



Closed Call

Transformer wanted to comment on urban change. It came sooner than expected.

By Maura Judkis

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A few weeks ago, Mandy Burrow was digging through the dusty corners of a building on the corner of 14th and T Streets NW, like a paleontologist unearthing bones. Here's what the 29-year-old sculptor found: Texaco oil cans and rusty bolts from the building's original incarnation in 1919 as a car showroom and Model T assembly space called the Taylor Motor Company; an industrial-grade meat slicer from the few years it spent as a kitchen-supply business; handouts about the Book of Revelation, a microphone stand, and signs from a fundraiser reading hot dogs, \$1.25 each from the years ('80s to 2005) that the building was home to the Church of the Rapture. There were toiletries, fastidiously bundled and arranged in clean plastic bags, owned by the homeless people who crashed here. And finally, signs from a real-estate agent, from 2005.

In Burrow's piece *This Place*, part of Transformer's "Here & Now" exhibit, she carefully arranged all of these artifacts to tell the story of the building before its next incarnation. This portion of "Here & Now" was scheduled to close May 24, making way for developers to gut 1840 14th St., restoring the façade for a four-story retail space (a related "Here & Now" exhibit runs at Transformer from May 31 to June 14). But the end came sooner than expected: Last Saturday, in the middle of a panel discussion related to the exhibit, police officers and an inspector from the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs arrived to shut down the show. DCRA spokesperson Michael Rupert said the building was shut down for electrical work done without a permit, lack of a business license, an open elevator shaft, and at least 65 fire code violations.

"If [the developers] come in and get the proper permits and fix the issues, there shouldn't be a problem," Rupert says. "They can't have an elevator-sized hole there while people are looking at art. It's too big of a danger."

Transformer executive director Victoria Reis says the elevator shaft, a remnant from the building's stint as a car dealership, was opened only by the inspectors and was secured by heavy garage doors during the exhibition.

"We cleaned every area in the space where the public might be, and took every precaution to insure public safety closing off unsafe areas," writes Reis in an e-mail. "We even took safety to the point where we consciously decided not to do a traditional large-scale opening reception, or any nighttime events, and no alcohol at all, to avoid any possible problems."

"We go out of our way to be responsible," says Steven Cassell, project manager for Four Points LLC, the property's majority owner. "We wanted to do something that would be good for the arts in D.C. Unfortunately there were some other issues that came into play. Everything was done in goodwill."

At press time, artists were awaiting word on when they could re-enter the building to remove their work. “We just vacated the building, and we were told that our work would not be accessible,” says Burrow. “We were all slightly in shock and confused.”

The sudden closure is disappointing but strangely fitting—the show, featuring 17 artists, 14 of whom placed their works in the Church of the Rapture building, comments on a rapidly changing urban landscape. The Church of the Rapture has long been regarded as the final domino in the ongoing gentrification of 14th Street; the *Washington Post* ran a two-part series on the building after it was sold for \$10 million in 2005, and surrounding store owners have also sold in quick succession. All the emotions that follow such a tipping point—anxiety, optimism, regret, nostalgia—were wrapped into the site as well as the art, from *Study for Framing: T Street Lofts*, Sonya Blesofsky’s fragile take on construction that uses aluminum foil to re-create metal wall framing, to Kyan Bishop’s and Kate Hardy’s *Near Distant Past*, featuring a wall dotted with bubble-shaped half-fishbowls (filled with live aquarium fish) using Washington scenes as backdrops. The show was a farewell party of sorts—the last chance for the building’s past to be celebrated before it’s swept and scrubbed spotless.

Not that “Here & Now” didn’t involve some tidying up. In fact, getting the site ready proved to be one of the more daunting aspects of staging the exhibition. “When I was going through the building for materials, I was always expecting to find a dead body,” says Burrow, who often works with site-specific found objects since receiving her M.F.A. from the George Washington University in 2006. Reis echoes that sentiment: Before the artists came in, she says, the building “looked like the set of a teen slasher movie.” Still, Reis saw the building as an ideal place for artists to explore the opportunities that come with unrestricted access to a space. (The exhibit also features one work by Jennifer Burkley Vasher in Transformer’s main space. For the show’s second installment from May 31 to June 14, Transformer will exhibit works from Mariah Johnson and Valerie Molnar.)

For artist Lisa Kellner, who was given the fourth floor for her installation, the decay of the building was analogous to the human body’s decline. Kellner consulted medical texts for her installation *Inner Sanctum*, where cancerous polyps of bright silk organza dotted the walls and spilled out from cracks of exposed bricks and drainpipes. Clusters of hairs emerged from the pores she’s added to the wall inches away from where plaster came off in sheets. The effect was beautiful yet appalling—the architectural equivalent of smoker’s lung.

Reis says she perceived the project as a way for artists to respond to “time and space.” But responding to time and space in a building with gaping holes and broken windows covered with cardboard presented unique challenges. Derek Coté’s piece, *Tapetum Lucidum*, was a collection of sawhorses with intricately carved antlers, their shadows cast on white backdrops by bright spotlights—deer in headlights made eerily abstract. When Coté arrived from Richmond, Va., to set up the piece on May 8, D.C.’s weekend of near-biblical rain was just beginning, and the building succumbed to leaks in several places. The dripping proved to be too distracting, so Coté jury-rigged a plastic chute to catch the water and dispense it in a container.

“If I would have known it was going to happen, I would have rigged up a microphone and an amplifier,” says Coté. “It makes a really great sound that has enhanced the piece.”

Other artists found similar inspiration in the grunginess of the space, which had remained nearly abandoned since 2005, when the Church of the Rapture left for a new space in Suitland. The building was used earlier this year by Meat Market Gallery for its Performance Week, and the graffiti it commissioned remains on the walls indoors and out. It made for a stark contrast with *What Is and What Should Never Be*, a piece by Graham Childs and Lily deSaussure. The couple re-created their living space, complete with potted plants and tchotchkes on shelves, entirely in a crisp, stark white. DeSaussure notes that the dinginess of the space gave the piece a heightened significance,