The Barbershop: a photographic documentation and exhibition

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the barbershop

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THE BARBERSHOP: a photographic documentation and exhibition

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Bachelor of Arts, Virginia Tech 2001
Richmond, Virginia / May 2006

Submitted to the faculty of the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communications.
I would like to thank Professor Sandra Wheeler and the VCU faculty, my classmates, my students, my family, my friends and my Goober for their wisdom, friendship, love and support during the last two years.
As a designer I am undeniably attracted to form, preferring simplicity and clarity to complexity and ambiguity. I believe that my partiality towards formal aesthetics is a direct result of intuition. For as long as I can remember, form has been a filter through which I view and construct my perceptual world.

However, I am uncomfortable with being defined by my design aesthetic. Often times a formalist aesthetic reflects rigidity and detachment – two qualities with which I do not want to be associated. The designer within is part, but not entirely, who I am. I am also an expressive son, brother, fiancé, and friend, someone who takes little for granted, is sustained by the simple joys in life, and revitalized by social interactions with people and community.

It is this duality – designer and person – that creates conflict in attempting to singularly define myself. I am a combination of two personalities, two parts forming a whole. I do not wish to be defined by either aspect or to force the two into compromise. I believe the two can co-exist and influence one another.

This project addresses the duality of my persona by reconciling formalist tendencies and personal interests through photographic documentation. Careful placement and juxtaposition of photographs establishes a grammar and syntax, forming a collective message and voice that is mine.

In this project I explore the environment that surrounds and frames my life experiences. Interests in form, architecture, vernacular typography and community blend into a photographic documentation - communicating my perceptual experience of Richmond barbershops through public exhibition.
problem statement

My creative project is a photographic documentation of the barbershops on Broad Street in Richmond, Virginia and a subsequent exhibition of the work within the community. The barbershops of Broad Street are sacred places where generations of men go to escape the struggles of daily life, to catch up, to relax, to speak freely about sports, women, music and politics, and to maybe get their hair cut, their face shaved or their mustaches trimmed. It is as much an extension of the home for barbers and customers alike as it is a business. It is a place that promotes a unique sense of fraternity.

I have synthesized my experiences and personal interaction with these barbershops into a body of work that portrays the men, interactions, and visual culture found within them. I have balanced the concrete with the abstract, the static with the moving, the human with the inanimate, to create rhythm and visual interest throughout the final series of photographic prints. The desire to make a public exhibition of these photographs came from the need to share my experience with the community, to be accepted into an unknown world and grant access to others, to create dialogue between different cultures and to celebrate the barbershop’s professionals and patrons.
In the early stages of my project, my research was focused primarily on interests in photography, vernacular typography, signage, and Richmond history. These topics influenced and informed my process significantly, providing critical insight and understanding.

Today, almost everyone owns a camera. We use photographs to record our experiences, document our world and hold onto the fleeting moments of time. Our environment has become increasingly visually complex and is saturated by images that are added on a daily basis. The photographic image has become a means for dialogue, provocation, disgust and communication. Since its invention, photography has changed the way we see, critique and respond to the world.

My photography has been primarily influenced and inspired by Walker Evans, Robert Frank and Edward Weston. I am drawn to the formal beauty and grace of all their photographs. Evans’ affinity for architecture, vernacular typography and signage align most closely with my own attractions. Frank’s early work, *The Americans*, has been particularly influential as a document of American culture through foreign eyes.

Vernacular is the standard native language of a country; locally and the natural, unschooled sensibility free from the stylistic self-censorship of modernism. (American Heritage Dictionary)

The term “vernacular” was adopted by the graphic design discipline in the 1980’s to describe a style appropriating the “untrained” visual language of commercial artists. Designers such as Tibor Kalman and Charles Anderson embraced the vernacular, transforming the unsophisticated into high design. I’m inspired by the vernacular typography found throughout Richmond, as it communicates a distinct personality and voice that is refreshingly “low design.”
Signs are everywhere and are an inherent part of our daily lives. They identify, direct, decorate, promote, and advertise. Acting as signatures, building signs reveal the taste, character and personality of their owners. In her book, Mixing Messages, Ellen Lupton asserts, “every institution has an image that it projects – deliberately or haphazardly – to its public.” She further comments that, “these images...whether ordered out of a catalog or commissioned from a design consultant, speak about the cultural values of its bearers.” Signage is often the first form of identification we encounter as we pass by a building - many times providing our first and lasting impression of the place.

This project lives and breathes within the city limits of Richmond, Virginia. I spent the summer learning about its history, its people, and its neighborhoods. This knowledge was purely supplemental to my work until I decided to document the commercial and residential signage found in the present-day “Seven Hills of Richmond.” (see pp. 33 – 35)

As the legend states, Richmond, like Rome, was built on seven hills. Since its establishment in the late 1880’s, the “Seven Hills of Richmond” legend has caused quite a bit of confusion and debate as to their identity. To this day the “original” seven hills have yet to be officially agreed upon, despite a number of valiant efforts. Most notable is that of City Councilman John Hirschberg, who in 1937, attempted to bring clarity to the issue. He proposed that the “original” Seven Hills of Richmond were the following; Union Hill, Church Hill, Council Chamber hill, Shockoe Hill, Gambles Hill, Navy Hill, and French Garden hill (Richmond Times Dispatch, 1937). The ordinance was never passed as no corroborating evidence could be found. So, the legend continues...
My design process takes place along the continuum of creative acts and critical thought. Often I work through the pains of uncertainty and confusion by simply making things. Materializing an idea or concept provides me with a tangible thing to reference and evaluate. This process was extremely helpful in working through and defining my creative project problem.

For much of the fall semester I was completely lost. I didn’t know what I wanted to focus on, and with no direction, the weight of the creative project became oppressive at times. In an attempt to free myself, I let go and experimented; I put down the books and started making. My experimentations took the form of collages, mapping exercises, posters, books, experiments with varied photography techniques, typographic studies, and explorations of type and image. My primary source of observation and documentation is through the lens of my camera. It is the way I organize and make sense of the world and therefore an integral component of my design process.

Moving ahead, making, and thinking relieved many of my frustrations, and in the end, lead me to the idea of exploring the barbershops of Broad Street. I learned that being lost is sometimes the only way to find where you’re going.
My goal was to depict the spirit of the barbershop, to document the culture and community that lives and breathes within its walls, to gain an understanding of a culture that is not my own, and to eventually be accepted as a part of that community – to no longer be a foreigner. I left the shops after each visit with a photographic record of my intimate ephemeral experiences, anxious to share my stories.

The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.

Susan Sontag

My photographic method is one of capturing reality through total absorption in my subject and is successful only through active participation. Upon first entering the barbershop, I am unavoidably met by looks of inspection and resistance. A foreigner in another man’s home, I am an intruder. Not only am I opposite in color, I carry a potentially invasive tool in hand. An attempt to mediate the assumed conflict is done through open dialogue and explanation of intentions. Access is then granted.

My role is as much director as spectator, moving around, changing angles, watching, framing, listening, and anticipating. The camera lens, recording experience one click at a time, frames a sensitive and attentive eye. Through immersion and eventual acceptance, my presence becomes invisible, my camera unobtrusive, and my photographs authentic. Inherently a duality arises – a sense of detachment is achieved only by absolute involvement. I am there; I am part of the scene, though I am absent in the final photographs. This approach allows me the opportunity to capture the true emotions and actions of my subject without compromise.
I pursued my first photographic exploration of Richmond through an elective course during my first semester in an intermediate photography class. The course was focused on the development of a personal voice; mine became one of form.

Having just begun graduate school and living in Shockoe Bottom, my experiences were framed by new urban surroundings. The harsh industrial textures and forms of buildings and exterior spaces engaged my eye. When viewing this environment, I immediately begin to filter what I saw into compositions of line and form.

I utilized extreme angles, high contrast and selective framing to accomplish my goal of composed formal unity. The view became my voice – creating an abstracted visual reflection of reality.

I strove to create new experiences and relationships with everyday objects and spaces through a fresh perspective of the subject matter. In the end, each photograph was a direct expression of my personal experience with my environment.
Matrix studies and visual explorations were then developed and applied to a visual identity system consisting of a mark, uniforms and recycling vehicles.

We were asked to collect found objects from the city to form a matrix for identity development of Richmond’s recycling effort. I found myself looking down everywhere I went and was amazed at the bounty of inspiration that lay beneath my feet.

Through this fresh perspective, I developed an affinity and appreciation for the discarded objects I encounter on a daily basis. This project allowed me to explore my urban environment in a new way.
I am interested in the act of exploration because it encourages creativity and allows for serendipitous invention. Exploration functions as an active process of investigation with the purpose of discovery.

More specifically, I am interested in how the act of exploration creates new relationships with everyday objects and surroundings. By actively investigating a space or object on both micro and macro levels, a greater understanding and fresh perspective results. The explorer is lead to previously unconsidered possibilities.

In this project we were asked to identify and study a specific child developmental skill and investigate it through development of a toy, visual identity system and website. I chose the concept of exploration as a motif for this workshop. In studying exploration I gained an understanding of my own creative process.

I used my camera to document and communicate my creative process in the form of a photographic journal.
I experimented with my camera, using it to not only capture images, but to create new ones. By taking long exposures and physically moving my camera around and tracing the path of letterforms, I was able to generate the image above. Through this process, city lights are transformed into typographic form.

The conceptual basis for these formal line studies was the infinite and continuous nature of personal growth. In the end, I applied my studies to a series of posters dealing with the creative process.

During the fall semester, we were asked to explore green conceptually. For me, green represented personal growth. My process for this project was focused and laterally moving. I was interested in how a singular concept could represent itself across mediums.

green project / sandra wheeler
Can the character of a place be revealed by its typography? My first attempt to answer this question involved documenting the signage found in Carytown. I walked up and down its streets, isolating and capturing the first letter of each external sign I encountered.

After gathering the images, I constructed a grid system to organize my findings and establish a vehicle for presenting the letterforms. By creating an abstract representation of my journey, a visual record and taxonomy was generated.

After evaluating the collection, I noticed an intense use of color and a preference toward non-traditional typefaces. The wide range of type styles speak to the distinct personality of each restaurant, store, café, or boutique found in the area.

To supplement the taxonomy, I created a map to document my journey and give a sense of place to the abstracted typographic forms.
I applied the methodology I developed in the Carytown signage project to another area in Richmond, the Jefferson Davis Highway. After assembling my photographs in the same manner as the Carytown collection, I was disappointed at first glance that the clear distinction I had experienced while photographing the areas was not evident. Due to the highly abstracted matrix, environmental context was completely stripped away and the common saturation of colors dominated. There are however trends that differentiate Jefferson Davis Highway from Carytown, the greater use of sans-serif typefaces and the prevalence of deteriorating letterforms.

The next project I undertook was an exploration of my love of the city. This concept was manifested by photographic studies, collages and typographic studies. I was engaged by the texture and energy of the city. The ultimate purpose of this study was to make things with the hope of discovering a concrete direction for my creative project.
On a trip to New York, I attempted to resist my tendency to control the camera, experimenting with “shooting from the hip.” I enjoyed this playful method and was surprised by the resulting photographs. I was able to capture true emotions and expressions of the people on the streets. This had a profound impact on my photography. Before this series, people were never seen in my photography. I believe this is because I have no control over people, unlike inanimate objects such as buildings and signs. However, by shooting freely, unconcerned with focus, I was instead concerned with the authenticity of the moment and I became comfortable with photographing people.

My next series of photographs marked the beginning of printing large 20”x30” prints of my work. Scale provided a visual impact and called attention to details lost in smaller reproductions. I began splicing the photographs together in an effort to create new visual relationships.
I experimented with making books. The concept of my 23 book series is rather simple, collect twenty-three of something and then design a book based on the content of that collection. Drawing on my appreciation of the unadorned, my collection of found beer bottle caps became the subject of 23 volume 1. I photographed each beer bottle cap in its environment before lifting it and physically integrating it into the book. The second volume was a collection of the number twenty-three found throughout the city. These two studies allowed me to experiment with book binding, page layout, and most importantly kept me making and doing, while thinking.
After evaluating the neighborhood type studies I altered my collection method by shooting from varied distances, so as to establish a greater sense of context and place. I was not concerned with every house, store, sign or building that I encountered; instead I was led through the neighborhood by what caught my eye.

I experimented with time of day, starting my explorations at 6 a.m. each morning. I found peace in solitude, and was able to shoot from the middle of the street without fear and without the distractions of people in my photographs. I focused on the architecture, texture and signage found in Church Hill.
inspired, I set out to capture the people of Richmond. I focused my study on people found along Broad street. I captured the daily ritual of public transportation and the pedestrian life of the city. Through inclusion of a human element, there was an immediate emotional aspect to my documentation.

I continued my neighborhood profiling and experimentation with time of day, shooting the same location in the morning, mid-day and evening. Upon completion of this and the Church Hill studies I began to sequence the photographs, attempting to establish relationships between the images in hopes of creating a narrative.

I realized through attempts to forge a narrative out of my highly formal studies that I was missing something. I rediscovered Walker Evans’ book, Walker Evans: Signs, for inspiration and guidance. In Evans’ depictions of the America South during the Great Depression I found the answer to my problem – I needed to include people.

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I triple-dog dare you.

Sandra Wheeler
Once inside, I listened to the barbers’ and patrons’ stories and joined in conversation as I surveyed the space setting up shots and waiting for decisive moments. Each visit, it took a while for me to “get warm,” to fully immerse myself and get a sense of atmosphere – especially so in the beginning. After several visits, our mutual comfort levels resulted in an amicable relationship, allowing me to capture the candid moments and expressions that were happening naturally around the room.

They (the photographs) capture an array of dichotomies: a sense of loneliness and a sense of community, the real and surreal, the mundane and the extraordinary, and the black and white.

I shot from the back of the barbershops looking out, from behind the external window signage looking in, from a seat in the rows of waiting chairs, and standing within close proximity to the barbers. The resulting photographs are genuine expressions of my perceptual experiences.

As I walked the streets of Broad Street, I was mesmerized by the barbershops. The hand-painted signs on the windows glowed like beacons in the night, attracting seemingly hundreds of people. Of all the neighborhood studies I had done, all the photographs I had accumulated, nothing moved me as much as the images now in front of me. It clicked. This is where I need to be; this is Richmond.

Since ancient Greece, the barbershop has been a pillar of the community. The great Greek poets, philosophers and politicians would convene at the barbershop to both have their hair and beards trimmed and to discuss the news of the day. The barbershop quickly became known as the headquarters for social, political and sporting news. A time-honored tradition that continues today.
The barbershop is an icon of neighborhood continuity and a last sanctum of American maleness. It is a third space, apart from home and the workplace, where men gravitate to get their hair cut, mustaches trimmed, beards shaved, or to just hang out. For customers, it is a place where time stops for a few minutes, where a man pampers himself. After settling into a rotating chair, the barber tightens a strip of tissue paper around his customer’s neck, he drapes a shroud over his frame. And then, something rare happens: one man relaxes and yields to another man who has a razor and scissors in hand. Meanwhile, bantering about politics and sports waft up among the barber chairs and above the hard, checkered linoleum flooring. Inevitably, those men awaiting their turn join the conversation. And who’s the old guy always sitting near the back? He’s not there to get his hair cut but to get out of his house, to kill some time.

West Broad Street for the past quarter century has been in slow transition. Retail spaces that housed furniture and music stores have been converted to art galleries, apartments and eateries. Of the Broad Street barbershops, however, few remain and thrive, maintaining and strengthening a community amid change.

Justin K. Howard, a designer, photographer and graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University, has explored Richmond’s old neighborhoods for the past few years. He has been fascinated by old, faded, commercial signage that is a link to the immediate and distant past. As he walked the city’s sidewalks Howard couldn’t escape the magnetism of the barbershops. He photographed them first from the street, as an outsider looking in. Eventually, he crossed the threshold, capturing the faces and interactions of the men inside. His images are familiar but detached, realistic but abstract. Like many experiences with American urban spaces, these pictures trigger sights, sounds, smells, memories and emotions. They touch something deep within us.
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<td>Over 65 Mon-Thur</td>
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<td>Round-Up</td>
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<td>Eyebrow Arch</td>
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<td>Relaxer</td>
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<td>55.00</td>
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The photographs captured during my first visits to the barbershops seemed to demand that they be shared and exhibited publicly. My first problem was to find an appropriate venue. I was lead to the Capital Garage Apartments (CGA) on Ed Slipek’s recommendation. Upon seeing the CGA for myself, I knew it was the perfect venue for the exhibition – it was located on Broad Street amidst pedestrian traffic and public transportation, its display windows could be viewed from the sidewalk at all hours of the day, and its exhibition space consisted of a long corridor that worked well with the linear quality of my series. The struggle to attain permission to use the space was difficult at times but persistence won out in the end as I secured the space for mid April.

Once I had the venue, my focus shifted to the design and production of the exhibition. Due to the size of the space, I had to go big which immediately caused some economic concerns. I scrambled to find the most cost effective ways of printing the photographs - from inkjet to laser to photographic prints. During this scramble I had an epiphany, why don’t I just ask Richmond Camera, a local camera store, if they would be willing to help me out. My economic woes were alleviated after sitting down and chatting with Ted Bullard, President of Richmond Camera. Ted was excited about the project, wanted to be a part of it and offered to print and mount the entire series of photographs for free. With Richmond Camera sponsoring the exhibit, I was reassured that I could pull it off. Several other people were integral in the design and production of the exhibition.

Ed Slipek wrote the introduction (see pp. 41 – 42) that provided significant context to the exhibition. Greg Fredrick donated his time and services to help in the hanging of the photographs – cutting the wood blocks that floated the photographs from the wall and drilling the wall anchors from which I hung the mounted photographs. The vinyl lettering that provided texture and refinement to the exhibition space was cut and installed by Pete Gillis. Leslie Hulick, my fiancé, fearlessly washed the huge windows that frame the exhibition and helped tremendously in the preparation of the space.
Prior to the exhibition, I presented my work (including examples of posters and postcards that would announce the event) to the faculty and students of the graduate program. This offered important critical analysis of the collateral promotional materials. Several points about the poster’s appropriate size and target audience caused me to reconsider the development of the final visual direction. Typographically, I wanted to evoke the feeling of traditional barbershop signs. The message needed to be clear and informative, so my more visually complex solutions were eventually discarded. The use of the halftone dot allowed people to get a sneak peak at the series. I also created an informational website that allowed people to get a sneak peak at the series.

The final promotional campaign consisted of a series of five postcards, and five posters - one for each of the featured barbershops. The posters were printed in two sizes: 20”x30” and 30”x45”. By presenting several of the barbers and patrons of the barbershops, a dialogue and excitement was instigated. It was a real joy taking the series of the barbershops, a dialogue and excitement was instigated. It was a real joy taking the series of large format posters to the barbershops and witnessing how people reacted to them. Rob, “the barber with the cigarette” in one of my posters, was beside himself upon seeing his image. People in other barbershops wanted to see the whole series of posters and postcards so they could see who else was featured.
With my hair freshly cut, balloons hung and refreshments prepared, it was time to officially open the exhibit. I was delighted by the turnout and the overwhelming support of the work. It was great to see people viewing the exhibition from within the space as well as from the sidewalk. People walking by stopped in to see the work and several patrons of the barbershops were compelled to come in because they recognized their barber in the photographs.

I was most pleased with the support of the barbers who came to the opening. I think it was a real treat for everyone involved to see and meet the men who were captured in the photographs. They became celebrities. I talked to many of the people who were there while I was photographing, got to catch-up with the barbers, and shared my experiences and recounted stories with many of the guests.

I am thankful that my fiancé, Leslie, and sister, Kayce, were able to come down and help make things run smoothly, allowing me to talk freely, answer questions and not worry about the little things. Kayce was a huge asset as the “official” event photographer. She did a fantastic job of capturing the spirit of the event.
My project evolved from formal typographic studies of Richmond neighborhoods into a documentation of the barbershops on Broad Street. This evolution allowed me the opportunity to become more personal with my work. I also gained confidence and insight regarding my creative process, learning to trust my intuition and to realize the value of uncertainty. My bond with the community has been strengthened and I am honored by the support offered throughout the project as was demonstrated in part by the turnout at the exhibition opening. The integration of barbers, students, professionals, faculty, patrons of the barbershops and other community members was a beautiful reflection of community. I am continually humbled as I walk by the exhibition and notice people – noses pushed against the glass – looking and talking about the work. The exhibition has offered appreciation and support of a neighborhood icon, the barbershop.

Conclusion

One future direction for my work is already in progress; a collaborative effort between writer Ed Silpak and myself on the creation of a book documenting the barbershops on Broad Street. The book is a direct extension of my creative project and will require a substantial time investment of at least a year of continued immersion, inclusion and photographing of the barbershops. This duration is essential to the credibility and validity of my documentation and needs to be reinforced before I would be comfortable in publishing a book. I look forward to this collaboration and continued relationship with the community.

Future Directions

I consider the possibility of future national or international exhibitions of this work as another potential direction. With the investment of more time, I am confident that my barbershop series will become richer and more revealing about the culture and its people. Outside of the barbershop, I see my future enriched by continued explorations of my environment and community.

The typeface used throughout this book is Gotham, designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones.
All photographs are taken using a Canon Digital Rebel with a 28 - 105mm lens.
Designed by Justin K. Howard. All work shown is the property of Justin K. Howard unless otherwise noted. jkhoward.com