

Response to Walking Tour and Bochure, collaborative Project with Kristin Nelson

To Be Abandoned: Living Walls and Breathing Stories

By Courtney Slobogian

Shhh. If you stop for just a minute you might be able to hear them. There are walls and doorways holding stories of a fight you had with your mother or the time you found your cat, dead on the front porch. There are bricks, each one stacked and stuck together with mortar, holding tight to one another, holding tight to the memories of where you used to read every Saturday morning, or the smell of burning toast from the time you had no money for food so you tried to make dinner from the stale bread you found in the dumpster a few blocks away. And maybe they aren't your stories, maybe they are stories from a life lived 40 years ago, but they are there for you, in this very moment, nonetheless. You have to be listening. You catch them out of the corner of your eye, every time you walk by that old house you barely notice any more. You barely notice them, the stories or the house, but they are there. They linger in the air like smoke; they drift in through an open window like voices from the apartment across the back lane. Walls made of plaster and cement hold stories of lives, stories of living and dying within those walls. And if they hold our lives, they also hold all of the lives of those that have come before, holding tight, in spaces that now stand empty. Abandoned.

My friend Marcie and I used to sit on her porch, smoking cheap cigarettes and recounting the latest dramatic event in whatever our romantic relations happened to be at the moment. Every once and a while, peering over our cups of steaming tea and cloudy cigarette smoke, we would shift our gaze across the wide, plump street laid out before her house and contemplate the towering structure that rested and waited in endless silence directly across from her porch.

Thoughts about this house would meander in and out of our aimless, yet seemingly profound romantic revelations.

“She clearly needs to understand that this puts you in a vulnerable position and”

hey, do you think someone really hung themselves in the bathroom?

“have you asked her why she always shuts down when....”

How many rooms do you think there are in there?

“I guess it comes down to you deciding if this is what you want. No matter how much she tries

hey, did you just see that light turn on in the upstairs window?

The looming early 20th century house had a presence in our lives that was silent, unknown, complicated and yet somehow stable. We knew nothing factual about this space, but the stories we had heard became a part of the stories we would share with each other. While we mulled over our own personal stories, we also played with the mysterious stories of the lives lived in 51 Balmoral Street. The act of integrating fact and fiction, combining our life with the imagined lives of past residents, created a new space, where an old empty house, someone's former home, now considered to all intents and purposes to be abandoned, still maintained a life of its own.

Kristin Nelson and Suzie Smith took us on a walking tour of some of the abandoned spaces that make up

the neighborhoods from Assiniboine Avenue all the way to the West End. Their project was in part about researching these spaces and their histories, but largely it was about the story-telling that occurs when residents of neighbourhoods begin to share their own accumulated knowledge of these so called 'abandoned spaces.' They played with fact and fiction, and in turn, demonstrated the ways in which empty spaces still hold life. Their work shows us how buildings, whether occupied or not, create and sustain a neighborhood through the ways in which people of that neighborhood interact with those spaces. The lines between fact and fiction are blurred, and in that blurring there is a recognition that to differentiate between the two is almost irrelevant. What we notice most is that there is something there that goes beyond by-laws or demolition orders, and in the stories that abandoned spaces hold, there is a heartbeat that gives life to an entire neighborhood.

It became clear to me on the walking tour that abandoned spaces create and maintain a neighborhood as much as occupied spaces do. The lives and importance of these spaces were made visible through the sharing of stories and experiences from people who have interacted with them and continue to do so. They find their way into our daily landscape. They tell their own stories to anyone who happens to listen, and they tell their stories even when you're not paying attention. For me, the magic of this art project occurred in the gathering of people and stories on the walking tour, and the dialogue that was created when those stories were shared and began mixing and churning with other stories about the physical spaces we were visiting.

And so in all of this, the question that kept arising for me was, what does it mean for a space to be abandoned? Dictionaries construct that which has been abandoned as "unoccupied, empty, deserted, vacant, derelict, uninhabited." But is a space truly unoccupied and empty when it is inhabited with the imagination of people around it; the stories of its history, the ideas for its future or the recognition of its contributions to a neighborhood full of lives that pass by it and interact with it every day? My feeling is that these spaces are far from abandoned. It is having a space to vocalize their value that has been left behind. They become a part of the background until we are asked a question, given a piece of information that perhaps contradicts something we feel we already know about a particular building, or are, in some way, pushed to bring into focus our very alive and real relationship with the spaces we have come to know as deserted or vacant.

And what is our emotional understanding of abandonment? A parent dies and a child feels abandoned; a lover leaves for a new affair and the remaining lover names that emptiness as abandonment; a friend spreads a rumour or simply drifts away and we have a sense of abandonment. But the child, the lover and the friend will continue to have memories of those missing figures, those empty spaces. Even in our emotional understandings of abandonment it is clear that just because a previously occupied space is no longer occupied in the same way, the space itself does not disappear. The hole does not close, but instead transforms into the stories we tell ourselves and others about what those spaces mean in our lives. In the same way, structures in our lives that are perhaps missing the life they once had, do not simply disappear. They continue to exist and live through the ways in which we interact with their presence and our understanding of their presence, whether fictional or factual.

And so, there may be no one roaming the halls of 51 Balmoral but it is far from an empty house. I encourage you to collect your own oral histories of abandoned spaces in your neighborhood and notice how their ever-present life begins to infiltrate your understanding and feelings about those uninhabited spaces. Perhaps you too will begin to feel the underlying heartbeat of stories that keeps a neighborhood alive.