is influenced by graffiti art.

Figure 16 “Cisma” Streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil

According to Tristan Manco,

“Icons are not just used in single cut-images or groups; they are part of a more graphic approach to graffiti, more relevant to today’s society, using the familiar design language of advertising, desktop publishing, websites, video games and popular culture…(Manco p.17)”

The iconographic/symbolic approach to creating art founds its roots in graphic design. Graffiti artists also discovered that there is a lot of variety in the representation of letterforms. Using this knowledge, graffiti artists began to think about iconography and symbology in creating their art. Iconographic and symbolic approaches speak more directly to an audience. This is what graffiti artists want; the message must be both recognized and understood by the public to be effective.

The interest in graphic design by graffiti artists has also been reciprocated. Many graphic designers are using the language of graffiti art to express ideas and concepts in their own work.
Graphic artist, “El Cartel,” (Figure 17), who is based in Madrid, Spain creates posters using iconic graffiti images to exploit social and political issues. He constantly experiments with new materials; techniques, and approaches. His style has changed since he became interested in graffiti art. “The use of iconography is just one of the many aspects in graffiti art these days because icons are often used as brands or logos for graffiti artists it becomes their calling card.”

Graffiti art became a mainstream art form in the 21st century appealing mainly to teenagers and young adults. It is in constant transformation and is feeding on all aspects of art culture including, but not limited to music, fashion, and design. Graffiti artists are constantly studying other art forms as well as other artists. As time passes, both technology and the cities themselves are changing. Artists like “Sonik” are involved in graphic design.
and find ways to incorporate design elements into their work. Many graffiti artists have taken the leap from graffiti art to graphic design and their “spray can” background is often incorporated into their art. This type of design is becoming more and more popular especially in designs for the music industry and extreme sports. The line between commercial and non-commercial art is being blurred before our eyes.

“There are a large number of graffiti writers, whether former or active, who are involved in graphic design today, so it is natural for them to incorporate their graffiti work into their design work (Sonik, personal communication, 2005).”

Graffiti offers a rich source of visual representation and symbolic meaning. It is a contemporary instance of developing vernacular design that merits examination.

**Communicative and symbolic aspects of graffiti design**

Over the past 100 years, industrial technology has developed throughout America and around the world. As technology developed, so did the American landscape and infrastructure. As transportation developed, and construction changed, businessman wanted to communicate and advertise their goods by posting big billboards signs and neon signs by the side of the roads to attract people’s attention. The concept of drive-by advertising gained popularity rapidly during fifties and sixties. A major example of this kind of signage was the Las Vegas “Strip.” During this time, a visual language was developed to communicate to the automotive public, with individual sign artists creating the norms of this visual language based on evolving technology, aesthetics, legislation, and commercial needs. In an article written by George LaRue,
"Some began scientific studies of perception at high velocity to solve the problem. Others, following a less rigorous course, reasoned that if it was big and shiny and lit up at night those speeding by would be able to make sense of it. In time a vernacular language was developed to communicate to the automotive public, with individual sign artists creating the norms of this visual language based on evolving technology, aesthetics, legislation, and commercial need. (LaRue p. 22)"

LaRue also talks about the characteristic roadside culture that deals with zoning. The first zone is called “Old downtown,” this would be the oldest commercial signage zone area within the city. In the old downtown, the scale and visual impact of architecture greatly outweigh that of the signage (LaRue p.23). Much of this signage is aimed at pedestrians as much as automotive traffic. In “Old downtown,” areas the commercial signage tends to be a true mix of old and new aesthetics with similarly old and new technology. Today’s city dwellers have fled to the suburbs, avoiding the old downtown area, with its vacant buildings and dreary office spaces, sometimes converted to artist studio lofts. Figure 18 is evidence of “Old Downtown” zoning within the city, a picture of Pioneer Square in downtown of Seattle, Washington. The building still has old painted signs for businesses that no longer exist. In another example, figure 19, also from Pioneer Square, a neon sign has been attached to the side of the building and hangs over the sidewalk.

Figure 18. Pioneer Square, downtown Seattle.
Figure 19. Pioneer Square, downtown Seattle.

The second zone, is the “Historical or tourist district,” signage, for example the “Hollywood” sign that’s on top of the hill is both historical and one of the best known tourist attraction signs in the world (Figure 20). Applying the historical visual vocabulary to signage has the power to make people feel the historic quality of the place. The historic signs are made to a scale of suitable to pedestrian traffic, which is different from the signage systems found in the old downtown signage environment. Historic signage is easily recognizable from the movies or from tourist books. One of the places we tend to find historical zoning is on the old commercial strip, such as in major cities and small towns. The old strip can be identified by its typical wide street lined with prosperous business structures in an architectural style native to the days before the proliferation of franchises like McDonald’s or Wal-Mart. This was the time period when sign makers produced creative signage to attract the customer’s attention, without the run away technology that followed.

“The neon, and incandescent, lacquered enamel deco to modern of the late twenties and to early forties, and the towering conglomerations of all that technology could offer of the fifties and sixties. (LaRue p.25)”
Figure 20. The Hollywood Sign is a major Los Angeles.

Figure 21, is good example of historical and tourists attraction sign in America. Located at the entrance to Las Vegas this sign was installed in 1959. The sign sits as a welcome to travelers entering the Las Vegas experience on Las Vegas Blvd.

“The sign itself resides in the middle of traffic median directly in the middle of the road. The famous Welcome to Las Vegas sign sits alone at the South end of the strip and is often the very first sign a traveler encounters when entering the strip. It casts a surprisingly powerful glow over the barren median, which it stands. It stands as a gateway to the extravaganza that is Las Vegas. When leaving the main drag headed south the sign has an equal effect of being a lone gateway in and out of the Strip. (Schwartz, 2002)”
In 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour, the author “Learning From Las Vegas,” wrote a book that describes vernacular architecture by creating an image map of the city. The target audience for this book was academic: professors, critics, and their students. How can designers learn from this history, culture, and tradition? Learning from Las Vegas introduces the scientific mapping and description of the city as it relates to the customs of individual peoples and cultures within it. It provides

“…an innocent sample of popular life to be studied by the knowing specialists of high culture. (Lupton, p.73)”

“We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And with holding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.” (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972)

In life, change is inevitable. Our lives change as technology develops and we have to adapt to our surroundings. As we adapt to our surrounding visual communication change, therefore perception of how we look at things change. It’s clear how a number of broad influences within the vernacular language of sign makers have created a visually homogeneous national roadside culture.

“As our environment continues to evolve it also continues to accumulate layers of commercial signage. Each new deposit reflects the latest communal vision of utopian commerce, and so fixes itself, like all previous ideas, to a particular point on the socioeconomic timeline. Reviewing historic context allows us some deeper understanding of the interconnectivity of visual communication and cultural norms, and how each constantly informs and mutates the other. Bearing the process of natural selection in mind, it becomes clear how a number of broad influences within the vernacular language of sign makers have created a visually homogeneous national roadside culture. (Brown, Izenour & Venturi, 1972)”

In the signage systems of urban areas, commercial signs communicate meaning through the selection and adaptation of typefaces and images. These, on occasion take on a naive and culturally unique quality which make them a part of the local vernacular. The signs adapt the letterforms and type based on the historical-cultural background of different areas.
in the city. Signs are designed for the broadest audience. Commercial signage conveys information about the business, and signage information will speak to the customer and the target audience. The idea of zoning applies within different areas of the cities. In many cases historical zoning is found throughout United States. For example, different parts of Chicago can be viewed as cultural regions in the city characterized by a group of people who lives within the region. In my own personal experience in Chicago I can easily find the Asian stores by simply looking at their signs, colors schemes, the images on the signs, the architectural details, and the surrounding of the area. According to Sojin Kim and Somi Kim, “The manner in which cultural groups are typographically referenced in signs depends on the connotative as well as denotative value of written forms. From earliest times the inscription of language by human hands involved practices in which value and meaning were assigned but just to what was written but to how it was written. (Kim & Kim, 1993)” In the cultural aspect of typesetting it’s reasonable to use the cultural typefaces, something that relates to the location of where signs are placed or signs that relates to their own culture. These cultural typefaces are easily seen on cities that are divided by race or ethnicity. Sojin Kim and Somi Kim who wrote an article called “Typecast: Meaning, Culture, and Identity in the Alphabet Omelet (Which came first?)” focuses on typefaces that are used on the streets of Los Angeles. For this essay Sojin Kim and Somi Kim talks about the relationship between the cultural backgrounds of the typefaces that’s used in commercial business signage. These businesses often use typefaces that relates to their ethnicity within the city and also using the letterform of their own typefaces to relate with alphabet. For many Chinese restaurants, signs can be recognized by the used of Mikita typefaces in their storefronts (Figure 22, 23). According to University of California Press in 1976; “Informal writing styles and brush scripts, particularly Chinese and Japanese, also began to affect character shapes. Around 1885, a font called Japanese appeared in England, perhaps the first font to allude directly to Japanese or other East Asian culture through the design of letters that evoke the calligraphic brushstrokes of Asian writing. (Grat, 1976)”
Typeface Mikita has characteristic of both Japanese and Chinese ethnicity within the typefaces. This can be also viewed as vernacular design within the Chinese and Japanese society and also for other people who are familiar with Chinese and Japanese typefaces. In metropolitan these cultural typefaces are becoming more familiar with groups of people in that part of the area. The cultural aspect of the signs can be viewed as zoning of the marking their own territory within the surrounding of the area. Other cultural typefaces also include Greek (Figure 24, 25), Arabic, and Hebrew versions. Certain types maybe made for one particular audience and groups of people but those typefaces can be reinvented in totally different ways for different cultures or different people. A good example of these culturally diverse signage can be seen in Los Angeles. It’s not just the language represented on these signs, but also the typeface within the language and the accompanying symbols. These reveal the cultural heritage and diversity. It’s a place where different languages and cultural groups oftentimes intersect and juxtapose one another. The manner in which two languages are situated in a sign reveals the way in which a business imagines others will identify it. Varying degrees of proficiency in different languages are also reflected in signs. For example, within Korean town in LA, business signs are in English but they are accompanied by their translation into Korean. The function of the Korean writing is linguistic, not graphic. Like graphic design, graffiti has a unique cultural milieu and a language of its own.
Social surroundings and subculture of graffiti symbol’s change

Contemporary graffiti can be used to communicate social, political and advertising messages. In many ways graffiti often has a reputation as part of a subculture that rebels against authority, although the thinking of the practitioners does diverge from this paradigm. For them, graffiti art can relate to a wide range of attitudes and purposes, such as political commentary, protection, beautification, or credibility. Graffiti is just one tool in an array of resistance techniques practiced by opposing urban factions. One early example includes the anarchy symbol that was adopted by the anarcho-punk band “Crass,” who conducted a campaign of stenciling anti-war, anarchist, feminist and anti-consumerist messages around
the London Underground system during the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Southern Records)

In the poster of underground band “Crass” they marked their band logo by marking with capital “A” in the middle of a circle as their band logo. (Figure 26) For followers of this band, anarchy has a unique meaning, and they use the symbol “A” with a circle to label this form of anarchy for others. They are telling the listeners, that they don’t believe in war and they support feminist and anti-consumerist messages in their music. These symbolic messages have caught the attention of listeners and viewers. Because Crass used the anarchy symbol to represent their own concept, and the band gained a certain popularity, others began to use the anarchy tag. It became mainstream and was used widely among graffiti artists and taggers during the 80s. Graffiti artists and taggers have used the anarchy symbol in their own works and one can see these symbols on the sides of buildings and sidewalks of East Village of Manhattan, New York for example. This is where one can easily see these symbols and their different interpretations among the people who live in or near East Village.

It is as though these symbols have their own meanings and languages that outsiders don’t know, only within their society or within the group would anyone know what concepts the symbols represent. Graphic designers, may often be outsiders in the unique societies that produce these symbols and not truly know what they mean. An effort should be made to understand the visual language before trying to use it. As communicators, it is important to understand the developmental forces that drive these new symbol systems.
The symbols have created a different sort of symbolic representation within the groups of people in the East Village of Manhattan in New York City. This population assigned different meanings to the symbols that came out of East Village in late 80s, and to the very presence of the graffiti on the surrounding surfaces. The bold presence of graffiti itself reflects the sense of community that characterizes this neighborhood. These new symbols that graffiti taggers and artists has created in East Village has not gone unnoticed by the police and authorities in New York City. Some of the more prominent of these symbols are: “A” inside of circle, “N” inside of circle, “DIN,” “five point star” inside of circle, and overturned martini glass. Some of these symbols have historical background and also have specific meanings.
About the “Circle A” (anarchy symbol), John Dale explains:

“It is a Middle Eastern (Israeli and Syrian) symbol from prepatriarchal societies (centuries B.C.), i.e., when matriarchal societies existed in these regions. The circle symbolizes “the world,” and three vertical lines side-by-side and equidistant symbolize “knowledge.” The “A,” however, and any lines which are not vertical, but rather angled, symbolize disorder or chaos. That an A is used to represent this refers to a specific sort of political disorder which the anarchist agenda addresses (Dale p.38).”

Throughout the East Village of New York City the anarchy symbols (Figure 27) maybe found all over the sides of buildings and sidewalks, as well as other areas where symbols can be easily noticed. The reason why anarchy symbols were developed in this area of New York City was to protest the displacement of locals by real estate developers and the police. These symbols are intended to tell them that they are not welcome in these neighborhoods, and that people who live in the East Village area are against the changes. The people of East Village do not spray paint anarchy symbols on the buildings and sidewalks for the pleasure of showing their sub-cultural artwork, nor to advocate revolution. They do it to show support for the local population in their opposition to unreasonable use of authority. A business owner who lives in this area explains the anarchy symbols as “symbol used by “teenagers,” in the area, who vandalize buildings. These are teens who are politically concerned about the changing culture of the East Village (Dale p.39).” He later explains that he also thinks the street designations relate somewhat to the anarchy symbol (circle A) with “Avenue A” which a is trendy area in East Village in Manhattan. He did not acknowledge any connection between the circle A and anarchy, anarchists, and anarchism.
It is uncertain if the graffiti writers intend to communicate anything at all but it is certain that people have their own interpretation of the symbols in their own sub-culture. For example, other symbols were called “DIN” (Figure 28) in East Village:

“…resembles characters from the Germanic rune alphabet, which was fixed no later than 200 A.D. At no time, however, were runes the main instrument of written communication. They were inscribed on stone monuments, weapons, and other artifacts and placed on burial mounds precisely because they were magical. The magical associations of runes lent authority to any message written within them. It was the voice of gods speaking to the reader, a holy script, even as Latin was until recent years the sacred language of the Catholic Church. (Tyson 1989)”

For the general population of East Village “DIN” is tag of a particular graffiti artist and it stands for many things such as Diversity Is Necessary, Disruptive Interrelated Networks, Disinvestment Is Neglect; the list goes on and on. In general, DIN relates to the theme of resistance to cultural genocide, economic gentrification of the local housing stock, and the politics of municipal control over the local community’s decision making (Dale p.38). The connection between message symbols is communicated by the form of graffiti on the wall and sidewalk on the streets of New York.
In many places in East Village you will find “five-point stars inside of a circle” (Figure 29) called a “pentagram” according to John Dale:

“This symbol originated in pre-Babylonian Sumerian history. The historical perspective on the pentagram is that during the Middle Ages (roughly AD 500-1450), ceremonial magicians considered it among the most potent, holy, and protective of symbols (Becker p.230).”

It was a symbol considered stronger even than the cross. Those involved in mystical practices could be sure that wherever this symbol was displayed, evil would have no power. But today it’s considered evil or Satan’s symbol. It is, however, not symbolic of the powers of evil and darkness, although anarchists use the inverted pentagram to represent evil just as an inverted flag can be used to represent distress. They use the inverted pentagram to represent the chaos and disorder of anarchy. When asked about the symbol, however, a police officer replied simply: “It’s Satan’s Symbol (Dale p.45).”
Conclusions from the Literature Review

As seen in the work of David Carson and the London 2012 Olympic symbol, vernacular design in general, and graffiti art in particular, have become important sources for graphic designers. As the significance of vernacular art as a source increases, it becomes essential to know about its cultural and creative origins since these designs grow out of the culture that produced it. While graffiti is an art form that disappears rapidly, there is still a need to know about the cultural properties of this art form. Little has actually been written about graffiti as a culturally inspired art form. This study will examine the cultural differences visible in graffiti markings in Chicago. It will provide a record of the symbolism contained in graffiti art that will inform the work of contemporary graphic designers.
CHAPTER 3. Case Studies

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand the communicative, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects of graffiti art as an urban vernacular design system. The examples for this study were drawn from the Wicker Park (Bucktown), and Mexican town (Little Village) in Chicago. We have seen that graffiti, applied to businesses and surfaces in a given region, have cultural and ethnic properties. The symbolic qualities of graffiti are a product unique to these cultures. We will examine graffiti art as an active organic symbol system. Because ethnic and cultural groups tend to develop specific urban locales, we might expect that graffiti could be used to identify the cultural and ethnic regions of an urban area. This study will map a section of the urban Chicago area, using graffiti as an indicator to distinguish the territories marked by gang signs and symbols or different types of tagging (graffiti artists nicknames) on the walls. This study will also note standard symbols in these areas in order to define the various purposes, similarities and differences, and also to observe the topics of interest in these visual conversations. It will show how vernacular designs may be used to differentiate the different regions of Chicago. Two different areas in Chicago were studied, Wicker Park (Bucktown), and Mexican town (Little Village) in Chicago (Figure 30). Wicker Park is an area populated by trendy singles and young families. The area is known for its artistic attitude and avant garde mentality. Mexican town (Little Village) is, as might be expected, largely populated by Mexicans. The region is primarily industrial, with a fair amount of low income family housing.
Wicker Park (Bucktown)

Wicker Park, also known as Buck Town, (Figure 31) got its nickname in the early 1800's as a result of its primarily Polish population's penchant for raising goats, the male of
which is called a buck. Bounded by North and Fullerton Avenues, Wicker Park is a slightly less expensive alternative to other, higher-priced Chicago neighborhoods. It is located on the west side of the downtown Chicago. The area has many trendy restaurants and upscale shops appealing to young professionals and real estate developers alike. But remnants of a historic and quaint Wicker Park are evident in the hundred-year-old buildings and cobblestone paths. The local artist population is reluctantly giving way to the yuppie crowd. Nevertheless, Wicker Park is still populated by artists. The main attraction in the city has been the “Wicker Park Arts Fest.” This huge art festival has taken place every August for over 20 years. The festival attracts over 30,000 art lovers from all over Chicago and its outlying areas. One can imagine the diversity of people that frequent this area. Visitors are also attracted by the stylish shops, bars, late-night clubs, and restaurants. The majority of people who visit this area are art lovers in their early 20’s through mid 30’s. A wide variety of ethnic groups of people come to this area as well. Wicker Park also has a traditional religious background. The region has several remarkable churches, the legacy of its early Polish immigrants. This place is filled with culture, ethnicity, trends, and the arts.

**An Excursion through Wicker Park**

![Figure 32. Birds-eye view of Wicker Park from top of the building.](image)
The route through of Wicker Park was roughly triangular (Figure 32), beginning at the intersection of Wood Street and North Avenues. This starting point was ideal, since all the stores and attractions are centralized in this area. The author examined the area in and around the Wicker Park on several occasions, at least once with a camera. In order to experience and record the atmosphere of the region, the method of walking through Wicker Park was used, the major focus was on what kind of graffiti that can be found on the streets, walls, and buildings. Wherever graffiti or signs were discovered that could relate to vernacular design, a picture was taken. In these case studies of Wicker Park, a map (Figure 33) of all the node points was made of the exploration through the neighborhood.

Figure 33. Case study map of Wicker Park in Chicago, Illinois.
Points in Wicker Park

Point 1 (Figure 34): Located at the intersection of W. North Avenue and N. Wood Street is the exterior sidewall of a pest control business called “Rose Exterminator Co.” It has a huge business advertisement that has been painted on the sidewall of the building and also graffiti tagging on the bottom part of the advertisement. This kind of signage is part of the roadside culture that was discussed earlier in the literature review. This example has the characteristics of “Old Downtown” zoning signage; the sign overpowers the building itself. It also has the qualities of visual impact to gain the attention of automobile drivers and pedestrians on the street. This painted wall gives true mix of old and new aesthetics with similarly old and new technology. The graffiti tagging, on the bottom part of the sign, shows that graffiti taggers may be active in this area.
Point 2 (Figure 35): Walking west on W. North Avenue. Intersection of W. Honore Street is a store called “Ave. N Guitars.” The letter “N” stands for North; the store was named after the street. This was one of the unique signage systems that found in this area. The sign has a symbol that is we easily recognize as resembling the features of a guitar, which, of course informs the public that this is a guitar shop. The sign uses the letter “N” and the word, “Avenue,” is abbreviated to “Ave.” to identify the business to the drivers and pedestrians on the street. Also, the front window of the store is tagged by the tagger name “KmoaR.” Many of these graffiti artists get their street creditability by how many tags they can write on the streets. This is one of the many taggers whose names were recorded photographically.
Point 3 (Figure 36): Point 3 is at intersection of W. North Avenue and Wolcott Street. “Chaise Lounge” is on the side of one of the trendy patio lounge bars that characterize Wicker Park. Typical of “Old Downtown” signage, the neon sign that marks this bar is now accompanied by a large painted graffiti. Two kinds of sign systems are incorporated on this with painted sidewall of the building, physical and graffiti.

Figure 37. Point 4 “Raincloud” Symbol.
Point 4 (Figure 37): At the intersection of W. North Avenue with N. Wolcott Street was found the “Raincloud,” symbol on the light pole. The symbol, “Raincloud,” has been one of the graffiti symbols that is easy to recognize and marks the work of an artist who has established a reputation in Wicker Park. According to the article written by Scott Smith from “http://www.chicagoists.com” this symbol means “Chicago, Sleep In.” Other graffiti artists think that actually two different individuals are at work on this tag. The people who live in this area have their own understandings of what these tags mean. These interpretations are based on the communicative style and values of the community. One reader, responding to an article written about “Raincloud” made an interesting point. According to the reader who identified himself as Stephen;

“My sense is that the rainclouds and "sleep in" are actually two different individuals... one person is posting / pasting / drawing the rainclouds and someone else is filling in the clouds with the additional "sleep in" directive. I'm just basing this guess on the Flicker photos that "sonny" (the raincloud artist) has posted - none of which have any writing in them. I find the raincloud image kinda soothing and aesthetically pleasing... but it always does irritate me when I see peoples' private property tagged with this stuff (Smith, 2007).”

A check of the Raincloud’s online photo server, “Flickr,” reveals no mention of “Chicago, Sleep In.” Therefore it is a logical conclusion that the “Chicago, Sleep In” tag is not the work of “Raincloud.” Maybe this misunderstanding is the result of the ways people in general interpret what they see.
Figure 38. Point 5 “The Rapid Transit Cycle Shop.”

Point 5 (Figure 38): Located across from “Point 4,” on the corner of W. North Avenue and Wolcott Street, is a cycling shop, called “The Rapid Transit Cycle Shop.” The store sign is an actual bicycle hung over the doorway as store signage, as well as a painted wall of store signage on the side of the building. This shop was using both store sign and graffiti on the wall as their store signage system. This is a signage system that people would certainly remember, either by just looking at the bicycle as the store sign or painted wall on the side of the building. This store has both characteristic graffiti and vernacular signage for people who like bicycles and cycling.
Point 6 (Figure 39): Walking down the W. North Avenue it was impossible to pass by this signage projecting from the building. This is an amusing way of showing the store concept and using slang word “Thang.” The word “Thang” is a slang word for “thing,” so in this sign is saying that the store sells sweet things. The concept of using the word “Thang” makes sense in this context. Familiarity with the target audience in this area is one of the most important reasons they used this slang word on their store signage. It is likely that people will always remember the name of the store with such a unique name. The sign is cleverly designed, using the Eiffel tower as both the letter “t,” on the top, and “A,” on the bottom. The symbolic meaning of the Eiffel tower is that French baking is reputedly excellent. The typography is done in freehand writing of “Sweet Thang,” in red and gold. This strategy also brings a homespun sweetness to the sign. This sign speaks to people who are familiar with the stores and communicative systems in Wicker Park.
Point 7 (Figure 40): Right next to “Sweet Thang” bakery, is another interesting sign and symbols on the storefront. This restaurant has a contemporary symbol of a circle with a missing slice. The restaurant is called “Piece,” it is a trendy pizzeria and brewery that’s has a really interesting interior. The restaurant’s interior features an open reception area by the window that’s visible to the public from the street. On the walls of the reception area are examples of contemporary artwork. The circle symbolizes the pizza and the missing piece symbolizes the slice of pizza that has been eaten. We understand, therefore, that this is a place to eat.
Figure 41. Point 8. “Tip Toe,” “IOWA,” and crew name “APT + ER.”

Point 8 (Figure 41): Just up the street, on the corner of the street where “Piece,” is located, is this green color graffiti on the side of the building. On the top it said “Tip Toe,” on the bottom, the graffiti it was tagged with name “Tip Toe” and “IOWA.” The graffiti on the side of the building was a representation of a guy spray-painting his own tag name on the wall. In all likelihood, it was “Tip Toe” himself tagging himself on the wall. On the other side of the wall by the door, doorways have been “dressed-up” by a group of taggers known as the “APT + ER.” People can recognize the crew by name on the top of the doorway. The crew has a tag to represent the group and each member of the crew is likely to also have a personal tag. Figure 41, point 8-2, is a picture of the doorway with the crew name of “APT + ER.” All the taggers names are on the door below the crew name. This gives a taggers and graffiti artists a sense of belonging to a group. On route traveled down W. North Avenue, this was the first encounter with graffiti dress-up activity. Looking at this graffiti might not mean anything for some people, but it’s street recognition by the graffiti artists and the crew. The
purpose for the crew members is to dress-up many areas in the city with their tag names and to represent their crew.

Figure 42. Point 9. “Cigars” and “Untitled.”

Point 9 (Figure 42): Continuing on W. North Avenue. Picture of an interesting signage systems of two businesses, one beside other. “Cigars” is a trendy tobacco store that sells a pretty interesting selection of imported cigars and cigarettes. Right next to “Cigars” is a clothing store called “Untitled.” “Untitled” is a trendy clothing store where young professions like to shop. This unique combination of signs merited attention. The “Cigar” sign has a quality of a cartoon signage system while “Untitled” uses an English gothic
typeface as their store signage system. Both signs show the characteristics of vernacular
design as they relate to the culture of the region. People smoke cigars because they enjoy
smoking and like the taste of the cigar. The “Cigars” sign has a playful and enjoyable quality
that people can relate to the cigar culture. Even the color of the sign is made with a yellow
color that gives the viewer a happy feeling of, taste, and smell. On the other hand, the
“Untitled” store has this sharp clean environment in the store. The clothes in the stores are
clean-cut, trendy, graphic shirts, and sharp clothing. This fits perfectly in this the area and for
the target audiences.

Figure 43. Point 10 “Swank Frank” shop sign and “Raincloud” graffiti symbol.

Point 10 (Figure 43): Intersection of W. North Avenue and N. Milwaukee Avenue.
This was good point to turn from North Avenue onto N. Milwaukee Avenue since this is
what might mark the boundary of the Wicker Park region. On this corner is a hot dog shop,
and their signage incorporated both a vernacular typeface and a hot dog. This combination
was an amusing way of identifying the store using something that relates to people in the area
and the hot dog. On this corner, too, found a light pole with sticker of “Raincloud” on the
pole. Throughout these observations the “Raincloud” stickers are all over the Wicker Park area.

Figure 44. Point 11. Store signs “Filter,” “Empire Liquors,” and graffiti crew “BC.”

Point 11. (Figure 44): Point 11 is a local internet café called “Filter.” This café was very interesting because it is located on the end of the building at the corner of North and Milwaukee Avenues. The café has entrances on both North Avenue and Milwaukee Avenue. The signage system they used on this building was bold and flat. It was different from the others observed in Wicker Park. Here, there is nothing fancy or special; it was very plain. Right next to “Filter” observing another doorway that had been dressed-up by a graffiti crew named “BC.” The members of this dress-up crew were: “Vear,” “Rebal,” “Wyse,” “Pose,” “Ship,” “KC,” “Boas,” “Dirty30,” and “Mayor.” Local graffiti artists told the author that when a graffiti crews dress-up the doorways, it usually means someone in the crew lives in
that place. In this case “Mayor” was one of the names on the top of the doorway probably meaning “Mayor” lives here. Across from “Filter,” there is popular bar call “Empire Liquors.” This is one of the happening (modern term) bars in Wicker Park. “Empire Liquors” had a really cool signage system; they put all the liquors in glass case sign that sticks out from the bar. This uniqueness is way communicating the community identity to those who visit or live in Wicker Park and Bucktown.

Figure 45. Point 12. Image of “Eye Want” on Milwaukee Avenue.

Point 12. (Figure 45): This is picture of an eyeglass shop called “Eye Want” on N. Milwaukee Avenue. The sidewall of the store has paintings of one-eyed super heroes flying around. The one-eye is huge in proportion compare to their bodies. A comic book reader, can easily recognize the super heroes that are painted on the wall as the heroes of DC (Detective Comics), “Superman,” “Batman”, and “Wonder Woman.” The concept for this painting is that even super heroes need eyeglasses; people might look at this and see that these are super heroes, but unless they are comic book lovers, they won’t understand what, and who they are.
Point 13 (Figure 46): At the intersection of N. Milwaukee Avenue and N. Honore Street, graffiti stickers were found all over the poles on the side streets. Graffiti stickers, which are found all over Wicker Park, are another way that graffiti artists of putting their works up in the city. Stickers are also a part of the subcultural development of graffiti artists in this area of the city. There are more activities for graffiti taggers in Wicker Park then other districts in Chicago. The prevalence of graffiti art in this area may be because the majority of business owners and people in this area like this art form and it is more acceptable to people in the Wicker Park area. The photos of the graffiti stickers are graffiti artists tag names. The stickers are more expensive, but easier to apply to the poles, doors, any surfaces instead of writing on the walls.
Point 14 (Figure 47): Between points eleven and twelve, and a little off the original route, Point 14 is good example of “dress-up” by the crews in Wicker Park. The dress-up of this door is done by the “BC BC” crew. All the active members in this crew tag their names
on the doorway, letting other crews know that this door has been dressed-up. It’s almost as if they are telling them we dressed-up this door so find your own door. It’s really interesting how these doors have not been cleaned up, maybe it’s because the owners of the building know even if they clean the door the crew will come and do it again. Even though people want these taggers to be caught by police, the police have not been very successful. Wicker Park and Bucktown is one of the hardest areas in which to capture these taggers as noted by officer Tom Stachula at 14th District police station. According to Officer Stachula:

“The hardest hit area, he said, is often the Milwaukee Avenue corridor in Wicker Park. One of most the recent tags to appear are renderings of rain clouds that have sprung up on buildings and garbage cans, he said (Grayson, 2006).”

Figure 48. Point 15. Example of “dressed-up” on abandoned building of the window.
Point 15. (Figure 48): This is another example of dress-up on the abandoned building in the intersection of N. Milwaukee Avenue and N. Honore Street that shows an example of dress-up on the window of the building, instead of the doorway. In this case, this is not the work of a crew but eight individual artists have tagged the window of this building. By name these taggers are, from the upper left hand corner: “StaLush,” “VESH,” “KYM,” and “CLAUDS,” and on the bottom left hand corner, “DARE 312,” “STAL,” “IOWA,” and “2NR.” It’s rare to see an abandoned building in the Wicker Park area that has tagging all over the window; it’s just another good example of dress-up.

Figure 49. Point 16. Graffiti stencil on intersection of Milwaukee and Evergreen Avenues.
Point 16. (Figure 49): At point 16 there were some interesting graffiti stencils on ground of the intersection of Milwaukee and Evergreen Avenues. This area featured a number of stencils on the sidewalk and pavement: a red graffiti stencil with “Killing People Is Rude,” a blue stencil “Designated Bird Feeding Area, City Of Chicago Richard M. Daley Mayor,” and a black stencil of “I’m Falling For U.” The stencil of the pigeon with “Designated, Bird Feeding Area, and City Of Chicago Richard M. Daley Mayor” is a statement that mocks Mayor Daley in Chicago. The apparent statement of these graffiti artists, to the mayor, is to stop persecuting graffiti artists and find something more worthwhile to do as mayor. Mayor Daley has been targeted in this way because of a 1992 directive that he created to eliminate graffiti and gang-related vandalism, the “Graffiti Blasters.” Also “Killing People Is Rude” has been all over in Chicago. The meaning of this stencil is just like what it says: “Killing People Is Rude.” It means to stop the violence in the city, a stance often taken by anti-gun activists. “I’m Falling For U” has really cute characters in their stencil, two stick figures holding hands, holding up their middle fingers, and with broken heart overhead. Maybe it is intended to mock the people who see this stencil on the ground by putting a touch of irony in details of the figures and the broken heart symbolizes you’ve been fooled. Overall, these symbols bring different meanings to the audiences of this region, and the audiences have come to understand these graffiti, tagging, and stencils through a unique sense of local culture.
Point 17. (Figure 50): Walking southeast on N. Milwaukee Avenue at the front of the men’s clothing store call “Imperial” at the intersection of N. Milwaukee Avenue and N. Wood Street. Turning onto N. Wood Street, the side of wall of the clothing store building was covered with graffiti artwork. This was first interaction with the graffiti on this particular wall, however, it appears that this art work is ongoing, as indicated by the unfinished and partially finished areas. This graffiti wall represents the in progress work of the graffiti artist “A. Lewellen.” According, Michael Corona, who works at Imperial men’s clothing store, the graffiti artists has the owner’s permission to work on the wall of the building. It was a surprising fact that graffiti artists get permission from the owner of the building to put their works on the walls. Up to this point, most of the graffiti that had been recorded were graffiti tagging, dress-up, graffiti stencil, and graffiti stickers. This was the first encounter with traditional graffiti art.
Point 18. (Figure 51): Moving up N. Wood Street toward the starting point, on the intersection of N. Wood Street and N. Elk Grove Avenue. This is the residential area in Wicker Park; quiet, clean, nice looking places that are being re-built. One of the walls of the apartment had bricks that are being renovated. Looking closely at this wall, one observes that an attempt has been made to clean the walls. It appears that something, most likely graffiti has been mostly removed from the wall surface. This region of Wicker Park was very clean.
with not many taggings on the street or sides of the buildings. Maybe this is because this is primarily a residential area that has been secured by the owner of the house or by real estate developers. Perhaps mayor Daley’s graffiti blaster tactics are working in this residential area.

Point 19. (Figure 52): Walking along the north end of the Wood Street, on the intersection of N. Wood Street and W. Le Moyne Street a “Raincloud” graffiti sticker on the top of a stop sign. The “Raincloud,” sticker is all over the Wicker Park area, on the streets and even in the residential area. Is “Raincloud” marking his territory or putting up his graffiti stickers in advance of the excursion route. Based on the case studies, “Raincloud” seems to be most active around the streets of N. North Avenue and N. Milwaukee Avenue; more of his stickers seem clustered in that area.

Point 20. (Figure 53): Walking through the residential area to the intersection of N. Wood Street and N. North Avenue the final destination for this case study ends up on the intersection of N. Wood Street and N. North Avenue where this started.
Conclusion of case study in Wicker Park

The purpose of this study is to understand the communicative, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects of graffiti art as an urban vernacular design system. From the case study Wicker Park was a rich resource for this study.

The examples that have recorded on my excursion through Wicker Park, illustrate several aspects of signage and graffiti, and most especially, the interaction of graffiti with established signage practices. The combination of graffiti painting on the walls and store signage is very prevalent. Good examples of this were found at (figure 34, points 1), (figure 36, point 3), (figure 38, point 5), (figure 45, point 12), and (figure 50, point 17). Figure 34, point 1, shows the vernacular concept of an “Old Downtown” zoning idea, using painted wall as part of their signage system, even though this painting is not graffiti but its visual strength still overpowers people in cars and pedestrians. A graffiti tag has been applied below the painting. (Figure 38, point 3) Is very good example of graffiti becoming part of the signage
for the lounge bar, “Chaise Lounge,” and again, you can see tagging on the sign. The graffiti wall augments and enhances the neon bar sign, and is probably much more noticeable in daylight. (Figure 38, point 5) Is unique because the graffiti supports the signage system of the bike shop. The graffiti is on the sidewall of the building is about cycling, and therefore represents a clear example of graffiti supporting the signs of the bike shop business. At (figure 45, points 12), and (figure 50, point 17), graffiti are painted on the side of the wall of a business to draw people attention to the business. In the case of (figure 50, point 17), this has been done with the full consent of the owner.

Vernacular design in Wicker Park communicates with the audience by using symbols as a communicative language in the area. It has been demonstrated by the examples of the French bakery shop “Sweet Thang,” the clothing store “Untitled,” and the cigar shop “Cigars,” that the use of slang terms, color, and typography give the people something they can relate to the, a uniqueness in the signage that is compatible with their sense of community. A good example is the use of the street name as the store name, “North Ave. Guitar,” a sign that symbolizes the features of a guitar to mark the shop. The symbolic meaning of the signage system at the pizzeria restaurant “Piece,” uses a circle to symbolize the pizza and the missing piece represents the slice of pizza that has been eaten. The graffiti tagging on the sidewall of the buildings, on the light poles and other traffic sign poles, on the doorways, and also on the window of an abandoned building, serve to display the symbolic language of graffiti artists. Other graffiti artists can look at these graffiti and learn from other artists. The practice of graffiti artists who dress-up doorways presents an interesting insight into the culture of crews and why they dress-up the doors, who does it, and how they
represent themselves. These are some of aspects of vernacular design that were apparent in the case study of Wicker Park.

We have seen that graffiti, applied to businesses and surfaces in a given region, has cultural and ethnic properties. This was certainly apparent in Wicker Park area. The symbolic qualities of graffiti are a product unique to these cultures. Looking at graffiti art as an active organic symbol system, we have observed the interaction of old and new, traditional and trendy. Because ethnic and cultural groups tend to develop specific urban locales, we might expect that graffiti could be used to identify the cultural and ethnic regions of an urban area, the graffiti in Wicker Park seem to have a character of their own.

**Mexican town (Little Village)**

![Image of Mexican town (Little Village) in Chicago](Figure 54 Image of Mexican town (Little Village) in Chicago)

Mexican town is an area of Chicago that is much better known as La Villita, meaning “Little Village” (Figure 54) in Spanish. This nickname is particularly fitting as La Villita, the largest Mexican neighborhood in the city of Chicago, possesses one of the most active commercial districts in the city, and serves as a gateway for Mexican-American migrants for much of the Midwestern United States. Little Village has many unique shops that sell Mexican specialty products in this community. Little Village residents and business owners
are well known for their entrepreneurial spirit, strong work ethic, and commitment to family and community. Bounded by Western Avenue, Ogden Avenue, Kostner Avenue and Interstate I-55, the Chicago neighborhood of Little Village is known for its prosperous shopping areas that attract Mexican visitors and residents from all over Chicago. One of the nation’s largest parades takes place here: “The 26th Street Mexican Independence Day Parade” annually attracts close to a million Mexican spectators and shoppers to the area. Over 100 different businesses, companies and institutions are involved in this event each year. Although Little Village has a strong sense of ethnicity, religion, and community; Little Village is also known for gang activity in the community. While Chicago is home to many gangs, only one is native to Little Village, the “Latin Kings.” One should be aware of the presence of opposing gangs, gang violence, gang activities in the Chicago land area. Last year the police recorded over 50 murders in Little Village. This isn’t the safest area for people to live, and much of the region would be considered economically deprived. For example, during one of the several visits to study this area, the author’s camera was stolen by a group of criminals. Nonetheless, it has strong family values, culture, and ethnic.

An Excursion through Little Village

Figure 55. City of Little Village in Chicago.
The route through of Little Village was began roughly in the areas surrounding the run down of Little Village (Figure 55). While the stores in the center of this area are in poor condition, they are still the central core of the Little Village area. Surrounding this core merchant area are neighborhoods that are intermixed residential, and industrial. The neighborhoods surrounding “downtown,” Little Village provided an ideal area for this study. As in the prior case study, the author traveled through the back neighborhoods of Little Village on foot, in order experience and record the atmosphere of the region. The major focus was on the kind of graffiti that might found on the streets, walls, and buildings, taking pictures of graffiti or signs that can relate to vernacular design, using the presence of these artifacts as a guide through the community. Again a case study map (Figure 56) was created regarding all the node points that had been explored.

Figure 56. Case study map of Little Village, Chicago, Illinois.
Points in Little Village

Figure 57. Point 1. “Anarchy” symbol on the window.

Point 1 (Figure 57): Discount Mall on 27th Street, picture of the “Anarchy” symbol on the window of the mall. It has graffiti tagging on the window by some taggers in this area. As explained in the literature review, the anarchy symbol may indicate that certain types of visitors are not welcome in this neighborhood, it has also been related to chaos, or new world order. In this case, the symbol means that people aren’t welcome in this mall. Perhaps a
statement against this establishment. The graffiti symbols on this mall indicate that there are graffiti activities in this area.

Point 2. (Figure 58): Walking west on 27th Street, a point where an alley intersected the street. This wall was a good example of graffiti artwork that would have been difficult to
overlook. The artwork was located on the side wall of this building and extended up the alley behind. This block of street was “back to back,” a graffiti term that means that the graffiti covers the wall from end to end. As we can see in figures 58, points 2-1 and 2-3 this example fits the definition of the term “back to back.” The work was tagged by graffiti artists from this area. These remarkable graffiti on the walls are visually interesting and pleasing for people to look at. This was the work of multiple artists in the area, as indicated by the different taggers names on the walls (points 2-5 and 2-6). In all this collection of graffiti was perhaps two blocks in length. The reason these graffiti’s haven’t been removed from the wall is that they have permission of the owners of the building.

Figure 59. Point 3. “Back to back” on the street alley.
Point 3. (Figure 59): Looking at the graffiti’s on the wall of the building from point 2, this “back to back” graffiti’s continued through the street alley. It was an amazing experience seeing this graffiti and walking down the alley. Little Village might be only place that this many graffiti works have been found in Chicago. The relationship between colors, and graphic elements on the wall made these walls visually exciting. Several different crews in the region have worked side by side to do this. At the end of the alley, there was a saw shoes hanging on a wire overhead (Figure 60). This usually means there is danger in this area or someone was attacked in this alley. Shoes are a territorial marking by gang members. Gang activities, and the Latin Kings in particular are familiar in this area, and the community would understand this symbol as a territorial marking.

Figure 60. Point 3. Shoes on wire.
Figure 61. Point 4. Gang graffiti’s on abandoned factory building.

Point 4 (Figure 61): Walking from the street alley towards S. Troy Street to the abandoned factory building on the intersection of 28th Street and S. Troy Street. On the sidewall of this abandoned factory building lot of gang graffiti were founded. Street gangs use graffiti to define territory and to communicate. Depending on how the symbols are used, the language may carry messages on several different levels. Chicago is the motherland of the founding chapter of the Latin King Nation (AMOR DE REY). The Latin King’s
originated in Chicago and Little Village is where majority of the Latin King’s gang members live. The words “FOLKILLA,” at point 4-2, warns a rival gang from the south side Chicago, that they enter here in fear of death. It’s interesting to see how the letter “A” is upside down. These gangs have different ways of communicating through letters and symbols. Many times they would use the upside down pitchfork to represent the “Folks.” When the pitchfork is upside down, this means “Latin King’s” have no respect for “Folks,” (rival gang groups) and Latin Kings set their territorial by marking these symbols and signs. Point 4-3, provides an example of ranking among the gang members. In particular, “The Five Point Of The Crown” with blackened stones on the five points is the mark that means he is “Supreme First Crown” which is highest ranking within their group. (Figure 62) This mark symbolizes respect, honesty, unity, knowledge, and love. This particular crown also represents the Latino people; the crown matters. According to WebRover Web Design:

“The color black is for the knowledge of our ancients and our superiors of our past, gold is for the sun that shines on us and brings light to our crown, red is for the brothers who shed their life for the cause of our nation (Unknown, 2007).”

At point 4-4, is sign. Painted in blue on the side of a building, “26 K,” which means 26th Street Kings. Usually every street has their own gang member that represents the gangs on that street. At point 4-5, is another example of gang language; it says “LKN,” Latin King Nation. The sign is accompanied by an upside-down rabbit, which represents disrespect for the “Vice Lords” (rival gang groups). Basically the message is that they don’t like the “Vice Lords,” another opposing gang in this area. At point 4-6 is another marking, “LK 28TH,” Latin King 28th street.” On the bottom is “ALKN” Almighty Latin King Nation, with an upside down pitchfork that represents disrespect for the Folk gangs. At point 4-7, is still another symbol of “King,” the symbolic mark of the highest-ranking gang member. The last
point, point 4-8, is an example of the visual language that one gang member speaks to one another. This language is unique within the gang, and must be considered vernacular. These languages are systematic of how the gangs use the alphabet in fixed language in their societies.

**NATIONS SUPERIORITY STRUCTURE STONES OF SUPERIORS.**
1-SUPREME FIRST CROWN.------------STONE BLACK.
2-SUPREME SECOND CROWN.------------STONE WHITE.
3-SUPREME WARLORD.-----------------STONE GREEN.
4-SUPREME CROWN OF ARMS.-----------STONE RED.
5-SUPREME CAPTAIN CROWN ADVISER.---STONE GOLD.

Figure 62 Chart of Latin King’s ranking (unknown, 2007)

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Point 5 (Figure 63), and 6 (Figure 64): Railroad track southwest from point 4 along side of an old railroad track. Walking through junkyard and saw graffiti all over the walls. This major graffiti extended to across Kedzie Avenue onto the other walls of another junkyard. The two walls combined would cover over three blocks, and display massive amount and variety of graffiti. Many of these are unique graffiti’s that you won’t see in other places in or around Chicago. The richness of color, graphics, and graffiti typography has a freshness and excitement that definitely should inspire artists in all genres. This was one of the most unique graffiti walls that was discovered in Little Village. This shows that people in Little Village accept the graffiti’s being painted in this area… or possibly that the graffiti
blasters don’t care about Little Village. For the Little Village community, this is perhaps not so much vandalism as it is art, and they protect it. It is part of the community culture of the area. Maybe, because of the number of illegal aliens residing in this area, a police presence is unwanted. Therefore members of the community are reluctant to report vandalism or graffiti.

Figure 64. Point 6. “Back to back,” graffiti art on the walls of junkyard, cross the S. Kedzie Avenue.

Point 7. (Figure 65): Walking west on 30th Street, the intersection of the 30th Street and S. Sawyer Avenue. The entire side wall of S. Sawyer was filled with gang graffiti signs and symbols. As you can see from figure 65 these graffiti and markings were violent gang language and symbols. At point 7-1, and 7-2; the entire wall is filled with graffiti arts and topped with gang’s graffiti of “The Five Point Of The Crown,” the color of stones on the crown are filled with black stones, which means “Supreme First Crown.” Whoever put this graffiti is on the wall is someone who has a high rank among gang members. The crown graffiti is painted over the top of an earlier graffiti painting, with apparently no regard for the earlier work. Image 7-3, on the same wall, tells us a lot about symbolic definition in gang graffiti signs. Drawing the symbol of “King,” shows this person is someone who is a high ranking gang member. The crown of the King holds white stones, this means “Supreme
Second Crown,” among the gang members. The gothic typeface of “F K” represents “FOLKILLA,” Folks are the opposing gang group in south side of Chicago. The upside down pitchfork represents, disrespect for the “Folk” members, and the Upside down rabbit represents, disrespect for the “Vice Lords” members. On the same wall on S. Sawyer, image 7-4, has a clear definition of “L K” representing the “Latin King.” Below it, the last point, point 7-5, is a definite representation of “FOLKILLA,” in writing. This wasn’t done by only one member but by several different members of the Latin Kings. The mark of two crowns with different color stones is evidence of different gang members writing on this same wall. This picture is very valuable information for my case studies because this wall contains clear definitions of symbols for gang graffiti. This wall communicates the message that “Folk,” and “Vice Lords” are not welcome in this area. If they are in this territory or around this area, the Latin Kings would kill them or hurt them in some way.

Figure 65. Point 7. Gang graffiti on S. Sawyer Avenue,
Point 8. (Figure 66): Walking away from the point 7, to continue west on 30th Street. Next, stopping at the street alley between S. Christiana Avenue and S. Homan Avenue. A picture of dumpster in the alley. The dumpster had large graffiti tagging on its surface. There were several taggings by the same tagger whose name is on the dumpster. By name, this graffiti tagger is “MR. SHADOW 23;” his tag name was interesting to me. The tag had the crowns on the top of “MR” and on the number “23,” this tag also has pitchfork. This was
tagging is the work of the Latin King’s on 23rd Street. The identity of the gang is discernable from the crowns; the number “23,” representing 23rd Street; and the pitchfork representing disrespect for the Folks. It’s unlikely other gangs like “Folk Nation” will show up to this area and put their personal gang tagging in this region.

Figure 67. Point 9. Graffiti marking on the fence.

Point 9. (Figure 67): Walking about block away from point 8, detecting a fence with gang graffiti behind a house. On the fence the graffiti reads ‘LKW,” Latin King World with sideways pitchfork, which also means “Folk Killer.” This was interesting finding of markings
on the fence of house. Gloria Carr, writer for Courier News Sun, who wrote an article about gang tagging, explains that gang graffitti’s on fence means, that house might be a target for rival gang members or they’re sending a message to gang members on that street. This is just another way of communicating through symbols and signs among gangs and gang members.

Point 10. (Figure 68): Point 10 took a dramatic change in direction from W. 30th Street, this is because of gang activity on the intersection of 30th Street and Louis Avenue. Therefore, change of the direction was made towards south on Trumbull Avenue, which lead to 31st Street. On the 31st Street the bricks on the railroad track had been taggged by a taggers. In the same railroad yard the pictures have been taken on points 10-1 through 10-5, all on bricks. Image 10-1, is a familiar name that has been recorded from Wicker Park,
“312,” this was really unique finding his name on the bricks in Little Village. At point 10-6, the work of the tagger named, “air,” whose work has been seen previously on the figure 58. For these graffiti artists it’s about how much their tag names can be seen by people, and how many of the graffiti artworks can be shown to the local public and other graffiti artists. This, however is really different a way of tagging their names on the bricks instead of on the doorways.

Point 11 (Figure 69): Walking along the edge of the railroad yard, in the direction of the Discount Mall on 27th Street, founding of abandoned train covered with gang graffiti sitting on the track across from 31st Street and S. Spaulding Avenue. The train was covered by gang graffiti and this was an interesting find in this area, even more interesting to see on this train was the mark of the gang tagger “MR SHADOW 23.” Along side his mark was the tag of fellow gang tagger “tsk.” On the front of the same car (11-1) both taggers have marked this train by putting up their names right next to each other. Both of them had very interesting writing styles. “MR SHADOW 23” likes to put “23” at the end of his tagging and “tsk” likes to put an upside down rabbit at the end of his tagging, it’s like their signature after they’re done writing. On the other side of the car, (11-3) is a tagging that reads “WLKSN,” World Latin Kings Nation disrespect to “Vice Lords,” and “Folks,” by “tsk.” Nearby, (11-4) “MR SHADOW 23,” writes same thing as what “tsk,” had said at point 11-3. Moving to the rear of the car (11-5) is another “FOLKILLA,” marking with a crown on the top. A utility box beside the railroad car had also been marked (11-7). It has the symbols of a “Crown,” to symbolize that this is Latin King territory. This was really interesting observation, that trains have been tagged by gangs in this area. The majority of gang taggings are similar to each
other and they carry similar messages. These graffiti feature the distinctive writing of each
gang members, for instance looking Figure 70, “MR SHADOW 23” uses the letter “S” with
an extra loop below which extends into an upside down cross. But what is the significance of
the unique mark of the upside down cross? Speculation on an online forum posted by a user
named Stephen:

“The Latin cross turned upside down is known as St. Peter's cross after Peter, the disciple of
Jesus who is believed to have been executed by crucifixion on an upside down cross. Satanists
are reported to use this form of the Latin cross for their rituals (Stephen, Msg. 4).”

Does this mean that “MR SHADOW 23,” is disciple of Latin Kings and he will execute the
“Folks?”

Figure 69. Point 11. Gang graffiti on the abandoned train.
Finally, completing the excursion through Little Village by walking back to the point of origin at the Discount Mall on 27th Street (Point 13).

**Conclusion of case study in Little Village**

The case study of Little Village provided another rich resource for the study of the communicative, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects of graffiti art as an urban vernacular design system. The graffiti in this area were both colorful and plentiful, but different in many ways from what’s found in Wicker Park.
The examples that’s been recorded from my excursion through Little Village, illustrate several aspects of graffiti artwork and gang graffiti symbols, and most especially, the interaction of graffiti with established local languages. The combination of graffiti artworks on facing walls street that extended as far as three blocks was a very interesting resource in Little Village. Examples of this kind of extended graffiti representation were found at Points 2, 3, and 6. These examples 2, 3, and 6, demonstrate the vernacular concept that graffiti artworks speak their own language, using their own terminology, such as “back to back.” The visual impact of a “back to back,” over powers the eye people walk past the street alley. The people who live in Little Village might be accustomed to seeing this kind of graffiti artwork, but just looking these walls cannot help but amaze people from outside of this area.

Vernacular design in Little Village communicates with the audience by using symbols as a communicative language in the area. This has been demonstrated by examples of the gang graffiti symbols produced by the “Latin King’s” and their unique way of communicating by manipulating the letters. Examples of this style of representation were found at Points 4, 7, 8, 9, and 11. At Point 4-3, “Crown,” we see the mark of “The Five Point Of The Crown” with blackened stones on the five points is the signifies the “Supreme First Crown” which is highest ranking within their group. Point 11-2 displays a clear example of an upside down rabbit meaning disrespect for the “Vice Lords.” At Points 4, 7, 8, 9, and 11 we see upside down pitchforks symbolizing disrespect for the “Folks.” All of this symbols, mark the territory of Latin Kings in Little Village. The marking on the fences of the house at Point 9, shows territorial marking and an example of symbolic communication among rival gangs in that area. The gang graffiti tagging on the sidewall of the buildings, abandoned
trains, and trashcans, serve to display the symbolic language of gang graffiti. People familiar with these markings can look at these gang graffiti and learn about the conflicts and territorial claims in this area. The marks by gang who do gang graffiti present an interesting insight into the culture of gang members. These are some of aspects of vernacular design that were apparent in the case study of Little Village.

Graffiti, applied by gang members and graffiti artists to the surfaces in a given region, has cultural and ethnic, and communicative properties. This was very apparent in Little Village area. The symbolic qualities of graffiti are a product unique to these cultures. Looking at graffiti art as a developing organic symbol system, we have observed the interaction of gangs, and the work of contemporary graffiti artists. Because ethnic and cultural groups tend to develop their own art styles and communicative systems, we have come to expect that graffiti can be used to identify the cultural and ethnic regions of an urban area, the graffiti is Little Village do indeed have a language and character of their own.
CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand graffiti and vernacular symbology as they relate to their cultural and ethnic foundations. This bond between culture, and the design that springs spontaneously from it, is the essence of vernacular design. In fact this study of Wicker Park compared to Little Village did reveal some interesting similarities and differences between the two rather different regions of Chicago. Both Wicker Park and Little Village have a unique cultural character, which creates a sense of community. This, of course, was what made these particular locations ideal for a study of vernacular design and graffiti. Wicker Park has been substantially influenced by Polish people and culture while Little Village and its surrounding the area has a largely Mexican population and Latino culture. Part of the Wicker Park culture is created by an age group that tends to congregate there. The majority of people who come to or visit Wicker Park are art lovers in their early 20’s to mid 30’s. In contrast, the people who visit Little Village are Mexican’s from all over Chicago land, the Midwest, and United States. Both cities contain remarkable graffiti on the streets, the walls of the buildings, the dumpsters, the street poles, and the trains.

Comparison

Comparing the graffiti, found in these two locations, revealed both similarities and differences in the graffiti and communicative practices. Graffiti were found in both regions, and the markings in both areas did relate to the culture of the region. The language of these markings was comprehensible to the populations of each region, though residents of Wicker Park might not comprehend the symbolic language of Little Village and the population of Little Village might find the language of Wicker Park difficult to understand. The graffiti and
Taggings, therefore have communicative value, although the purpose of these communications and the messages they convey are quite different. Similarly, the symbolism involved in the graffiti recorded in each area tended to convey different kinds of meaning, although on the surface they might appear similar. The relationship between ethnicity and symbology appeared to be strong in Little Village, but less noticeable in Wicker Park.

Tagging was a practice in both Wicker Park and Little Village, however the kinds of taggings were different, and again, when the two regions are compared, the nature of the message was different. Groups of graffiti artists were active in both of the two regions studied, however, the size style and preferred locations were different. Four areas of comparison appear significant (Figure 71):

- Message and goals
- Symbolism
- Tagging and marking practices
- Group graffiti

Figure 71. Diagram of comparison between similarities and differences.
We have said that the graffiti found at both of the case study locations had communicative value, but that the messages and goals tended to be different. In Wicker Park, the motivation of the graffiti artist seems related to “street credibility,” while the purpose of the graffiti in Little Village is more a matter of defining and protecting a territory. The messages were correspondingly different. The most common message of the graffiti found in Little Village was threatening, rebellious, and tended especially to express disrespect for other gangs. In Wicker Park, on the other hand, the graffiti lack that feeling of rebellion, in fact they often support the businesses on whose walls they are painted. Raincloud is everywhere in Wicker Park, but what does the tag mean? The cultural interpretation of the Raincloud mark is “take it easy.” When it rains, many kinds of work cease. This message is culturally appropriate to the yuppie population of Wicker Park. The vernacular language in Little Village does not extend to the store front signage the way we see in Wicker Park. Taggers in both regions have a systematic way of marking their territory, they just use different visual languages and the symbols have different meanings. In the case study of Little Village you can see the symbolic meaning of violent tagging in the up side down pitchfork or rabbits, representing disrespect for other gangs in Southside of Chicago. Another form of symbolism unique to Little Village was the visual language of writing “FOLKILLA,” with distinct typography, and tagging surfaces with “crowns” that demonstrate the ranks of the gang members. The distinctive tagging; using the letter “S” with an extra loop below extending into an upside down cross, is still another unique example of symbolic meaning in the graffiti artwork of Little Village. The message of graffiti symbology in Little Village is rebellious or threatening; it is part of a counter culture. In Wicker Park,
symbolic meanings were demonstrated by the examples of the French bakery shop “Sweet
Thang,” the clothing store “Untitled,” and the cigar shop “Cigars,” that the use of slang
terms, color, and typography to give the people something they can relate to. This symbology
has a different flavor than what we saw in Little Village. In Wicker Park, the vernacular
language has been adopted by the main culture of the community. The unique qualities of the
signage and symbolism are compatible with their sense of community. The bike shop in
Wicker Park (Figure 38) is example of unique signage that has both graffiti and vernacular
design as signage system. This bike shop uses actual bicycle hung over the doorway as store
signage, and also painted wall of store signage on the side of the building. This is a signage
system that people would certainly remember, either by just looking at the bicycle as the
store sign or painted wall on the side of the building. This store has both characteristic
graffiti and vernacular signage for people who like bicycles and cycling. Another interesting
observation of the case studies was that vernacular design doesn’t have to be the spoken
language of a country or locality; it can be a visual language ranging from gang signs and
territorial markings to commercial signage. Graffiti art is a form of 2nd language that people
inscribe on to the walls of the building, signs, maps, and poles for people to understand; it is
a way of communicating. People need to know and understand these visual resources in their
area. This is the origin of an art form and a symbolic system. Someday we are likely to regret
cleaning them off the walls.

Symbolism is related to graffiti, in that it has communicative value, but simpler and
more direct in the way it conveys the message. Symbols, in particular, appear similar when
seen on the street. It is necessary to know something of the cultural and ethnic implications
of the symbol to compare them. The symbols in Little Village were found to treat different
topics than those found in Wicker Park. The examples of visual conversation recorded on the streets of Wicker Park were about commerce, politics, and even art for the sake of art. Graffiti artists want to make their presence known. On the other hand, the symbolic content of markings in Little Village praises the Latin Kings Gang, sometimes representing the ranks of the individual members, such as the various crown markings. Sometimes, the symbol warns others to avoid certain areas. The same rebellion and disrespect for other gangs that characterizes the graffiti messages is also present in the symbolism of Little Village. Graffiti symbols do appear to have a unique language that is understood by the cultural and ethnic groups of the two regions studied. The symbols found in Little Village are often arranged in sentence like groupings to convey more complex messages. This syntactic aspect is, therefore, different from what was found in Wicker Park.

Tagging was plentiful in both of the areas studied, however taggings in Wicker Park were more plentiful than in Little Village. Also, there are many graffiti stickers in Wicker Park, although they are rare in Little Village. Maybe in Little Village, graffiti tagging isn’t as popular as the larger graffiti artworks on the sidewalls of the buildings. This difference in popularity might be because Little Village is of less concern to the people who regulate graffiti in Chicago. The general population of Chicago land would perhaps prefer to avoid Little Village, and therefore may even expect vandalism there. Wicker Park is different because it is an upscale trendy area in the city where it’s safe to enjoy the urban night life. The population is more affluent than the population of Little Village, including the graffiti artists. Stickers are a faster (and therefore safer) way to put a mark on the street, but manufacturing the stickers has a price. On the other hand, Little Village is a low cost area where it’s cheap to live; it’s also right next to Cook County Jail. Little Village is a rather
dangerous area in Chicago. The tagging in this area is gang-related and territorial. Stickers were not found in Little Village.

Group graffiti were another feature that was found in both Wicker Park and Little Village, but both the membership of the group and the nature of the work was different. In Wicker Park, tagger group is called “the crew.” Members of the crew walk around the Wicker Park and tag as much as they can in the city. The tags tend to be small and plentiful. A major “crew” activity might be a “dress-up” of a doorway or a window. Little Village also has “the crew” but the work of the crews is quite different from what we see in Wicker Park. The crews in Little Village do “back to back” graffiti on the walls, accompanied by the tags of the crew. These “back to back,” instances are extremely large and colorful graffiti covering a block or more at a time.

Something that was interesting in Little Village was the massive number of gang graffiti markings on the walls of the buildings, dumpsters, and trains. In fact the nature and variety of the marked surfaces provides still another contrast between the marking practices in the two areas studied. Artists in Wicker Park practice “dress up,” while those in Little Village do “back-to-back.” The difference in scale is enormous, but is the purpose similar, perhaps it is. A greater variety of surfaces was marked in Little Village, but unlike Wicker Park, traffic signs tended to be unmarked in Little Village.

With regard to mapping, the case study of Little Village can be defined by studying the territorial markings of the gang graffiti and the work of graffiti artists within the community. Looking at the points 2, 3, 4, and 6 on the case study map of Little Village, you can see long blocks of graffiti at these points. Charting these major graffiti artworks painted on the walls easily defines this particular region, and differentiates it from neighboring areas.
Instances of graffiti artworks and gang graffiti can be used as territorial markings to create territorial maps of these areas.

As graffiti artwork makes its way into graphic design, this study will become significant in other ways. First, graphic designers are and continue to be interested in symbolic systems, both visual and verbal. Graffiti art represents an evolving symbol system. If we are to study this evolutionary process, we must begin somewhere by creating a record of graffiti symbolism at some point in time. This record can then be compared to future examples of graffiti symbolism in order to track the developmental process.

In addition, it has tended to be the case that, graffiti has only been viewed as a design resource for form, color and appearance. Graphic designers may like the style of graffiti art, so it is borrowed; the new 2012 London Olympic logo would be an excellent example of borrowed form. The problem with this approach is that it may neglect the cultural and symbolic meanings that are native to the borrowed elements. We have learned in that cross-cultural translation of symbols is risky. When designers transplant a form that has symbolic meaning, they must be aware of that meaning in order to avoid inappropriate implications.

For those designers who use graffiti as a design source, the audience will be comprised of two groups: those who do not understand the symbolism, but admire the aesthetic, and also those who do understand the graffiti symbology. When designers borrow the visual language of a unique subculture, it has great potential to influence the design sphere, but this influence will be most powerful if we fully understand the subcultures from which we borrow. As David Carson designed for Raygun, he understood his audience as a subculture, and designed in a language that was relevant to the beach culture. The result of Carson’s efforts to communicate in a unique vernacular had an enormous impact on graphic
design and inspired many graphic designers to try new things. This study provides an initial resource for graphic designers who appreciate graffiti as a design source and who would like to know more about its meanings. Perhaps, like David Carson, a deeper understanding of the subculture itself will produce still more innovative designs.

**Future Projection**

The findings of these two case studies have been interesting, but this study is only a beginning. Future research in mapping the city would include artists like Christian Nold. He is an artist, teacher and cultural activist living in London who makes emotional maps in metropolitan areas. He monitors people’s arousal in certain areas within the city and uses it to map emotional reactions to various areas of the cities. He maps the cities according to how people feel in certain areas as measured in terms of high arousal to low arousal. High arousal means that something that triggered his participants to be excited at a given point and low arousal means that point tends not to cause much excitement. This might be new way of mapping the cities. You can measure people’s arousal for use as marketing tools or for urban development. This method could be applied to my case study. Perhaps it would be interesting to have someone wearing this monitor walk around the Wicker Park and Little Village areas to measure their heartbeat and levels of excitement. One could then make a comparison of their reactions to the various graffiti markings and symbologies in these urban Chicago areas. By using the heartbeat monitor, we might learn more about feelings of danger or excitement in major urban areas. I, myself, have already experienced these feelings of danger in Little Village, and also a sense of excitement at seeing three blocks of brilliant graffiti. Still, it would interesting to go back and do more studies on the territorial marking of the cities by gang graffiti. As our understanding of gang symbols and their meanings becomes more
extensive, it may also reveal more about this very interesting culture. This study of graffiti art and symbology should be extended to other areas of Chicago, and perhaps to other cities. The south side of Chicago is one of the places where we could compare the gang graffiti. This is an area of Chicago that has other gangs like “Vice Lords,” “Folk,” and “Kings.” Comparing the different gang graffiti could further inform this study of gang markings and symbols. Graffiti represent a contemporary symbolic language among gang members and subcultures that is developing in the present time; we should examine and record this developmental process.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


