

Mini-Project #1: Site Exploration

A Ghost Ship in a Living City

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The existing conditions of my chosen site in Oakland, California is now a fenced-up, dirt patch with minimal indication of future construction plans. Therefore, the main focus of the site is on a building that no longer exists—the Ghost Ship Warehouse.

The Ghost Ship Warehouse was an illegal artist live-work collective and venue space. The warehouse was home to Derick Almerna, previously known as the master tenant of the space, and twenty local Oakland artists. Almerna had illegally subleased the first floor of the building to these artists as affordable live-work space. He priced rent at around seven-hundred a month, which at the time was nearly half of what rent for a one apartment in Oakland would have cost (Bernard 2016). In addition to being a residential and studio space, the warehouse was often the location for underground concerts and parties. The Ghost Ship Warehouse was located in East Oakland, on a block bounded by Derby Avenue, International Boulevard, 31st Avenue, and E. 13th Street. Fruitvale Avenue lies one block away from the site at 1305 31st Avenue, and the Fruitvale BART Station is a four-minute walk away from where the building used to stand. The site is within a mixed-use area. Immediately to the west are neighborhoods of one-story, Bay Area bungalow-style residential homes. North of the site is a Wendy's fast food chain. Across the International Boulevard are more mixed-use developments, such as renovated apartments, office buildings for insurance companies, local restaurants and boutiques, and salons. Other nearby developments include public service spaces like the Freedom Community Clinic and the Fruitvale Healthcare Center.

However, the building does not exist today due to the tragic event known as the Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire. The site's importance to the greater Oakland and Bay Area culture cannot be fully understood without an understanding of this tragedy and the conditions that caused the event to occur. On December 2nd, 2016, the building was hosting a touring band from the LA

record label 100% Silk with an estimated audience of eighty to one-hundred attendees (Booth 2017). When a fire began due to faulty electrical wiring, many structural factors caused escape from the building nearly impossible. The warehouse was reported to be "cluttered with impromptu and unlicensed" artist work that made the building maze-like (Weise 2016). Not only this, but the building itself lacked essential safety features like working fire alarms and sprinkler systems (Bernard 2016). Yet, these structural elements of the fire are not the only reason behind this tragedy. Rather, the incident offers a greater insight to the relationship between the built environment and the erasure of disadvantaged communities through the question: Does the built environment create and respond to socioeconomic conditions or is it bounded by socioeconomic conditions?

The Ghost Ship Warehouse is a physical representation of how urbanism does both. The built environment is a tool that operates within existing systems, meaning it can marginalize communities, but also be the reason or method that marginalized communities come together. Examining this phenomenon through the Ghost Ship Warehouse, the "success" of the site both responded and was limited to the socioeconomic conditions of its tenants. The Ghost Ship was successful in being a response to the growing gentrification of Oakland's artistry groups. Being in the historically cultural Fruitvale District of Oakland, the Ghost Ship's location led to eased mobility, proximity to other forms of labor, and similar community members. As for a residential-work space, the Ghost Ship offered affordability and workability for artists who could "weld, etch with acid, construct and generally not worry about the carpets or neighbors when they use power tools" (Weise 2016). The removal of rent burden and in providing a space for like-minded individuals to collectivize reveals that disadvantaged communities often face a tradeoff of safety for these benefits. In Oakland, the lack of affordable spaces—amenities,

studios, and housing alike—can be tied back to constant urban redevelopment and reinvestment plans like the 10K Initiative (Schwarzer 2021). Thus, indicating how the principle of land-value in the built environment creates the economic conditions that force low-income communities to compromise safety for the sake of affordability, in order to exist in cities like Oakland. Yet, these conditions are what causes the “success” behind community gathering by marginalized groups. If these successes are defined by a marginalized community’s ability to discover spaces in an oppressive environment, then this means that the built environment does not respond to socioeconomic conditions by simply being designed or existing. Instead, a “successful” response is twofold, where the built environment is used as a tool by marginalized communities, and thus provides spaces for these specific groups.

Furthermore, a “successful” usage of the built environment to uplift these othered communities is one that addresses both socioeconomic shortcomings and structural problems. Because the Ghost Ship Warehouse only addressed the ability to gather and live without rent burden without intentions to address physical safety of the building, the space became an opportunity of exploitation of disenfranchised communities. Through this exploitation, the built environment also reveals the hierarchy of labor types through the amount of violence that they face. This is because the built environment is tied to foundations that invisibilize the struggles of non-corporate laborers. When one views a skyscraper, skyline, or even mid-rise industrial building, they often do not imagine the amount of deaths or injuries that had been suffered for the sake of urban development. In the same way, when one views the Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire, they do not recognize the compromise of safety that was made for the sake of creative labor. Cities are breeding grounds for all types of feats with the shadow of safety issues, that of which have been historically and contemporarily placed onto the backs of the working-class. The

Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire was a tragedy, but it is far from being an unfortunate circumstance or special case. Instead, it is a representation of how the built environment can uphold socioeconomic hardships, and how these hardships are often fatal. In order to address these hardships, the built environment must address how structural failures and fatalities are a result of socioeconomically oppressed groups being barred from the spaces that grant them physical—and therefore emotional—safeties.

MAP INTERPRETATION

Figure 1

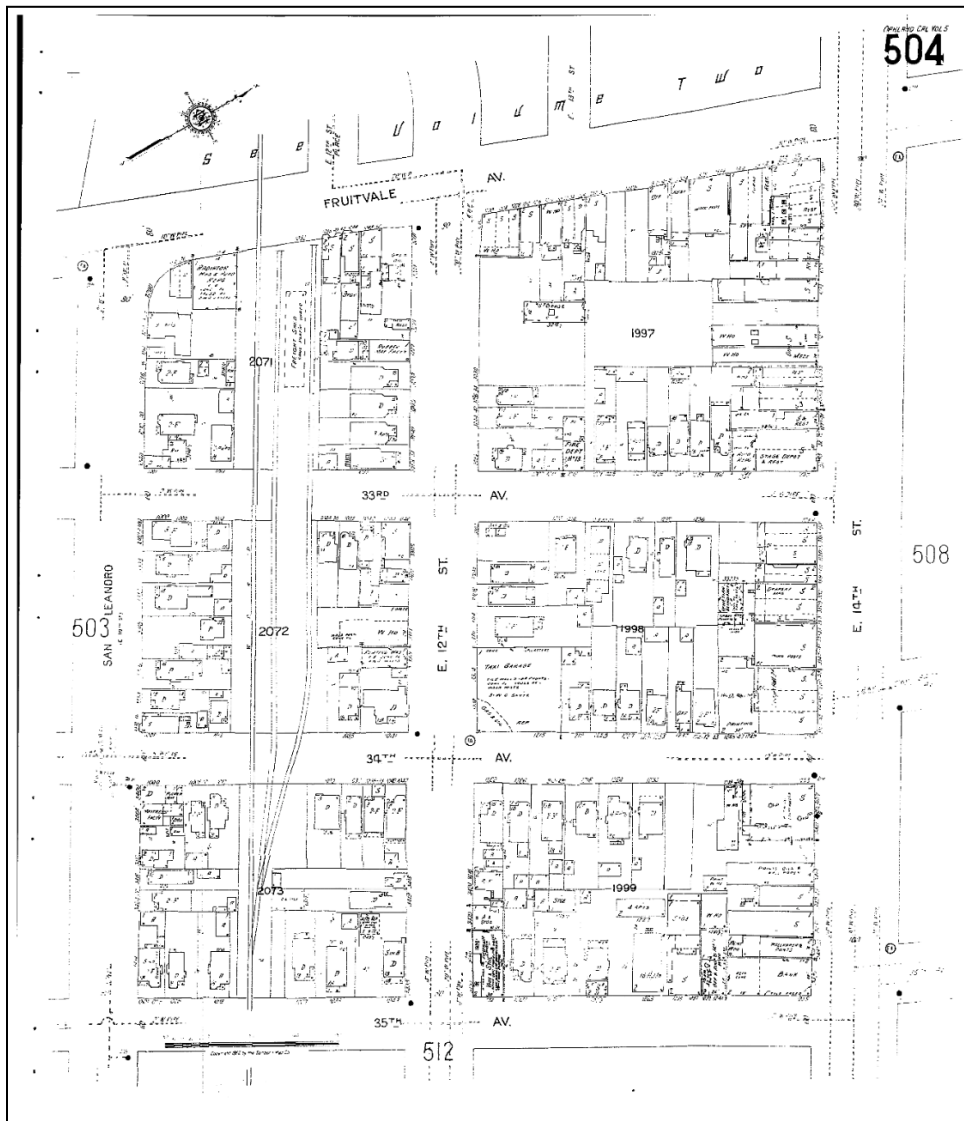
Fire Insurance Map of 1305 31st Avenue in Oakland, CA



Note. Adapted from [Fire Insurance Maps Online: California](#). This map shows a Sanborn map layered over a Google Maps satellite image with a pinpoint indicating where the area of study is located on both maps.

Figure 2

Digital Sanborn Map of Oakland 1912-1952 Vol. 5, 1925; Republished 1952, Sheet 504



Note. Adapted from [Digital Sanborn Maps](#). This map is where the Ghost Ship Warehouse was to be located in the previous century. This is the main map being used for interpretation.

The main map for interpretation is Figure 2, in which there were many pivots in deciding which digital media would be most insightful for analysis of the Ghost Ship Warehouse.

Originally, I had chosen to search for a photograph for analysis, but a few shortcomings in the

research led to a map interpretation. Initial thoughts centered around wanting to envision the building given that the warehouse no longer stands. By dissecting the alleged “maze-like” layout of the building or the structure’s material, there would have been an opportunity to investigate modern design and building safety. Additionally, a conversation around architectural preservation could have revealed a deeper understanding of industrial impact on urban safety.

However, the reason for pivoting to a map was that the loose criteria developed in the search for a database and relevant photograph proved to be a limitation rather than a guide. Given that the Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire was a more recent tragedy, the idea of having a criteria for this search was critical to lessening the amount of databases to search through. The first criterion was that the database chosen was to not have a timeframe limitation. Many databases were for accessing photographs from the 20th Century or earlier. Since my site was so specific, the likelihood of a photograph for the area of study was difficult. One out of the few databases available for this search was *The World Through the Lens*. In opening this database, many of the photo collections for Oakland buildings were from the 19th Century, which did not align with a specific photograph of the Ghost Ship. Even in utilizing methods of various word combinations and quotations, such as “Oakland fires” and “warehouse fires,” the Ghost Ship Warehouse was not in the results. A second criterion was to filter through photographic databases centered around the built environment or architectural designs. One prominent database out of the ten available was *Birkhauser Building Types Online*. After applying filters for US industrial buildings, this database was demonstrated to be around building typology rather than site-specific photos. The third criterion was developed through the discovery of Ghost Ship photos from a previously-cited *Rolling Stone* article, “Inside Oakland Ghost Ship Warehouse Before the Fire” (2016). In such, the third criterion was to allow for searching through article and

newspaper clipping databases. Yet, the *Library of Congress* did not have any results on the Ghost Ship or Oakland industrial warehouses. The *Rolling Stone Archive* only contained articles on concerts and shows at large venues like the Oakland Coliseum, Fox Theater, and the Paramount. The consistent lack of results clarified that these criteria were too limiting to find a relevant photograph of the Ghost Ship in an academic database. This experience caused an internal questioning of urbanist research and photography: What constitutes as an urban event that should be recorded through digital media? How do informal spaces such as the Ghost Ship Warehouse face greater chances of erasure in academic research? I would argue that informality in itself indicates a less likelihood of physical evidence that is catalogued in academic research. Thus, bringing forth the question of the validity of academic archival processes in the context of smaller sites and informal spaces. Research on the built environment is bounded in the same way that the built environment itself is bounded—the lack of available media on smaller, informal spaces parallels the invisibilization of these sites. In fact, these informal spaces face the tradeoff of archival erasure for the sake of preserving a cultural shield. This brings the insight that urbanization can act as both a pillar to the development of community spaces, while also being how informal spaces form in the shadow of these sites. Certainly, both the Fox Theater and the Ghost Ship Warehouse reflect two sides of the same cultural value in Oakland, where entertainment venues and the arts are celebrated. However, the informality of the Ghost Ship Warehouse acted as a protection for the underground groups that had experienced othering in the built environment. Though, who is to protect the groups of these informal sites, and how might changing the effort to record these spaces pose a cultural danger to their existence as informal? Overall, the challenges in finding content that aligned with the Ghost Ship was a reflection of

how academia is part of the system that caused the othering of this group, in the sense that academia is a formal digital space.

That is to say, the decision to change to map interpretation was grounded in how urbanization was charted through the production of maps. Therefore, the media change also meant that the opportunity for analysis was also to change from site-specific to a more historic view. The existence of fire insurance maps of previous Oakland conditions also allowed for a perspective that welcomed understanding how urban historic frames can impact urban safety. The challenges in using *Digital Sanborn Maps* was that there were hundreds of pages and various volumes to search through. Working under the assumption that the street intersections had changed from the previous centuries, I attempted to locate the site by comparing current *Google Maps* location with the existing Fruitvale Avenue as a guide. The Sausal Creek also worked as a landscape marker. This was inefficient in the context of research time, as this led to searching through numerous sheets. Eventually, I used the *Fire Insurance Maps Online: California* to find both the specific parcel and a relevant Sanborn volume (Figure 1).

The *Fire Insurance Sanborn Maps* were large-scale maps produced by the Sanborn Map and Publishing Company to primarily assist fire insurance companies with insuring properties. In such, the ability to read the scale of insurance coverage is not easily understood by the average viewer. Yet, the map includes details that provide insight on Oakland's development and patterns in planning.

The map (Figure 2) is oriented southwest, as indicated by the north arrow, and the scale is fifty feet to one inch. There is no legend, as these are found in the overall key maps rather than sheets. Meaning, specific sheets have different purposes of showcasing key details like land

usage, road measurements, unit numbers, major railroad lines, and large companies. Per being a fire insurance map, details like fire hydrants, fire escapes, gasoline tanks, chimneys, building materiality, etc. are keyed. Figure 2's most notable details are Fruitvale Avenue, E. 14th Street, and San Leandro as major streets through their large and clear font. Other notable details are the Western Pacific Railroad lines, larger units with legible writing like "TAXI GARAGE" and "FIRE DEPT.," dwelling units, and warehouses keyed as "W.H." Though, my noting of the warehouses might have been biased since my area of study is a warehouse. Some key details are illegible due to the font sizing, possibly due to them being quick turnover commercial units. The map illustrates that there are many dwelling units and two-story, wooden frame buildings on the streets that run from San Leandro to E. 14th Street, meaning the circulation through these streets are for residents moving in-and-out of their homes. There is more mixed-use development along the major streets of E. 12th and E. 14th Streets, as well as San Leandro and Fruitvale Avenue. This zoning poses two key ideas: the planning of Oakland urban blocks had intended to ensure various land usage and encourage foot traffic through commercial areas, and that Sanborn map sheets were likely separated by neighborhood sectors.

Though being a fire insurance map, the key details acknowledge patterns of urbanization. Figure 2 reveals that 20th Century Oakland had many residential structures, revealing the large population in Oakland during this century. Auto-spaces on personal units were separated from the dwellings themselves, and the sheer amount of auto-spaces indicates that automobile ownership was common in Oakland urban life. Yet, major streets—like San Leandro and Fruitvale Avenue—and their proximity to the Western Pacific Railroad demonstrates that the freight industry is a lasting anchor to the development of California urban spaces. The notability of these details reflect Paul Groth's process four of inertia of resources in his "Landscape

Processes” (1997) reflect how “legal lines around a plot of land often last longer than any building on that plot.” In addition, Groth claims that this saddens architects. The preservation of urban forms due to the development of large-scale railroads and streets are often a key nostalgic aspect to many cities. Reminding citizens of the age of a city both empowers the city itself, while also showcasing the presence of change. Planners often romanticize this idea of nostalgic preservation, but urban nostalgia is a slippery slope. In urban landscapes, preservation is an indicator of what is important to a city’s identity. However, in the Bay Area, there are many contentions of exclusionary acts by planners and developers that steadily contribute to the oppression and displacement of Black and brown residents, especially in Oakland. Preservation of street names, buildings, materiality, etc. must be handled in a similar context that which they were dealt with—through a careful lens of racial and economic status. Modern urbanization should address the shortcomings of the past by deciding what is meant to be preserved, and what can be reversed through the built environment.

Contextualizing the details of Figure 2 to the previous Ghost Ship Warehouse site analysis, if the built environment is a tool for understanding and responding to socioeconomic conditions, then there is a serious lack of perspective in these Sanborn maps. While the maps are valuable for charting urban development, there is a lack of understanding of who is benefitting from insurance and who is receiving less coverage. The maps lack a certain characterization of the cities that hide what biases insurance companies were operating under. The Sanborn maps offer the idea that insurance companies had operated purely off of structure, but Groth’s fifth process of economic lens on the environment is critical here. Both insurance and real estate are in the same economic sectors of production that impacts urban conditions (Groth 1997). In fact, the republishing of these Sanborn maps were parallel to the production of HOLC redlining maps.

Because these redlining maps had been clear in how mortgage lenders were operating under racial exclusion from wealth accumulation (Schwarzer 2021), there is a likelihood that insurance coverage could have been measured with the same exclusionary principles. If the Sanborn maps had showcased predicted coverage, with a layer of demographic reasoning, this could have been essential insight as to how informal spaces like the Ghost Ship Warehouse had yet to receive modifications necessary for fire safety. By offering a critique on this lack of content, there is an opportunity to revisit these Sanborn maps with a layer of wealth accumulation, insurance coverages, and even plot fire disasters.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Ghost Ship Warehouse in Oakland, California reflects multiple ideas that can be seen in the built environment. The warehouse's tragic fire demonstrates how socioeconomic status often determines structural safety. Therefore, urban land value is not only measured by financial opportunity, but social capital. The Sanborn map used to evaluate the site reflects how the built environment hides exclusionary natures within urbanization. Overall, the exploration of this site was an attempt to understand how urbanism is not only about understanding what occurs in the built environment, but also in understanding who is barred from existing and how—through what no longer exists.

(WC: 3022)

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